

Edward II



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

The son of a shoemaker, Christopher Marlowe nevertheless earned a scholarship to study at Cambridge, where he completed a bachelor's degree. The school also awarded him a master's degree, apparently on the recommendation of the government, which had praised Marlowe for services to his country—possibly a reference to a role as a secret agent. Marlowe likely began writing plays while still at Cambridge, but the exact date of most of his work is uncertain. What is clear is that after graduating, Marlowe moved to London to pursue a career as a playwright, but was frequently sidetracked by problems with the authorities (among other things, Marlowe was suspected of blasphemy and atheism). He died in a tavern fight shortly after a warrant had been issued for his arrest, and most of his plays were published posthumously. Marlowe was enormously popular as a playwright, however, and his style (including his use of blank verse and his experimentation with historical drama) influenced Shakespeare, whose own career as a playwright overlapped with Marlowe's, significantly.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Marlowe's play (based largely on the work of a chronicler of English monarchy named Raphael Holinshed) is broadly historically accurate in its treatment of Edward II's reign. It does, however, significantly compress the timeline, since the real Edward II ruled for nearly 20 years (1307–1326). The rising tensions in the play over Edward's military defeats and personal favoritism are also true to life, though it's difficult to say with certainty that the historical relationship between Edward and Gaveston was sexual. Marlowe's only major departure from historical fact concerns Edward's murder, though his depiction is, again, based on Holinshed's. The real Edward II was almost certainly not murdered in the karmic way Marlowe and Holinshed describe—i.e. rectally impaled on a heated spit. In fact, Edward might not have been murdered at all. It's possible that he instead died of natural causes, and even at a much later date; a letter sent by an Italian priest to Edward III, for instance, claimed that the king had escaped and fled the country.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Marlowe's most famous play by far is [Doctor Faustus](#). His *Edward II*, however, arguably has more in common with William Shakespeare's work than with much of Marlowe's—commonalities are particularly strong between *Edward II* and Shakespeare's [Richard II](#) and *Henry VI Part 1*,

Henry VI Part 2, and *Henry VI Part 3*. Like *Edward II*, these plays all center on the rule of a "weak" king and the domestic turmoil and bloodshed that results. The parallels with [Richard II](#) in particular are striking, since both works also raise questions about the nature of monarchy and the legitimacy of rebellion. In fact, it is highly likely that *Edward II* influenced Shakespeare's play.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England: with the Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer
- **When Written:** Early 1590s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1593
- **Literary Period:** Elizabethan/Renaissance
- **Genre:** Drama, Historical Play
- **Setting:** 14th-century England and France
- **Climax:** Lightborne murders Edward II.
- **Antagonist:** Mortimer Junior and Isabella are the play's primary antagonists in the sense that they act in opposition to the main character, Edward II. It's worth noting, however, that both Mortimer and Isabella are somewhat sympathetic characters, particularly in the first half of the play. Neither, in other words, is a villain per se.

EXTRA CREDIT

A Woman Scorned. Edward II might not have been a popular king, but the role his wife played in deposing him earned her an infamous place in English history and a terrifying nickname: "the she-wolf of France."

Elvis Sightings, Renaissance Style. Marlowe died at just 29 years old—or did he? Basically all historians and literary critics say yes, but that hasn't stopped people from speculating that Marlowe not only faked his own death, but also went on to write all of William Shakespeare's works. It's a silly idea, but fun to think about.



PLOT SUMMARY

Piers Gaveston, in exile from England in his native France, receives a letter from his friend and probable lover, Edward II. Upon the death of his father, Edward II has been newly crowned King of England, and in his letter he reveals that he has revoked Gaveston's banishment and wants his favorite to

come share in his own wealth and power. Gaveston eagerly complies, delighted at the prospect of seeing Edward but also hopeful that he can use the King's affection to his own advantage.

Tensions begin to surface, however, even before Gaveston makes his return to England known. As Gaveston watches from a place of hiding, Edward II argues with a group of nobles who regard Gaveston as a manipulative social climber and support his continued exile. Although the King's brother, the Earl of Kent, warns Mortimer Junior and the other nobles that they are dangerously close to committing treason, they stand firm in their opposition and leave for their homes threatening war. Gaveston then reveals himself to Edward, and the two share a joyful reunion during which Edward makes Gaveston Earl of Cornwall and gives him the authority to issue commands and draw money from the treasury in the King's name. The joyful reunion, though, is marred by the arrival of the Bishop of Coventry, who makes it clear that he also opposes Gaveston's return. With Edward's encouragement, Gaveston assaults and imprisons the Bishop and then confiscates his property.

The attack on Coventry further cements the nobility's low opinion of Gaveston, as does Edward's ongoing neglect of his wife Isabella, the sister of the King of France. Along with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the nobles Mortimer Junior, Mortimer Senior, the Earl of Warwick, the Earl of Lancaster, and the Earl of Pembroke together issue an order for Gaveston's exile. However, despite their insistence that Edward has obligations to both the Church and the English nobility, Edward at first refuses to sign the order. In response, the nobles forcibly arrest Gaveston and threaten rebellion, causing the King to reluctantly agree to his favorite's banishment. A sorrowful parting follows, during which Edward promises to send money to Gaveston in Ireland.

Shortly after Gaveston departs, however, Isabella begins trying to persuade the nobles to allow him to return: Edward, who suspects her of having an affair with Mortimer Junior, holds her responsible for Gaveston's exile and refuses to even speak to her while Gaveston is away. The nobles agree, reasoning that recalling Gaveston will at least provide them with an opportunity to murder him. Naturally, the nobles do not share this plan with Edward, and their apparent willingness to compromise brings them back into the King's good graces: Edward even entrusts Mortimer Senior with leading his army in Scotland. Meanwhile, Edward prepares for Gaveston's return by calling Gaveston's fiancée, Lady Margaret de Clare, back to court so that the two can be married (Lady Margaret is Edward's niece, so marriage to her will formally tie Gaveston to the royal family). Lady Margaret brings with her tutor Baldock and a family retainer named Spencer Junior—two men who hope to find employment with Gaveston and eventually become favorites of the King.

Virtually as soon as Gaveston has arrived back at court,

however, another quarrel breaks out between him and the nobility. Matters only worsen when Mortimer Junior learns that his uncle, Mortimer Senior, has been captured and is being held for ransom by the Scots. Edward is unwilling to pay for Mortimer Senior's release himself, which prompts the nobles to list all the ways in which they feel the King has behaved irresponsibly—by spending money on art rather than the military, by jeopardizing diplomatic ties through his treatment of the Queen, by flouting the nobles' own opinions, and so on. Edward ignores all of this, decisively alienating not only the nobility but also his own brother, who goes to join Mortimer Junior, Lancaster, and the other earls in planning an assault on the court at Tynemouth to capture Gaveston.

The attack on the castle forces Edward and Gaveston to split up, fleeing in different directions. The nobles choose to pursue Gaveston, eventually overtaking him. Initially, they agree to allow Gaveston to see Edward one last time before he is executed. Warwick, however, is unhappy with the compromise and ambushes and kills Gaveston as he is being escorted to the King. When Edward learns of this, he swears revenge and prepares to go to war with the nobles, who are now demanding that Edward cease with his favoritism of Spencer Junior as well.

Edward's forces succeed in defeating the nobles in the initial battle, and Warwick, Lancaster, and Mortimer Junior are all arrested. The first two are eventually executed, but Mortimer Junior succeeds in escaping to France with Kent. There, they join forces with Isabella, whom Edward had initially sent with their son, Prince Edward, to negotiate with France regarding England's claims to the region of Normandy. Isabella's loyalty to her husband has finally worn thin, however, and she is now trying to find allies who will help her install her son as king instead (something the Prince himself does not want).

Edward believes that he can successfully curb the threat the Queen poses by buying off the French nobility, but Isabella and Mortimer—who now in fact *are* lovers—eventually manage to find a supporter in a nobleman named Sir John of Hainault. Together with Kent, they return to England and fight the King's forces in a battle at Bristol. This time, it is Edward who is defeated, although Baldock, Spencer Junior, and the king himself succeed in escaping to a monastery where an Abbot offers to hide them. A man who works as a mower, however, betrays their whereabouts and all three are arrested: Spencer Junior and Baldock are taken off to be executed while Edward is imprisoned in Kenilworth under the guard of the Earl of Leicester.

Together with the Bishop of Winchester, Leicester manages to persuade Edward to surrender his crown. Nevertheless, Mortimer Junior quickly dismisses Leicester for being too sympathetic to Edward's plight, replacing him with Berkeley, whom he then *also* dismisses. Mortimer finally settles on Gourney and Maltravers as guards, instructing them both to torment Edward as much as possible and to move him back and

forth from Kenilworth to Berkeley in order to frustrate any escape attempts: Mortimer has learned that Kent now regrets the role he played in his brother's overthrow and is plotting to free him. Gourney and Maltravers comply with these instructions, mocking Edward and apprehending Kent when he tries to make contact with his brother.

Meanwhile, Mortimer Junior has made plans for Prince Edward's coronation. Since the new king is still a boy, Mortimer himself will wield de facto power as the Lord Protector, as well as the lover of the Queen Mother. Nevertheless, he feels his position will not truly be secure until Edward II is dead, and therefore arranges for an assassin—Lightborne—to murder him. Having sent Lightborne on his way, Mortimer quickly asserts his authority over Prince Edward (now Edward III) by ordering Kent's execution against the new king's wishes.

Lightborne arrives at Berkeley and explains his mission to Gourney and Maltravers, who—unbeknownst to him—have orders to murder Lightborne as soon as Edward is dead. Initially pretending to sympathize with Edward, Lightborne urges the deposed king to lie down on a feather bed, where he then kills him with a hot poker. Gourney then stabs Lightborne and flees, while Maltravers reports the crime to Mortimer Junior. As he does so, however, Isabella enters in a frenzy, reporting that Edward III has learned of his father's death and suspects both her and Mortimer of murder. Edward III then enters himself, accompanied by members of the nobility and bearing the written order Mortimer had issued for Edward II's death. Realizing the jig is up, Mortimer bids farewell to Isabella and stoically accepts his impending execution. Isabella herself continues to plead with her son but is ultimately unsuccessful: Edward III orders her imprisonment until he can learn whether and how she was involved in his father's murder. Finally, he orders a hearse to be prepared for Edward II, on which he places the severed head of Mortimer.

know on some level that he is not especially suited to being king. At the very least, he occasionally expresses dissatisfaction with his position, saying he would happily give up his power if that meant he could be with Gaveston. Perhaps the best way of understanding Edward, then, is as a man who values personal happiness and relationships over public life. His devotion to Gaveston and his enjoyment of theater and pageantry are perfectly normal, although the play's events suggest these traits are not compatible with the strength and cunning required of a medieval ruler. In the end, Edward is overthrown and murdered by his wife Isabella and Mortimer, although his son—Edward III—avenges his death.

Piers Gaveston – Gaveston is Edward II's companion and (almost certainly) lover. The two men have known each other for some time by the time the play opens, but had recently been separated by Edward's father, the former king, who disapproved of the relationship (this is a historically accurate detail, although Edward I had initially *chosen* the real Gaveston as a companion for his young son). The play begins with Gaveston receiving a letter from Edward II informing him of his father's death and his own ascension to the throne. Gaveston eagerly complies with the new king's summons to return, in large part because he hopes to use the situation to his own advantage. Ambitious and quick-witted, Gaveston encourages Edward to pursue his interests in poetry and theater—presumably to keep him in a state of happy compliance. Gaveston's tactics pay off in the short term, with Edward raising him from his low-born status and making him Earl of Cornwall, Lord High Chamberlain, and Chief Secretary. However, if Gaveston uses Edward's favor to his own advantage, it is nevertheless true that he seems to genuinely love the king: alone on stage during his opening monologue, he speaks about "dying" on Edward's "bosom" even at the cost of the "world's" esteem. Gaveston's relationship with Edward also speaks to the broader complexities of his character. For instance, while Mortimer Junior describes Gaveston as being a somewhat foppish man, a description supported by Gaveston's expensive tastes in clothing and entertainment, it is nonetheless also true that Gaveston is unafraid to fight: he repeatedly gets into brawls and duels. If anything, Gaveston seems too *quick* to resort to physical violence.

Mortimer Junior – Mortimer Junior is a powerful member of the English nobility and, eventually, the lead challenger to Edward II's rule. As Marlowe states outright in the play's full title, Mortimer is extremely "proud," and he views the presence and influence of Gaveston—a commoner—as an affront to his own rightful position and dignity. Further exacerbating Mortimer's resentment is the fact that Gaveston encourages the king to spend money on pageants and plays rather than military matters. Besides being rather militant and hot-tempered himself, Mortimer feels (or at least expresses) a sense of obligation to the former soldiers now in need of



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Edward II – Edward is, of course, the play's title character, and the plot more or less corresponds to the course of his actual historical reign (though the play significantly compresses the events of his reign), beginning with his ascension to the throne and ending shortly after his death. That said, Edward is often less compelling as a character than either his lover, Gaveston, or his enemy, Mortimer. This is telling, since one of the primary complaints the English nobility lodge against the king is that he is weak. It's certainly true that Edward has little interest in war, and that he tends to blindly comply with the advice and wishes of his favorites. He is also moodier than a ruler probably ought to be, often swinging between hopeless self-pity and vows of violent revenge. To Edward's credit, however, he seems to

pensions. Although Mortimer never makes any secret of his discontent, it is likely Edward's unwillingness to pay ransom for the return of Mortimer Junior's uncle, Mortimer Senior, that pushes him into open rebellion. While Mortimer's initial resistance to Edward II seems to be based on a degree of principle, he grows increasingly less sympathetic as he rises to a position of power. He has Edward murdered, despite Edward's willingness to abdicate the throne, and after becoming the lover of Edward's wife, Isabella, he uses his relationship with her to manipulate both her and her young son Edward III—the new king. The courage and resignation with which he faces his own execution at the end of the play, however, do restore a sense of dignity to him in the play's final moments.

Isabella – Isabella is a daughter of the King of France, Edward II's wife, and mother to his son, Prince Edward. She is also one of the play's most ambiguous characters. The historical Isabella was a French princess who became infamous in England for the role she played in Edward's overthrow and (possibly) murder. In Marlowe's version of events, however, Isabella is quite sympathetic, at least initially. She first appears as a loving wife who is genuinely grieved and confused by her husband's preference for Gaveston—not least because Edward, under Gaveston's influence, treats her viciously at times. He repeatedly accuses her, for example, of having an affair with Mortimer Junior long before there is any evidence that she is doing so. Nevertheless, Isabella's willingness to conspire in Gaveston's recall and murder suggests she harbors an underlying ruthlessness. When her husband simply shifts his affections from Gaveston to Spencer Junior, Isabella decisively turns against Edward, taking Mortimer as her lover and supporting his rebellion against her husband. By the time Isabella colludes in Edward's murder and lies about it to her son, she has revealed herself to be a deeply treacherous character. It is never clear, however, whether she was untrustworthy and vengeful all along, or whether frustration with her husband's mistreatment of her is what drove her actions.

Edmund, Earl of Kent – Kent is Edward II's brother, and thus spends much of the play torn between loyalty to his family and loyalty to England. Kent initially condemns the English nobles for voicing their dissatisfaction with Edward and Gaveston's relationship; in fact, he considers their open opposition to Edward's actions treasonous and urges his brother to have them executed. At the same time, Kent himself is clearly disturbed by the king's decisions and repeatedly tries to steer him toward a more prudent course of action (e.g. avoiding upsetting the Pope by attacking the Bishop of Coventry). As time goes on and it becomes increasingly clear that Gaveston's voice is the only one Edward will listen to, Kent's absolute allegiance to his brother wavers, and he eventually joins the nobles in rebellion—an action he later comes to regret as an

unjustifiable betrayal of his own blood. Kent ultimately attempts to return to his brother's side but is arrested and executed by Mortimer and Isabella. Kent is thus a major vehicle for Marlowe to explore issues related to legitimacy and loyalty.

Prince Edward/Edward III – The son of Edward II and Isabella. Prince Edward is absent for the first half of the play, which makes sense given his young age: the real Edward III was fourteen at the time of his coronation, and multiple characters in Marlowe's play reference his youth. Nevertheless, Edward III proves surprisingly astute and competent in the play's final scenes, where he reveals his knowledge of Mortimer and Isabella's crimes before assuming the full responsibilities of his position as king. This suggests he will be a more effective ruler than his father was, although Edward III himself frames his execution of Mortimer and his imprisonment of Isabella as the restoration of Edward II's legacy.

Mortimer Senior – Mortimer Senior is the uncle of Mortimer Junior and a powerful member of the English nobility. Although he shares his nephew's frustration with Gaveston's influence, Mortimer Senior is somewhat more inclined to give Edward the benefit of the doubt; as he explains it, many powerful men have had "minions," and the king may become wiser as he grows older. Mortimer Senior therefore willingly complies with the king's order to lead an army against the Scots, but is captured and held for ransom in the ensuing battle. Edward's apparent disinterest in paying the ransom him after having sent him into battle in the first place exacerbates the nobility's discontent.

The Earl of Lancaster – Other than Mortimer Junior, Lancaster is perhaps the most outspoken of the lords who oppose Gaveston's relationship with Edward. He repeatedly warns the king, for instance, that his favoritism places his rule in jeopardy, and is ultimately eager to join forces with the other nobles to kill Gaveston and depose Edward. He is also presumably one of the most powerful members of the English nobility, since he is earl not only of Lancaster but also of Derby, Salisbury, and Lincoln. Interestingly, Gaveston says in an aside that he "abhors" Lancaster in particular—perhaps because of both the earl's power and his vehemence in opposing Gaveston himself.

Guy, Earl of Warwick – The Earl of Warwick is one of the nobles who opposes Gaveston's position at court and (ultimately) the rule of Edward himself. Edward describes Warwick as having "silver hairs," and suggests at one point that Warwick's age make him suited for a position as the king's "chiefest counsellor." In fact, however, Warwick is nearly as hot-headed as Mortimer Junior, as evidenced by the role he plays in Gaveston's death. After Gaveston's capture, the Earl of Pembroke had consented to allow Gaveston to see Edward before being executed, and sent him to the king under armed guard. Warwick, however, ambushed the group and murdered Gaveston, betraying his own ally (Pembroke) to satisfy his own anger and desire for vengeance.

Spencer Junior – After Gaveston's death, Edward II relies

instead on the support and advice of two of Gaveston's former retainers: Spencer Junior and his father, Spencer Senior. Neither man is well born, but (as he had with Gaveston) Edward grants them noble status: Spencer Junior thus becomes the Earl of Cornwall—the position Gaveston himself had held. It is less clear whether Spencer also assumes Gaveston's role as the king's lover, because while Spencer *does* stand by (and attempt to influence) Edward, the two men never speak particularly passionately or personally to one another.

The Earl of Pembroke – Pembroke is one of a group of nobles who oppose Edward's reliance on Gaveston. Nevertheless, after Gaveston's capture he eventually insists that the king should be allowed to see Gaveston one last time before Gaveston is executed. Pembroke's belief that the other nobles should agree to Edward's request to see Gaveston indicates that for all his differences with Edward *personally*, he still feels that anyone holding the title of king deserves a minimum standard of respect.

Bishop of Canterbury – The Bishop of Canterbury is the head of the Catholic Church in England. His anger with Edward II and Gaveston over the latter's assault on the Bishop of Coventry therefore reflects the king's broader and more general relationship to the Church, which Marlowe depicts as troubled: Edward resents the idea that a bishop—or even a pope—should have any authority over his actions as King of England. This is one area in which Edward would likely have appeared sympathetic to an Elizabethan audience, because England had recently broken away from the Catholic Church over precisely these sorts of jurisdictional issues.

Bishop of Coventry – The Bishop of Coventry is a high-ranking official of the Catholic Church who evidently helped persuade Edward II's father to exile Gaveston. He does not hide his displeasure over Gaveston's return in Scene 1, and the ill will between the two men quickly erupts into violence. Gaveston attacks the Bishop and tears his "sacred garments," and then Edward (who had been egging Gaveston on) imprisons the bishop and confiscates his property. The political tension this causes with the Pope, as well as the implied disrespect to the Church (or even Christianity itself) is what sets the plot against Gaveston in motion: Mortimer and the other nobles had disliked Gaveston from the start, but decide that something has to be done about him after the attack on the Bishop.

Lord Maltravers/Earl of Arundel – Maltravers is a noble who initially remains loyal to Edward II, delivering the king's request that he be allowed to see Gaveston before the latter is executed. At some point, however, Maltravers switches sides and allies himself with Mortimer Junior, at which point he becomes one of the deposed king's jailkeepers. In this role, he not only torments Edward with taunts and insults, but also allows Lightborne to murder the king. Maltravers' actions thus underscore his treacherous nature and suggest that Edward, who had trusted him, is not a particularly good judge of

character.

Gourney – Like Maltravers, Gourney serves as one of Edward II's sadistic jailkeepers after the king is deposed. Unlike Maltravers, Gourney does not appear to be a noble, which is perhaps why he does the dirty work of killing Lightborne after the assassin murders Edward. Gourney then flees, and also betrays both Maltravers and Mortimer Junior, who was the mastermind behind the murders, by revealing their roles in the bloody deeds.

Lightborne Lightborne is the assassin Mortimer Junior hires to kill Edward II. He specializes in murders that do not leave physical traces of violence on the victims' bodies (such as pouring poison in the victim's ear). His name is an Anglicized version of "Lucifer"—i.e. the devil. Nevertheless, he is not cunning enough to avoid betrayal, since Gourney kills him immediately after the king's assassination in order to better cover up the crime.

Lady Margaret de Clare – Lady Margaret is the daughter of the Earl of Gloucester, and thus the niece of Edward II. She is engaged to marry Gaveston, presumably because Edward wants his favorite to have official standing within the royal family. If the marriage is one of convenience, however, it is nevertheless true that Margaret herself seems devoted to her fiancé.

The Earl of Leicester – Leicester is an English noble who first appears in the play after Edward's defeat, arresting Baldock and Spencer Junior and also conveying the deposed king Edward to Kenilworth. He is nevertheless generally kind and sympathetic to Edward. Because of this kindness, Mortimer Junior dismisses Leicester from his position as the King's jailer.

The Mower – A man who maintains the grounds around the monastery. He is, literally, a mower of grass and other vegetation. The mower informs Rhys ap Howell and the Earl of Leicester of Edward's whereabouts when the King takes refuge in a monastery. He is also a symbolically important character because of his relationship to **plant** imagery: if England is a disordered garden, the mower's function is to "prune" it back into shape politically.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Spencer Senior – Spencer Senior is the father of Spencer Junior, who becomes a favorite of Edward II's after Gaveston's death. Edward similarly favors Spencer Senior and makes him Earl of Wiltshire. In return, Spencer Senior remains loyal to the king and is eventually arrested for supporting him.

