

Ironies of kingship essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A good ruler is supposed to lead his country and keep his kingdom united but Edward II prefers to waste time and enjoy himself with his flatterers. Edward II is introduced to the audience as a ‘pliant king’, a pleasure seeker who prefers to divide his kingdom than have his lover Gaveston exiled from the kingdom. Later in the play, his orders are disregarded by the nobles and a civil war within the kingdom of England ensues. By the end of the play we see the king at his most tragic, having lost everything including his friends, his lover Gaveston, his kingdom and having been betrayed by his own wife, Isabella.

The play Edward II reaches its emotional climax in Act V, Scene I. It is in this scene that the king’s image as an irresponsible and weak person undergoes a total transformation, and he emerges before the audience as a tragic figure in his understanding of the worthlessness of a king stripped of power just like the King in King Lear. Historically Edward II might not have shown this kind of tragic understanding of life. It is here that one has to look for the poet in the dramatist who expressed the renaissance anxiety for the helplessness of the human beings before Time. In the context of the drama, however, the understanding of the futility of human endeavour is related to another personal fact of the king; in fact, he lost the desire to live after Gaveston’s death, who was half his self. In other words, the king is under the control of death-instinct. With this he has also lost the desire for pomp and pleasure, and what he cares for now are his sense of honour, betrayal, conspiracy and anxiety for the future of his son. His refusal to surrender the crown to the Bishop of Winchester is a symbolic overture to defy Mortimer’s

authority. And this is necessary for the dramatist also in reversing the sway of sympathy of the audience in the king's favour.

The king rises above the ordinary level when he expresses his understanding of the tragic situation of a king remaining in imprisonment in his own kingdom and still remaining the titular head of the kingdom. This kind of situation forces him to understand the tragedy of power or the irony of kingship:

“ I wear the crown, but am controlled by them By Mortimer, and my unconstant queen...”

Though it is rather ironical that he expects constancy from the queen whom he disregarded as long as he had Gaveston by his side, the audience tends to forget that and sympathise with him in his plight. They may fall under the influence of the king's emotional condemnation of the queen, who “ spot my nuptial bed with infamy.” In the next moment, however, he breaks in cold sarcasm when he asks the Bishop of Winchester whether he must resign to “ make usurping Mortimer a king”. It is clear now that his mind is being frequented by a variety of moods.

For the king the situation is more pathetic as he cares now for his son, who, according to him, is “ a lamb encompassed by wolves”. In utter helplessness and frustration he bursts out in cursing Mortimer. But soon recovers sanity and comments on the tragedy of his situation:

“...weigh how hardy I can brook
To lose my crown and kingdom without a cause...”