

## Assessing Marlowe in Context

ADAM HANSEN

NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY

### Introduction

For the past ten years I have taught a semester-long (12 week) option module to third-year (final year) BA undergraduates at Northumbria University, in Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Sin, Sex, and Violence: Marlowe in Context. The module was inspired by the work I did after being asked to contribute a chapter on “Marlowe and the Critics” to a 2013 collection of essays edited by Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith, *Christopher Marlowe in Context*. Not only did that work necessitate me apprising myself of the critical heritage on Marlowe, but it also made me realise how his work suited a semester’s-worth of teaching (basically, with introductory sessions and time for reflection and review at the end, we cover a text a week). There are usually 25–30 students on the module, from a variety of degree programmes: English Literature, English Literature and Creative Writing, English and History, and, until the programme ended recently English and Journalism. The students have all taken a core (compulsory) second-year module, Early Modern Cultures, where they encounter the work of Marlowe and his contemporaries. This grounding in the period provides them with the skills, understanding, desire, and confidence to do more on the period in more detail. Many have also done *Doctor Faustus* for A-Level before university. Because we cover all of the plays and poems most scholars attribute to Marlowe (and, of course, we spend time thinking about the complications attendant on that process of attribution as we do), it is the only module we offer where students get to read a writer’s complete works. Putting issues of dating and chronology aside (and again, we discuss those issues throughout), students seem to appreciate this opportunity to think through and work within a single author’s oeuvre.

The module is assessed through two pieces of work. The second, completed and submitted after teaching delivery has ended, is a traditional essay (2000 words), based on students selecting a question from a range set, with those questions corresponding to issues and topics we have covered on the module’s weekly lectures and seminars. The first assessment is more unusual: a “critical introduction” (1500 words) with accompanying reflective commentary (200 words). This article reflects on the pedagogical drivers, implications, and challenges of this mode of assessment, how students respond to it, and how it helps them engage with Marlowe’s diverse works. The aim is to put assessing Marlowe in

Context in context. If any of these reflections prove useful to other teachers, you are warmly encouraged to adapt, use, and abuse the approach as appropriate in *your* teaching context.

### **What is a “critical introduction”?**

In the module guide, in the introductory sessions, and during the module until they submit the piece, I explain what is meant in this context by a “critical introduction” in the following terms:

For this task you will have to select a text studied on the module and produce a concise, critically informed, and engaging critical introduction to it, as if for a student edition. This exercise will require you to apprehend a single text in detail, while also prioritising the contexts, scholarship, and performance histories you think are important for understanding that text. As such, this assessment tests key skills in identifying and assimilating research, and expressing a provocative and personal view in a form of prose different to a standard essay. In your 200-word reflective commentary you should briefly explicate why you made some of the choices you made in terms of how you designed your “critical introduction,” chose its format, or targeted its audience. This is not a form of assessment you will be used to, but you will be supported by receiving feedback on a plan, lecture work, and online resources.

The module guide then expands on this brief description to offer more detailed instruction, because, as that expanded description notes, this is not a mode of assessment students might have encountered before:

Please write a 1500-word Critical Introduction to any one of the texts by Marlowe you have studied on the module: *Tamburlaine 1 and 2*, *Edward II*, *Dido*, *Queen of Carthage*, *Lucan’s Histories*, *The Massacre at Paris*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, *Hero and Leander*, “The Passionate Shepherd,” *Ovid’s Elegies*. Please also include a 200-word reflective commentary where you briefly explicate why you made some of the choices you made in terms of how you designed your “critical introduction,” chose its format, or targeted its audience.

When you are deciding which text to write about, please remember that your second assessment for this module, a 2000-word essay, should consider at least two texts by Marlowe you have studied on this module and that are different to the text you write about in this Critical Introduction. Your essay answers and Critical

Introduction should not deal with the same literary text but may refer to the same contextual or critical material.

This mode of assessment might seem new to you. However, the Critical Introduction builds on work you did for your Critical Review for Early Modern Cultures in your second year [when students have to critically evaluate a piece of scholarship on *Othello*]. The aim of this assessment is to give you the opportunity to get to grips with the range of Marlowe's work, and some of the diverse contexts, theoretical positions and concepts which might help you understand it. It is also an opportunity for you to present your ideas (and others') about Marlowe and his contexts in innovative, engaging ways. People have used all kinds of formats, including study-guides, "Top Trumps" cards, letters to government ministers, letters to school-children's parents, theatre programmes, newspaper articles, and scripts for radio or TV shows. But why not also consider a blog, a vlog, a Wiki, or a webpage? Do whatever works for your material and your audience.

