

**“Why, this is Hell, nor are we out of it”: The Problem with Marlowe in UK English  
Secondary Schools (and How to Get Over It)**

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Readers of this journal will need no persuading that Christopher Marlowe is in the pantheon of genius playwrights. Were you to ask students who have gone no further than A-Level English in UK schools about Marlowe, however, their answer would probably be “Who?” The average English school leaver, even if she has studied English to A-Level, is likely to have studied no more than three or four plays from the early modern period, and all of them by one author. In this brief paper, I wish to offer some historical reasons for this ignorance, and explain, using examples from my own history as a secondary school teacher of 33 years, how to address and potentially overcome it.

### **Historical background**

About thirteen years ago, while teaching *Doctor Faustus*<sup>1</sup> as part of an English Literature A-Level course, I discovered the writings of Jim Smith and his *Lazy Teacher’s Handbook*.<sup>2</sup> His key philosophy is that students learn more when a teacher teaches less. This led to my pushing for a “Research-Link-Present” style of teaching: my A-Level students (16–18), and subsequently my GCSE students (14–16), and then my Key Stage 3 students (11–14) were encouraged to do their own research, and then teach (parts of) my classes for me. While facing some initial reluctance, I discovered that students became more confident the more presentations they did; and the more they became experts in the topic they were presenting the deeper their work became: students across the ability range were able to develop and integrate ideas from their research into subsequent work. University colleagues will recognise this style of teaching as akin to the student-led seminar. When I had two classes in a week, one would be me teaching, and one would be the students teaching each other.

At around the same time, I had started freelancing for Stage On Screen, a company who produced theatrical performances of classic texts which were then recorded and released

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<sup>1</sup> The edition used in most English schools is Christopher Marlowe *Doctor Faustus, Based on the A Text*, ed. Roma Gill (London: New Mermaids, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1989)

<sup>2</sup> Jim Smith *The Lazy Teacher’s Handbook: How Your Students Learn More When You Teach Less* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2010)

on DVD commercially to schools and universities, and are now available on Drama Online. Their first two plays were *Doctor Faustus* and *A School for Scandal*, followed by *Volpone* and *The Duchess of Malfi* the subsequent year. My role was to prepare teaching resources, suitable for any A-Level or first year university courses for the four plays. Based on the principles described above, I created Research-Link-Present teaching materials, as well as guidelines for discussion topics and detailed summaries of the play, which were (and are) made available in their “Green Room,” an online free resource for teachers.<sup>3</sup> The text used both by the exam boards and by Stage On Screen was the 1604 A-Text, whereas the Globe Production, originally on DVD and now on Drama Online, was a rewritten version based on combining the A and B texts, so was less relevant for the A-Level (though interesting in itself).

Before 2015 this part of the A-Level course at the time was an open-ended coursework unit of 4000 words: students had to take a Shakespeare play, another early modern play, and a third text (which could be a third play, or another relevant text) and write a response. This gave teachers substantial freedom, and we could select the texts that we wished to (within these parameters), according to student ability levels. In the three years that I ran that unit, I selected *Doctor Faustus*, *The Tempest* and a popular modern biography of John Dee.<sup>4</sup> Other colleagues in the department opted for *The Changeling*, *King Lear* and *Gorboduc* one year, and then *Othello*, *Volpone* and *The Jew of Malta* in another. Students were encouraged to explore the texts comparatively, through appropriate critical and theoretical lenses, and were given credit for these approaches.

If students wished to write a creative response, they could complete a piece of creative writing-and-commentary (in total 2000 words) and a further critical essay (of 2000 words). I particularly remember a dialogue written by one of my students between Faustus and Prospero, excellently capturing the “mighty line” of Marlowe and the more fractured iambic of late-Shakespeare. His understanding of the two playwrights’ use of verse showed a clear understanding of the power and versatility of blank verse in the early modern theatre. Another student explored the division between necromancy (in *Doctor Faustus*) and geomancy (in *The Tempest*); another completed costume designs for Mephistophilis and Ariel by using details from the texts to explore (materially) their fascinating differences and similarities.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Green Room,” *Stage on Screen*. [www.stageonscreen.com/green-room/](http://www.stageonscreen.com/green-room/)

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen’s Conjuror: The Science and Magic of Dr Dee* (London: Harper Collins, 2011)

### **Changes to the Curriculum and Their Effects on Studying Early Modern Drama**

With the arrival of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010, the Department for Education announced it wished to make national exams (both the GCSE at 16 and the A-Level at 18) more “academic” with more “higher order thinking skills.”<sup>5</sup> English secondary students had, it seemed, slipped down the international PISA scale for academic achievement; and the UK Government was determined that our teenagers should be more internationally competitive.