Baldock – Baldock is a retainer of Gaveston's who frequently appears alongside Spencer Junior. He is also an Oxford scholar and the tutor of Lady Margaret, who is engaged to marry Gaveston. He remains loyal to Edward II until the king's defeat.

Bishop of Winchester – Although Edward II's actions earn him

many enemies within the Church, the Bishop of Winchester is the only religious official who appears to openly side with Mortimer Junior against the king. In fact, he is one of the men sent to persuade Edward to abdicate.

Lord Berkeley – When Mortimer Junior decides the Earl of Leicester may be untrustworthy, he sends Lord Berkeley to Kenilworth to convey Edward II to imprisonment at Berkeley. Nevertheless, Mortimer quickly decides Berkeley is too lenient with Edward as well, and replaces him with Maltravers and Gourney.

Sir John of Hainault – Hainault is a French lord who offers shelter and aid to Isabella even when her brother, the King of France, refuses to side with her in her dispute with Edward II.

Abbot of Neath – The Abbot of Neath is one of the few Church officials in the play who seem to support Edward II. He hides the king, Spencer Junior, and Baldock in his monastery, although the three men's whereabouts are ultimately betrayed.

Rhys ap Howell – A Welsh supporter of Mortimer Junior who helps arrest Spencer Senior, Spencer Junior, Baldock, and eventually Edward II himself.

Trussel – Trussel is a representative from Parliament who accompanies the Bishop of Winchester when he comes to collect Edward II's crown.

Initially, the objections of the nobility to Gaveston seem quite clearly rooted in sexual prejudice in light of his presumed romantic relationship with the king. Mortimer Senior, for instance, remarks that it is “strange” that Edward is “bewitched” by Gaveston. Edward's sexual preferences, however, are ultimately of less concern to the nobility than his willingness to follow the advice of Gaveston, a commoner, rather than their own. It is this, at least as much as Gaveston's gender, that Mortimer Junior suggests has disrupted the rightful order of things, sparking discontent among the common people and robbing the nobility of their legitimate position at court. “Thy court is naked,” Mortimer Junior says, “being bereft of those / That makes a king seem glorious to the world— / I mean the peers whom thou shouldst dearly love.” In other words, Mortimer Junior asserts that the authority of the court depends on its members being of high social rank. That being the case, Mortimer argues, Edward should love those of his own class, which further implies that he should *not* love the commoners.

To the extent that Edward's relationship with Gaveston is a problem, then, it is a problem not so much because it is homosexual, but because it ignores the categories according to which society is organized. In Edward II's world (and Marlowe's), ties of blood were far more important than ties of romance, because an individual's rank hinged entirely on whom he was biologically related to. By prioritizing a sexual relationship over the inherited claims of the nobility, Edward is in effect undermining the entire system by which power was allocated, making it possible for a “peasant” like Gaveston to enjoy more political power than the nobility. Isabella's eventual affair with Mortimer Junior creates a similar problem, because Mortimer—though a noble—is not in the direct line of succession for the throne. By choosing to pursue a relationship with him, however, Isabella opens up both herself and her newly crowned son to Mortimer's manipulation. This culminates in a scene where Mortimer orders Kent's executions over Edward III's protests before dragging the King bodily from the room. This flagrant disrespect for the wishes of a king—even a young king—is clearly problematic in a monarchical society.

From start to finish, then, *Edward II* depicts sexuality as a force that potentially threatens the entire social order. This is particularly clear in the repeated use of the word “unnatural”—a term often applied to sexual transgressions—to describe a variety of broken social ties. Kent, for instance, claims that only an “unnatural king” would “slaughter noblemen / And cherish flatterers,” while Edward III says he has difficulty believing his mother “unnatural” enough to conspire in her husband's murder.

The ascension of Edward III to the throne at the end of the play seems to mark a return to the social norm, since the new king explicitly invokes his father (that is, his bloodline) when



THEMES

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SEX, LINEAGE, AND THE NATURAL ORDER

For its time, *Edward II* is remarkably open about the kind of relationship that exists between the king and his favorite, Gaveston. As Marlowe depicts them, the two men are almost certainly lovers. While the concept of homosexuality as it is understood today may not have existed until the 19th century, homosexual behavior and relationships obviously *did* exist, and in the times when the play was set and was written were extremely taboo. It is therefore not surprising that Edward's relationship with Gaveston is a point of contention in the play. What is surprising, however, is that the play's characters are more concerned with Gaveston's status as a commoner than his sexual behavior. In fact, *Edward II* does not ultimately seem to condemn homosexuality at all, but instead uses the two men's relationship to make a broader point about the role of sexuality in a society based on class, rank, and birthright.

imprisoning his mother and executing her lover. Presumably, he will also defer to the nobility when appropriate, thus preserving social order on a broader scale as well. However, readers may find it difficult not to sympathize with Edward II's love for Gaveston, or even with the frustration that drives Isabella to her affair with Mortimer. In other words, while Marlowe depicts these relationships as a *threat* to the status quo, he does not entirely condemn them, leaving open the possibility that he does not entirely support the return to normalcy in the play's final lines.



FEAR OF THE OTHER AND INTERNAL DISCORD

At the time *Edward II* was written, the casual xenophobia of its characters would not have seemed out of the ordinary in English society. War was common, both in Marlowe's day and in Edward's, and tensions with the French, Scottish, and Irish ran correspondingly high. With that said, the mistrust of foreigners and the pervasive threat of war in the play also points to a broader suspicion of "otherness," whether based on ethnicity, sexuality, or even class. Ultimately, however, these fears prove to be misguided, as the most serious threats faced by characters in the play are internal.

The character who most clearly fulfills the role of outsider in *Edward II* is Gaveston. In fact, Marlowe underscores Gaveston's otherness by making him low-born—something that was not true of the historical Gaveston, but which clearly unnerves the nobles, who have inherited their position in the court. Gaveston's sexual behavior is also more obviously at odds with societal norms than Edward's. This is partly because Isabella and the nobles view Gaveston as the corrupter of an otherwise innocent (though weak) king, but it is also because Gaveston is quite open about where his sexual preferences lie. He talks, for instance, about arranging homoerotic "masques" with "men like satyrs grazing on the lawns" and "a lovely boy in Dian's shape, / ...in his sportful hands an olive tree / To hide those parts which men delight to see." Finally, Gaveston is a foreigner both by birth (he is French) and by habits and appearance; in a speech that links Gaveston's class, sexuality, and foreignness, Mortimer Junior complains that Gaveston "wears a short Italian hooded cloak" and goes around "with base outlandish cullions at his heels." Since "cullions"—an insult comparable to the modern "low-life"—also was sometimes used as slang to refer to testicles, the term captures much of what marks Gaveston as different, and much of what other characters malign him for.

What is ultimately threatening to the nobles about Gaveston, however, is not his threefold status as an outsider (homosexual, low-born, and foreign), but rather his status as an *insider*—specifically, the fact that Edward views his favorite as an extension of himself. Edward not only gives Gaveston permission to issue commands in his own name, but repeatedly

describes the two of them as being one and the same person: Edward responds to Gaveston's exile, for example, by claiming, "I from my self am banished." To some extent, then, Gaveston's influence over the king (and all the ill effects that follow) are simply a reflection of Edward's own "brainsickness"—a problem that is internal to both England and Edward himself. What exactly this sickness consists of is never entirely clear, but Edward's remarks about being separated from himself suggest that his sense of identity is unstable or divided. In this way, Edward's inner state mirrors the political divisions that eventually erupt into civil war. In fact, when fighting eventually *does* break out between Edward and the nobility, Isabella's remarks underscore the idea that the violence is an outward manifestation of the king's own state of mind; her description of "kin and countrymen / Slaughter[ing] themselves in others" recalls Edward's comments about his relationship with Gaveston, and she concludes by attributing these problems to "misgoverned kings."

In the end, then, it is not the foreigner—the "wild O'Neill" or the "haughty Dane"—that poses the real danger to England, but rather internal discord, which manifests not only in the rebellion of the nobility against the king, but also in the psychology of the king himself. In fact, as the political situation deteriorates further under Mortimer's rule, Edward descends so far into inner turmoil that he becomes a complete stranger to himself: he says, for instance, that he cannot tell whether he has "limbs" or not. By the end of the play, Marlowe suggests that the true "other" is not an external enemy but rather something that comes from within.



MONARCHY, LEGITIMACY, AND LOYALTY

Like many works of English Renaissance drama, *Edward II* deals extensively with the nature and limits of monarchical rule. Although the English kings and queens of the time certainly wielded more power than they would in later years, they were not absolute monarchs in the way that many rulers in continental Europe were. Instead, England had a tradition of semi-constitutional monarchy dating back to the rule of King John and the signing of the Magna Carta—a document that gave the nobility some checks on the king's power. This tug-of-war between the monarchy and the nobility continued for the next several centuries, and forms the backdrop for *Edward II*, in which the nobility eventually overthrows Edward in favor of his son, whom Mortimer intends to use as a puppet ruler. However, Marlowe's take on history also incorporates questions of personal loyalty and patriotism which—although anachronistic to the era in which the play is set—add further nuance to the conflict between Edward and the nobility.

Perhaps more than anything else, Edward's repeated complaints about being "overruled" by the nobility reveal his shortcomings as a king. For one, the remarks betray his lack of

awareness, since Gaveston is in fact “overruling” Edward’s decisions on a continual basis through his influence. Even more to the point, however, Edward’s preoccupation with the indignity of his treatment by the nobles suggests that he has difficulty viewing the broader political implications of events beyond whatever personal meaning they hold for him. This is to some extent understandable, particularly given that Edward at times expresses a desire to be free of the burdens of kingship (at one point telling the nobility to “Make several kingdoms of this monarchy, / And share it equally amongst you all, / So I may have some nook or corner yet / To frolic with my Gaveston”). For as long as he is king, however, Edward has a responsibility to abide by the norms and responsibilities of the position, which includes paying attention to the concerns of the nobility. As Warwick puts it, “We know our duties [to the king]; let [the king] know his peers.” Ultimately, the nobles decide the king has failed to leave up to his duties, and they rise up in revolt to depose him.

Whether Edward’s flouting of his kingly responsibilities does justify deposing him is a complicated question. Early in the play, even those characters who are most frustrated with the king are wary of actually taking action against him because they believe the role of the king demands loyalty, regardless of the fitness of the individual who has the role. The Bishop of Canterbury, for instance, cautions Mortimer Junior to “lift not [his] swords against the King.” The exception, as this exchange demonstrates, is Mortimer, who repeatedly argues that the king’s actions have broken the implicit contract that *makes* him king in the first place, and that it is therefore “lawful” to rise up against him. His argument is based not only on the idea that Edward’s actions have wronged his nobles, but also that they have “wronged [the] country.” Warwick and even Kent—Edward’s own brother—eventually come to share in this view, citing their duty to England as a reason to support the coup that deposes the king. This line of reasoning, if accepted, transforms the nobles’ rebellion (which would normally be an act of treason) into an act of patriotism. In addition, this logic also redefines treason as a matter of undermining the country’s welfare, rather than rebelling against any particular leader. The nobles, for instance, repeatedly describe Gaveston as a “traitor” despite his loyalty to the king.

This idea of civic or patriotic loyalty—loyalty not to a person but to a country—however, is tarnished by Mortimer’s own ambition, and his behavior after his own ascent to power. His pleasure at seeing the “proudest lords salute [him]” does not make him seem like someone who places the interests of his country before his own. Perhaps, then, the best way to understand Marlowe’s treatment of loyalty and royal legitimacy is to view it in the context of the time in which the play was written (not the time in which it was set). Renaissance England was moving away from the medieval feudal system, where individuals owed allegiance to a particular lord or monarch, and

was beginning to embrace something like modern nationalism, where individuals owe allegiance to a nation-state that exists independently of any particular ruler. The transition was incomplete at the time Marlowe was writing, however, and in fact England at the time was strongly united under Elizabeth I, though tensions over succession marked both the times before and after her reign (and in fact, about 40 years after the publication of the play England would erupt in a civil war that would end with the execution of its king). This may explain why *Edward II* views Mortimer’s patriotism with some suspicion, while painting Gaveston and Edward’s personal devotion to one another in a relatively sympathetic light.



LANGUAGE AND VIOLENCE

From start to finish, *Edward II* is an exceptionally violent play: Gaveston attacks a bishop in the very first scene, and the play ends with Edward brutally murdering and his son, Edward III, displaying the severed head of Mortimer Junior alongside his father’s corpse. What is even more striking, however, is how much of the dialogue in the play centers on violence, often describing it as something that, like language itself, can convey meaning. In fact, Marlowe seems to suggest that words are of limited usefulness in the world of *Edward II*—a message given further nuance by the fact that the work is a play, and is therefore a medium that blends language and physical action.

The idea that violence might function as a substitute for language appears very early in *Edward II*. When the nobles first speak out against Edward’s decision to recall Gaveston, Kent advises his brother, Edward, to “let these their heads / Preach upon poles for trespass of their tongues.” Mortimer responds by threatening to “henceforth parley with our naked swords.” Similar statements recur throughout the play, with the implication generally being that the spectacle of violence conveys a more powerful message about power and the consequences of treason than language alone ever could.

Initially, this is a view that Edward himself seems to share. Some of the most powerful speeches in the play are about the vengeance he intends to seek for the nobles’ treatment of both Gaveston and himself. He threatens at one point, for instance, to “unfold [his] paws / And let their lives’ blood slake [his] fury’s hunger.” But, at some point, all Edwards’ talk of violence comes to feel more like bluster than true strength. And, over time, Edward’s own language becomes more passive and uncertain. When Edward hears of Gaveston’s death, for example, he responds by wondering aloud, “O, shall I speak, or shall I sigh and die?” Neither alternative seems particularly effective, as Spencer Junior points out when he advises the king to “refer [his] vengeance to the sword.” Spencer, in other words, is advising Edward not to talk about violence, but to use actual violence to assert his power. Edward does so, and initially defeats his enemies. But battle creates inherent vulnerability;

the cost of losing is much greater than the cost of losing an argument. Edward, does eventually lose, and the play's final scenes further underscore the idea that violent action has triumphed over language (this time to Edward's dismay), with Mortimer transforming language into a kind of weapon when he writes the note ordering the deposed king's murder.

With all that said, it is worth remembering that *Edward II* is a work of literature, and therefore a testament to the power of language in and of itself. This, in fact, is something that Marlowe draws attention to by repeatedly noting the king's fondness for poetry and theater. A performance of the play, of course, would also draw some of its power from its depiction of violence, but Marlowe at least raises the possibility that Edward's preference for language is vindicated after his death: his son, Edward III, claims that his "loving father speaks" through him, thereby quite literally giving Edward II the play's final word.



FORTUNE AND TRAGEDY

One recurring image in *Edward II* is the "Wheel of Fortune"—a symbol medieval writers used to warn against the dangers of striving for worldly power and success. The basic idea was that the same fortune that carried a man to a position of prominence would ultimately bring about his downfall. Perhaps because of the clear parallel to the genre of tragedy (traditionally concerned with the fall of a powerful individual), the image frequently appears in Renaissance theater. *Edward II*, however, is remarkable for the sheer *number* of downfalls it depicts—not just the title character's, but also Gaveston's, Mortimer's, and even secondary characters'. In the end, the play suggests that rank, morality, and individual agency matter very little in the face of an entirely impersonal fate.

This trend becomes particularly clear in the case of Mortimer Junior, who is perhaps the closest thing *Edward II* has to a tragic hero. In fact, the play is subtitled the "tragicall fall of proud Mortimer," which also gives some insight into exactly where Mortimer's failings lie. Mortimer is certainly "proud" once he assumes power, even to the point of hubris. He boasts, for instance, that no one and nothing can touch him, and claims to control fate itself. This arrogance, according to Mortimer himself, is what ultimately causes his downfall: there is a point on Fortune's wheel, he says, "to which, when men aspire, / They tumble headlong down." Given this, and given the implied courage of someone who dares to challenge destiny itself, Mortimer would seem to stand out as an exceptional (though fatally flawed) character.

Within the context of the play as a whole, however, Mortimer's fall from grace is not unique at all. Instead, it is the last of a string of downfalls that overtake virtually every character who at any points holds a position of power: Gaveston, Edward himself, Isabella, and Spencer Junior. What's more, even

relatively minor (and, to Mortimer's mind, ignoble) characters like Baldock cite the concept of Fortune's wheel to explain their fate: "All live to die, and rise to fall." This slew of characters rising and falling arguably dilutes the emotional impact of any single character's defeat, and instead more generally emphasizes the idea that downfall and death (in Baldock's words) are the shared experience of all humanity.

To some extent, then, the play's depiction of fortune and tragedy mirrors what is (for the time it was written) a relatively democratic worldview. Mortimer bitterly resents the social climbing of characters like Gaveston and Spencer Junior because they are low-born, but his own ambition leads him to precisely the same fate: his rise and fall, in other words, are not more "noble" by virtue of his own social standing. On the other hand, it is hard not to see the play's many downfalls as evidence of a dark and bleak worldview. *Edward II*'s characters seem trapped in an endlessly looping cycle of violence and death. In this world, individual action and morality hardly seem to matter, not simply in the sense that characters cannot ward off their fates, but also in the sense that no character can even attain the status of a full tragic hero: the audience's attention is split between a number of tragic figures (Gaveston, Mortimer, and Edward II) who ultimately share the same fate despite having very different failings as individuals. In this way, the play breaks the conventional association between a fatal flaw or mistake and a fall from grace. Although characters repeatedly claim that their successes—e.g. Edward's initial victory over the rebel nobles—stem from the virtuousness of their motives, these claims ring hollow: Mortimer and Isabella, for instance, seem very nearly as corrupt when they rise to power as they are when they fall from it. In other words, Marlowe depicts fortune as a largely arbitrary and impersonal force, rather than as one that punishes the bad and rewards the good.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE SUN

In *Edward II*, as in much Renaissance literature, the sun functions as a symbol of the reigning monarch. This is likely at least in part the result of the prevailing cosmology of the day. Elizabethan England viewed the universe in terms of an orderly and hierarchical "Great Chain of Being," and analogies could be drawn between various relationships along the chain: the sun, for instance, naturally "ruled" the planets in much the same way a king naturally "ruled" his subjects. Not surprisingly, then, various characters in *Edward II* compare Edward himself to the sun, as when Warwick scolds Gaveston for trying "like Phaëthon" to control the sun/king.

Using this basic symbolism as a starting point, Marlowe also plays with sun imagery to develop the play's themes and plot. Edward's favorites, for instance, draw on the metaphor frequently, but often in personal rather than political ways. When Edward summons Gaveston to his side at the beginning of the play, Gaveston questions, "What need the arctic people love starlight, / To whom the sun shines both by day and night?". The lines, which immediately precede Gaveston's resolution to ignore the nobility entirely, underscore the extent to which Edward's personal relationship with Gaveston supersedes his responsibilities as king. It is therefore fitting that when Edward finally falls from power, he remarks that "kings, when regiment is gone, / [Are] but perfect shadows in a sunshine day": far from being a sun himself, Edward now feels that his rule is, in effect, a trick of the light.



TREES AND VEGETATION

Elizabethan theater often used plant imagery to describe the health of a nation: gardens, for instance, play a major role in *Richard II*. Marlowe also draws on this symbolism in *Edward II*, often tying it to descriptions of Edward himself, as when the nobles describe Spencer Junior as a "putrefying branch / That deads the royal vine." The rationale behind this and similar passages lies in Edward's *own* symbolic function as a monarch whose circumstances represent the circumstances of his entire country. Thus, in allowing social-climbing "flatterers" like Spencer and Gaveston access to himself, Edward is (according to the nobility) destabilizing the entire country.

The fact that it is a "mower" who, after Edward has lost the final battle and hidden himself in a monastery, reveals Edward's whereabouts to the nobles supports this idea: just as he literally prunes hedges, the mower symbolically "prunes" England back into shape. That said, Edward's arrest does not, in fact, end up putting an end to the country's problems, and it's worth noting that Mortimer Junior, who assumes power as Lord Protector after Edward's fall, at one point compares himself to "Jove's huge tree." Since Mortimer would not be the lawful king even if Edward II were dead, his use of this imagery arguably hints at his own growing arrogance and corruption, and further implies that it is not until the rightful heir, Edward III, ousts Mortimer Junior that England again returns to natural health.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Methuen Drama edition of *Edward II* published in 2014.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

☞ These are not men for me;
I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,
Musicians, that with touching of a string
May draw the pliant King which way I please.
...In the day when he shall walk abroad,
Like sylvan nymphs my pages shall be clad.
My men like satyrs grazing on the lawns,
Shall with their goat-feet dance an antic hay;
Sometime a lovely boy in Dian's shape,
With hair that gilds the water as it glides,
Crownets of pearl above his naked arms,
And in his sportful hands an olive tree
To hide those parts which men delight to see,
Shall bathe him in a spring.

Related Characters: Piers Gaveston (speaker), Edward II

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 1.1.549–65

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Edward II summons Gaveston back to court, three poor men approach Gaveston asking for his help in finding work. Gaveston rejects them, however, on the grounds that they do not serve his purposes: one, for instance, is a former soldier, and therefore unlikely to find favor with a king who prefers theater to warfare. Since the English nobility see Edward's disinterest in military matters as yet another sign of his unfitness for rule, Gaveston's speech here helps to set up later questions of where a monarch's authority comes from and whether a monarch can ever be lawfully stripped of that authority. The passage is probably also the best evidence in the play that Gaveston's relationship with Edward is romantic, since the scene Gaveston describes is quite clearly sexual in tone: the "parts which men delight to see," for instance, is a reference to genitalia. Finally, the above speech establishes that Gaveston's involvement with Edward is at least partly a matter of self-interest, since he admits to hoping to "draw the pliant King which way he pleases." It is this ambition, even more than Gaveston's sexual behavior, that puts him at odds with the English nobility. For the lords who have inherited their position at court, Gaveston's social climbing is both an insult and a threat to their own power.

☞ My lord, why do you thus incense your peers
That naturally would love and honour you,
But for that base and obscure Gaveston?

Related Characters: The Earl of Lancaster (speaker), Piers Gaveston, Edward II

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 1.1.98–100

Explanation and Analysis

As Gaveston, newly returned from exile, listens in hiding, Edward and the nobility argue about the King's favorite. This is the first dispute of its kind in the play, and it therefore establishes the nobles' main quarrels with Gaveston. Lancaster's speech, for instance, introduces several ideas that will recur throughout the nobles' interactions with Edward—first and foremost, the fact that as a commoner, Gaveston is not entitled to the honor Edward has shown him. This is a sticking point for the nobility, because their own power depends on the claim that their lineage makes them specially worthy of authority. In addition, Lancaster argues that the "natural" relationship between the king and the nobility should be one of mutual support. This ties into his complaint about Gaveston, whom the nobles repeatedly describe as disrupting the natural social order. It also, however, reflects the English tradition of semi-limited monarchy, where the nobles had some input into the governing of the realm.