You are, in a sense, trying to "sell" the text you have chosen to potential readers, and briefly explain in your reflective commentary how you did this. Who those potential readers are is up to you—they may be school students, or actors thinking of putting on the play or interpreting the poem(s) you have selected. Be careful and considered when choosing this audience. You are free to aim your "introduction" at pre-GCSE students, but if you do how will you ensure the material presented is age-appropriate? Equally, it is not really appropriate to aim your Critical Introduction at third-year undergraduates studying English, so please do not do this! Why? Because you are brilliant enough to show more imagination, and because that kind of introduction is what I do with you, meaning it is hard for you to do the same without replicating what you have been given in class.

Following this, when you produce your introduction, please state explicitly who the audience is (who it is for), if that isn't obvious. For example, if you are producing a theatre programme, or a GCSE workbook, and it says so on the front, your audience is clear. But what seems clear to you may not always be so to your examiners (internal and external), so make sure you are clear.

In addition to discussing your ideas in seminars or with your tutor, it would be very sensible to look at one or two examples of a "critical introduction" that could serve as models for what you are being asked to produce. Previous ones are available on Blackboard [the e-learning platform]. Moreover, a textbook we used last year, *The*

*Routledge Anthology of Renaissance Drama*, has excellent, brief, critically-aware and contextually-rich introductions to each play (including Marlowe's *Edward III*!). You might also consider the introductions prefacing each play in the Complete Works of Shakespeare we have used throughout your degree. On Blackboard you will find some samples of work from previous years.

Having looked at some models, your Critical Introduction might address some of these questions or issues: What does a reader need to know about this text in order to make sense of it, and develop a critical appreciation of it? When and where was it first performed or published? Why might this be significant? What contexts should readers be aware of when engaging with this text? Where does the text fit into Marlowe's career? Is it early, late, performed a lot or not? Why might the text be relevant to readers now? If the text is Marlowe's translation, imitation, or adaptation of an existing text or account of events, what does a reader need to know about the "original" events or text? How does Marlowe alter his sources? Are there any important issues about the provenance or history of the text that readers should be aware of (for example, does it exist in two versions, or in a form modified by another author)? What resources are useful for understanding this text? Can you refer to any significant images, productions, performances, editions or adaptations (old or new) that might bring the text to life for its readers? What sort of critical heritage has built up around this text? In other words, can you summarise what key critics have said about the text, to help your readers understand it better? Can you arrange your introduction on the page in a way that will help or appeal to readers (using a timeline, pictures, subheadings etc.)?

Please also remember: Using a resource like EEBO (or any of the other electronic resources listed in the module guide) for images, references, or context is a great idea and will allow your examiners to give you credit for the research and work you do. Similarly, the module guide and e-reading list (which share materials) should provide all the scholarly resources you need for thinking about and presenting your introduction. You should use these resources in ways that are appropriate to your target audience. In other words, you may need to aggregate, translate, or survey a range of critics to give your audience a compact understanding of what has been said about a particular topic in the plays, but that audience may not want lengthy analysis of critics; it depends on your audience. Take care if making observations about Marlowe's biography, or linking his life to his work: don't say he was a "spy" (though

he might have been) “homosexual” (an ahistorical term, and we have no genuine evidence of this) or “atheist” (we just don’t know if he was, though he was accused of being one) without qualification. Marlowe lived and died during the reign of Elizabeth I. This makes him Elizabethan, not Jacobean (ie. the reign of James I). “Britain” did not exist as a united political entity or state at this time. Elizabeth ruled England and Wales, and parts of Ireland. So don’t say Marlowe was “British.” Some audiences may need special treatment, or a careful approach: if you are targeting GCSE students with an introduction to *Edward II* for example, how will you deal with the play’s sexual violence in ways appropriate to their age, curriculum and level? Creative-writing type responses to, or appropriations of, a Marlovian text might offer great opportunities for providing a “critical introduction,” but they may need some commentary to ensure their intentions and planned effects are clear. If you are offering something to university-level (NOT 3rd year, please!) how will you make it at once stand out, while also being comparable with the kinds of materials and resources you and other students have used or encountered during your degree? Rarely will you, as an undergraduate, have been presented by a tutor with 3 A4 pages of solid text as an introduction to a play...