Because of my involvement with Stage On Screen, I was asked to help put together a team of secondary school English and Drama teachers by Dr Pascale Aebischer of Exeter University to work on widening the early modern drama unit at GCSE and A-Level. Funding was not forthcoming from the AHRC, as it became clear that “academic” meant, for the DfE under Michael Gove (and then Special Advisor, Dominic Cummings), easy to mark and with very specific “right” answers. This meant that “higher order thinking skills” now excluded creative thinking, connectivity, inter-disciplinary approaches, big ideas, indeed anything that got in the way of “teacher tells you the right answers.” And there *were* clearly ‘right answers’ for all Literature texts, or at least right answers that got you marks.

Again, this flew in the face of the academic research of luminaries such as Dylan Wiliam and Philip Adey, which stated that students learned more the more they were encouraged to think open-endedly, and the more they discussed the texts and made cognitive links across the curriculum.<sup>6</sup> In fact, their research showed that “right answers” style teaching slowed down academic and intellectual development, especially for students from lower socio-economic groups and less academic backgrounds. (I am, of necessity, simplifying their arguments, and apologise to them for doing so.) While I do not think it was Gove’s intention, by the time the desires of the DfE had been translated into terms that the exam boards could assess, academic stretch and challenge had been lost.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Gove, “The Purpose of our School Reforms.” <http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-purpose-of-our-school-reforms>: “There is growing evidence—both from this country’s best schools and from other nations—that access to a stretching academic curriculum to the age of 16 helps improve performance for all children, all round. The work of Dr Cristina Iannelli at Edinburgh University demonstrates that the type of curriculum you study—specifically enjoyment of core academic subjects—is more important than the type of school you attend, whether grammar, independent or comprehensive, in determining future success ... And our curriculum and qualifications changes provide more scope than ever before for higher-order thinking skills and genuine creativity.”

<sup>6</sup> Dylan Wiliam and Paul Black, *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment* (Brentford: GL Assessment Ltd, 2006). Philip Adey and Michael Shayer, *Really Raising Standards: Cognitive Intervention and Academic Achievement* (London: Routledge, 1994).

As a result of these reforms, since 2015 GCSE Literature has consisted of one Shakespeare play, one nineteenth century novel (by an English author), one prose or drama text written since 1900 (also English), and roughly fifteen poems (about half of which come from 1780–1900: the exact number depends on which of the four exam boards your school follows). In an increasing number of secondary schools, all Literature education from the moment 11-year-olds arrive in year 7 is to prepare them for this exam. The constant training of students only in the skills for which they can be guaranteed marks at GCSE, with half-termly assessment, means that there is little time to explore the wider implications of the texts they are studying, or indeed for any in-depth work at all. In some schools, the texts for GCSE are taught over and over again, to embed knowledge. One consequence of this approach has been that students (and their teachers) are bored of Literature by the time they reach 16, leading to a 23% reduction in students choosing to continue with English Literature after 16, compared to 2017 (the first year this new exam was used), with even more reduction in the number of students choosing the other English A-Levels (English Language, and English Language-and-Literature).<sup>7</sup>

There is also increased homogenisation of texts chosen for teaching. According to Sarah Olive and Victoria Elliott, 65% of English schools taught *Macbeth* for GCSE in 2017, and 32% *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>8</sup> Conversations with friends and colleagues would suggest that the *Macbeth* proportion has risen in the six years since. Because of costs, headteachers have put pressure on Heads of Department to make sure all teachers are teaching the same texts (this happened in a school I was teaching in, and it is centralised across Multi Academy Trusts). This means, in practice, more *Macbeth*.

At A-Level, too, from 2015 texts were put in silos. A single Shakespeare play was now sacrosanct; one other play (from the whole of English Literature) was assessed, and your answer on this was worth (ten marks) less than your answer on Shakespeare. Neither comparison nor interpretation was formally rewarded. And if your Head of Department decided that *A Streetcar Named Desire* was the play to be studied, there was no argument. Micro-management by Senior Leadership was the order of the day.

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<sup>7</sup> OFQUAL, “A-Level Outcomes in England.” <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/Alevel/Outcomes/>: in 2017, 42,245 students took English Literature A-Level; in 2022, it was 32,485. The figures for 2023 were not available at time of writing.