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

Related Characters: Mortimer Junior (speaker), Mortimer Senior, Piers Gaveston, Edward II

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.1.124–125

Explanation and Analysis

When it becomes clear that Edward has no intention of giving Gaveston up, the nobles storm off issuing threats of war. Mortimer Junior's words, however, are particularly significant, because they explicitly associate violence and language—two forces which are often at odds in the play, but which also overlap in some ways. Here, for instance, Mortimer describes his sword as speaking, implying that violence itself can function as a form of communication when language itself fails. Mortimer, of course, vastly prefers action to talking, so his words here also help to establish a clear contrast between him and Edward, who loves poetry and frequently delivers long and ornate

speeches. Finally, Mortimer's passing description of Edward as "brainsick" foreshadows the role that internal turmoil will play in *Edward II* as the country descends into civil war and the King himself descends into madness.



Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

☞ Bishop of Canterbury: ...We and the rest that are his councillors
Will meet and with a general consent
Confirm his banishment with our hands and seals.

Lancaster: What we confirm the King will frustrate.

Mortimer Junior: Then may we lawfully revolt from him.

Related Characters: Mortimer Junior, The Earl of Lancaster, Bishop of Canterbury (speaker), Piers Gaveston, Edward II

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.2.69–73

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of Gaveston's attack on the Bishop of Coventry, the nobles and the Bishop of Canterbury meet to discuss how to address the threat they feel Gaveston poses. The conversation quickly turns toward rebellion, and Canterbury—alarmed by the thought of rising against the King—urges the nobles to instead present a legal order for Gaveston's exile. Mortimer responds with what is possibly the clearest articulation of why the nobles' rebellion might be considered legitimate: by ignoring the law himself, Edward II would undercut his own claims to lawful rule and therefore free the nobility of any responsibility to obey him. It is worth noting, however, that Edward ultimately *does* comply with the order for Gaveston's banishment, though only under duress. Combined with the fact that Mortimer Junior seems eager to rebel throughout the play, this undermines the nobility's claims to the moral highground.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

Edward: Lay hands on that traitor Mortimer!



Mortimer Senior: Lay hands on that traitor Gaveston!

[The NOBLES draw swords]

Kent: Is this the duty that you owe your King?

Warwick: We know our duties; let him know his peers.

Related Characters: Guy, Earl of Warwick, Edmund, Earl of Kent, Mortimer Senior, Edward II (speaker), Mortimer Junior, Piers Gaveston

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 1.4.20–23

Explanation and Analysis

When Edward places Gaveston beside his throne, the nobles react with outrage, and Mortimer Junior goes so far as to predict the "downfall" of both the King and his favorite. Edward responds with this order for Mortimer Junior's arrest, and the exchange that follows distills the conflicting perspectives the play offers on treason and monarchical legitimacy. Mortimer's words certainly seem treasonous at first glance, since they directly threaten the reigning king. The nobles, however, view Gaveston as the true traitor, both because he is manipulating Edward (and thus usurping the king's status) and because his actions are harming the country's welfare. As the argument continues, it raises the related issue of what exactly Edward's position as king entails. According to Kent, what Edward does as king is beside the point, because the mere fact that he *is* king entitles him to absolute obedience. The nobles, by contrast, feel that Edward is at a minimum bound to listen to the concerns of the nobility (that is, the "peers").

Edward: Rend not my heart with thy too-piercing words.
Thou from this land, I from my self am banished.

Related Characters: Edward II (speaker), Piers Gaveston

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.4.117–118

Explanation and Analysis


When Edward confirms to Gaveston that he has been exiled, Gaveston says that his happiness has turned to a "hell of grief." Edward responds by suggesting that Gaveston's misfortune is relatively mild compared to Edward's, since Gaveston's exile means that Edward is "banished" from himself. This is in keeping with other comments Edward has made about feeling that he and Gaveston are one and the same person. To some extent, this is conventional romantic language, but in the context of the play's interest in internal division and turmoil (e.g. civil war), it takes on added significance. Throughout the play, Edward seems to have a rather weak sense of his identity, relying not only on Gaveston but also on his status as king for stability. Gaveston's absence thus threatens to further destabilize Edward's sense of self (or reveal that it is already divided).

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.

Related Characters: Piers Gaveston, Isabella, Edward II (speaker), Mortimer Junior

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.4.145–148

Explanation and Analysis



As Edward prepares to accompany Gaveston on his way to exile in Ireland, Isabella stumbles across her husband and asks him where he is going. Edward responds with an insult—"French strumpet"—and then takes his wife to task both for her foreign birth and for her sexual promiscuity. Since there is no indication, at this point in the play, that Isabella actually *has* been unfaithful to her husband, the latter charge is puzzling. It does, however, draw a parallel between Isabella and Gaveston, who (like the Queen) is French, and whose sexual behavior lies outside societal norms. In other words, where other characters view Gaveston as an alien presence at court, Edward views Isabella as the outsider.

Gaveston's accusation is also significant, in part because it is the first time anyone suggests Isabella is having an affair with Mortimer Junior. Edward immediately latches on to Gaveston's insinuation and begins throwing it in his wife's

face at every possible opportunity. The exchange therefore reveals the extent of Gaveston's control over Edward, as well as his skills as a manipulator; he knows, for instance, to pretend to allow Edward to draw his own conclusions. Finally, it is worth noting that Gaveston's accusation, though (probably) false at this point, establishes that an affair with Mortimer would be "ungentle" of Isabella. This is important because Isabella eventually does pursue an affair with Mortimer, and the relationship—like Edward's relationship with Gaveston's—threatens to destabilize the entire kingdom.

☛☛ His wanton humour grieves not me,
But this I scorn, that one so basely born
Should by his sovereign's favour grow so pert,
And riot it with the treasure of the realm
While soldiers mutiny for want of pay.
He wear's a lord's revenue on his back,
And Midas-like he jets it in the court
With base outlandish cullions at his heels,
Whose proud fantastic liveries make such show
As if that Proteus, god of shapes, appeared.
I have not seen a dapper jack so brisk;
He wears a short Italian hooded cloak,
Larded with pearl; and in his Tuscan cap
A jewel of more value than the crown.
Whiles other walk below, the King and he
From out a window laugh at such as we,
And flout our train and jest at our attire.

Related Characters: Mortimer Junior (speaker), Edward II, Piers Gaveston

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.4.403–419

Explanation and Analysis



Before Mortimer Senior leaves to lead Edward's army in Scotland, he urges tolerance of Edward's relationship with Gaveston, telling Mortimer Junior that it is not unusual for a king to have a favorite, and that Edward will likely outgrow the infatuation in time. Mortimer, however, refuses to listen to his uncle, because it is not primarily the nature of Edward and Gaveston's relationship that concerns him. Although the above speech does touch on Gaveston's sexuality—"cullions," for instance, means both "scoundrels" and "testicles"—Mortimer references it in the context of Gaveston's broader status as an outsider. Gaveston, for instance, is French and also prone to wearing foreign

fashions. Most significantly, he is low born, which Mortimer takes particular offense at. Although his concerns about Gaveston's spending seem legitimate, what truly seems to bother Mortimer is the fact that Gaveston has used his "sovereign's favour" to climb the social ladder. Given that Mortimer's own rank is inherited, it makes sense that he would regard Gaveston with suspicion: if chosen relationships rather than blood ties determine social status, Mortimer would lose his own power and standing in society.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

☛☛ You must cast the scholar off
And learn to court it like a gentleman...
You must be proud, bold, pleasant, resolute,
And now and then, stab, as occasion serves.

Related Characters: Spencer Junior (speaker), Baldock

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2.1.31–43

Explanation and Analysis

When Spencer Junior and Baldock—former retainers of Lady Margaret's father—learn that their master has died, they begin to look for a new noble to attach themselves to. Baldock hopes to win favor with Gaveston, but since Baldock was previously employed as Lady Margaret's tutor, Spencer says he first needs to learn to act the part of a "gentleman." This is a striking statement in and of itself, because it implies that nobility is a series of actions rather than a birthright. As Spencer goes on, his words become even more subversive. There is a sexual double meaning to the word "stab" that is especially dangerous to the status quo, because it implies the possibility of leveraging sexual relationships to advance socially, as Gaveston, Mortimer Junior, and perhaps Spencer himself do. Even in its more literal sense, however, the term is significant, because it suggests that the nobility maintains its status in part through violence—a suggestion that again undercuts the idea of inherited rank.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

☛☛ Base leaden earls that glory in your birth,
Go sit at home and eat your tenants' beef,
And come not here to scoff at Gaveston,
Whose mounting thoughts did never creep so low
As to bestow a look on such as you.

Related Characters: Piers Gaveston (speaker), Guy, Earl of Warwick, The Earl of Pembroke, Mortimer Junior, The Earl of Lancaster

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2.2.74–78

Explanation and Analysis

When Gaveston returns from his second exile, the nobles greet him with mocking references to the titles Edward has conferred on him—the implication being that Gaveston is still not a true nobleman despite these honors. Gaveston responds with the above insult, which undercuts the grounds for the nobles' own mockery by suggesting that there is nothing noble about inherited wealth and power. In fact, Gaveston implies that there is something distinctly *ignoble* about the nobility's status: he refers to them as "base," which is a word the nobles themselves have repeatedly used to describe Gaveston's low birth. This implication becomes even clearer when Gaveston suggests that the nobles are "low" in spite of their birth. This passage, then, help illustrate why the nobles see Gaveston as such a threat: his words here openly challenge the merits of the social hierarchy that gives the nobility its power.

☛ Lancaster: Look for rebellion, look to be deposed:

Thy garrisons are beaten out of France,
And, lame and poor, lie groaning at the gates;
The wild O'Neill, with swarms of Irish kerns,
Lives uncontrolled within the English pale;
Unto the walls of York the Scots made road
And, unresisted, drove away rich spoils.

Mortimer Junior: The haughty Dane commands the narrow seas,
While in the harbour ride thy ships unrigged.

Related Characters: The Earl of Lancaster (speaker), Edward II

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2.2.158–164

Explanation and Analysis

When Edward refuses to ransom Mortimer Junior's uncle, who has been captured while waging war in Scotland, the nobles vent their frustrations even more explicitly than they had previously. These concerns range from allegations of

mispending and overtaxation to the persistent complaint that Edward does not adequately respect his nobles. The topic they spend the most time discussing, however, is Edward's neglect of military matters. In this passage, for instance, Lancaster and Mortimer argue that Edward's behavior has opened the country up to attack by a number of foreign powers, including France, Scotland, and Ireland. Their words thus play on fears of the outsider: they personify different countries as figures that embody ethnic stereotypes (e.g. "haughty Dane"). In this context, Lancaster's warning about the possibility of rebellion is easy to overlook, and yet it is this internal threat that ultimately brings about Edward's downfall.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

☛☛ Monster of men,
That, like the Greekish strumpet, trained to arms
And bloody wars so many valiant knights,
Look for no other fortune, wretch, than death;
King Edward is not here to buckler thee.

Related Characters: The Earl of Lancaster (speaker), Edward II, Piers Gaveston

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2.4.14–18

Explanation and Analysis



As Gaveston flees from Tynemouth, he taunts the nobles who are pursuing him, and they respond in kind. Lancaster's insults are especially interesting because of their complex treatment of sexuality and social order. On the one hand, Lancaster's use of the word "monster" seems quite clearly homophobic, in that it positions Gaveston as an abnormal and dangerous outsider. In the very next breath, however, Lancaster compares Gaveston's effects on England to Helen of Troy's role in inciting the Trojan War. On the face of it, this is an odd comparison: Helen and Paris's relationship was heterosexual (though adulterous), and Lancaster seems to be drawing a moral equivalency between it and Gaveston's relationship with Edward. This is actually in keeping with the play as a whole, however, since Marlowe depicts sexuality in general (not just homosexual sexuality) as a force that can destabilize society. In fact, the above passage applies equally well to Isabella as it does to Gaveston, since her adulterous relationship with Mortimer is partially responsible for the violence that occurs in the second half of the play.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

Edward: O, shall I speak, or shall I sigh and die?

Spencer Junior: My lord, refer your vengeance to the sword
Upon these barons.

Related Characters: Spencer Junior , Edward II (speaker), Guy, Earl of Warwick , Piers Gaveston

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.2.121–123

Explanation and Analysis

When Edward learns that the escort charged with bringing Gaveston to him has been ambushed (and Gaveston himself killed), he responds with despair. Edward consistently prefers words to action, but in this case he seems incapable of even speech, saying that he may "sigh and die" instead. Although this silence is temporary, it is telling: as Mortimer rises to power in the second half of the play, action (and violent action in particular) renders language increasingly ineffective and ultimately takes its place. Edward's speechlessness here foreshadows this development.

The fact that Edward more or less wishes for death is also significant in a play as bloody as this one. Edward's initial response to Gaveston's death is not to seek revenge, but instead to turn his violent impulses on himself (though in a passive way). It is only when Spencer intervenes that Edward decides to go to war with Gaveston's killers. In other words, the passage reflects *Edward II's* interest in self-destruction of various kinds (civil war, insanity, and so on).

Act 3, Scene 3 Quotes

Mortimer Junior: Then, Edward, thou wilt fight it to the last,
And rather bathe thy sword in subjects' blood
Than banish that pernicious company?

Edward: Ay, traitors all! Rather than thus be braved,
Make England's civil towns huge heaps of stones
And ploughs to go about our palace gates.

Warwick: A desperate and unnatural resolution.

Related Characters: Guy, Earl of Warwick , Edward II, Mortimer Junior (speaker), Spencer Junior

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.3.27–33

Explanation and Analysis

As Edward and the rebel nobles fight over the King's favoritism of Spencer Junior, Mortimer Junior asks Edward whether Spencer's companionship is truly worth killing his own subjects. Edward replies that it in fact *is*, insisting that he would rather destroy every town in England than allow the nobles to overrule him. Presumably, Edward's determination reflects not only his feelings for Spencer, but also his belief in his absolute power as king: yielding to the nobles would mean admitting that they should in fact have some power to curb his actions. Not surprisingly, Edward's words appall the nobles, who have repeatedly argued that the legitimacy of the monarchy rests in part on the king faithfully carrying out his duties to his subjects—something Edward appears to have little interest in. Warwick's use of the word "unnatural" underscores the degree to which Edward is flouting his responsibilities, while also tying his actions to his "unnatural" behavior elsewhere in the play (i.e. taking a male lover).

Act 4, Scene 4 Quotes

Isabella:...A heavy case,
When force to force is knit, and sword and glaive
In civil broils make kin and countrymen
Slaughter themselves in others, and their sides
With their own weapons gored. But what's the help?
Misgoverned kings are cause of all this wrack;
And Edward, thou art one among them all,
Whose looseness hath betrayed thy land to spoil
And made the channels overflow with blood.
Of thine own people patron shouldst thou be,
But thou—

Mortimer Junior: Nay madam, if you be a warrior,
Ye must not grow so passionate in speeches.

Related Characters: Mortimer Junior, Isabella (speaker), Edward II

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4.4.4–15

Explanation and Analysis

When Isabella and Mortimer Junior arrive in Bristol to do battle with Edward II, Isabella launches into what appears to be a speech to rally the troops. Tellingly, however, Mortimer interrupts her midsentence and tells her that her



words are not suited to the battlefield. He describes her speech as too "passionate," but it seems likely that he also views it as overly long and too abstract in its speculations about the causes of civil war. Mortimer, as always, prefers action to words.

With that said, Isabella's words actually do have significance in terms of the play as a whole. While it's difficult to know whether her lament is sincere, her description of civil war as a uniquely unnatural form of conflict does ring true in light of Marlowe's broader depiction of internal discord in the play. According to Isabella, civil war is not simply a matter of killing people *like* oneself but rather of metaphorically killing *oneself*. In this way, it corresponds to other forms of self-destruction and fractured identity in the play (most importantly, Edward's disturbed self-image and suicidal impulses).

Act 4, Scene 5 Quotes

☛☛ Successful battles gives the God of kings
To them that fight in right and fear his wrath.
Since then successfully we have prevailed,
Thanks be heaven's great architect and you...
Sith the fates
Have made [Edward II] so infortunate,
Deal you, my lords, in this, my loving lords,
As to your wisdoms fittest seems in all.

Related Characters: Isabella (speaker), Edward II

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.5.28–38

Explanation and Analysis

Following the rebels' victory at Bristol, Isabella delivers the above speech to her allies, attributing their success to the justice of their cause. Regardless of whether Isabella and Mortimer are at this point acting primarily out of a sense of civic duty, the remark is significant, because it implies that good fortune follows from moral behavior. This is something that Edward himself had suggested in his earlier, successful confrontation with the rebels, but it is not a view that the play in its entirety supports. There are few (if any) entirely "pure" characters in *Edward II*, but there are also no real villains: most characters act in ways that are at least semi-justified. Despite this, virtually every major character in the play ultimately proves, in Isabella's words, "infortunate": Gaveston, Edward II, and Mortimer Junior are all murdered or executed, and Isabella herself is imprisoned. This suggests that "fortune" in *Edward II* is a largely impersonal

force that eventually cuts everyone down regardless of individual actions or morality.

Act 4, Scene 6 Quotes

☛☛ But what is he, whom rule and empery
Have not in life or death made miserable?

Related Characters: Edward II (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 4.6.14–15



Explanation and Analysis


After Edward's defeat at Bristol, he goes into hiding in a monastery, where he rebuffs the Abbot's attempts to console him with a speech about the power and wealth he once enjoyed as king. His tone then changes, however, and he suggests that kingship is inseparable from suffering. In part, this reflects the concept of Fortune's Wheel, which depicts downfall as the inevitable consequence of worldly success. Relatedly, Edward's remark about misery in "death" perhaps reflects the Christian worldview that riches and prestige are at best transitory, and at worst an impediment to leading the devout life that would earn an individual a place in Heaven.

However, in light of earlier remarks Edward has made, the passage also has a more personal undercurrent. Although Edward has often prided himself on his status as a king, this arrogance alternates with a wish to rid himself of the burdens of monarchy: in Scene 4, for instance, he offered to give up his entire kingdom if the nobles would leave him "some nook or corner...to frolic with [his] dearest Gaveston." In this scene, Edward expresses an even more modest wish to retire to the "life contemplative" the monks enjoy. Edward's views of kingship therefore underscore a sad truth about him: if he wasn't especially suited to being king, it's perhaps because he didn't really want to be one.

☛☛ Spencer, I see our souls are fled hence;
We are deprived the sunshine of our life.
Make for a new life, man; throw up thy eyes,
And heart and hand to heaven's immortal throne,
Pay nature's debt with cheerful countenance.
Reduce we all our lessons unto this:
To die, sweet Spencer, therefore live we all;
Spencer, all live to die, and rise to fall.

Related Characters: Baldock (speaker), Edward II, Spencer Junior

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4.6.104–111

Explanation and Analysis


When Mortimer's forces discover the King in hiding at the monastery, they remove Edward to Kenilworth and prepare to lead Spencer Junior and Baldock away for execution. In this passage, Baldock urges Spencer to resign himself to death, as he himself has accepted. Baldock's stoicism stems in part from the loss of Edward himself, whom he here compares to sunshine: the metaphor underscores the centrality of Edward to Baldock and Spencer's lives, but also "corrupts" a symbol of the King's political role (as the center of the nation) for personal use. The fact that the passage is nevertheless poignant is a sign of the play's ambivalence toward Edward's relationships with his favorites. Although the play suggests that these intense personal and romantic bonds may conflict with the duties of a monarch, it is sympathetic to the feelings themselves.


Baldock's resignation also ties into the play's depiction of fortune and tragedy. Spencer and Baldock are relatively minor characters, but their sentiments here are similar to those expressed by characters like Edward and Mortimer in their own downfalls. In part, this reflects the fact that, as Baldock says in this passage, all humans die no matter what their social status. It also underscores the implications of this common fate for tragedy, however: if all men "rise to fall," there is nothing especially noble or even remarkable about the fall of a character like Mortimer. In this way, *Edward II* challenges the idea of tragedy as something unique to kings or noblemen whose moral failings lead them into trouble. Instead, it suggests that tragedy is simply an ongoing and mostly arbitrary fact of life, since everyone will ultimately "fall."

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

☛☛ But what are kings, when regiment is gone,
But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?
My nobles rule; I bear the name of King.
I wear the crown, but am controlled by them

Related Characters: Edward II (speaker), Mortimer Junior

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5.1.27–30

Explanation and Analysis

When Edward is imprisoned at Kenilworth, he initially responds to Leicester's attempts at consolation by saying that it is hard for him, as a former king, to bear his current situation. As Edward continues to speak, however, he begins to question his former attitudes toward kingship. For most of the play, Edward has insisted on the exceptionality of his position as king, arguing that it gives him (for example) the right to completely ignore the wishes of the nobility. Now, however, Edward suggests that a king stripped of the outward signs of royalty is no different than any other person. The reference to sunshine underscores this, since the sun has appeared throughout the play as a symbol for the king's splendor and importance. By contrast, Edward here describes kings as "shadows"—figures that do not even exist independently, but instead depend on the sun shining.

☛☛ Well may I rend his name that rends my heart!
This poor revenge hath something eased my mind.
So may his limbs be torn, as is this paper!

Related Characters: Edward II (speaker), Mortimer Junior

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.1.140–142

Explanation and Analysis


When Berkeley arrives at Kenilworth, he brings a letter from Mortimer Junior dismissing the Earl of Leicester and entrusting Edward to Berkeley himself. The note enrages Edward, who suspects (correctly) that Mortimer has dismissed Leicester for being too sympathetic to the deposed king. Edward therefore tears up the letter, wishing as he does so that he could tear similarly tear Mortimer's body apart. The moment thus ties together themes of violence and language, while hinting that the latter may prove stronger in the end. Although Edward's "attack" on Mortimer's name seems futile, it bears a striking resemblance to Mortimer's ultimate fate in the play, which is to be hanged, drawn, and quartered (i.e. torn apart). Interestingly, this is not the way the real-life Mortimer was executed, which makes Edward's words here even more

significant: it is as if Marlowe has changed Mortimer's death in response to Edward's speech. In other words, the very fact that this passage takes place in a work of literature gives it a power it might not have in real life: the power to foreshadow an event, but also perhaps to cause the event in a figurative sense.

Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

☛☛ As thou intendest to rise by Mortimer,
Who now makes Fortune's wheel turn as he please,
Seek all the means thou canst to make him droop,
And neither give him kind word nor good look.