Though lengthy and detailed, this guidance is meant to be suggestive and supportive rather than prescriptive, and has evolved over the years to respond to recurrent or sporadic problems that the assessment generates; for example, it aims to guard against students producing (or reproducing) materials of the kind they are given on the module for students like themselves. Moreover, the assessment is supported by multiple “check in” points throughout the semester: we spend part of one session closely analysing the introduction to *Edward II* in *The Routledge Anthology* mentioned above; and students submit a plan for their “critical introduction” on which they receive detailed feedback and have the opportunity for a one-to-one meeting to discuss it. The reflective commentary, in turn, was brought in at the suggestion of a colleague in their capacity as internal moderator of my marking, to encourage students to be more reflective about their choices and approach, and to help markers work out, and reward, students’ deliberations about how they present the material.

And, year on year, there has been much to reward. Showcasing incredible effort, humour, sensitivity, technical know-how, and critical acuity students have produced: theatre programmes for imagined performances of *Dido* at London’s National Theatre (choosing and “interviewing” the cast and director, designing sets and costumes); mocked-up transcripts of

discussions of *Lucan* with Melvyn Bragg on the BBC Radio 4 show *In Our Time*; prefaces to student editions of *Hero and Leander*; a *Tamburlaine* board game for GCSE students, materials petitioning education officials that advocated for the study of *The Massacre at Paris* in Northern Ireland; learning aids like posters, newspapers copy, and leaflets for A-Level students that referenced assessment objectives; a pitch to Netflix for a *Tamburlaine* series; an Instagram account for the director Maria Aberg's (fake) movie version of *Tamburlaine*; and blogposts on popular history websites about *Edward II*.

### **Why assess with a “critical introduction”?**

But beyond enjoying the privilege of seeing what students produce, why did I choose to assess in this way? In one of my second-year core lectures, on writing skills (called “How 2 Rite Bettah?”), I ask students whether they think they will have to write essays in any job (outside academia) when they leave university. Few say yes. With those students now transitioning into this final-year Marlowe module, I refer back to that discussion, to make the point that in a few months' time most of them, if in gainful employment and not in further study, will never have to write an essay again. Many, in what are deemed “graduate” professions, will have to produce reports, give presentations, or develop materials to deliver complex information to diverse or specific audiences. Of course, essay writing requires or enhances the kinds of skills needed to do those tasks well: identifying and synthesising relevant data from various sources; articulating a position clearly; understanding your intended audience. But are essays *useful*?

This makes it sound as though I devised this mode of assessment to comply with the kinds of objectives and discourses around “employability” that haunt contemporary academia, discourses promulgated most recently and influentially by the 2019 Augar *Review*, and translated into a humanities context by the British Academy's 2020 *Qualified for the Future* report.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we do not always take the opportunity to convey to students and employers that through experiential, problem-solving learning, employability is an easy thing

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Augar, *Post-18 Review of Education and Funding: Independent Panel Report. Report for the UK Government*, 2019, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report>; British Academy, *Qualified for the Future: Quantifying Demand for Arts, Humanities and Social Science Skills*, 2020, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/>. See also Maria De Rodanas Valero *et al.*, “Embedding Employability and Transferable Skills in the Curriculum: A Practical, Multidisciplinary Approach,” *Higher Education Pedagogies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 247-266; and Daniel Ashton *et al.*, “In the Name of Employability: Faculties and Futures for the Arts and Humanities in Higher Education,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (2023): 103–111.

for humanities disciplines to demonstrate: “surfacing the employability value of curriculum through using a richer language of transferable skills in learning outcomes and curriculum structures can work effectively.”<sup>2</sup> Yet given ongoing attacks on humanities disciplines as worthless and “woke,” going beyond flagging up shifts in language about module outcomes to emphasise the socio-economic utility and instrumental value of what we do in our subjects is a totally understandable defensive position to adopt, in which we necessarily accept that the “analytical skills of the humanities provide an excellent foundation for learning the technological, digital and data skills that might be required” by graduates “in our digital age.”<sup>3</sup> This means moving away from modes of assessment that have little to no direct relevance beyond academia and to something that does: “To prepare graduates for this sociotechnological world, teaching and assessment needs to focus on shifting from ‘recall-on-paper’ to ‘do-it-for-real’.”<sup>4</sup> Arguably, this mode of assessment also ticks another box that has come to mean a lot in the contemporary university regarding “authentic” assessment: “‘Authentic assessment’ is closely connected to employability. One study defines it as a form of assessment that requires students to demonstrate ‘the same competencies, or combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, that they need to apply in the criterion situation in professional life’.”<sup>5</sup>