<sup>8</sup> Victoria Elliott and Sarah Olive, “Secondary Shakespeare in the UK: What Gets Taught and Why?,” *English in Education* 55, no. 2 (2021): 104.

There are four exam boards offering A-Level Literature, one of which (AQA) offers two different styles of exam. Of the five possible choices for the A-Level exam, therefore, three offer *Doctor Faustus* as a choice, one offers *Edward II*, one no Marlowe at all. At present, the only other choices for early modern plays across all the exam boards are *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and (not assessed as Shakespeare plays, and therefore worth ten marks less overall) *Richard II* and *Measure for Measure*.

The upshot of this, nationally, is that the average 18-year-old school leaver (even if she has studied English A-Level) has the total exposure to early modern drama of maybe three plays by Shakespeare: one in year 9 (normally *Romeo* or *Much Ado*), one in year 11 (*Macbeth* in most schools), and one in year 13 (probably *Lear* or *Othello*).<sup>9</sup> No Marlowe, Jonson, Webster, Middleton, Fletcher, Heywood or Ford. Many leave school without even an awareness that there were other early modern writers, making Shakespeare, with his strange and off-putting language, seem even stranger.

Luckily, in the early days of the new A Level, I worked for a school where most teachers preferred teaching lower years, and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) didn't mind which play I taught: I was able to bring *Doctor Faustus* onto the school's A-Level curriculum. Because my colleague was teaching *Hamlet* for the Shakespeare unit, we were able to do some cross-text teaching anyway, as so many themes in each play inform each other (Hell, death, afterlife, morality, Faustus' "on kai me on" and its similarity with Hamlet's "To be or not to be" etc). It was also a way of seeing how two authors from the same era approached the same ideas differently, getting over the "Well, people in the 1590s thought..." because at least one clearly did not. As with a lot of what goes on in secondary schools these days, the education had to be sneaked in around the preparation for the exams, rather than being the ostensible purpose of the lessons. Because I was teaching in North London, my classes tended to have more culturally Muslim students than is the national average; but these students anecdotally responded to Marlowe's cynical (and broadly non-Christian) world-view more positively than that of his more famous contemporary.

### **What Can be Done to Introduce Marlowe into the Secondary Curriculum: Practical Pointers**

So, what is to be done to give our school students a broader understanding of early modern theatre? To enable them to think creatively and with "higher order thinking skills"? To give

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<sup>9</sup> Elliot and Olive, "Secondary Shakespeare in the UK," 104.

them a taste of Christopher Marlowe and his different approach to the issues of his time (and ours)? To prepare them for beginning an English or Humanities degree? In the second half of this piece, I shall go through some practices I used to make *Doctor Faustus* come alive in the A-Level classroom. I hope secondary English teachers will see how these could be used at younger years, both with Marlowe and with other authors.

I divided my lessons into two, with the “Monday” lesson being teacher-led, and the “Wednesday” being seminar/Research-Link-Present mode. Monday lessons were divided into three types of class: traditional scene-based classes, where we would read the scene and discuss it (what is the turning-point in this scene? For plot? For character? For emotion? Dramatically? How would we stage it? etc.); then explorations of “Faustian pact” stories, where we would look at extracts or trailers for movies where someone sold his soul - this could either be literal, such as *The Devil’s Advocate* (1997), *Angel Heart* (1987) or *Bedazzled* (1967), or metaphorical, such as *Wall Street* (1987), *99 Homes* (2014) or *Spring Breakers* (2013), which enabled students to see how the story had a continuing message, or how the trope was used differently; and then philosophical classes, where we discussed questions such as “If there is no Devil, is there anything wrong with selling your soul?,” “Is there anything worth selling your soul for?,” “If you were offered the questions for the upcoming exam a week in advance, should you take them?,” “What do we mean by your ‘Soul’ and how is it different from a conscience, a self or a personality?” Philosophical questions engage students and enable them to make links between texts, their own lives, and the wider curriculum. Dedicated philosophy & cognitive acceleration classes, at all ages, have repeatedly been shown to increase student achievement by an average of a grade and a half, with the largest effect on children on Free School Meals.<sup>10</sup>

Wednesday classes were the ones led by the students, and the research they did was of three types. The first was a detailed, deep-dive context question where they had to research and present on a topic such as morality plays, Paracelsus, Wittenberg in the sixteenth century, Rudolf II, John Dee and Edward Kelley, Helen of Troy, *Tamburlaine*, sixteenth century ideas of atheism etc. I produced about 50 topics to provide background for *Doctor Faustus* (a lot of these are available on the Stage On Screen website). One third of the marks on the post-2015 paper was based on the play’s relationship to context, which did tend to create a New Historicist reading of the play, but it enabled students to see the choices Marlowe was