Related Characters: Mortimer Senior (speaker), Gourney , Edward II

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.2.51–54



Explanation and Analysis

When Mortimer Junior decides to dismiss Berkeley as Edward II's jailer, he instead places the deposed king in the care of Gourney and Maltravers. Maltravers is a nobleman, but Gourney is not, which is why Mortimer addresses the latter specifically in this passage, promising him social advancement in return for faithful service. More importantly, though, Mortimer explicitly brings up the image of Fortune's Wheel for the first time in the play, and in a way that reveals how arrogant he has become. Fortune's Wheel is typically a symbol of the futility of ambition, since it depicts downfall as inevitable and outside of human control. Mortimer, however, suggests that he has mastered fortune and can effectively act as a "wheel" himself, elevating Gourney and casting Edward down. This of course turns out to be untrue: in fact, it is actually Gourney who brings about Mortimer's downfall by betraying him.

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

☛☛ O, miserable is that commonweal, where lords
Keep courts and kings are locked in prison!

Related Characters: Edmund, Earl of Kent (speaker), Edward II

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.3.63–64

Explanation and Analysis

After aiding Mortimer Junior and the rest of the rebels in deposing Edward II, Kent has second thoughts and tries to help his brother escape from prison. Kent is arrested during the attempt, and his response helps clarify why his allegiance shifted back to Edward. Although family loyalty does play a role in Kent's decision, this passage suggests that the same sense of patriotic duty that first inspired him to rebel has now inspired him to turn on Mortimer. More specifically, the passage suggests that the natural social hierarchy has been turned upside down as a result of Mortimer's rule, since a noble is now the de facto king while the crowned king is imprisoned. This underscores the extent to which Mortimer and Isabella's relationship parallels Gaveston and Edward's: in both cases, an illicit romance has opened the door to social upheaval.

Act 5, Scene 5 Quotes

☛☛ And there in mire and puddle have I stood
This ten days' space; and lest that I should sleep,
One plays continually upon a drum.
They give me bread and water being a king,
So that for want of sleep and sustenance
My mind's distempered and my body's numbed,
And whether I have limbs or no, I know not.

Related Characters: Edward II (speaker), Gourney , Lord Maltravers/Earl of Arundel

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.5.58–64

Explanation and Analysis

Although Edward (correctly) guesses that Lightborne has come to assassinate him, his experience of imprisonment is so awful that he seems to welcome the chance to talk about it with someone. The physical conditions in which Edward is being kept are quite obviously terrible, but it is their effect on Edward's psyche that is most striking. In the above passage, for instance, Edward describes his mental state as confused and to some extent fragmented, since he has lost sensation in and/or awareness of parts of his body. Edward cites hunger and sleep deprivation as the immediate causes of this state, but it is in many ways the culmination of a kind of "madness" that has plagued him throughout the play, from his infatuation with Gaveston to his despair after losing his crown. The passage therefore reinforces the idea that the most significant personal and political threats come

from within, with Edward's "distempered" mind paralleling the disordered state of the country in the wake of Mortimer's takeover.

Act 5, Scene 6 Quotes



👤 King Edward III: Traitor, in me my loving father speaks
And plainly saith, 'twas thou that murd' redst him.

Mortimer Junior: But hath your grace no other proof than this?

King Edward III: Yes, if this be the hand of Mortimer.

[He presents the letter]

Related Characters: Mortimer Junior, Prince Edward/Edward III (speaker), Edward II

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.6.41–44

Explanation and Analysis

When Edward III charges Mortimer Junior with murdering Edward II, Mortimer initially denies the charge and asks who "dares" to accuse him. Edward III responds by saying that his father, Edward II, is speaking through him to accuse Mortimer, and then produces the letter that Mortimer wrote ordering the former King's death. In this way, the exchange is a double vindication of the power of language over violence: Edward II figuratively speaks from beyond the grave to accuse Mortimer, and it is Mortimer's own words that prove his guilt.

The passage also marks the reestablishment of "proper" social order after the reigns of first Edward II and then Mortimer and Isabella. Both regimes prioritized illicit and

cross-class sexual relationships over inherited rank and family ties. By citing his relationship to his father, however, Edward III is reasserting the importance of blood relationships in defining the social structure: Edward III's relationship to his father is what enables him to accuse Mortimer, and (more importantly) what legitimizes his claim to the throne.

👤 Base Fortune, now I see that in thy wheel
There is a point to which, when men aspire,
They tumble headlong down; that point I touched,
And seeing there was no place to mount up higher,
Why should I grieve at my declining fall?

Related Characters: Mortimer Junior (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.6.59–63

Explanation and Analysis

When Edward III discovers and publically reveals the role that Mortimer Junior played in Edward II's murder, Mortimer quickly resigns himself to his impending execution. Where Mortimer had previously (and arrogantly) assumed that he could control his fate by sheer force of will, he now accepts that "Fortune" lies outside of human control and inevitably cuts down anyone who aspires to power. There is relatively little sense, however, that fortune is *punishing* ambition: instead, Mortimer's words echo earlier speeches (e.g. Baldock's) that depict this rising and falling as a basic fact of existence, comparable to life and death. This to some extent undercuts the grandeur of Mortimer's speech: although he continues to speak scornfully of fortune as a tragic hero might, his fate is far from unique in the play.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Gaveston, who until recently was in exile in France, reads aloud from a letter informing him of the death of the former king of England, Edward I. As Gaveston goes on, it becomes clear that the writer of the letter is Edward II, who has inherited the throne from his father and is now inviting Gaveston to return to court and “share the kingdom” with him.

Gaveston responds to the letter with delight, declaring his intention to rejoin Edward II immediately and comparing himself to Leander, who in Greek myth swam across the Hellespont every night to be with his lover Hero. Furthermore, Gaveston says, he will willingly suffer the “enmity” of the world in order to be with Edward, whose presence he compares to the **sun**. That being the case, Gaveston casually dismisses the common people and the nobility alike, vowing to bow only to the king.

Gaveston is interrupted by the arrival of three poor men seeking employment. In response, Gaveston questions them about who they are, and each man provides a different answer. Gaveston dismisses all three carelessly, telling the last—a soldier—that there are “hospitals” (i.e. charities) for veterans. This angers the soldier, who says that he hopes a soldier will kill Gaveston one day. In an aside, Gaveston admits to being unmoved but says it costs him nothing to “flatter” the men's hopes. He therefore tells them he will help them if he is successful at court, and the men leave expressing their gratitude.

Edward II opens with the King extending a fairly shocking invitation to Gaveston. Although the romantic nature of the men's relationship does not become fully clear until a few lines later, this is largely beside the point: from the point of view of the English nobility, Edward has no right to elevate a commoner like Gaveston to a position of power (and certainly not to a position of equality with the King himself, as Edward's remark about sharing his kingdom suggests).



Gaveston's reference to the myth of Leander and Hero is the first of several classical allusions in the play, many of which hint that Gaveston and Edward's relationship is sexual. This particular allusion, however, also hints that the men's relationship will come to a bad end, since Hero and Leander's affair ended with Leander drowning and Hero killing herself in grief. Furthermore, as Gaveston goes on, it becomes clear why the men's relationship might pose problems. Gaveston is totally dismissive of everyone except Edward, but a ruler (or, in Gaveston's case, an advisor to a ruler) cannot simply disregard the welfare of his people or the ambitions of the other nobility. The comparison of Edward to the sun underscores the self-absorption of Gaveston's dreams, since he is using a symbol typically meant to evoke the king's centrality to the nation as a way of describing a personal relationship.



Gaveston's disinterest in the poor men's plight foreshadows the issues that will dominate the argument between him and Edward on the one hand, and the English nobility on the other. The nobles (Mortimer Junior in particular) see the King's disregard for military matters as evidence of his weakness as a ruler. Gaveston's dismissal of the soldier lends some credibility to this position. Regardless of whether war is itself a good thing, Gaveston's treatment of the soldier is callous, and part of a broader pattern of indifference toward the well-being of the kingdom.



After the poor men leave, Gaveston explains why they will not suit his purposes: Edward loves poetry and music, and Gaveston hopes to surround him with artists and performers in order to better “draw the pliant King which way [he] please[s].” He then envisions Edward walking through an elaborate tableau of men dressed like nymphs and satyrs while others act out a scene from Greek mythology: the goddess Artemis transforming a man who caught sight of her bathing into a deer.

Although Gaveston's feelings for Edward are quite obviously reciprocated, Gaveston is marked as a sexual outsider in a way that the King mostly is not. In this passage, for instance, Gaveston speaks openly about homosexual desire, which he plans to use to manipulate Edward. By contrast, while Edward often expresses intense affection for Gaveston and his other male favorites, he doesn't ever draw on the explicitly sexual imagery present in this passage. The discussion of poetry and theater, meanwhile, lays the groundwork for the conflict between violence and language in the play. Edward explicitly favors the latter, but his words become increasingly powerless and empty as time goes on, and the actual violence of rebellion rises.



Gaveston is again interrupted, this time by the arrival of Edward and several nobles: Lancaster, Warwick, Mortimer Senior, Mortimer Junior, and Kent. Edward is attempting to persuade the nobility to allow Gaveston's return, although he says in an aside that he intends to do what he pleases regardless of what the nobles say. In response, Mortimer Junior explains that he and his uncle promised Edward I that Gaveston would never return from exile. Going further, he threatens to forgo fighting on Edward's behalf if the King does not listen to him now. Meanwhile, Gaveston, who has remained hidden, eavesdrops on the conversation, declaring in an aside his hatred for both Lancaster and Mortimer Junior.

The power struggle between Edward and the English nobility is well underway by the time the play begins, and neither side comes across as entirely in the right. Although Edward's frustration is understandable from a personal perspective, his willingness to completely ignore the wishes of the nobility flies in the face of English monarchical tradition. On the other hand, Mortimer's quickness to resort to threats implies a lack of respect for the King's status, and comes across as bullying in tone.



Edward and the nobles continue to argue, with the King threatening the nobles and openly stating his intention to have Gaveston by his side. In response, Lancaster questions why Edward should prefer the low-born Gaveston to those who would “naturally...love and honour [the king]”—i.e. the nobility. Kent then echoes Edward's earlier warning against defying a sovereign, saying that in his father's time anyone who dared “brave the King unto his face” was risking death. Turning to Edward, Kent urges his brother to execute the nobles as a warning to others. Mortimer Junior responds to this threat with one of his own, saying that the nobles will “henceforth parley with [their] naked swords.” Mortimer Senior, Lancaster, and Warwick agree that they can each raise armies in their respective lands, and all four nobles leave, warning Edward that his throne will “float in blood” if he doesn't reconsider.

Much of the nobility's hatred for Gaveston is rooted in his status as a commoner. As Lancaster's words make clear, the nobles view Edward's favoritism not simply as an insult but also as a challenge to the “natural” order of things—namely, the social structure that provides them with their own power and status. In a sense, Gaveston's ability to leapfrog the social hierarchy by pursuing a relationship with the King is an existential threat to the idea of power as something that is inherited. This helps explain the nobles' boldness in confronting Edward, although it does not necessarily excuse it: Kent's criticism of the nobles implies that it is basically never acceptable to challenge the King's authority so openly. Finally, this first exchange between Edward and the nobility also introduces the idea of violence as a form of communication (e.g. Mortimer saying the nobles will “parley” (speak) with their swords). Similar images recur throughout the play, underscoring the complex relationship between violence and language.



With the nobles gone, Edward complains about their attempts to “overrule” him and orders Kent to raise his military banners: he would rather die than give up Gaveston. Hearing this, Gaveston bursts out from hiding, and Edward—surprised but elated—urges him to embrace him: “Why shouldst thou kneel; knowest thou not who I am? / Thy friend, thy self, another Gaveston!” The two men describe how much they have missed each other, and Edward reiterates that he will never give Gaveston up.

Over the protestations of both Kent and Gaveston himself, Edward makes the latter Earl of Cornwall, Lord High Chamberlain, and Chief Secretary. Edward explains that his only joy in being king is the ability to honor Gaveston, and goes so far as to tell Gaveston that he can enjoy everything Edward himself does: a guard, access to the treasury, the ability to issue commands in the king's name, etc. In response, Gaveston says that he is content simply to have Edward's love.

The Bishop of Coventry enters on his way to Edward I's funeral rites. He reacts with displeasure to the sight of Gaveston, and Edward warns Coventry that Gaveston wants revenge on the bishop for the role he played in his exile. Coventry defends his former actions, saying he intends to see Gaveston exiled again. Edward urges Gaveston to attack Coventry even as Kent warns his brother of angering the Pope. Gaveston ignores Kent and assaults the bishop and rips his clothes, but does not kill Coventry or take him as his chaplain, as Edward first recommends. Instead, he has Edward orders his guards to take Coventry to the Tower of London. Edward then advises Gaveston to confiscate Coventry's house and property, and Gaveston mocks the fact that a priest would have “so fair a house” to begin with.

Just as Mortimer's open defiance of the king seems out step with English tradition, so do Edward's complaints about the nobility reveal an attitude that is itself not totally compatible with English monarchical tradition, since he seems to believe he should enjoy unlimited power as king. Such an outlook would likely cause problems regardless, but what makes it especially troubling (at least from the nobles' perspective) is the fact that Edward is not truly suited to hold power. Here, for instance, Edward's total identification with his lover reflects his inability to separate his personal life from his political role. Arguably, it also suggests that Edward has a rather weak sense of self, which would help explain the nobles' persistent claims that the King is somehow out of his mind.



Since, later in the play, Kent eventually (though temporarily) joins the nobility in opposing his brother's rule, his objections in this passage are significant. Although he earlier defended Edward's rights as king, he evidently shares some of the nobility's concerns about elevating a commoner like Gaveston. Edward's response, meanwhile, further demonstrates the extent to which he allows his private feelings to dominate political decisions. In fact, he redefines his public role as king in entirely personal terms when he claims to only care about power as a way of advancing Gaveston.



Like his earlier snubbing of the nobility, Edward's attack on Coventry oversteps his authority as King. At the time the play is set, the Church was separate from the English monarchy and (at least in theory) superior to it in some respects. Despite the violence of the scene, however, Edward and Gaveston's treatment of Coventry would likely have been more sympathetic to the audience of the play than their treatment of the nobility would be: England had broken away from the Catholic Church earlier in the 16th century precisely because the monarch at the time (Henry VIII) did not acknowledge the Pope's authority over his actions. Gaveston's remarks about the implicit hypocrisy of a wealthy priest are also very much in keeping with prevailing 16th-century attitudes toward Catholicism, and therefore cast Gaveston himself in a favorable light.



ACT 1, SCENE 2

Some time after The Bishop of Coventry's arrest, Warwick and Lancaster meet with Mortimer Senior and Mortimer Junior to discuss the situation. Warwick confirms that Coventry is in prison and that his possessions have been confiscated, and Lancaster and Mortimer Junior vow revenge on Gaveston (or, as Mortimer calls him, the "Frenchman"). Lancaster and Warwick also explain the new titles that Edward has conferred on Gaveston, and how haughty and powerful Gaveston has become as a result. Because the King and his favorite are inseparable, however, no one dares to challenge Gaveston. Both Mortimers respond with outrage, and Mortimer Junior wonders aloud why they have not begun to raise an army. He further adds that if he had the support of the rest of the English nobility, he would kill Gaveston and display the "peasant's" body on the court gates to prevent the "ruin" of the country.

The nobles' conversation comes to a halt as the Bishop of Canterbury enters, explaining to an attendant what happened to the Bishop of Coventry and telling him to relay the message to the Pope. Hearing this, Lancaster asks whether Canterbury intends to "take arms against the King," to which Canterbury replies that he does not need to, because "God himself is up in arms." He does, however, agree with Mortimer Junior that Gaveston should be banished or beheaded.

Mortimer Junior notices Queen Isabella walking past in a hurry, and asks her where she is going. Despairingly, she responds that she is going "to the forest," because her husband Edward has lost all interest in her, instead "dot[ing] upon the love of Gaveston." Mortimer Senior remarks that it is "strange that [Edward] is thus bewitched."

Although the nobles most commonly cite Gaveston's low birth as the reason for their opposition to him, Gaveston's foreignness (his background is French) and his sexual preferences undoubtedly exacerbate the situation. Here, for instance, Mortimer's reference to Gaveston as "that peevish Frenchman" would be disparaging in tone even without the word "peevish." Still, elements of the nobility's anger do seem to reflect genuine concern for the country's welfare. Mortimer repeatedly suggests that Gaveston's influence at court will harm England, and while it eventually becomes clear that Mortimer's patriotism is compromised by personal ambition, the concern itself seems valid: Gaveston's earlier interactions with the poor men demonstrated that he is not particularly interested in serving the common good. Characteristically, however, Mortimer's only proposed solution to the problem is violence: raising an army and assassinating Gaveston.



The Bishop of Canterbury's response to Lancaster is telling. Although the English nobles are already considering rebellion, Canterbury is not, despite Edward and Gaveston's disrespectful treatment of the Church. Canterbury claims that he simply sees no need for an uprising, but it emerges only a few lines later that, in fact, his disinterest in a rebellion stems from the fact that he actually views the prospect of rebelling against (or even deposing) a king with trepidation. Even in a quasi-constitutional monarchy, respect for the king runs deep.



Isabella's remarks in this exchange are another strong hint that the relationship Edward has with Gaveston is sexual: she clearly describes Gaveston as replacing her in her husband's affections. Mortimer Senior's response, meanwhile, places the "blame" for the relationship on Gaveston, again positioning Gaveston as an outsider who has corrupted an otherwise innocent King.



Mortimer Junior tells Isabella to return to court, promising that the nobility will see Gaveston banished and even depose Edward if necessary. The Bishop of Canterbury, however, warns the nobles not to rebel against their king. This sparks a discussion about whether Gaveston can be removed without violence: Canterbury favors drafting a decree for Gaveston's exile, but Lancaster anticipates that Edward would simply ignore any order Canterbury and the rest of the King's councilors sign—at which point, Mortimer Junior argues, it would be “lawful” to rebel. Isabella, meanwhile, says she would prefer to suffer her husband's neglect than see him “oppressed by civil mutinies.”

This exchange begins to explore the complexities of deposing a king whose right to rule is inherited and (in theory) divine. Canterbury is clearly disturbed by the prospect of a rebellion and insists that Gaveston can be removed without any violence toward Edward himself. The nobles are skeptical, and Mortimer Junior proposes an alternative understanding of where Edward's legitimacy comes from: as a king, Mortimer implicitly suggests, Edward's role is to uphold social order and the law. That being the case, the nobles could “lawfully” depose Edward if he failed in this role—for instance, by flouting a legal decree himself. Isabella, however, is wary of the prospect of civil unrest. All these different viewpoints highlight the play's interest in various kinds of internal national discord, and how such discord gets worked out.



The nobles and the Bishop of Canterbury eventually agree to wait at the Bishop's residence for the council meeting to take place. As the men leave, Isabella again pleads with Mortimer Junior not to go to war with Edward. Mortimer promises not to, but only if “words will serve.”

Despite Mortimer's promise to Isabella, his words throughout the scene have made it quite clear that he thinks the time for words is long past and instead favors fighting. Isabella's intentions are more ambiguous, however. Although she eventually plays a leading role in deposing her husband, her plea in this exchange seems sincere—as does her broader love for her husband. Perhaps Isabella's later change of heart reflects a disillusionment with the power of language: after all, her attempts to speak to her husband repeatedly go nowhere.



ACT 1, SCENE 3

Gaveston and Kent enter, deep in conversation. Gaveston explains that Warwick, Mortimer Senior, Mortimer Junior, and Lancaster (who “hath more earldoms than an ass can bear”) are at the Bishop of Canterbury's residence in Lambeth. He concludes by telling Kent to let the nobles stay there.

Gaveston dislikes the nobility every bit as much as they dislike him, but for the opposite reasons: his remark about Lancaster's many titles (and his unworthiness of them) suggests that Gaveston feels contempt for those who have inherited their power and status. In retrospect, however, Gaveston's quick dismissal of the nobles seems unwise and even arrogant, since he fails to appreciate the threat they pose.



ACT 1, SCENE 4

The Archbishop of Canterbury and several nobles enter, putting their final signatures on the order for Gaveston's exile. Mortimer Junior is especially hopeful that the addition of his name will intimidate Edward.

Mortimer's greatest flaw is his pride, which eventually becomes outright hubris as his power grows later in the play. Mortimer hasn't reached those heights of arrogance at this point in the play, but it's striking that he assumes that his own name will make a particularly lasting impression on Edward. Throughout the play, Mortimer's motives are a complicated mix between wanting to protect his country and personal ambition and desire for power.



Kent, Gaveston, and Edward enter. As he seats himself on his throne, Edward taunts the nobles by placing Gaveston at his side. The nobles fume about the indignity of seeing the low-born Gaveston treated with such respect, and Warwick suggests that Gaveston is manipulating the King: “Ignoble vassal, that like Phaëthon / Aspir’st unto the guidance of the sun.” Mortimer Junior, however, assures his fellow nobles that Edward and Gaveston’s “downfall is at hand.” This prompts Edward to call for Mortimer Junior’s arrest on charges of treason—a charge Mortimer Senior immediately throws back at Gaveston. The nobles draw their swords and manage to seize Gaveston, ignoring Kent’s warning that they are forgetting their “duties” to their monarch.

Enraged, Edward threatens to kill the nobles if they leave with Gaveston. Mortimer Senior says that it is unfair to threaten them as if they were “traitors,” and Gaveston begins to describe what he would do if he were king. This further angers Mortimer Junior, who says that Gaveston has no right to even talk about kings, given his low birth. Edward, however, replies that “were [Gaveston] a peasant, being [his] minion, / [he’d] make the proudest...stoop to him.” Lancaster responds that the King cannot speak to the nobles so disrespectfully, and Gaveston and Kent are taken away under guard. Edward views this as the equivalent of “laying violent hands upon” the King himself, and says as much, bitterly complaining that the nobles might as well sit on his throne and wear his crown. Lancaster, unmoved, retorts that Edward should “learn to rule [them] better, and the realm.”

Mortimer Junior and Warwick continue to defend the justice of their actions, but Edward refuses to speak to them. At this point, the Bishop of Canterbury intervenes and, urging Edward to be “patient,” presents the decree for Gaveston’s banishment. Edward defiantly states that England will “flete upon the ocean / And wander to the unfrequented Inde” before he will agree to give up Gaveston. Canterbury refuses to give up, however, reminding Edward of both his “allegiance” to the Pope and the attack on the Bishop of Coventry. Meanwhile, Mortimer Junior urges Canterbury to excommunicate Edward so that the nobles can legally depose him—something Canterbury suggests he will in fact do if Edward does not cooperate.