However, it wasn’t ensuring or enhancing students’ employability, and certainly not obeisance to discourses demanding it, that made me design the “critical introduction.” That design, and deviation from standard modes of assessment in English, in fact, had less to do with employability and more to do with diversity, equality, and inclusion:

Ideally, in an inclusive higher education system, assessment will afford all students equitable opportunities to succeed and demonstrate strengths relevant to their studies. Assessment that treats all students the same is by definition inequitable, because it ignores differences in students’ past and present circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Daubney, “Surfacing the Employability Value of the Humanities,” 29 September 2021, Higher Education Policy Institute blogpost, accessed September 26, 2023, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/09/29/surfacing-the-employability-value-of-the-humanities/>

<sup>3</sup> Daubney, “Surfacing the Employability Value of the Humanities.”

<sup>4</sup> G. L. Knight and T. D. Drysdale, “The Future of Higher Education (HE) Hangs on Innovating our Assessment—But Are We Ready, Willing and Able?,” *Higher Education Pedagogies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 58.

<sup>5</sup> Judith T.M. Gulikers, Theo J. Bastiaens, and Paul A. Kirschner, “A Five-Dimensional Framework for Authentic Assessment,” *Educational Technology Research and Development* 52, no. 3 (2004): 69. See also Daniel Glover, “Improving Employability through Authentic Assessment,” accessed September 29, 2023, <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/queenmaryacademy/educators/resources/assessment-and-feedback/resources/assessment-case-studies/case-studies/improving-employability-through-authentic-assessment/>

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Hong-Meng Tai et al., “Designing Assessment for Inclusion: An Exploration of Diverse Students’ Assessment Experiences,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 48, no. 3 (2023): 403.

In a section of *The Lecturer's Toolkit*, called “Why should we assess?,” Phil Race gives twelve reasons. One touches on professional qualifications (“licence to practice”), but none mention employability (though elsewhere Race notes “assessment should be linked as far as is reasonably practicable to the sorts of activities which students may expect to meet in the wider world of employment”).<sup>7</sup> Race does, however, suggest that: “Utilising a range of different assessment methods spurs students to develop different skills and processes. This can promote more effective—and enjoyable—teaching and learning.”<sup>8</sup> Joy should never be underestimated, nor, Race reminds us, should the point of assessment in enhancing learning be forgotten: “when essays are over-used in assessment strategies” students who can deliver the “hallmarks of a good essay” end up being “repeatedly rewarded irrespective of any other strengths and weaknesses they may have.”<sup>9</sup> Put differently, and reaffirming the real reason for the assessment design choices on the module, I would argue diverse students need inclusive assessments, and those doing this module, in my university, are particularly diverse:

Of the 20 local authorities with the largest deprivation gap between neighbourhoods, 17 are urban areas in the north or Midlands ... In Newcastle upon Tyne, 17.8% of the population was income-deprived in 2019. Of the 316 local authorities in England ... Newcastle upon Tyne is ranked 36th most income-deprived.<sup>10</sup>

Given a very high percentage of our students come from the “Greater North” (roughly the Scottish Borders to the M62 motorway connecting England’s east and west coasts from Hull to Liverpool via Manchester and Leeds), it follows that the overwhelming majority of Northumbria students identify with “widening participation” characteristics, including being from a neighbourhood with high socio-economic deprivation. Accordingly, inclusion, equality, and access are fundamental to recruiting, retaining, and supporting them, not least in how they are assessed: “shifting to inclusion in assessment moves past responding to the needs of a single equity group, or a reactive stance where diversity is reduced to a narrow set of categories, to creating assessments that are accessible for a wide range of students.”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, an increasing body of scholarship is indicating that while we might think emphasising employability serves a greater purpose for students from disadvantaged or non-

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<sup>7</sup> Phil Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Assessment, Learning and Teaching* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit*, 53, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit*, 80–81.

