

Embodying Machiavellianism: Marlowe's Portrayal of Young Mortimer in Edward II

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Abstract:

Machiavelli's political philosophy exerted profound influence on English Literature, particularly drama, during the era of Renaissance. Machiavelli's ideas, primarily from *The Prince*, spurred the creation of the 'Machiavellian' archetype in drama, highlighting themes of deceit, ambition, and ruthless political manoeuvring. Machiavelli's doctrine was the most important shaping force on Christopher Marlowe's plays. Infact, all the major Marlovian heroes, such as Tamburlaine, Dr. Faustus, and Barabas exhibit, selfish egotism and attachment to evil in their assertions of respective individualities. However, what is noteworthy about *Edward II* is that Marlowe here attaches the Machiavellian spirit not to his hero Edward, but to an arch villain, the Young Mortimer. This paper seeks to trace Young Mortimer's development from the young, enthusiastic warrior at the beginning to a ruthless Machiavellian villain who murders and tricks his way to the throne in *Edward II*.

Keywords: Machiavellian, ruthless, ambition, manoeuvring, tricks.

As Edward Meyer has aptly observed in the ‘Preface’ to his scholarly work, *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama*:

“ Four years ago when first making the acquaintance of Kyd , Marlowe, Greene , Peele , Jonson , Chapman , Marston , Dekker , Middleton , Webster , Massinger and other of Shakespeare’s great contemporaries , I was struck by the number of times Machiavelli and Aretino were referred to , and the reckless manner in which , what I then supposed to be the former’s political principles , were cited and put into practice by the villains of dramatic literature.” (Meyer, ix)

The whole English Renaissance mind was irrefutably influenced by Machiavelli, the Florentine diplomat and his celebrated political treatise *The Prince*. He was only known through the French of Gentillet, if that, but he was the great character of supreme intrigue that, however taken, was at the back of every Tudor mind. Elizabethan drama--"the first terror-stricken meeting of the England of Elizabeth with the Italy of the late renaissance"--was more terrified of Machiavelli than of anybody. The Borgias, Sforzas, Baglionis, Malatestas, Riartes were of far more importance to the Elizabethan dramatists than any of the eminent families of their own country. Edward Meyer has catalogued three hundred and ninety-five references to Machiavelli in Elizabethan literature. As to his influence in England, Dr Grosart wrote: “I have suggested to the biographer of the renowned Machiavelli (Professor Villari of Florence) that an odd chapter might be written on the scare his name was for long in England: so much so that he came to be regarded as an incarnation of the Evil One himself.”(Gossart, quoted in Meyer, x)

“In the last fifty years of Renaissance scholarship,” as Irving Ribner observes, “few names have been coupled more often and with less agreement than those of Christopher Marlowe and Niccolo Machiavelli.” In fact, Machiavelli’s doctrine was the most important shaping force on Marlowe’s plays. Perhaps, Marlowe’s atheistic, rebellious and realistic mind found it

most suitable for his literary expressions. Infact, all the major Marlovian heroes, such as Tamburlaine, Dr. Faustus, and Barabas, exhibit selfish egotism and attachment to evil in their assertions of respective individualities. However, what is noteworthy about *Edward II* is that Marlowe here attaches the Machiavellian spirit not to his hero Edward, but to an arch villain, the Young Mortimer.

To examine and to understand critically how far Marlowe's Young Mortimer is a Machiavellian villain, it is necessary to examine those parts of Machiavelli's philosophy which are relevant to Mortimer's actions and to trace Mortimer's development from the young, enthusiastic warrior at the beginning to the ruthless villain who murders and tricks his way to the throne in *Edward II*.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born into this unstable time of shifting fortunes in the year 1469. He served in several minor government positions, and was banished or imprisoned at various points of his career. One of his most notable positions was serving as a sort of political advisor to the Borgia family. The head of the family, Alexander Borgia, was Pope; the eldest son was Cesare Borgia, a bloodthirsty young warlord; the younger daughter Lucrezia was rumored to have poisoned her way through several husbands in order to stuff the Borgia coffers with golden inheritances. The name "Borgia" was synonymous with betrayal, murder, and power-mongering.