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<sup>10</sup> See S. Trickey & K. J. Topping, “‘Philosophy for Children’: A Systematic Review,” *Research Papers in Education* 19, no. 3 (2004): 363–378; and “Evidence of Success,” *Let’s Think in English*. <https://www.letsthinkinenglish.org/evidence-of-success/>.

making. There were excellent presentations on mermaid imagery, the Voynich manuscript, the A and B texts, the Danse Macabre etc, all of which added detailed historical and-or cultural depth to students' subsequent essays. Hearing seventeen-year-olds arguing about whether the play reflected Paduan Avarrhoism more than an Arian outlook was most rewarding, particularly as half the class in this school was culturally Muslim.

The next Research-Link-Present was a Close Text Reading. Students were given a section of about five pages of the play, and had to choose a section of 5–7 continuous lines, on which they would present, focusing on linguistic, character, plot details. Again, one third of the marks in the exam were given to analysis of language, structure and form, so this was beneficial for the question asked.

What was less justifiable (or only tangentially) in terms of exam grades, but essential in terms of improving my students' minds and preparing them for university, was getting them to do a Research-Link-Present on a literary theory. While the new A-Level does not require any explicit knowledge of any literary theory, a student who got stuck in the exam could apply a theory to the question and generate an instant interesting new paragraph. It is worth bearing in mind that schools are generally about 20 years behind the academic curve, so in 2018 I was considered radical for teaching "Lesbian/Gay Theory" when Universities had been teaching Third Wave Queer Theory for at least ten years.<sup>11</sup> A fifteen-minute seminar by a student first explaining the theory, then applying it to some part of *Doctor Faustus*, made them understand how theory could be helpful, and the application of (and argument with) Marxism, Feminism, Freud, Jung, Genette, Propp, Todorov, Post-Colonialism, Eco-Criticism, Lesbian/Gay, Isobel Armstrong, Foucault etc would automatically enhance the quality of a student's argument.

One of my students, who was politically on the right wing of the Conservative Party, complained that Marxist and Feminist criticism were "rubbish," and I was trying to turn her into a Corbynite (which then meant someone on the left wing of the Labour Party). I pointed out to her that, whatever she thought of the politics behind them, she was excellent at using both theoretical lenses to generate interesting arguments, so should do it anyway. She scored an A, and went on to study Politics. Applying a class-based economic reading of *Doctor Faustus*, she looked at the specifics of the legal transaction of "selling" the soul, in a purely

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). Ch. 7. Daniel Juan Gil, "The Deep Structure of Sexuality: War and Masochism in *Henry IV, Part 2*," in *Shakespeare*, ed. Mahdavi Menon (New York: Duke University Press, 2011), 114–20.

capitalist sense; her feminist lens forced her to look at the masculinist language of Faustus' "Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?" speech. Another student, applying a Lesbian-Gay lens, focused on the lack of intimacy in that language as opposed to the scenes between Faustus and Mephistophilis.

Interestingly, the theorist that seemed every year to have the most impact on the individual student studying him was Jacques Lacan. I say interestingly, because in my opinion Lacan was something of a charlatan. But for a 16–18-year-old, his notions of "the other" versus "The Other," or his Mirror Theory, made a sense of Faustus' relationship with Mephistophilis (among other notions in the play), and his combination of the Freudian subconscious and the linguistic theories of structuralism made very clear sense of the play, and other Literature texts. From anecdotal evidence, four of my six students who applied Lacan to their A-Level texts went on to study English Literature at university.

### **Conclusion**

The value of teaching Marlowe in secondary schools is inestimable. Not only are his plays continually relevant to our students' lives and often shorter and more immediately intelligible than his younger contemporary, but they demonstrate that there is more to early modern theatre than simply William Shakespeare. I have shown here how I went about teaching *Doctor Faustus* for A-Level. If there is, out there, a secondary school teacher who would like to collaborate on a course for Key Stage Three on *Tamburlaine* or *Edward II*, I would love to come in with you. While I love *The Jew of Malta* (I think it Marlowe's funniest), it is a problematic play, which I think I would only attempt as part of an interdisciplinary school project on antisemitism and racism, taking in History, Geography, RE, PSHCE and Biology.

And if you are a government education minister, or likely to become so shortly, I would also love to work with you on exposing students to a wider variety of texts. Marlowe should be part of our national conversation.

And *Macbeth* and *Romeo* need a rest.



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