<sup>10</sup> Office for National Statistics, *Exploring Local Income Deprivation: A Detailed Picture of Disparities within English Local Authorities to a Neighbourhood Level*, May 24, 2021, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1371/#/E08000021>.

<sup>11</sup> Tai et al., “Designing Assessment for Inclusion,” 404.



traditional backgrounds in terms of enhancing their social mobility, this may not actually be the case: “the need to demonstrate ‘employability skills’ is often counterproductive, especially for less advantaged students who perceive themselves to be ‘lacking’ such immediate job readiness.”<sup>12</sup> As researchers are now finding, “inequalities based on race, gender and class continue to inform just how ‘employable’ graduates might be,” and, indeed, might think themselves to be (and such research has identified “the ‘geographical barrier’ ... of being located in the north of England” as another inhibiting factor).<sup>13</sup> In contexts where socio-economic discrimination and disadvantage are rife, repeatedly stressing the need to be employable only stresses students out because they think they are not.

### **Conclusion: Why Marlowe?**

Just because the mode of assessment is “different” does not make it easier to do, or to mark. I and the internal moderator regularly have to look at module learning outcomes and departmental assessment criteria—designed, basically, for essays—to ascertain where these pieces fit in relation, and to make sure our feedback refers to these in useful, defensible ways. Moreover, just because some students excel at the “critical introduction,” this does not mean all students are comfortable or confident doing it. Student module feedback occasionally indicates some people find the task daunting precisely because others have done such amazing things in the past (or are planning to in the present), because it isn’t a standard essay, because it requires a level of “creativity” they worry they lack, and because they feel they need (even) more support to do it than is currently offered.<sup>14</sup> However, these perspectives are usually outweighed by those saying the opposite: they relished the chance to do something creative, they find essays hard and welcomed not having to do another, and they liked working in a different way to normal.<sup>15</sup>

On balance, the mode of assessment does much more good than harm, and it could be adapted or applied to any author or set of texts. Why do it with Marlowe? Partly because *he* wrote in diverse ways for a diverse, demanding audience, so the assessment mimics his

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<sup>12</sup> Ashton et al., “In the Name of Employability,” 106.

<sup>13</sup> Emma Coffield et al., “‘Lacking’ Subjects: Challenging the Construction of the ‘Empowered’ Graduate in Museum, Gallery and Heritage Studies,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (2023): 122.

<sup>14</sup> See B. H. Kniveton, “Student Perceptions of Assessment Methods,” *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 21, no. 3 (1996): 229–38.

<sup>15</sup> See D. Hounsell, “Contrasting Conceptions of Essay-Writing,” in *The Experience of Learning: Implications for Teaching and Studying in Higher Education*, ed. F. Marton, D. Hounsell, and N. Entwistle (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1997), 106–126.

medium; partly because the way we encounter Marlowe now is through diverse means (beyond academic articles or essays), as the module tries to emphasise in its final session “Future Marlowes.” Here, we critically survey and contextualise adaptations and appropriations of his work and identity in films (like Derek Jarman’s *Edward II*, *Will* from the Horrible Histories team, and Jim Jarmusch’s *Only Lovers Left Alive*), significant productions (such as Edmund Kean’s 1819 *Jew of Malta*, and David Farr’s 2005 *Tamburlaine*), creative reimaginations (such as Anthony Burgess’s *A Dead Man in Deptford*) and, in a return to where the module began for me, scholarly interventions (from Harry Levin, Emily C. Bartels, and Stephen Greenblatt). This week’s work evinces that what we now call “Marlowe” isn’t just words on a page, and nor should be how we engage with him. His texts exist “in the world” and so must our interpretation of them. In turn, this means engaging with Marlowe involves engaging with a fantastic range of cultural artefacts, what we might, indeed, term cultural capital, of the kinds students on the module have been denied full access to for too long. To recollect and emphasise this article’s title, teaching and assessing Marlowe in Context necessitates and invites keeping Marlowe in context then, both our students’ and our subject’s:

Formal learning that encourages partnership, creative and critical pedagogic approaches within the humanities and beyond skills and consumer rights discourse has the scope to emancipate students towards more empowering dispositions and to enhance cultural capital that has genuine purchase in the cultural and creative industries.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ashton, et al., “In the Name of Employability,” 106.

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