Edward’s words and actions in this scene seem designed to antagonize the nobility; he not only seats Gaveston on his own level, but also comments directly on the nobles’ discontented expressions. Presumably, this is a power play meant to demonstrate Edward’s absolute authority. It backfires, however, and instead leads into another dispute about where power truly lies. Although Kent once more supports Edward’s royal prerogative to do as he pleases, the nobles clearly feel that Edward’s responsibilities to them supersede his personal desires. This in turn has implications for what one considers treasonous, or (as in this passage) whom one considers a traitor. If, for instance, treason is mostly about betraying the best interests of the country, it’s possible to describe Gaveston as a traitor despite his personal loyalty to Edward.



The same questions about loyalty and legitimacy that emerged in the previous section continue to play out in this exchange. Lancaster, for instance, hints that the nobles view Edward’s claim to rule as dependent on his skill at ruling. Meanwhile, Edward’s claim that the nobles’ actions amount to an assault on their king reflect his belief that any defiance of his wishes constitutes treason. It also, however, speaks to the degree to which Edward identifies with Gaveston—so much so that he views himself and Gaveston as one and the same person. Finally, the exchange gets to the heart of the controversy surrounding Gaveston’s social status. Edward defends elevating Gaveston above the nobility on the grounds that Gaveston is his “minion” (“favorite,” but with a sexual undertone). This, however, is exactly why the nobles oppose Gaveston: his power stems from a relationship of choice (with Edward) rather than from birthright, and therefore undermines the social order that gives the nobles their own power.



Canterbury’s intervention presents another twist on the idea that rebellion against the king might be justified in some circumstances. Since medieval England was a deeply Catholic society, a ruler who was excommunicated—barred from participation in the Catholic sacraments, which were considered necessary for salvation—would lose much of his legitimacy. In fact, since obeying a ruler who had been excommunicated could theoretically jeopardize the nobles’ own souls, Edward’s excommunication would relieve his subjects of their obligations to him.



Edward, realizing that his options are limited, appears to agree, but then invites the nobles to divide up his kingdom amongst themselves provided they leave him “some nook or corner...to frolic with [his] dearest Gaveston.” Growing impatient, the Bishop of Canterbury and Lancaster again urge the King to sign the order. Mortimer Junior, meanwhile, questions why Edward “should love him whom the world hates so,” and Edward retorts that Gaveston “loves [him] more than all the world.” As a result, he says, only “rude and savage-minded men” would want to harm Gaveston. Under pressure, however, the King signs the order as Mortimer Junior taunts him for being “love-sick.”

Lancaster takes the signed order to display publically, while Mortimer Junior goes to see to Gaveston. Pembroke speculates that the common people will profit from Gaveston's banishment, and Mortimer Senior says that that is beside the point: Gaveston should be exiled regardless. Satisfied, the Archbishop of Canterbury and all the nobles leave.

Now alone, Edward laments that he—a king—must defer to the Pope. He grows angrier as he speaks, threatening to set fire to Rome's buildings and “with slaughtered priests make Tiber's channel swell.” Furthermore, he says, he will kill any noble who sides with the Church.

Gaveston appears, saying that he has heard rumors he is to be exiled. Edward confirms his suspicions, but consoles Gaveston with the fact that his departure will allow Edward to remain king: in time, therefore, he will be able to take revenge on the nobility. In the meantime, he promises to send Gaveston money. Gaveston, however, remains inconsolable, which in turn upsets Edward: Gaveston, he says, is merely leaving England, but Edward “from [his] self [is] banished.” Gaveston responds that it is the separation from Edward that upsets him, because the King is the only source of his “felicity.”

The fact that Edward values Gaveston in large part for his personal devotion is telling, because it speaks to Edward's own tendency to prioritize his personal relationships over everything else. This arguably makes Edward unsuited to ruling, assuming that a ruler's first responsibility is to safeguard the country's well-being. This, however, is a relatively modern idea: medieval notions of responsibility, for instance, were much more intertwined with personal relationships. Perhaps for this reason, Gaveston and Edward's personal loyalty to one another appears in the play in a relatively sympathetic light.



Pembroke and Mortimer Junior's exchange about the common people is typical of the play's broader depiction of civic duty. On the one hand, many characters (e.g. Mortimer Junior) justify their actions as necessary for the overall good of the country. However, it is never entirely clear whether these expressions of patriotism are genuine: Mortimer Senior's response here, for instance, suggests that the well-being of the common people is little more than a pretext for the nobility to pursue their own goals.



Once again, Edward defends the idea that, as king, his power should be virtually unchecked—in this case, by the Pope. Because Edward is once more positioning himself against the Catholic Church, however, his speech would likely have played well with a Protestant Elizabethan audience that was itself generally fervently anti-Catholic. His scorn for the “superstitious” practices of the Church, for instance, reflects a then common Protestant critique of Catholicism.



Edward's description of feeling “banished” from himself is in one sense simply a way of conveying the depth of his attachment to Gaveston. Within the context of the nobles' allegations of “brainsickness,” however, it could also imply mental instability: Edward's sense of himself is disturbed or divided.



Edward urges Gaveston to act as Governor of Ireland until he can return. The two men then exchange miniature portraits, and Edward's resolution wavers several times: he first suggests hiding Gaveston, then decides to part from him in silence, then finally outright pleads with him to stay. For his part, Gaveston seems to realize his departure is necessary and begs Edward not to make it more difficult. Eventually, Edward resigns himself, but insists on accompanying Gaveston on his way.

Kent and Isabella appear, and the Queen asks where Edward is going. Edward rebukes her for bothering him and calls her a "strumpet." Isabella questions who she should "fawn on" if not her husband, and Gaveston responds with Mortimer Junior's name, implying the two are having an affair. Isabella denies the accusation, saying it is bad enough for Gaveston to "corrupt" the King without shaming her as well. Edward, however, has picked up on Gaveston's insinuation and scolds Isabella for being "too familiar" with Mortimer. He further suggests that she is responsible for Gaveston's exile, and orders her to change the minds of the nobles in order to get back into his good graces. Isabella protests that she has no power over the nobles and, turning to Gaveston, accuses him of "robbing her" of her husband. Gaveston throws the same accusation back at her, as Edward reiterates his determination to ignore Isabella until she complies with his wishes.

Edward, Gaveston, and Kent leave, and Isabella—now alone—imagines all the ways she might have been spared her husband's abandonment: poisoned on her wedding day, "stifled" in Edward's embrace, and so on. At first, she vows to "fill the earth / With ghastly murmur of [her] sighs and cries" as Hera did when Zeus neglected her in favor of Ganymede. Isabella quickly realizes, however, that complaining of her situation will just estrange Edward further, and therefore resolves to try to overturn Gaveston's banishment, even if it costs her her husband.

As he does here, Edward frequently resolves to remain silent only to then immediately begin speaking again. Besides indicating Edward's generally indecisive nature, these moments suggest that he is very literally "all talk": no matter how desperate the situation, he does not seem able to stop speaking long enough to act. With that said, the play ultimately vindicates Edward's preference for language over action by allowing him to "speak through" his son, Edward III, at the end of the play and after Edward II's own death.



Edward's open contempt for Isabella is another way in which his relationship with Gaveston threatens to destabilize the social order—not so much because it violates his marriage vows, but because Isabella is the sister of the King of France. Their marriage is therefore a political alliance, and Edward's mistreatment of her could conceivably threaten the relationship between the two countries. That said, it is clearly the personal betrayal that is uppermost in Isabella's mind, since she describes Gaveston as having stolen her husband's affection from her. Under the circumstances, this presumably makes the accusations of infidelity especially galling to Isabella, and it seems likely that her later affair with Mortimer is motivated at least in part by spite.



Although Isabella eventually participates in the rebellion against her husband, her first impulse is toward self-destruction: she wishes she had died before Edward abandoned her. This sets her apart from the English nobility, who from the start direct their anger and violence outward, toward Gaveston and the King. Isabella's passivity here may partly reflect the limitations she faces due to her gender, but it also links her—ironically—to her husband, who tends to lament his situation rather than address it with action. This becomes especially clear when Isabella talks about "filling the earth with her sighs," as if simply speaking about her grief will change the situation.



Lancaster, Warwick, Pembroke, Mortimer Senior, and Mortimer Junior enter and witness Isabella's distress. The nobles speculate that Edward must have been cruel to her and blame her suffering on Gaveston. Eventually, Mortimer Junior addresses Isabella directly and asks her what is wrong, to which she replies that the King no longer loves her. In response, Mortimer Junior urges her to “cry quittance... and love him not,” but Isabella says she would rather die. Lancaster then attempts to comfort the Queen by telling her that Edward's affections will return to her now that Gaveston is gone, forcing Isabella to explain why she must work for Gaveston's “repeal.” The nobles are outraged and attempt to dissuade her, but Isabella is adamant, saying that it is “for [her]self [she] speaks, and not for him.” Eventually, she takes Mortimer aside to explain her reasoning in more detail.

As Mortimer Junior and Isabella talk privately, Lancaster asks the other nobles for assurance that they will not change their minds about Gaveston's exile. Mortimer Senior says he will not go against his nephew's wishes, and the rest of the nobles debate whether Isabella will be able to change Mortimer Junior's mind.

When Mortimer Junior rejoins the nobles, he says that while he hates Gaveston, he is now convinced they should bring him back to England “for the realm's behoof and for the King's.” Lancaster erupts, calling Mortimer's honor into question and denying that there can be any good in Gaveston's return, but Mortimer and Isabella urge him and the other nobles to hear what they have to say. Asking whether the other nobles do not wish to see Gaveston dead, Mortimer Junior explains his reasoning. With Edward's financial support, Gaveston might be able to find allies in Ireland, making it that much harder for the nobles to “overthrow” him. If, however, Gaveston returns to a place where he is “detested,” it will be relatively easy to find someone to assassinate Gaveston, “And none so much as blame the murderer, / But rather praise him for that brave attempt.”

Isabella's private conversation with Mortimer Junior is the first hint as to the change that will take place in her character over the course of the play. Since Mortimer returns from the conversation convinced that Gaveston should be recalled so that he can be killed, it seems likely that ease of assassination was one of the “reasons” Isabella cited in making her case. It's interesting, however, that Marlowe chooses not to reveal the details of what passes between Mortimer and Isabella in this scene—particularly because he elsewhere does use asides to depict private exchanges.



Mortimer Senior's determination to support his nephew even in an action he himself considers unwise speaks to how deep ties of blood run in this society: questions about the overall good of the country go out the window when family loyalty is on the line. Meanwhile, the nobles' debate about the effect Isabella's words are likely to have introduces a new wrinkle to the play's treatment of language. If it is in fact Isabella who proposes killing Gaveston, her words are the catalyst for much of the violence that follows.



As he outlines his plan to kill Gaveston, Mortimer Junior again argues that he is acting out of a sense of patriotism. Interestingly, however, he also suggests that murdering Gaveston is a way of serving the King. Given Edward's feelings for Gaveston, this is obviously not true in any straightforward sense, and it's possible that Mortimer doesn't truly care about helping Edward anyway. That said, the basic threat that Gaveston poses to the social hierarchy is arguably just as much an issue for the King as it is for the nobility. Gaveston is a commoner who has become powerful by currying favor rather than inheriting a title, and the monarchy is of course also an inherited position — so any destabilization of the tradition of inherited power could be seen as a threat to the role of the King.



The nobles agree that Mortimer Junior's plan is sound but are not entirely convinced. He therefore points out additional advantages: for instance, the possibility that Gaveston, realizing that the nobles have the power both to exile him and call him back, will treat them more deferentially in the future. When Mortimer Senior questions what will happen if Gaveston does not reform, Mortimer replies that in that case they will go to war, "For howsoever we have borne it out, / 'Tis treason to be up against the King." He further claims, however, that if they do revolt that they will have the support of the common people, who "cannot brook a night-grown **mushroom**"—i.e. an upstart like Gaveston. The nobles agree to Mortimer's plan, and Isabella promises not to forget the "favour" they have done for her.

Isabella notices Edward returning from seeing Gaveston off, and looks forward to cheering him up with the news of the banishment being overturned. She is exasperated, however, to hear him "harp[ing] upon his minion"—wishing he could exchange all his wealth for Gaveston's return and describing his heart as "an anvil unto sorrow, / Which beats upon it like the Cyclops' hammers, / And with the noise turns up [his] giddy brain." Nevertheless, she approaches her husband saying she has "news" for him, which Edward immediately implies is evidence of her supposed affair with Mortimer Junior. Isabella ignores this and informs him that Gaveston will soon return, asking whether this will cause Edward to love her again. Edward, delighted, lavishes praise on his wife and says that this is the beginning of a "second marriage" between them.

Isabella reminds Edward of the nobles, who are now kneeling before him. Edward addresses Lancaster first, urging him to, "as gross vapours perish by the **sun**, / Even so let hatred with [his] sovereign's smile." The King then speaks to each noble in turn, welcoming them back into his good graces and giving them various responsibilities: Warwick will be his "chiefest counsellor," Pembroke will carry the sword of state on official occasions, Mortimer Junior will be Lord Marshal, and Mortimer Senior will lead the army that is ready to do battle with the Scots. Isabella watches all this approvingly and remarks that Edward is truly "rich and strong" now that he enjoys the nobles' loyalty.

Mortimer's words here contradict what he has earlier claimed about the lawfulness of revolting against an unlawful king. Now, he suggests that no amount of ill-treatment ("howsoever we have borne it out") negates the fact that the actions the nobles are discussing are in fact treason. This again points to the play's ambivalence toward royal legitimacy: on the one hand, Edward does shirk some of his responsibilities as king, but on the other, even the most outspoken of his critics realizes that contradicting the king is a serious matter. In fact, Mortimer might not be so eager to rebel if he were not so sure he had the backing of the common people. His certainty, however, rests on the idea that they too will perceive Gaveston as a threat to the social status quo: his description of Gaveston as a "night-grown mushroom" is another jab at Gaveston's desire to rise above his allotted station in life.



Edward's grief over Gaveston's exile seems to have caused his mental state to deteriorate somewhat: he describes his mind as "giddy," and says he is "frantic" for Gaveston. This is in keeping with his earlier description of feeling "banished from himself" as a result of separation from Gaveston, and again suggests that he may suffer from some form of mental instability or division. His moods are certainly unstable: because Edward views everything and everyone through the prism of his relationship with Gaveston, he goes from accusing his wife of adultery to showering her with gifts over the course of a few lines.



Edward's brief reconciliation with the nobles offers a glimpse into what a working relationship between the monarchy and the nobility would be like. Although Isabella has her own reasons for encouraging this development, her remark that it is the nobility's "love" for the king that makes him "rich and strong" does reflect a historical truth about the English monarchy. Because the Magna Carta placed some limits on royal power, compromise and cooperation with the nobility became necessary for English kings.



Edward instructs the Clerk of the Court and Lord Beaumont to fetch Gaveston from exile in Ireland, and both leave. He then announces a feast and tournament to celebrate Gaveston's return, as well as his plans to "solemnize" Gaveston's marriage to his niece, Lady Margaret de Clare. He urges the nobles to spare no expense in planning all this, and leaves after they have restated their obedience to his wishes. Isabella, Pembroke, Warwick, and Lancaster also exit, leaving Mortimer Senior and Mortimer Junior alone.

Mortimer Senior reminds Mortimer Junior that he will soon be leaving for Scotland, and urges his nephew to let Edward have his way in his absence. He further explains that the "wisest men" and "mightiest kings have had their minions," and lists a number of classical pairs popularly assumed to be lovers: Alexander and Hephaestion, Hercules and Hylas, etc. In time, Mortimer Senior says, Edward will be "weaned" from Gaveston. Mortimer Junior, however, retorts that he doesn't care about the King's "wanton humour," but cannot bear the thought that the low-born Gaveston is allowed to "riot it with the treasure of the realm / While soldiers mutiny for want of pay." He further complains of the elaborate foreign fashions Gaveston and his followers wear while mocking Mortimer and the other nobles. Mortimer Senior again attempts to calm his nephew down, saying the King is "changed," but Mortimer Junior remains skeptical, saying he will not "yield" to Gaveston as long as he has "a sword, a hand, [and] a heart."

Edward's desire for Gaveston to marry Lady Margaret might seem odd, assuming the relationship between the two men is romantic. Margaret, however, is a member of the royal family, so marriage to her will give Gaveston more formal standing at court. In fact, by bringing Gaveston into the royal family, Edward is quite literally doing what the nobles have feared all along: undermining the traditional system of inherited rank by elevating a commoner to noble status.



This conversation between the two Mortimers is likely the play's most detailed exploration of the nobility's true feelings about Gaveston, and some elements of it are surprising, given the date the play was written. Gaveston's homosexuality is in and of itself only a minor concern to Mortimer Junior, and his uncle goes so far as to advise a live-and-let-live approach. That said, Mortimer Junior does take issue with Gaveston's sexual behavior as part of a broader pattern of "otherness": in his speech, he implicitly associates Gaveston's sexuality with both his low birth and his foreignness (Gaveston has a fondness, for instance, for Italian fashions). In other words, Mortimer sees Gaveston as an alien and threatening presence on multiple levels, but first and foremost on grounds of rank. His comments about Gaveston's spending, for instance, seem to imply that someone less "basely born" would not risk destabilizing the country in the way that Gaveston is doing (i.e. by driving soldiers to "mutiny").



ACT 2, SCENE 1

Spencer Junior and Baldock—two retainers of the recently deceased Earl of Gloucester—enter, discussing whom they should serve now. Spencer rejects Mortimer on the grounds that he is feuding with Edward II, and proposes seeking out the Earl of Cornwall (i.e. Gaveston) instead. In fact, Spencer expects to be Gaveston's "companion" rather than his "follower," since Gaveston "loves [him] well, / And would once have preferred [him] to the King."

Although they are relatively minor characters themselves, Spencer Junior and Baldock underscore the play's exploration of social status and hierarchy. Like Gaveston, Spencer Junior and Baldock are "commoners" who use personal relationships to advance in the world. In Spencer's case, these relationships are implied to be sexual; although it is unclear whether he ever becomes Edward's lover, Spencer's description of his relationship with Gaveston suggests a romantic connection.



Baldock reminds Spencer Junior that Gaveston is exiled and can therefore do little to help him, but Spencer says he has heard a rumor that Gaveston has been called back to court. What's more, Spencer saw Lady Margaret smiling as she read a letter that he suspects had news of her fiancé. Baldock hopes Spencer is correct and that the marriage between Margaret and Gaveston will in fact go forward: as Margaret's former tutor, he hopes to profit off of it himself. With this in mind, Spencer advises Baldock to "cast the scholar off" and adopt the ways of a nobleman: "You must be proud, bold, pleasant, resolute, / And now and then, stab, as the occasion serves." Baldock protests that he has only dressed and behaved like a "common pedant" in order to please his former master, and he and Spencer Junior joke about scholarly life.

Lady Margaret's arrival interrupts Baldock and Spencer Junior's banter, and the two men listen as she reads aloud from letters from Gaveston and Edward: Gaveston's declares his intention to remain true to her at any cost, and the King's calls her back to court to be married. At this point, she notices that someone else is present and calls out for Baldock, who comes forward with Spencer. Margaret orders Baldock to prepare her coach for her departure, and he leaves. She urges Spencer Junior to stay, however, because she wants to share the good news of Gaveston's return with someone else, which she hints will prove beneficial to Spencer.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Edward, Isabella, Lancaster, Mortimer Junior, Warwick, Pembroke, and Kent are waiting for Gaveston's arrival. The King is impatient and preoccupied with thoughts of Gaveston, which irritates Isabella and the nobles—most notably Mortimer, who reminds the King that he ought to be thinking of "matters of more weight," like France's attempts to recapture Normandy. Edward, however, dismisses this as a "trifle" and asks what kind of heraldic device Mortimer has designed for the welcoming ceremony.

Spencer Junior's advice to Baldock on how to remake himself as a nobleman touches on many of the central tensions in the play. His remark about "stabbing," for instance, is a sexual innuendo that captures the way characters like Gaveston and (perhaps) Spencer use sex in order to climb the social ladder. What's more, by equating this "stabbing" with nobility, Spencer suggests that nothing fundamental separates the kind of power he and Gaveston hold from the kind of power the inherited nobility holds. This, of course, poses a threat to characters like Mortimer Junior, who views his rank as an innate quality that distinguishes him from the common people. In fact, even the more literal sense of "stab" contains a similar challenge to the social hierarchy, since it hints that being a noble is partly (or even largely) a matter of force: the implication is that the nobility maintains its status through the use of violence.



Margaret's parting words to Spencer vindicate much of what he has said throughout this scene: Gaveston's advancement, she implies, will also mean Spencer's. Margaret's words also establish her as a foil to Isabella. Like the Queen, Margaret is in love with a man (Gaveston) who is romantically involved with someone else. Unlike Isabella, however, she does not seem to resent her fiancé/husband's relationships with men, whether because she is not aware of them, or because she feels it is not her place to complain, or for some other reason. Whatever her reasoning, however, Margaret apparently accepts Spencer's connection to Gaveston.



One of the nobles' central complaints with Edward is that he is not adequately interested in military matters. In many cases, these complaints may strike a modern reader as excessive, if not downright bloodthirsty: Mortimer Junior in particular seems to value war above virtually everything else. In this instance, however, the criticism does point to a real shortcoming on Edward's part. Edward's infatuation with Gaveston is so all-consuming that he completely dismisses a threat to England's holdings.



Mortimer Junior describes the scene that will decorate his shield: "A lofty cedar **tree** fair flourishing...And by the bark a canker creeps me up / And gets unto the highest bough of all." Edward then asks what Lancaster's device will be, and Lancaster describes a flying fish being captured by a bird. The King, realizing that these are symbols for Gaveston, questions whether the nobles have really made peace with him and his favorite: "Can you in words make show of amity, / And in your shields display your rancorous minds?". Isabella attempts to reassure her husband that the nobles "love" him, but Edward argues that no one can love him and hate Gaveston before turning the nobles' heraldry around: "And "Æque tandem" shall that canker cry / Unto the proudest peer in Brittainy."

In an aside to the other nobles, Mortimer Junior worries that Gaveston's presence will just deepen Edward's fervor. At that very moment, however, Gaveston arrives. The two share a joyful reunion, with Edward comparing himself to the lovers of Danaë, who "desired her more and waxed outrageous" when her father locked her in a tower. When the nobles greet Gaveston, however, they do so by mockingly referring to his many titles. Edward, appealing to Kent for support, complains of the nobles' behavior, while Gaveston says he cannot tolerate their treatment of him. Encouraged by Edward, he mocks the nobles, telling them to return home and cease to bother him, since his "mounting thoughts did never creep so low / As to bestow a look on such as [them]." In response, Lancaster draws his sword. Edward attempts to remove Gaveston to safety, but Mortimer Junior succeeds in wounding Gaveston first.