Machiavelli, disillusioned with the ineffectual bickering and infighting among the Italian cities, saw the effectiveness of the Borgia family members in seizing and maintaining their power. He formulated his own theory of effective government in his treatise known as *The Prince*, and he based his ideal "Prince" on Cesare Borgia's life. He famously asserted that good rulers sometimes have to learn "not to be good," they have to be willing to set aside ethical concerns of justice, honesty, and kindness in order to maintain the stability of the

state. The idea was shocking to contemporaries, who had inherited medieval ideas about divine kingship, in which the king was appointed by God for the express purpose of serving as a sort of celestial deputy on earth, upholding law and justice. Throughout the history of European literature, the idea of the prime importance of virtue has played a major part. Ever since the sixth century, political theorists had stressed how important it was for a ruler to have moral integrity and to be a good ruler to his subjects. In popular medieval belief, the king was considered to be a "primate," an avatar of human virtue with innate authority over lesser beings in the cosmological hierarchy. In contrast, Machiavelli argued that the most successful kings were not the ones who acted according to the dictates of law, or justice, or conscience, but those willing to do whatever was necessary to preserve their own power--and thus indirectly preserve the order of the state. His title, "The Prince," in fact, is a subtle mockery of the idea that rulers should be noble in their character. The implication of his title is that the idealised Prince Charming is a mere fairy tale based on his own experience in the foreign politics of Florence. He created a framework of political thought which argued that a wise ruler had to be pragmatic and flexible in the choice of his measures, instead of adhering to the imperative of virtues. The most striking novelty in Machiavellian politics was the total subordination of moral imperatives to those of political efficiency. It was the end which for him justified the means.

Machiavelli was excommunicated for espousing his views, but his arguments had a profound effect on Renaissance attitudes toward government. In literature such as Renaissance drama, the "machiavelle," or machiavellian villain, became a moustache-twirling stereotypical villain--the bad guy who appears to be good in front of all his companions in order to betray them all the more effectively. "Machiavellian" became a byword for treachery, sneakiness, ambition, and ruthlessness. A Machiavellian villain is a "puppet master". He uses other "tool villains" in order to get what he desires. A Machiavellian villain

always operates in secrecy, concealing his true intentions from everyone. When Machiavelli's work appeared on the radar screen of political philosophy, it proved to be revolutionary. The second pillar of Machiavelli's political philosophy was Fortune. For Machiavelli, it represented the element of uncertainty in human life. This meant that, however carefully something was prepared and later carried out, there was still a possibility that it could eventually fail.

Marlowe's treatment of the character of Young Mortimer in *Edward II* has offered difficulties to some worthy critics in their way of evaluation. The development in that character can hardly be called 'development' as understood in the criticism of dramatic art: it is rather a 'change' than a development. A careful examination of the drama from the first to the last scene gives us an inevitable impression that there are two Mortimers in the same person. At the very outset of the play, he appears as a redoubtable leader of the earls and barons in their conflict with the king over his ruinous attachment to the canker Gaveston, the king's favourite. Though formally Lancaster among the nobles was regarded as the greatest enemy of the king in the conflict, it is Young Mortimer who represents the spirit of opposition at every stage of the long conflict. Marlowe here slightly deviates from his source materials in history and represents him as an outspoken critic to the king. However, he has done so in order to intensify the conflict in the play. He is, of course, arrogant, hasty, haughty, impulsive and all that. However, even before Gaveston makes his appearance before the barons, Mortimer sternly reminds the king that they would not allow Gaveston to enter the boundaries of their country because:

"Mine uncle here, this earl, and I myself,

Were sworn to your father into the realm.

And know, my lord, ere I will break my oath,

.....

For Mortimer will hang his armour up.

(Act I, Sc. i, L.82-89)

He condemns the king for his base love for Gaveston and reminds him of his royal duty: “You have matter of more weight to think upon”. Mortimer’s argument is clear enough: Why should the king lay waste his kingdom, alienate his nobles for the sake of a base favourite?

