CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Edward the Second

Christopher Marlowe · *c. 1592 · original English text*

Edward II calls Gaveston home to ‘share the kingdom’ and will not be parted from him. The barons, the queen, and at last young Mortimer turn the realm against a king who would rather have his friend than their counsel. Marlowe’s history ends in a dungeon at Berkeley, with Lightborn, and it is among the starkest of Elizabethan tragedies.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What happens to a kingdom when a king’s love will not be ruled, and what kind of deposition becomes a murder?

“Kiss not my hand: Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee.”
King Edward · The king’s greeting at Gaveston’s return

Edward will not treat Gaveston as a subject or a passing favorite; the barons will not treat that love as private. Isabel, neglected, turns toward Mortimer. Gaveston is exiled, recalled, and killed. Spencer follows in the same dangerous nearness. The king, hunted and shamed, is forced to surrender the crown and is at last murdered in a manner the play does not pretty. Marlowe shows a weak king and a cruel realm, not a simple moral against affection. The history is for older students, and the last scene must be taught with gravity, not as a spectacle.

KEY CHARACTERS

King Edward II
A king who will share the realm with the man he loves and who cannot, or will not, rule the barons.

Piers Gaveston
The recalled exile, proud, mocking, and fatal to himself and to the king’s peace.

Queen Isabel
Edward’s neglected wife, who turns from a wronged woman into Mortimer’s ally.

Young Mortimer
The most able of the peers, who takes the realm and orders the murder.

Kent, Spencer, and Lightborn
A wavering brother, a second favorite, and the hired killer of the last scene.

SHARE THE KINGDOM

> *“Come, Gaveston, And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.”*
> The opening letter

> *“Kiss not my hand: Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee.”*
> **King Edward** · Gaveston’s return

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Come, Gaveston
THE OPENING

Gaveston reads the new king’s summons and comes. Edward embraces him, advances him, and insults the peers who call him a base minion.

- The first line of the action is already a sharing of the kingdom.
- The barons’ pride and Edward’s will meet head-on.
- Kent, the king’s brother, is not yet a foe.

> *“Come, Gaveston, And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.”*
> The king’s letter, read by Gaveston at the opening

02
Exile, Return, and Blood
THE MIDDLE RISING

The peers force Gaveston’s exile, then his recall, and at last his death. Edward’s grief hardens into a war with his own nobles.

- Isabel’s embassy and her turning are a political as well as a private plot.
- Gaveston’s mockery of the bishop and the peers lights fuses already laid.
- The killing of the favorite is not the end of the pattern.

03
Spencer, and a Queen Abroad
THE LATER RISE OF MORTIMER

Young Spencer takes a place near the king. Isabel and the young prince go to France; Mortimer becomes the power beside her. Edward’s party begins to fail.

- A second favorite proves the conflict was never only one man.
- The prince is already a piece in Mortimer’s game.
- Loyalty to the king and love of the realm pull Kent both ways.

04
A Crown Yielded
THE DEPOSITION

Edward is hunted, taken, and pressed to resign the crown for his son’s sake. He yields, still a king in his own mind, and is moved from prison to fouler prison.

- The deposition is a stripping, not a ceremony like Richard II’s glass.
- ‘Tell Isabel the queen, I look’d not thus’ is the shamed body speaking.
- Mortimer’s ‘Lightborn, come forth’ is the order that ends policy and begins murder.

05
Lightborn
THE CLOSE

Lightborn is sent to Berkeley. The king is murdered. Young Edward III, coming into his own, makes Mortimer pay, and Isabel is sent down. The new reign begins in the shadow of a horrible death.

- The manner of the killing is brutal; do not stage or describe it in more detail than the class and the text require.
- The boy-king’s justice is real and is also a political necessity.
- Marlowe leaves no one clean.

> *“Tell Isabel the queen, I look’d not thus, When for her sake I ran at tilt in France,”*
> **King Edward** · The prison, to Lightborn

Kingship | Love and Favor | The Barons | Deposition | A Cruel Death

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #20288, Marlowe’s history play (printed 1594). The typography is older: deceas’d, look’d, I’ll, and speech-prefixes such as _K. Edw._
2. Exact: “Come, Gaveston, / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.” “Kiss not my hand: / Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee.” “Tell Isabel the queen, I look’d not thus, / When for her sake I ran at tilt in France,”
3. The play concerns the king’s love for Gaveston, a deposition, and a brutal murder at Berkeley (Lightborn). It is for older students. Teach the politics and the cruelty gravely; do not sensationalize the last scene, and do not reduce the play to a single modern slogan.
4. This is Marlowe, not Shakespeare’s later histories. The tone is harsher, the sympathies less evenly spread, and the close is starker.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #20288, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/marlowe-edward-the-second/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.