As Gaveston leaves, Isabella laments Mortimer Junior's rash actions. Mortimer, unrepentant, implies that his only regret is that he didn't kill Gaveston. Edward responds by sending both Mortimer Junior and Lancaster away from court. Edward further implies that they are in danger of being executed, to which Warwick responds that *Edward* is in danger of losing his crown. Kent attempts to quiet Warwick, but Edward interrupts, saying he will "tread upon their heads / That think with high looks thus to tread me down." He then summons his brother to come with him to raise an army, and the two men exit, accompanied by Isabella.

The device Mortimer describes draws heavily on a fairly common symbol in Elizabethan theater: the idea of the society or nation as a tree (or plant, garden, etc.). As Mortimer's speech demonstrates, the image is especially evocative when it comes to describing the overall health of society. In this case, for instance, Mortimer imagines Gaveston as a "canker" (worm) that feeds parasitically on both Edward and the kingdom as a whole. Not surprisingly, Edward responds badly, and effectively defends upending the entire social order to promote Gaveston's interests: he adopts the motto Mortimer sarcastically proposes ("Æque tandem"—i.e. "equal in height") as an appropriate one for Gaveston. He also notes the discrepancy between the nobles' words and the images they intend to display on their shields, which again points to the tension between language and violence in the play. In this case, the nobles' shields—a symbol of warfare—"speak" more honestly than their actual words.



The confrontation between Gaveston and the nobility once more centers on social status. The nobles refer to Gaveston's titles sarcastically, making it clear that regardless of the status Edward bestows on him, they will always view Gaveston as a commoner. Gaveston, however, refuses to take the bait. Although he does grow angry with the nobles, he mocks their own status rather than defending his own. In particular, Gaveston's remark that the nobles "glory in their birth" undercuts the idea that there is anything special about being a noble by blood. The fact that the nobles immediately respond by drawing their swords arguably proves Gaveston's point, particularly given Spencer Junior's earlier remarks about the link between nobility and violence: in order to maintain the distinctiveness of their status, the nobles must resort to force.



Given that the scene opened with a discussion of the military threat posed by France, it is striking that the violence so quickly turns inward, with Edward now arguing that war is the only way to deal with the nobles' rebelliousness. This is in keeping with the fact that the most serious threats in the play ultimately come from within rather than without. It is also worth noting that Edward's threats of violence are characteristically over-the-top. Throughout the play, Edward describes in elaborate detail what he intends to do to his enemies, but rarely follows through on his threats.



Warwick, Mortimer Junior, Lancaster, and Pembroke are now more convinced than ever of the need for Gaveston's death. They further feel that there is no point talking with Edward further; as Lancaster says, the King “means to make [them] stoop by force of arms.” They therefore prepare to send heralds to Edward—a symbolically significant act, since heralds were typically used to communicate during war.

As the nobles make plans, a messenger arrives with a letter from Scotland, informing Mortimer Junior that his uncle, Mortimer Senior, is being held for ransom. Mortimer feels that Edward should pay this money, since Mortimer Senior was fighting on his behalf when he was captured, and Lancaster offers to go with him to make this case to the King. Meanwhile, Warwick and Pembroke depart to go to Newcastle to begin to raise an army.

A guard arrives just as Mortimer Junior is hinting darkly at what he will do if Edward does not agree to his demands that his uncle be ransomed. The guard attempts to prevent Mortimer Junior and Lancaster from seeing the King, but the commotion attracts the attention of both Edward and Kent, who emerge from the King's chambers. Mortimer explains what has happened to Mortimer Senior before Edward has a chance to leave, but Edward refuses to pay the ransom, even when Mortimer begins to threaten him. Instead, he offers to give Mortimer authorization to raise money, implying that the Mortimer family is poor. In response, Mortimer grasps his sword and says his family “never beg[s], but use[s] such prayers as these.”

Like Edward himself, the nobles feel that violence is the only solution to the situation they find themselves in. Although they frame this as a response to Edward's own threats, it is worth noting that Mortimer Junior, at least, has argued in favor of rebellion all along.



The conflict surrounding Mortimer Senior's ransom is another example Edward's and the nobility's differing views on the responsibilities of a monarch. Not unreasonably, Mortimer Junior believes that the services the nobles provide (e.g. military service) should inspire some reciprocal loyalty on Edward's part. Edward, however, apparently does not share this view, perhaps because the nobles' loyalty is itself in question by this point. Whatever the case, the nobles take Edward's ultimate refusal to pay the ransom as yet another way in which he has breached an implicit contract with them.



Although Edward's refusal to ransom Mortimer Senior would likely have angered Mortimer Junior regardless, it comes across as particularly unfair in context. The implied insult to the Mortimer family makes it clear that Edward's refusal stems mostly from personal dislike. While this is to some degree understandable, given how Mortimer Junior himself has treated Edward, it speaks to Edward's unfitness as a ruler: he is unable to set aside his personal grievances to address the broader political issues in question. What's more, the particular insult Edward chooses is one that targets Mortimer's status as a member of the nobility—a point of particular pride for him and the other lords. As Lancaster did earlier, Mortimer responds to a challenge to his rank by threatening violence.



Edward begins to complain about the behavior of Lancaster and Mortimer Junior, but the nobles cut him off in order to list their own grievances: that the nation's wealth is being wasted on pageantry and gifts, that the King's treatment of Isabella jeopardizes international relations, that England is rapidly losing territory to the French, Scottish, and Irish, and that the common people are turning against Edward and Gaveston as a result of overtaxation and lack of military protection. Mortimer Junior further complains that Edward himself has almost never been to war, and that when he did ride to battle at Bannockburn, he treated it as a spectacle rather than a serious military engagement: "Thy soldiers marched like players, / With garish robes, not armour."

Mortimer Junior and Lancaster leave, resolving to sell the Mortimer castle for ransom money and then "purchase more" by force. Edward, enraged, says he will no longer be held back by fear of the nobles, but will instead, "unfold [his] paws / And let their lives' blood slake [his] fury's hunger." Kent, however, is alarmed by the threat of war and urges his brother to banish Gaveston once and for all, for the good of the country. Edward is predictably upset to learn that Kent does not approve of Gaveston's influence, and the two argue briefly before Edward dismisses Kent in anger. Alone on stage, Edward says that he does not care if his castle is besieged as long as he has Gaveston with him.

Edward notices Isabella, whom he describes as the cause of all his problems. Isabella reports the rumors about the nobles going to war, and Edward again taunts her about her supposed affair with Mortimer Junior. Lady Margaret and Gaveston, who have entered with Isabella, urge Edward to be kinder to his wife, and he apologizes.

By and large, the accusations the nobles level at Edward in this scene are (if true) legitimate grounds for complaint. As the nobles describe it, Edward has abused his power as king for his own pleasure while neglecting the overall good of the kingdom—for instance, by overtaxing his subjects in order to shower his lover with expensive gifts. Furthermore, the nobles argue, Edward's policies have weakened England to such an extent that it is now vulnerable to multiple attacks from outside. All these charges arguably furnish the nobles with grounds for rebelling against the king as a way of protecting the country's overall welfare. With that said, Mortimer Junior's complaint about Edward's conduct during battle seems petty and personal in tone, which to some extent undercuts the nobility's claim to the moral high ground: although the concerns they raise may be valid, their motives are not totally pure.



Although Kent has repeatedly defended Edward's decision in the past, it becomes clear in this exchange that he was acting at least in part out of respect for the monarchy itself. Kent does not approve of Gaveston or—to the extent that Edward persists in defending Gaveston—of Edward's own actions. Edward, who consistently views people and events in terms of his own personal feelings, sees this as treason, despite Kent's attempts to justify his position in terms of his loyalty to the country as a whole.



Edward's response to Isabella again reveals his understanding of loyalty as something that is due to him personally, rather than to the monarchy or country in general. Although he does not seem particularly disturbed by the news that the nobles are plotting an uprising, he takes the time to criticize Isabella for supposedly committing adultery. Edward's quick about-face, meanwhile, illustrates the extent to which Gaveston is able to control him, since a few words persuade him to apologize to his wife.



Edward and Gaveston discuss what to do about Mortimer Junior now that he is openly threatening “civil wars”: Gaveston favors imprisoning or murdering him, but Edward fears upsetting the common people. Edward's attention then turns to Baldock and Spencer Junior, and he asks first Lady Margaret and then the men themselves who they are. Edward promises to let both men “wait on” him and (thanks to Gaveston's recommendation) to provide Spencer Junior with a title at some point in the future.

Although Gaveston's overtly violent solutions to dealing with Mortimer Junior are likely to be jarring to a modern reader, this kind of ruthlessness was widely accepted at the time Marlowe was writing. Edward's failure to act decisively is thus another indication of his ineffectuality as a ruler. Although Edward's remark that killing Mortimer could backfire does demonstrate a degree of political awareness, his quick dismissal of the brewing rebellion is unwise. What's more, the fact that he turns his attention away from the problem in order to interview Baldock and Spencer Junior—two new prospective favorites—underscores his persistent preoccupation with the personal rather than the political.



Turning back to Lady Margaret, Edward tells her that she and Gaveston will be married today, in part as a demonstration of his love for Gaveston. Edward then reiterates that the “headstrong barons shall not limit [him]” and says that they will begin preparing for war as soon as the wedding is over.

Edward appears to push forward the date of the wedding as a way of reaffirming his loyalty to Gaveston in the face of the nobility's (and now Kent's) opposition. Gaveston and Margaret's marriage, in other words, is in some sense the opening salvo in the war Edward says will follow the wedding.



ACT 2, SCENE 3

Kent appears before Lancaster, Mortimer Junior, Warwick, and Pembroke, saying that “love to this [their] native land” has compelled him to join forces with them. Lancaster and Warwick suspect that Edward has sent Kent as a spy, but Mortimer Junior trusts in Kent's honor, and the nobles accept him.

Although his allegiances shift over the course of the play, Kent is one of the few characters who does seem to follow his conscience first and foremost. His decision to join the rebel nobles, as he says, stems from a sense of loyalty to England that outweighs his personal loyalty to his brother.



Lancaster explains that Gaveston and Edward are “frolicking” in Tynemouth, and the nobles resolve to attack the castle, with Mortimer Junior declaring that he will raise the “tattered ensign of [his] ancestors.” Although Lancaster warns the group against laying hands on the King, he urges them to kill Gaveston and his friends.

Despite the fact that the nobles are at this point planning to attack the castle where Edward currently resides, they are still at least paying lip service to their allegiance to the King. As of now, their plan is to avoid deposing or even harming Edward if possible. This again suggests that Edward continues to command a certain amount of respect simply by virtue of being king, regardless of the nobility's many complaints with his style of ruling.



ACT 2, SCENE 4

Fighting is already underway as the scene opens and Edward frantically questions Spencer Junior as to Gaveston's whereabouts. Just then, however, he catches sight of Gaveston, and the two men agree to flee in different directions. Edward accordingly says goodbye to both Gaveston and Lady Margaret, but only bids farewell to Isabella "for Mortimer, [her] lover's sake." Everyone then leaves except for Isabella, who reiterates that she loves no one but Edward and wishes he would take pity on her.

Lancaster, Warwick, and Mortimer Junior burst in. They are searching for Edward, and Mortimer interrupts Isabella's lament about her efforts to win her husband's affections to ask her where the King is. Isabella appears suspicious, so Lancaster clarifies that they have no intention of harming Edward, but simply want to "rid the realm of Gaveston." Isabella therefore tells them that Gaveston has gone to Scarborough, unaccompanied by the King. Mortimer questions her on this last point, and Isabella explains that Edward hoped to force the nobles' army to split into smaller groups that could be more easily defeated.

Heeding Isabella's words, the nobles decide to pursue Gaveston as a group. Before they leave, however, a dispute arises about where Isabella should go: Mortimer urges her to either stay in place or go with him, but Isabella declines, saying that Edward already suspects her of adultery. Once the nobles have left, however, Isabella's loyalty to her husband begins to waver, and she says she could "live with [Mortimer] forever." She decides, however, to plead with her husband one last time and—if that fails—to go to France and appeal to her brother, the King of France, for help. She hopes, however, that Gaveston's death will make the trip unnecessary.

It's difficult to pinpoint the exact moment at which Isabella definitively turns against her husband; alone on stage, she is still at this point professing her love for Edward. However, her loyalty does begin to falter later in this scene, and Edward's words to her here help explain why: Edward continues to harass her about her alleged infidelity regardless of what she says or does. Of course, Edward's words also speak unfavorably to his priorities, since he finds time even in a crisis to taunt his wife.



Mortimer here characteristically favors action over words, brusquely cutting off Isabella's complaints about Gaveston to demand information. The fact that Isabella complies is one of the first hints that her allegiance may be shifting. Although she does make sure to clarify the nobles' intentions toward her husband before responding, Isabella not only points the nobles toward Gaveston but also divulges Edward's plans to them. The fact that it apparently did not occur to Edward that Isabella might betray him in this way reveals his lack of political acumen, but also points to the broader tendency of characters to underestimate the dangers posed by internal threats.



As Isabella's love for her husband begins to falter, she gives her first indication yet that she might consider Mortimer a replacement. This is not a decision to make lightly, however, since an affair on Isabella's part would be nearly as illicit and "threatening" as Edward's relationship with Gaveston. More specifically, it would open up the possibility that an illegitimate child might be passed off as Edward's, endangering the entire line of succession.



ACT 2, SCENE 5

Lancaster, Warwick, Pembroke, Mortimer Junior, and their forces chase after Gaveston, who is taunting them as he enters. Mortimer and Lancaster respond with threats of death, and accuse Gaveston of causing civil unrest by “corrupting” Edward. Lancaster, in fact, compares Gaveston to “the Greekish strumpet” (i.e. Helen) whose love affair started the Trojan War. Warwick, however, urges the other nobles not to speak to Gaveston and instead orders the soldiers to seize Gaveston.

Warwick at first intends to hang Gaveston for “[his] country's cause,” but then decides to give him the relative honor of a beheading. At that moment, however, Lord Maltravers arrives, explaining that he has been sent to request that Edward be allowed to see Gaveston before the latter dies. The nobles at first refuse, even when Gaveston himself seconds the King's request. Although Maltravers says that Edward has promised to surrender Gaveston when the meeting is over, Warwick says they cannot trust the word of a king who “the care of realm remits, / And drives his nobles to these exigents.” Eventually, however, Pembroke agrees to escort Gaveston to the King and back. The other nobles agree, but Warwick—who does so reluctantly—says in an aside that he will attempt to thwart the plan.

Trumpets sound, and everyone but Gaveston, Maltravers, and Pembroke leaves. Pembroke explains that his house is nearby and invites Maltravers to stay there. Maltravers accepts, so Pembroke places Gaveston in the keeping of James—one of his men—for the night. The group therefore splits up, Gaveston wondering unhappily where he is being taken now.

Mortimer and Lancaster's words to Gaveston in this scene quite clearly tie England's current state of turmoil to Gaveston's relationship with Edward. Elements of their criticism appear to stem specifically from homophobia: Mortimer, for instance, calls Gaveston a "corrupter" of the King, implying that Gaveston has introduced Edward to a particularly illicit lifestyle. Interestingly, however, Lancaster compares Gaveston and Edward's relationship to the heterosexual affair between Helen and Paris, which ultimately resulted in the fall of Troy. This suggests that there is something potentially dangerous or destructive about sexuality in general, over and apart from homosexuality in particular.



The debate over how and when to execute Gaveston encapsulates many of the questions Marlowe poses about social status in medieval and Renaissance England. Although members of the nobility were not exempt from execution, they were entitled to the theoretically more dignified method of beheading. Warwick's decision not to hang Gaveston is therefore a small concession to Gaveston's status as the "favourite of a king." Gaveston, however, characteristically undercuts the idea that there is any real difference between the punishments allotted to commoners and nobleman, and therefore implies that there is not much difference between commoners and noblemen in general. Meanwhile, Pembroke's decision to allow a final meeting between Edward and Gaveston signals his lingering respect for the monarchy, in spite of everything Edward himself has done. Although Pembroke presumably agrees that Edward has failed to live up to his responsibilities as king, he nevertheless feels that Edward is due a certain amount of consideration simply by virtue of being king.



Gaveston's fall from power is quick and absolute. Where he was previously one of the play's most resourceful characters, skillfully using his relationship with Edward to advance his own interests, Gaveston is now reduced to a completely passive position. This establishes a pattern that will hold true throughout the rest of the play: characters who initially believe themselves to be in control of their own lives are eventually revealed to be at the mercy of fate.



ACT 3, SCENE 1

As the scene opens, James and Gaveston realize that Warwick has betrayed Pembroke and is pursuing them. Gaveston desperately urges Pembroke's men to hurry so that he can see Edward, but it is too late; Warwick arrives and demands that they hand Gaveston over, claiming that his duty to his country takes precedent over his loyalty to Pembroke. He then leaves with Gaveston, and James and Pembroke's men go to report what has happened to their master.

As the nobles have done throughout the play, Warwick once again justifies his actions with an appeal to patriotic duty. In this case, however, the actions seem highly questionable, since Pembroke has given his word that he will escort Gaveston to the king and back. Warwick is therefore both betraying his ally and calling Pembroke's own honor into question. All in all, the scene demonstrates the play's wariness toward the idea of civic (as opposed to personal) loyalty.



ACT 3, SCENE 2

Edward waits anxiously with Spencer Junior and Baldock. He knows that he cannot save Gaveston's life, and fears that the nobles will not even let him see Gaveston again. Spencer says that if he were king, he would not allow the nobles to insult him and his lineage in this way, and urges Edward to “strike off their heads, and let them preach on poles...As by their preachments [others] will profit much / And learn obedience to their lawful King.” Edward agrees that he has so far been “too mild,” and Baldock approves of his resolution to be harsher in the future.

Perhaps in order to curry favor with Edward, both Spencer Junior and Baldock defend the King's right to exercise virtually unlimited power. In fact, Spencer goes further and suggests that in allowing the nobles to act in opposition to him, Edward is actually dishonoring his own royal status, since his birth and lineage entitle him to respect. Ironically, this defense of royal birthright shares many similarities with the nobility's protectiveness of their own status (and corresponding dislike of Gaveston and Spencer). It's telling, then, that Spencer ultimately urges Edward to act as the nobles have and shore up his claims to authority with violence.



Spencer Senior, Spencer Junior's father, arrives and announces that he has brought a company of soldiers to defend Edward's “royal right.” Edward responds by making him Earl of Wiltshire, promising him money to “outbid” the nobles, and vowing to “enrich [Spencer] with [the King's] favour / That, as the **sunshine**, shall reflect over [him].”

Once more, Edward reveals himself to be easily swayed by flattery and personal emotion. He takes Spencer Senior's words about Edward's royal prerogative as an indication of the man's “noble” character and confers a title on him, effectively revealing that he is more interested in having his own ideas confirmed than in seriously considering what is best for either him or the country.



Spencer Junior notices Isabella approaching with Prince Edward and Levune, a messenger from France. Edward II asks Isabella for news, and she explains that her brother, the King of France, has seized Normandy because Edward has “been slack in homage.” Edward, preoccupied with Gaveston's fate, dismisses this as easily solved and decides—over the young prince's reservations—to send his son and wife to France to negotiate. He will remain, he says, to deal with the domestic turmoil, which prompts Isabella to remark on the “unnatural wars, where subjects brave their King.”

As the nobles earlier warned, Edward's negligence has opened England up to attacks by foreign powers. What is even more worrying, however, is Edward's response: he still does not see Isabella as a potential political threat, and therefore entrusts her with representing his interests in France. This proves to be a disastrous decision, since Isabella eventually returns from France with the army that will unseat Edward. Once again, in other words, the most serious dangers in the play come from within. Isabella's comments about the uprising attest to this, while also touching on the play's interest in disruptions of the social order: according to Isabella, it is not just treasonous but “unnatural” to challenge the rule of a king.



As Isabella, Prince Edward, and Levune leave, Maltravers arrives. He is alone, and reports that Gaveston is dead. Edward presses him for details, and Maltravers explains the events leading up to Warwick's ambush and the capture and beheading of Gaveston. Edward despairingly wonders whether he should "speak, or...sigh and die?", but Spencer Junior—who remarks that Warwick's actions are "flatly against law of arms"—urges the King to "refer [his] vengeance to the sword."

Edward kneels, swearing by heaven, his lineage, and his status as king to be revenged on anyone involved in Gaveston's death: "If I be England's king, in lakes of gore / Your headless trunks, your bodies will I trail, / That you may drink your fill and quaff in blood, / And stain my royal standard with the same." He then makes Spencer Junior Earl of Gloucester and Lord Chamberlain—two of Gaveston's former positions.

Spencer Junior remarks that a herald has arrived from the nobles. The herald greets Edward and reports that the nobles want the King to dismiss "This Spencer, as a putrefying **branch** / That deads the royal vine whose golden leaves / Impale your princely head." Instead, they hope that he will "cherish virtue and nobility, / And have old servitors in high esteem." If the King complies, they say that they will happily remain loyal to him, but if he does not they warn that there will be bloodshed.

Edward angrily sends the herald away, saying the noble have no right to dictate the King's "sports, his pleasures, and his company." He embraces Spencer Junior to prove his point. He further orders the herald to tell the nobles that he is on his way to seek revenge for Gaveston's death. Then, turning to the rest of those present, Edward urges them to notice "how these rebels swell" and to join him in "mak[ing] them stoop."

Edward's initial response to Gaveston's death is typically passive. In fact, Edward seems in this case to reject not only action, but even words. Instead (and as Isabella did earlier), Edward turns whatever violent impulses he has inwards and wishes for death. It takes the intervention of Spencer Junior to persuade Edward to shift his attention from self-destruction to the rebel nobles.



Once again, Edward speaks at length about the elaborate vengeance he intends to take. In this case, Edward's words do translate into action, since he (temporarily) succeeds in crushing the nobles' rebellion. This in turn allows Edward to execute Lancaster and Warwick, partially fulfilling the vows he makes in this speech. Interestingly, however, Lancaster and Warwick's eventual deaths are rather anticlimactic when compared to the passion of Edward's speech in this scene (in fact, the nobles do not even die onstage). This is perhaps an indication of where the play's real sympathies lie: although the plot repeatedly suggests that words are useless in such a violent world, Marlowe ensures that it is the play's language (rather than its action) that ultimately sticks in the audience's mind.



The nobles' description of Spencer as a corrupting influence on both Edward and the country echoes their earlier statements about Gaveston. Given that Spencer has now stepped into the role Gaveston formerly held as Edward's favorite, the comparison is a logical one. In this case, however, the nobles are unwilling to even pretend to compromise with Edward over his favoritism, instead jumping straight to threats of civil war. This is an early hint that the nobles have begun to overstep their own authority, and have even perhaps lost sight of their justified grievances as a result of their own ambition.