“Who, swoln with venom of ambitious pride,

Will be the ruin of the realm and us.

(Act I, Sc. ii, L. 31-32)

He breeds the notion that Gaveston turns to be the greatest enemy of England. In his conversation with his uncle Elder Mortimer, he worriedly dwells upon how Gaveston is getting undue favours from the king and bringing about the country’s ruin:

“While soldiers mutiny for want of pay,

He wears a lord’s revenue on his back,

And Midas-like; he jets it in the court.”

(Act I, Sc. iv, L. 405-7)

Hence, he is bent upon removing Gaveston, staking all his interest and energy:

“We’d hale him from the bosom of the king,

And at the court-gate hang the peasant up”.

(Act I, Sc. ii, L. 29-30)

He defies the threats of the king and practically pits himself against the will of the king and instigates all the barons to rise in revolt against the king to banish Gaveston:

“Our hands I hope shall fence our heads,

*And strike off his that makes us threaten us.
Come, uncle, let us leave the brain-sick king,
And henceforth parley with our naked swords?"*

(Act I, Sc. i , L. 123-126)

He is gallantly courteous to the queen and sympathises with her in the first stage of their intimacy. He gets annoyed at the king's unjust neglect of the queen: Why should the king be so infatuated with Gavestone, a base favourite, that he would not care for his queen? His caring attitude to the queen bears no touch of guilty armour at this stage. He is far from being an intriguing courtier and contriving man, seeking to win the queen's love. But it can not but be admitted that he is overtly impulsive, haughty and hasty in nature and often becomes rudely violent in his speech and action. For instance, when Gavestone returns from his exile and irritates the nobles by his insolence under the protection of the king, Mortimer stabs him, thinking least about the consequences:

“Villain, thy life, unless I miss mine aim.” (Act II, Sc. ii, L.84)

In spite of such reckless impulsiveness and violent temperament, Mortimer is raised, in the earlier part of the drama, almost to the status of a national hero whose prime concern is to secure the welfare of the state and to keep up its peace, prosperity and solidarity that is almost bartered away by the weak king at the instigation of his mischievous minion. By espousing worthy causes and by raising his voice of protest against the king for the ruin he is bringing upon himself and the kingdom by his indulgence in pomp and glitter and idle amusements, Mortimer loses no esteem in our eyes.

However, this champion of the cause of England's welfare gradually changes into a Machiavellian villain in the course of the drama. As presented in the drama, his relations with

Queen Isabella have two distinct stages. In the very beginning, his concern for the queen is nothing more than a “chivalrous attention to the neglected queen”. However, it undergoes a sea-change in the latter half of the drama; and “we wonder whether this egregious villain can be the same man”. They become partners in guilty love as well as in the heinous conspiracies. It is the queen who first teaches Mortimer to scheme, to use Machiavelli’s formula “of necessity” (Act I, Sc. iv, L. 238) and to sacrifice integrity to expediency. From this moment, we can trace in him the lawless ambition as we find in Tamburlaine, the typical Marlovian hero. There is, of course, a great essential difference between the Scythian tyrannical conqueror (Tamburlaine) and the high-aspiring leader of the English Barons in historical times. “The lines of Mortimer’s character” as Boas observes, “are, of course, toned down to suit the altered environment, but there is the same note of lawlessly aspiring ambition” (Boas 54) . He comes akin to those ‘overreachers’ in Marlowe’s tragedies, who fall owing only to their ‘lawless’ ambition. Tamburlaine is the embodiment of infinite will for domination; Barabas represents the unsatiated yearning for wealth; and Faustus embodies the unquenchable thirst for infinite knowledge. It is, in fact, the reckless aspiration that aligns Mortimer to the typical Marlovian heroes. We can see the change coming over him when the king refuses to pay the ransom amount to the Scots in order to free his uncle from their captivity. Now, he raises his voice against him pointing out his extravagances and the discontentment of the mass that is cropping up and thus starts all his planning and scheming against the king. The nobles led by Mortimer, however, are defeated in the fight with the king at Boroughbridge. The king, however, could not dare execute him along with other lords since he was aware of his popularity among the mass: “The people love him well.” Hence he orders, “Go, take that haughty Mortimer to the Tower, There see him safe bestow’d”. Mortimer’s reckless defiance of earthly obstacles to attain his unattainable end comes out in his haughty words to the king:

*“What, Mortimer! can ragged stony walls
Immure thy virtue that aspires to heaven?
No, Edward, England’s scourge, it may not be;
Mortimer’s hope surmounts his fortune far.”*

(Act III, Sc. iii, L.71-74)

He manages to escape from the prison, and along with the Earl of Kent, crosses over to France, only to join Queen Isabella to lead her to fight against the king.

The Young Mortimer now grows powerful, as fortune turns against the king. Acquisition of power leads him to seek for more power and ultimately for absolute power in the kingdom. He throws away his mask of allegiance and honour and becomes a truly Machiavellian. “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”— this becomes truly testimonial to Mortimer. With his illicit love for the queen, he plans of making himself the supreme authority in the state by ousting Edward from the throne and keeping the young prince and his mother under his grip. In other words, he grows Machiavellian in his secret design of promoting himself to the ruler of the state – he grows mean, greedy, cruel and hypocritical, as the play progresses. After the king is taken in custody, he conspires meanly against the king and instigates the queen to coronate her son and make him his protector; but to Kent he pretends as if he had no hand in the matter:

*“My lord of Kent, what needs these questions?
‘Tis not in her controlment, nor in ours,
But as the ralm and parliament shall please,
So shall your brother be disposed of?”*

(Act IV, Sc.v, L.43-46)

He shamelessly gloats of his secret design:

*“They thrust upon me the protectorship,
And sue to me for that that I desire.
While at the council-table, grave enough,
And not unlike a bashful puritan
First I complain of imbecility.*

.....
.....

*Mine enemies Will I plague, my friends advance;
And what I list command who dare control?”*

(Act IV, Sc.iv, L.56-68)

In the spirit of Tamburlaine, he vaunts with an utter defiance:

*“The prince I rule, the queen do I command,
And with a lowly conge to the ground,
The proudest lords salute me as I pass;
I seal, I cancel, I do what I will.”* (Act V, Sc. iv, 48-51)

But he realises that “the king must die, or Mortimer goes down”. The commons begin to pity the king. He fears popular rising on the king’s behalf. Like Macbeth and Richard III, Mortimer is always conscious of his position:

“Fear’d am I more than loved;-- let me feared.” (Act V, Sc.iv, L.52)

Hence, with mingled cruelty and craft, he procures the king’s removal in Berkley Castle and his brutal assassination of its vaults. Even Kent is not spared for his sympathy to his brother, Edward. The heinous crime carried out, Mortimer now feels safe:

“As for myself, I stand as Jove’s huge tree,

*And others are but shrubs compar'd to me.
All tremble at my name, and I fear none;
Let's see who dare impeach me for his death."*

(Act V, Sc.vi, L.11-14)

As a matter of fact, Mortimer, particularly in the later part of the drama, is a politician, without any scruple of conscience or regard for morality. We can trace in him a perfect embodiment of Machiavellism that advocates the shortest way to achieve political power by any measure, fair or foul.

Of Course, Mortimer's crime does not pay. Fate turns against him and his villainy is exposed, as the "false Gurney hath betrayed" him. The young prince, helped by the peers, arrests him and orders his immediate execution. In keeping with his character, the arch contriver meets his fate with his usual spirit of defiance and haughty indifference and without the slightest touch of repentance or regret. "He has made the most of his life and he looks forward with eager zest", as Boas observes, "to the new possibilities that lie beyond grave":

*"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?
Farewell, fair queen; weep not for Mortimer,
That scorns the world, and, as a traveler,
Goes to discover countries yet unknown."*

(Act V, Sc. vi, L.59-66)

This is truly Machiavellian which was, infact, the most favourite pursuit of Marlowe. Here, Mortimer remains a villain, not a tragic hero, but a hero villain, rather like Macbeth – a villain hero.

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