Once again, Edward defends his right to do as he wishes as a king. In previous scenes, this insistence has tended to sound arrogant: Edward's love for Gaveston might be understandable, but his preoccupation with his own power verges (as the nobles themselves say) on "tyrannical." In the context of the nobles' own high-handed behavior, however, Edward's complaints begin to seem justified. As the play goes on, Edward will become increasingly sympathetic while his enemies (particularly Mortimer Junior and Isabella) become increasingly less so.



ACT 3, SCENE 3

A huge battle is underway as the scene opens, culminating in the retreat of Edward's forces. Edward questions this decision, saying he intends to "pour vengeance" on everyone who is up in arms against their sovereign. Spencer Junior shares his belief that "right will prevail," but Spencer Senior remarks that their forces are exhausted and need a break from the fight.

Mortimer Junior, Kent, Lancaster, Warwick, and Pembroke appear, and the two sides exchange boasts and insults. Lancaster says Edward's followers will betray him, "traitors as they are." Spencer Junior throws the charge of treason back at the nobles. Then Pembroke calls Spencer a "base upstart," and so it continues back and forth. Finally, Edward threatens that the nobles will die for rebelling against their king, and Mortimer questions whether Edward would rather "bathe [his] sword in subjects' blood / Than banish that pernicious company." Edward replies that he would rather reduce all of England's towns to piles of stone, which Warwick calls a "desperate and unnatural resolution." The nobles rally to cries of "the barons' right" as Edward's followers do the same in the name of the King.

Edward and Spencer Junior's faith that their forces will win reflects their broader belief in (as Spencer says) the righteousness of their cause: because they see Edward's right to rule as God-given and innate, they assume that nothing can ultimately threaten it.



Once again, Edward and the nobility find themselves at odds over what constitutes treason. To the nobles, Spencer Junior has already proven himself to be a traitor by virtue of the harm he is allegedly doing to both the dignity of the monarchy and to the welfare of the country. That being the case, they suggest, it stands to reason that he would betray Edward. In fact, by this line of reasoning, Edward himself is a kind of traitor, since he continues to demonstrate his basic disregard for England's well-being: in this scene, for instance, he says that he is willing to destroy the entire country in order to get his way. Since the nobles' view of monarchy is predicated on the idea that the king has certain obligations to his subjects (and, of course, nobles), they view this as "unnatural"—a decision that threatens the basic order of society. By contrast, Edward and Spencer's understanding of kinship is based on personal loyalty, which leads them to accuse the rebellious nobles of treason.



ACT 3, SCENE 4

As trumpets sound, Edward, Spencer Senior, Spencer Junior, Baldock, and Levune appear, and they have a number of nobles (Kent, Warwick, Lancaster, and Mortimer Junior) under guard. Edward is boasting about his victory, which he attributes to "justice" rather than the "chance of war." Still mourning Gaveston's loss, he looks forward to executing the nobles.

Kent argues that the nobles killed Gaveston for the good of both the country and Edward himself, and Edward sends him away. He then disputes the idea that the nobles acted in "regard" of him by ignoring his request to see Gaveston once more, and killing him in an ambush. Warwick and Lancaster, however, dismiss Edward's threats, saying they would rather die than "live in infamy under such a king." In response, Edward sends them off for execution under the guard of Spencer Senior.

Edward's insistence that he is responsible (morally or tactically) for his victory is a mark of arrogance in a play where "fortune" figures prominently. As more and more characters rise to power and then fall, it becomes increasingly clear that they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control—including, as Edward says here, simple "chance."



Kent's definition of loyalty continues to clash with Edward's in this scene. As Kent describes it, the nobles' rebellion was actually a roundabout demonstration of their allegiance to both England and its monarch, since Gaveston was usurping Edward's place as king (Kent describes Gaveston as being removed from Edward's "throne"). Edward clearly disagrees and continues to complain of the nobles' disregard for his wishes. This in turn cements Lancaster and Warwick's opinion of Edward as unworthy of the throne. As they see it, it would be dishonorable not to rebel against Edward, even at the cost of their own lives.



Mortimer Junior laments the state of the country, which he addresses directly: "England, unkind to thy nobility, / Groan for this grief, behold how thou art maimed." Edward gives orders for Mortimer's imprisonment, and the latter is taken away under guard, complaining that he deserves a higher "fortune" than this. Edward himself then leaves, celebrating the victory that has symbolically "crowned him King anew."

Mortimer's words combine what appears to be genuine patriotism with personal ambition. On the one hand, his concern for the welfare of the country seems authentic. His complaints at being imprisoned, however, hint at the extent of his personal pride. In fact, he describes himself as "aspiring" even to "heaven." Mortimer ultimately pays for this hubris, not so much in the sense that he is punished for it, but in the sense that "fortune" proves indifferent to his plans for himself.



Spencer Junior instructs Levune to go to France and bribe the king and nobility there to withhold their support from Isabella: he suspects that she and the English nobility have been plotting to make Prince Edward king. Levune agrees, and Spencer urges him to leave as soon as possible

Tellingly, it is Spencer Junior rather than Edward himself who finally realizes the danger that Isabella poses and takes steps to undermine it. His attempts to counteract Isabella's pleas do in fact prove largely successful, but are not enough to prevent her from returning to England with an army.



ACT 4, SCENE 1

Kent is preparing to join Isabella in France, where he will back up the Queen's claims about Edward's behavior. He appears somewhat conflicted about betraying his brother, asking "nature" to "yield to [his] country's cause." Nevertheless, he remains where he is, waiting for the arrival of Mortimer Junior, who has devised a plan to escape his captors. Mortimer duly appears, though in disguise. When he has confirmed that it is Kent he is speaking to, he explains that he drugged his guards and is now ready to accompany Kent to France.

Kent's misgivings about rebelling against his brother attest to the importance of blood relations in medieval society. According to Kent, turning on one's family is a disruption in the natural order of things. This makes sense in the context of a society where social status (and therefore social stability) depend on lineage. Nevertheless, Kent's decision to place duty to country over duty to family indicates that ideas had begun to shift by the time Marlowe was writing: although personal and familial loyalty still loomed large, a concept of loyalty to an abstract nation-state was also beginning to develop. That Kent's sympathies ultimately shift back attests to how this mix of viewpoints created complexity and confusion.



ACT 4, SCENE 2

In France, Isabella speaks to Prince Edward. She laments that the French king and nobles have failed to support her. The Prince urges her to return to Edward II and trust in his ability to win his father's favor. Isabella, however, says that she and her husband now "jar" together too much to ever be reunited, and wonders aloud what will become of her.

Because Prince Edward will eventually emerge as the King of England, the play works to establish his legitimacy early on by having him demonstrate his allegiance to Edward II. Because Edward II is both Prince Edward's father and the crowned king, the Prince's declaration serves as a double display of loyalty to both family and the rule of law. The Prince's youth helps in this respect, because while it is true that Edward II has himself arguably flouted the law as king, his son is at this point too young to be implicated in Edward's actions or possibly even to fully understand them.



Sir John, a nobleman from modern-day Belgium, enters and greets Isabella. He invites her and Prince Edward to come with him to his home in Hainault, where they can “shake of all [their] fortunes equally.” Prince Edward agrees, provided Isabella does as well, because he is determined not to leave her side until he is old enough to challenge Spencer Junior. Isabella, for her part, remarks proudly on how hopeful her son makes her and agrees to go to Hainault. At that moment, however, she notices Kent and Mortimer Junior entering.

Isabella is surprised to see Kent and Mortimer Junior, whom she had heard were dead. Mortimer, however, explains that he is “reserved for better hap,” and has escaped in order to help crown Prince Edward the king of England. This upsets the Prince but pleases Isabella, though she hastens to add that their attempts to find allies in France have been unsuccessful. Mortimer reassures her, saying that “right makes room / Where weapons want”: although he admits that Warwick and Lancaster are dead, he assures her that they still have friends in England. Kent interjects that he wishes peace were restored and Edward II “reclaimed” (i.e. subdued), but Mortimer Junior brushes this aside, arguing that Edward can only ever be made to accept their terms “by the sword.”

Sir John urges Kent and Mortimer Junior to accompany Isabella to Hainault, where they will be able to raise both money and an army. Prince Edward predicts that Edward II will nevertheless defeat them, and Isabella scolds him for discouraging their allies. Kent and Mortimer, however, accept Sir John's proposal and praise him for helping the English Queen and nobles in a time of need.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Back in England, Edward celebrates both his military victory and the fact that he has gotten his own way with regards to Spencer Junior. He asks Maltravers to read the list of executed rebels, and then gloats that Isabella's efforts to find French allies have failed thanks to the money he has spent there. Finally, he asks whether Spencer has issued a reward for Mortimer Junior's capture and dismisses the idea that Mortimer could have slipped out of the country.

Prince Edward's remarks here continue to demonstrate his worthiness as a successor to the English throne. Despite his devotion to his family, it is clear that he will not tolerate behavior that threatens the welfare of the kingdom: his remarks about Spencer foreshadow his ultimate execution of Mortimer Junior, who similarly functions as the favorite of a member of the royal family (i.e. Isabella).



Kent's words in this scene are an early sign that his allegiance is once again shifting. Mortimer interprets his wish to see Edward “reclaimed” to mean that Kent would like to see his brother change his ways but remain king—something Mortimer insists is impossible. Mortimer instead feels that war is inevitable, and assures his listeners' that the rebels will prevail: as Edward did earlier, Mortimer associates the justice of his cause with certain victory. This speaks to Mortimer's belief that his life has so far been spared because he is “reserved for better hap” (i.e. fortune). At this point in the play, Mortimer believes that an individual's ultimate fate hinges on his worthiness. This eventually proves to be untrue, since “fortune's wheel” will eventually cast down nobles, commoners, heroes, and villains indiscriminately.



Once again, Prince Edward's warning seems to stem at least in part from familial loyalty: his faith in his father's ability to defeat the rebels, though misplaced, helps establish the Prince as an honorable character.



As he has throughout the play, Edward here places too much stock in his authority as king. It is inconceivable to Edward that any harbormaster could have been “so careless of their King's command” as to allow Mortimer to escape, but this appears to be precisely what happened: whether through bribery or some other means, Mortimer managed to secure passage to France. Similarly, his certainty that Isabella no longer poses a threat now that he has paid off the French nobles smacks of arrogance, and speaks to his constant underestimation of those closest to him.



A messenger arrives from France with a letter for Spencer Junior from Levune. It explains both that Levune succeeded in buying off the French nobility and that Isabella, disappointed, went to Hainault with Kent and Mortimer Junior to raise an army. The news of Mortimer's escape and Kent's betrayal angers Edward, and he sarcastically "welcomes" both them and Isabella to England so he can meet them in battle. He is saddened by Prince Edward's involvement, however, even as he prepares to go with his followers to Bristol where he plans to confront the rebels.

The news of Prince Edward's involvement in the rebellion presumably hits Edward II particularly hard because of the familial relationship that connects them. Edward does not know that his son is involved in the rebellion only reluctantly, and instead assumes that the Prince actually supports the rebels' cause.



ACT 4, SCENE 4

Isabella, Mortimer Junior, Kent, Prince Edward, and Sir John arrive in England. Isabella laments the necessity of civil wars that force "kin and countrymen [to] / Slaughter themselves in others," and begins to describe how Edward II's irresponsibility as a king has brought them to this impasse.

Isabella describes civil war as self-destructive in the most literal sense: killing one's kin and countrymen, she says, is the same as killing oneself. This once again speaks to the dangers of internal discord, while echoing the language Edward has earlier used to describe his mental state in the wake of Gaveston's exile (when he felt "divided from himself"). In this way, the play establishes a parallel between the inner turmoil of England's monarch and the inner turmoil of England itself, implying that the former has brought about the latter. Isabella's description of Edward as "misgoverned" reinforces this connection, because it implies that Edward has failed to govern himself in much the same way he has failed to govern the country.



Mortimer Junior interrupts Isabella and tells her that she must be less "passionate" in speech if she wants to be a "warrior." He then briefly states their loyalty to Prince Edward and reiterates that their purpose in fighting is to restore order to the country. Sir John orders the trumpets to sound, and the group leaves for battle.

The tension between language and violence is particularly clear in this exchange. As Isabella speaks about Edward's failures as a king, she appears to grow angrier (or, as Mortimer says, more "passionate"). However, just as she prepares to launch into a detailed explanation of a king's responsibilities to his people, Mortimer cuts her off midsentence with a warning that flowery speeches do not suit "warriors." His own explanation of why the rebels are going to war is brief and matter-of-fact, presumably so that they can get down to fighting sooner. Mortimer always favors action over language.



ACT 4, SCENE 5

Battle is once more underway, and Edward's forces are in disarray. Spencer Junior urges the King to flee to Ireland, but Edward refuses, vowing to fight to the death in England, because he "was not born to fly and run away." Baldock responds by seconding Spencer's warning, saying that Edward's "princely resolution / Fits not the time."

Edward's refusal to flee is based on a sense that retreat would be shameful for someone of his status. As they have throughout the play, however, Spencer Junior and Baldock ignore the nobility's (or king's, in this case) claims that they possess a special kind of honor by virtue of their rank. Instead, they pragmatically suggest that "princely" behavior is something to cast aside when it ceases to be useful. This once again undercuts the idea that nobility, and the actions associated with it, are innate qualities.



Kent appears in search of Edward, whom he now regrets turning against. Condemning the rebellion against his king and brother, he asks God to "punish this unnatural revolt." However, he then chastises himself for speaking so openly, knowing Mortimer Junior will kill him if he discovers his loyalties have changed. Finally, Kent confirms for the first time in the play that Isabella and Mortimer are having an affair.

Kent's belief that the rebellion is unnatural stems both from Edward's position as king and from Kent's personal relationship to him. Just as revolting against a lawful king plunges a supposedly natural social hierarchy into chaos, so does betraying one's brother: since the hierarchy itself is based on blood relations, it is vital that members of the same family defend one another's rights.



Isabella, Mortimer Junior, Prince Edward, and Sir John now appear as well. Isabella appoints Prince Edward viceroy and rejoices in their victory, which she attributes to the justice of their cause. She concludes by telling her companions to deal with Edward II as they see fit, now that his "infortunate" destiny has resulted in his overthrow.

Interestingly, while Isabella describes Edward's fall from power as the result of bad luck, she does not apply the same concept of fortune to her own victory. Instead, she suggests that it is the result of moral worthiness and divine intervention. This corresponds to a broader pattern in the play, whereby characters refuse to believe that their own fates may be as arbitrary and undeserved as anyone else's.



Kent asks Isabella what she intends to do with Edward II, and Mortimer Junior grows irritated, saying that that is a matter for Parliament to decide. Privately, however, he warns Isabella that Kent may be having second thoughts.

Outwardly, Mortimer still seems concerned with the lawfulness of the rebellion: he refers Edward's fate to Parliament and insists that neither he nor Isabella has any authority in the matter (as they shouldn't, since neither has been appointed Protector at this point in the play). His aside, however, makes it clear that Mortimer is now concerned first and foremost with shoring up his own power, since he is alert to any hint of disloyalty.



As the group discusses the whereabouts of Spencer Junior and Baldock, Rhys ap Howell (a Welsh lord), and the Mayor of Bristol enter. Rhys ap Howell presents Spencer Senior, who has been taken prisoner, to Isabella and Prince Edward. He also explains that Spencer Junior and Baldock have fled with Edward II to Ireland—news which distresses Prince Edward and Kent. Isabella also professes to be upset about her "lord's ill fortune," but says she had no choice but to go to war. Mortimer Junior, however, brushes Isabella's qualms aside, saying that Edward "wronged [the] country and himself."

Mortimer Junior gives orders for Spencer Senior's execution, but the latter condemns Mortimer and Isabella as "rebels" before being taken away. Mortimer then orders Rhys ap Howell to deal with the remaining rebels in Bristol, while he and Isabella figure out what to do about Spencer Junior and Baldock.

In his attempts to "console" Isabella, Mortimer again pays lip service to the rule of law and the country's welfare. Because Edward's behavior jeopardized both England and the very authority of the monarchy itself, Mortimer says, he was obliged to try to "right" the situation. It is clear from his words elsewhere in the scene, however, that Mortimer is now mostly acting out of personal ambition rather than any sense of patriotism.



Spencer Senior once more offers a definition of treason that casts anyone who "fights against his prince" as a rebel. He does not have much time to make his case, however, because Mortimer dismisses his words as "prating" (rambling or ranting) and sends him away: clearly, Mortimer will favor action over language as a ruler.



ACT 4, SCENE 6

Edward II, Baldock, and Spencer Junior have disguised themselves and taken refuge in a monastery. The Abbot assures Edward that he will be safe in his protection. Edward, however, is preoccupied by thoughts of his fall from power, bemoaning the miseries of life as a king and wishing he could lead the "life contemplative" the monks enjoy.

Edward's suggestion that the life of a king is inherently tragic foreshadows an image that will become central when Mortimer Junior takes power: Fortune's Wheel. The symbol deals with the impermanence of worldly success and the random nature of men's fates, so it in many ways parallels Edward's realization that kings are "in life or death made miserable": even if fortune spares a ruler overthrow and downfall, he will ultimately lose all his power in death.



Despite the monks' reassurances, Spencer Junior fears that their location will be betrayed. Baldock explains that bad weather thwarted their voyage to Ireland, leaving them vulnerable to Mortimer Junior. At this, Edward exclaims, "Who wounds me with the name of Mortimer, / That bloody man?" and kneels before the Abbot, begging to be allowed to rest there until his death.

Fittingly, Mortimer's very name has by this point in the play become a kind of weapon: here, for instance, Edward describes it as "wounding" him. Mortimer, in other words, has made even language into a tool for violence.



Suddenly, Spencer Junior urges Edward to look up: Rhys ap Howell and the Earl of Leicester have discovered them, thanks to the help of a Mower who had seen them and revealed their location. Spencer Junior had earlier noticed the Mower looking suspiciously at the King and his companions.

Since the play repeatedly associates both England and the monarchy with plant imagery, the fact that it is a mower who betrays Edward has symbolic significance. If the tree or garden of the kingdom has grown out of control, it is the Mower who "trims" it back into order. More ominously, the fact that the Mower carries a scythe makes him a Grim Reaper-like figure, and therefore foreshadows the deaths of Spencer Junior, Baldock, and Edward himself.



Leicester, in an aside, speaks pityingly of Edward and quotes a Latin proverb about the precariousness of power. Aloud, however, he arrests Spencer Junior and Baldock for treason.

The proverb Leicester quotes translates to, "He whom dawn of day hath seen in pride to reign, / Him overthrown hath seen the evening late." Leicester therefore echoes Edward's earlier words about the price of being king, while also laying the groundwork for the image of Fortune's wheel, which will play a major role in the scenes involving Mortimer's rise and fall.



Edward laments his fate and questions why the stars have "lour[ed] unkindly on a king" before inviting Leicester to kill him rather than imprison Spencer Junior and Baldock. Edward then begins to say his goodbye to his companions, blaming their misfortunes on "hell and cruel Mortimer." Meanwhile, the Abbot looks on, distressed to see a king "bear these words and proud commands."

Despite his earlier comment about the sorrows unique to kingship, Edward here implies that his status should make him immune to his misfortunes. This idea that any particular individual is exceptional (and untouchable) is one that the play itself constantly challenges: fortune consistently cuts down everyone who occupies or aspires to a position of power. On the other hand, the Abbot clearly shares Edward's sense of what it means to be king, since he views the nobles' treatment of Edward as an affront.



Rhys ap Howell informs Edward that he "must go to Kenilworth," which causes Edward to take issue with his use of the word "must." Edward further argues he might as well be transported in a "hearse," now that his friends are being taken away for execution. Seeing that Rhys ap Howell is unmoved, however, Edward remarks that "that shall be shall be" and bids farewell to Spencer Junior and Baldock before Leicester escorts him from the room.

In this passage, Edward continues to swing between bitterness over his fall from power and acceptance of the whims of fortune. He first remarks that it is "hard when kings must go," implying that monarchs should be exempt from commands (and, perhaps, from the broader "necessities" of fate). Later, however, he implies that because whatever is destined to happen will happen regardless of human action, it is best to make peace with it.



Spencer Junior and Baldock mourn their parting with Edward, likening him both to the **sun** and to their own "souls." Baldock concludes that there is nothing left for them to do but die, but takes comfort in the fact that death is humanity's common lot. Rhys ap Howell cuts off their "preachments," however, and takes them away after promising to pay the Mower for his services.

Like Gaveston, Baldock compares Edward to the sun in order to describe the centrality of the King to Baldock himself. Since the symbol ordinarily refers to a king's public role as the center of society, Baldock is appropriating it to describe a personal relationship in much the same way he (and the King's other favorites) have "corrupted" Edward's reign. Meanwhile, Baldock's resignation in the face of death evokes another image that is central to the play: the Wheel of Fortune. In particular, his remark that all people "rise to fall" corresponds to the structure of the wheel, where power peaks and then inevitably declines. Finally, Rhys ap Howell's impatience with Spencer and Baldock's parting speeches is characteristic of Mortimer's (and increasingly the play's) intolerance of language.



ACT 5, SCENE 1

Edward has now arrived at Kenilworth, which Leicester urges him to imagine is his court. Edward, however, says that while he appreciates the kindness Leicester has always shown him, he cannot be consoled by “gentle words”: as a king, he says, he cannot help but chafe against his imprisonment at the hands of Mortimer Junior and his “unnatural queen” Isabella. Almost as soon as he has vowed to seek revenge, however, Edward’s mood changes. He questions whether kings are actually anything more than “perfect shadows in a **sunshine** day,” and remarks bitterly that he now rules only in name. Finally, he questions whether he will be forced to give up the trappings of his position—i.e. his crown—to Mortimer.

The Bishop of Winchester, who has also come to Kenilworth, responds to Edward’s question by arguing that they “crave the crown” for the sake of England and Prince Edward—not Mortimer Junior. Edward, however, suspects that Mortimer plans to take power himself and hopes that the crown will be a curse to him, “So shall not England’s **vines** be perished, / But Edward’s name survives.”

Leicester presses Edward for a response, and Edward takes off his crown, remarking that while it is hard to stomach the thought of Mortimer Junior as king, his fate leaves him no choice. He further asks for death, since “Two kings in England cannot reign at once.” Almost immediately, however, he reconsiders and begs to be allowed to retain his crown until nightfall, which he prays will never come. Then, calling those around him “inhuman creatures...who gape for [their] sovereign’s overthrow,” he places the crown back on his head. Although he realizes that the sight of him with a crown will no longer strike fear in those around him, he asks to be allowed to wear it for a while longer.

Edward’s comments about kingship in this passage once more suggest a tension between the exceptional glory of the position and the fact that monarchs ultimately meet the same fate as everyone else. Although Edward recognizes that a king without his wealth and authority is simply a “shadow,” he also suggests that the sufferings of kings are more intense than those of commoners, perhaps because there is further for them to fall. Meanwhile, Edward’s remark that Isabella is an “unnatural queen” mark a major shift in the play. Prior to this, it was Edward’s relationship with Gaveston that was “unnatural,” not only for its homosexuality but also because it threatened to destabilize the social order. Now that Isabella has embarked on her own illicit affair, however, she herself has become “unnatural.”



Edward’s suspicions turn out to be well justified. Whatever Mortimer Junior’s motives were at the beginning of the play, he now seems to crave power for its own sake, and uses his position as Isabella’s lover to control Prince Edward. Ironically, this places him in the same position that Gaveston earlier occupied: a social climber who leverages sexual relationships to attain power.



Edward’s request for death may be sincere in some respects, but it is also a statement about his understanding of the monarchy. The implication is that death is the only way to unmake a king, probably because the position is God-given rather than dependent on the fulfillment of particular duties (e.g. defending the realm). According to this view, anyone who rebels against the King is rebelling against a social order that has been ordained by God, and is therefore, as Edward puts it, a “monster.” On the other hand, Edward’s willingness to “obey” the dictates of fate suggests that he no longer sees his status as king as exceptional enough to protect him from the ups and downs of fortune.



Trussel, a member of Parliament who has come to Kenilworth with Winchester, says that they need a definite answer from Edward about whether he will give up the crown. Edward responds that Mortimer Junior and the other “traitors” can do as they wish, but that he will not comply. Trussel and the Bishop of Winchester leave. However, when Leicester warns Edward that his course of action could result in Prince Edward losing his rights to the throne, Edward changes his mind and asks Leicester to call Trussel and the Bishop of Winchester back. He then removes his crown again, although he says that anyone who takes it from him will be guilty of murdering a king. Eventually, however, he hands the crown to the Bishop, praying as he does so to either die or “forget [him]self.”

Edward orders the Bishop of Winchester and Trussel away, but hands them a handkerchief—“wet with [his] tears”—to take to Isabella. He fears for Prince Edward's safety while his son is under Mortimer Junior's care, but hopes the Prince will prove a better ruler than he himself did. He hastens to add, however, that his only mistake was showing too much “clemency.”

Before the Bishop of Winchester and Trussel can leave, another messenger—Berkeley—arrives. Edward expects that Berkeley has come to kill him, which he now looks forward to. Berkeley protests that he has merely come to serve Edward: the letter he has brought dismisses Leicester and appoints Berkeley as Edward's guard. Edward tears up the letter, which was written by Mortimer Junior, but resigns himself to go with Berkeley on the grounds that he can only die once.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

At court, Mortimer Junior rejoices in the execution of Edward's supporters as well as at the imprisonment of the “light-brained King.” He urges Isabella to “be ruled by [him]” and arrange for Prince Edward's coronation: he himself will then act as Protector. Isabella agrees that Mortimer can do anything he likes to Edward II as long as her son is safe.

Edward's inability to call Winchester and Trussel back for himself would seem to suggest that Mortimer's preference for action has finally won out over Edward's for language. That said, Edward speaks at great length elsewhere in the scene, so his words here may be another way in which he refuses to cooperate in his overthrow: Edward repeatedly stalls for time, denounces the actions of the nobles as illegal, and generally makes Winchester and Trussel's job as difficult as possible. His wish for death or madness, however, does ring true, since Edward has shown a tendency toward instability and self-destruction throughout the play.



Edward's views on kingship continue to waver in this passage. His remarks about his son suggest that he agrees to some extent with the nobles' assessment of Edward's own rule as ineffectual. He immediately qualifies this statement, however, so it is difficult to know how much his ideas have actually shifted.



Edward's destruction of the message in some ways reflects the futility of language under Mortimer's rule. Edward describes “rending” Mortimer's name as a substitute for attacking Mortimer himself, but it obviously does Mortimer no harm. It is symbolically important, however, that Edward wishes for Mortimer's “limbs [to] be torn” like the message itself, because Edward III will eventually order Mortimer to be hanged, drawn, and quartered (i.e. to have his limbs torn off). Since the historical Mortimer was simply hanged, the change is especially significant: in some sense, Edward's words do seem to bring about Mortimer's downfall.



Given Mortimer's previous objections to Gaveston's influence over Edward, his determination to control both Isabella and Prince Edward is deeply hypocritical. Although Mortimer is a noble by birth, he would not be able to wield the kind of power he now enjoys if he were not having an affair with Isabella. Mortimer and Isabella's relationship therefore ends up being just as destructive to the normal social hierarchy as Edward's relationship with Gaveston.



A messenger arrives from Kenilworth, followed shortly afterward by the Bishop of Winchester. Isabella feigns distress at the news of Edward's unhappiness, but sends for Prince Edward when she sees the king's crown. The Bishop further explains that it's been discovered that Kent is plotting to help his brother escape, and that Edward has been put in Berkeley's custody. He warns, however, that Berkeley may pity the King too much to be trustworthy. Mortimer Junior consequently plans to move Edward, but Isabella hints that it might be safer to simply kill him.

Mortimer Junior summons Gourney and Maltravers, entrusting the latter with a message dismissing Berkeley. He then gives Gourney detailed instructions on how to deal with Edward, telling him not only to move him from place to place to thwart Kent's plans, but also to "amplify [Edward's] grief with bitter words." If Gourney complies with these orders, Mortimer says, he will "rise" alongside Mortimer himself, "who now makes Fortune's wheel turn as he please." Gourney then prepares to leave, but before he does so, Isabella gives him a jewel to give to Edward as evidence of her love.

Gourney leaves, and Mortimer Junior tells Isabella in an aside to keep up her pretense: Prince Edward and Kent have just walked in the room. The two of them continue to speak to one another privately, speculating that Kent is attempting to gain control of the Prince. Aloud, Mortimer and Isabella exchange greetings and commiserations with Kent, who nevertheless realizes that they are lying.

The conversation turns to Prince Edward and the Protectorship: Kent denies aspiring to the position, while the Prince himself begs not to be crowned king on the grounds that he is too young. He then relents, but only if he can see Edward II and learn what his father wants to have happen. Isabella, however, says that this is impossible, and she, Mortimer Junior, and Kent begin to argue: Kent doubts the couple's sincerity, and Mortimer Junior claims to fear to allow Kent—who "hath betrayed the King, his brother"—near the Prince. Prince Edward then joins the argument on Kent's side, prompting Mortimer to drag the prince out of the room by force. Now alone with Isabella, Kent demands the return of the Prince. Isabella refuses, so Kent departs to try to rescue his brother from Kenilworth.

Although Mortimer believes he fully controls Isabella, her interactions with him in this scene suggest that that may not be the case. The idea to kill Edward is Isabella's, but she manages to sidestep direct culpability for it: when Mortimer urges her to say directly whether Edward should be murdered, she hedges, saying that she wishes he were dead but not by her "means." Isabella, in other words, understands the power her speech has to harm her. This is not the case with Mortimer, whose guilt is ultimately discovered by means of a written message.



Mortimer's belief that he can conquer chance and dictate his own fate is the clearest example yet of the kind of hubris that often characterizes tragic heroes. Mortimer, however, lacks the larger-than-life presence of a typical tragic hero, mainly because he shares a play with so many other tragic characters (most notably Gaveston and Edward II). This ultimately underscores Marlowe's usage of Fortune's Wheel, however: all the characters in the play who wield power end up reduced to the same status, even in terms of the amount of "screen time" they receive.



Isabella and Mortimer's distrust of Kent speaks to the dishonesty of their motivations. As Mortimer himself points out, Kent's relationship to Prince Edward would make him a natural candidate for the Protectorship—certainly more natural than Mortimer, who is not closely related to the Prince. Clearly, however, Mortimer is now more concerned with wielding power than with maintaining the established social hierarchy.



In this passage, Mortimer is able to use the importance of family ties in order to discredit Kent. Although both Mortimer and Kent have rebelled against their monarch, only Kent has committed the "crime" of rebelling against his own flesh and blood. The implication is that only someone truly depraved would act in such an unnatural way, and that Kent therefore cannot be trusted around the Prince. Of course, the fact that Mortimer ignores Prince Edward's own wishes and then pulls him from the room reveals that he does not have the Prince's best wishes at heart either.



ACT 5, SCENE 3

Maltravers and Gourney, carrying torches, hurry Edward toward Kenilworth as the latter asks where they are taking him. Wearily, Edward wonders whether he will ever be allowed to rest, and offers up his heart to satisfy Mortimer Junior's desire for revenge. He then remarks that he will likely die soon anyway: he is starving, and the stench in the dungeons is overpowering. Nevertheless, he begs for water to drink and clean himself of "foul excrements." In response, Maltravers and Gourney mockingly douse him in sewer water and shave off his beard as Edward laments the futility of "seek[ing] for mercy at a tyrant's hand."

Edward calls on God to bear witness to Maltravers and Gourney's treatment of "their liege and sovereign, England's King." He then calls on Gaveston, saying that he is now suffering for his sake, as Gaveston and Spencer Senior and Junior died for him.

Maltravers orders that the torches be put out as the group approach Kenilworth. At that moment, however, Kent appears, and a struggle breaks out. Gourney and Maltravers's soldiers eventually succeed in seizing Kent to take him away to "court"—though Edward protests that the true court is wherever he, as king, is. Ignoring this, Gourney and Maltravers leave with Edward, while Kent bemoans the state of a country "where lords / Keep courts and kings are locked in prison." He then resigns himself to execution, knowing he has failed to secure his brother's escape.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

Speaking aloud to himself, Mortimer Junior decides that only Edward's death will ensure his own safety. He fears reprisal from Prince Edward, however, so the message he writes ordering Edward's murder is deliberately ambiguous: it could also be read as ordering Edward's safety. In addition, he has ensured that the assassin—Lightborne—will be murdered once Edward himself is dead.

Gourney and Maltravers's cruelty to Edward in this scene continues to make the deposed king a more sympathetic figure while rendering Mortimer correspondingly less sympathetic. This process culminates in Edward's use of the word "tyrant" to describe Mortimer—a term the nobles had earlier applied to Edward to describe his perceived abuses of power.



Once again, Edward claims to remain the true King of England in spite of his overthrow. However, where Edward's early insistences on his divine right to the crown came across as dictatorial, here they give him an aura of dignity now that he has fallen from power. The play's attitude toward monarchical legitimacy, then, is ultimately ambiguous: while it criticizes Edward's abuses of power, it is also suspicious of the efforts to depose him.



Kent's lament for England echoes the patriotism that led him to betray Edward in the first place. Although his feelings about his participation in the rebellion have clearly changed—in fact, like Edward himself, he now implies that no rebellion can undo the legitimacy of a crowned king—his sense of civic responsibility has remained stable over the course of the play. This is significant, because the other character who frequently claims to act on patriotic grounds—Mortimer—reveals himself to be a hypocrite.



At first glance, the message ordering Edward's death represents the ultimate triumph of violence over language, in the sense that Mortimer has effectively made language itself into an act of violence. In using language in this way, however, Mortimer reveals his ineptitude with words: although he talks at great length about how the ambiguity of the note will protect him, Mortimer is immediately revealed as Edward's killer when the message is brought to light. Mortimer's downfall, in other words, is the result of language.



Mortimer Junior calls Lightborne in, and the two discuss the plans for Edward's murder. Lightborne scoffs at the idea that he will pity the King, and assures Mortimer that he knows many ways to kill without leaving marks on the victim's body. Mortimer accordingly gives Lightborne a letter to take to Gourney and Maltravers, along with the token that—unbeknownst to Lightborne—marks him for death.

Lightborne leaves, and Mortimer Junior takes stock of his position, which allows him to control both Prince Edward and Isabella. Gloatingly, he remarks that everyone at court fears him and hurries to do whatever he wishes. Noting that today is Prince Edward's coronation day—a day that will confirm Mortimer's own position as Protector—he brags that even fortune cannot touch him now.

Trumpets sound, and Prince Edward enters, accompanied by Isabella, the Bishop of Canterbury, and a group of nobles. The Bishop proclaims the Prince to be king, and a champion swears to defend his right to rule by force of arms.

As soon as Edward III is crowned, a group of soldiers bring Kent forward for judgment. When questioned, Kent admits to trying to free Edward II but insists that in doing so he was serving the true king. Mortimer Junior then orders Kent's execution over the pleas of Edward III, insisting that he does so for the good of both the king and the country. Kent himself also challenges Mortimer's right to condemn him, but is eventually escorted away under guard. Turning to Isabella, Edward III expresses concern over his own safety at Mortimer Junior's hands. Isabella, however, reassures her son that she will protect him and urges him not to think anymore about the “traitor” Kent.

Like the note ordering Edward's death, the murder method is meant to be undetectable. Once again, however, Mortimer proves to have no talent for covert violence: Gourney betrays Mortimer, and Edward III learns of his father's murder almost as soon as it happens.



Once again, Mortimer reveals the extent of his arrogance by boasting that he is immune to fortune. He also reveals himself to be more disinterested than ever in legitimate rule, since he brags that he has intimidated Prince Edward to such an extent that a mere glance from Mortimer is the equivalent of a beating in the Prince's eyes. This comment, however, also reveals Mortimer's weakness as a ruler: he relies almost entirely on force. This makes sense, given that he frequently criticized Edward II for his disinterest in warfare and bloodshed, but Mortimer's remarks about manipulating the other councilors make it clear that force alone is not enough for a successful ruler. More specifically, Mortimer also needs to be able to use language to his advantage, and the episode with the note suggests that this is not his strong suit.



The inclusion of the champion in the coronation—though mostly symbolic—underscores a point that Spencer Junior made earlier, in his discussion of what it means to be a nobleman: that the social hierarchy is not something that exists naturally, but that it is instead maintained by force.



Despite Mortimer's continued protestations that he is acting for the good of the country, his personal ambition is more and more obvious. Although Mortimer's position as Protector does entitle him to make decisions on Edward III's behalf, his use of the royal plural while ordering Kent's execution ("at our command") hints that he covets the throne for himself.



ACT 5, SCENE 5

At Berkeley, Gourney and Maltravers marvel at the fact that Edward has not yet died, despite being kept in a wet and dirty cell. They therefore decide to “assail his mind another while,” since he seems physically capable of withstanding his circumstances.

Just then, Lightborne enters and hands Mortimer Junior's letter to Gourney and Maltravers. Lightborne also shows them the token Mortimer gave him, and—in asides—Gourney and Maltravers discuss the fact that Lightborne is there to murder Edward and then be killed himself. Maltravers accordingly gives Lightborne the keys to Edward's cell, and Lightborne asks Maltravers and Gourney to fetch a table, a feather bed, and a hot spit.

Now alone, Lightborne finds Edward, who suspects that Lightborne is there to kill him. Lightborne denies this, saying Isabella has sent him to enquire after Edward's well-being. In response, Edward describes the conditions in which he is held prisoner: his cell is in a cess-pool, he is given little to eat, and his jailers continuously make noise to prevent him from sleeping. As a result, he says, his “mind's distempered and [his] body's numb.”

Lightborne, claiming to be moved, urges Edward to lie down on the feather bed. Edward is still suspicious, even when Lightborne once more protests his innocence. In his uncertainty, however, he gives Lightborne a jewel to try to win his favor. Edward also tells Lightborne to “know that [he is] a king,” but is then immediately overcome by grief at the loss of his crown. Lightborne simply urges Edward to sleep again. Edward does sleep, though fitfully: as soon as he has begun to drift off, he starts awake, saying that something tells him he will die if he falls asleep. He once more questions why Lightborne has come, and Lightborne now admits the truth, calling Maltravers and Gourney into the room.

Significantly, Edward's deterioration while in prison is entirely internal. As Gourney and Maltravers note, Edward remains outwardly healthy. Edward's state thus parallels England's descent into civil war and political turmoil, particularly because Mortimer Junior has a hand in both: acting on orders from the Protector, Gourney and Maltravers decide to hasten Edward's decline into madness.



Gourney and Maltravers's willingness to betray Lightborne foreshadows Gourney's later willingness to betray Mortimer. The fact that Mortimer does not recognize that this is a possibility, even after labeling Kent dangerous on similar grounds (i.e. his betrayal of Edward II) suggests that power has made Mortimer overconfident, and also perhaps that Mortimer's rather blunt personality and limited ability with language makes him insensitive to the subtleties of life.



Edward's words in this exchange reveal the full extent of his deterioration. Lack of sleep and food have made his mind “distempered,” as evidenced by his confused behavior toward Lightborne: Edward is alternately suspicious of Lightborne and desperate to tell his story to him. Edward's sense of his physical self is also disturbed, perhaps in part because of the conditions in which he is being kept. He remarks, for instance, that he does not know whether he has limbs or not. Like Edward's mental state as a whole, this comment is symbolically significant, as it parallels the fragmented state of England itself.



Edward's gift of the jewel, coupled with his reminder that he is a king, echoes much of the action from the first half of the play, when Edward lavished presents on Gaveston and insisted on his right to absolute rule. Given Edward's current circumstances, however, the parallel is bitter and ironic: the fact that Edward here gives the present to his killer underscores the role that his earlier behavior played in his downfall.



Maltravers and Gourney hold Edward down while Lightborne kills him with the spit. Fearing that Edward's screams will have been heard, Gourney quickly stabs Lightborne. The two men then leave, intending to take Edward's body to Mortimer Junior after throwing Lightborne's in the moat.

Although it is not clear from the stage directions, Marlowe's depiction of Edward's murder is based on a widely circulated rumor that he was rectally impaled with a heated spit. Although this is probably not what happened to the historical Edward (in fact, it is unclear that Edward was murdered at all), the story clearly arose because of Edward's suspected homosexuality: the murder method is a gruesome parody of anal sex, and therefore a kind of "justice" in the eyes of a homophobic society.



ACT 5, SCENE 6

Maltravers informs Mortimer Junior that both Edward and Lightborne are dead. However, he also reveals that Gourney has fled and may betray them. Mortimer threatens to kill Maltravers, who is showing signs of remorse, but eventually dismisses him instead. Mortimer then boasts that he “stands as Jove's huge **tree**” and thus has nothing to fear from anyone.

Mortimer's response to the news of Gourney's betrayal once again demonstrates how arrogant he has become: he simply cannot imagine that he himself might be in danger. His comparison of himself to a tree—a symbol repeatedly associated with royalty in the play—further highlights his overconfidence and ambition.



Isabella enters in distress, explaining that Edward III knows about Edward II's death and suspects her and Mortimer Junior of ordering it. Mortimer is unconcerned, but Isabella explains that her son has already gone to seek the advice of his council. At that very moment, Edward III enters, accompanied by several lords.

Even the news that Edward III suspects Mortimer of Edward II's murder does not disturb Mortimer. By contrast, Isabella seems aware of the fact that her and Mortimer's luck has run out, saying that this is the beginning of their "tragedy." Meanwhile, the fact that Edward III has sought the advice of his counselors before confronting Mortimer signals that he will be a better rule than either his father or the Protector—at least in the sense that he is willing to listen to the opinions of the nobles.



Hailing Mortimer Junior as a “villain,” Edward III says he knows that Mortimer murdered Edward II and intends to have him executed. That way, Edward III says, Mortimer's “hateful and accursed head” can stand “witness” to his crime. He also rebuffs Isabella's attempt to quiet him, saying he fears she is guilty as well. Finally, when Mortimer questions who dares to accuse him, Edward responds that his father speaks through him, “And plainly saith, 'twas [Mortimer] that murd' redst him.”

Edward III's warning that Mortimer's severed head will publically testify to his guilt draws on an idea that has recurred throughout the play: that violence can be a form of communication. Unlike Mortimer, however, Edward III does not rely exclusively on force to shore up his position. In fact, his declaration that Edward II is speaking through him in some ways vindicates the former king's preference for language over violence. As king, Edward III will presumably strike a balance between language and force in a way that neither Edward II nor Mortimer was able to do.



Mortimer Junior challenges Edward III to provide evidence, at which point Edward III produces the letter ordering Edward II's murder. Mortimer at first attempts to protest his innocence but, quickly realizing the situation is hopeless, he orders Isabella to be quiet, saying he would rather die than "sue for life unto a paltry boy." Before he is escorted away, he speaks scornfully of "Base Fortune," noting that "There is a point to which, when men aspire, / They tumble headlong down." Resigned to his death, he is escorted away by guards.

Isabella continues to plead with Edward III, begging him to spare Mortimer Junior's life. Edward, however, takes his mother's pleading as evidence of her own guilt, although he admits he hesitates to think her "so unnatural" as to have killed Edward II. Nevertheless, he orders her to be imprisoned, even as she herself begs for death instead.

Isabella is escorted to prison as a lord returns with Mortimer Junior's head. Edward III then asks his attendants to prepare Edward II's hearse, and as he waits for them to return, he laments that he could not "rule" Mortimer's "accursed head" well enough to prevent his father's murder. Eventually, the hearse is brought in, and Edward places Mortimer's head on it as he proclaims his own "grief and innocence."

Mortimer's ineptitude with words comes back to haunt him in the form of the order for Edward II's murder. Despite Mortimer's attempts to craft a protectively ambiguous message, no one is ever in any doubt about what the letter means. Since it is also written in Mortimer's handwriting, his downfall quickly becomes certain. In being exposed and executed, however, Mortimer regains a measure of the courage and bluntness that had initially made him a sympathetic character: his stoic acceptance of his fate and his refusal to beg for his life restore some of the dignity he lost by becoming a liar and murderer.



In weighing the evidence of Isabella's guilt, Edward III once more brings up the topic of her "unnaturalness." It is not simply that Isabella might have been involved in her husband's murder, but rather the fact that she has committed adultery that makes her threatening: in addition to giving Mortimer broad and unlawful authority over both England and Edward III, Isabella's affair could in theory have placed an illegitimate child in the line of succession to the throne. In a society based on blood lineage, this would have been hugely disruptive.



With Mortimer's death, order is finally restored to England and the monarchy. The relationships that threatened to destabilize the social hierarchy (Edward and Gaveston, Isabella and Mortimer) have been violently ended, and Edward III's actions so far have indicated that he will show proper deference to his counselors while also ruling with a firm hand.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Beaumont, Lily. "Edward II." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 11 May 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Beaumont, Lily. "Edward II." LitCharts LLC, May 11, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/edward-ii>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Edward II* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Marlowe, Christopher. *Edward II*. Methuen Drama. 2014.

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Marlowe, Christopher. *Edward II*. London: Methuen Drama. 2014.