



**General Certificate of Education**

**English Literature 5746**

*Specification B*

**LTB3      Shakespeare**

**Report on the Examination**

*2007 examination - June series*

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**LTB3                  Shakespeare**

Moderators report that there was some excellent work in this unit, which had been accurately assessed by teachers who had undergone rigorous standardisation within their own centres. Particular praise was given to those teachers and centres which provided detailed summative comments on each folder in the sample. These comments, at their best, do three things:

- they reflect the overall criteria and mark bands issued with this unit
- they relate specifically to the individual piece of work
- they reflect the centre's own standardising debates when it comes to fine-tuning the mark.

Many centres have clearly taken careful account of suggestions made in earlier reports and in standardising meetings and AQA Teacher Support meetings. In some centres, though, task setting and/or assessment still requires further attention; additionally the number of new centres joining this specification means that some of the basic messages need to be repeated. It is also worth noting that even if a centre has been with the specification for some time, new teachers need support in understanding how this unit works.

One further point can be added here. Because a set of texts/tasks has worked effectively in the past with certain teachers and certain cohorts of candidates, this does not guarantee that they will always work. Coursework is independent and centre-focused, meaning it is the job of the centre, with external help, to monitor continually the appropriateness of tasks.

**Centres are reminded that there is an adviser who is allocated to each centre. This adviser is able to provide practical advice with all aspects of this unit, especially task setting. Even if centres feel confident on what they are doing, it is sometimes worth making contact with the adviser to gain continued approval.**

**If centres are not aware of the identity of their adviser, then they should contact the English Office of AQA at Guildford.**

Recent reports on this unit have stressed that one of the rationales for having coursework at all is that it does more than replicate the other written papers, instead allowing students some degree of flexibility in what they write about, and in individually researching their ideas. In some centres, but pleasingly fewer than last year, all candidates in the sample wrote on the same task, wrote much the same on that task in terms of structure, and seemed to be using a potted set of critical/contextual notes provided by the teacher. In the case of context, this was often barely relevant and barely accurate historical material. Such scaffolding for all candidates, regardless of their ability, is against the spirit of coursework.

**While understanding that AS Level is taken by a very wide range of candidates, with equally wide ranges of ability and interest, it is strongly recommended that centres ensure there is some element of choice available to students, both in the tasks themselves, and in the ways in which these tasks can be supported by critical and contextual evidence. Where candidates are struggling with the demands of AS Level, and need further help via a structure that is given to them, then such help should be reflected in the final mark awarded. It is appropriate, for example, for a candidate working within a fairly prescribed framework to get a mark in the 6-10, or even the 11-15 band, but it is certainly not appropriate for such work to be placed in the higher bands.**

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**Coursework is valuable because it allows flexibility of approach. It does not, though, allow all candidates to write much the same, and then all be rewarded as though they had worked independently.**

While it is possible to submit two pieces of coursework and to study more than one text, the norm is very much one piece on one text. Where two pieces are submitted, however, both pieces must cover **all** the required assessment objectives: it is not possible to divide them up between the two pieces.

A wide range of Shakespeare plays was chosen; the best choices enabled teachers to set tasks which worked effectively for their students within the requirements of this unit. Some of the History plays, for example, worked well this year. Choosing a text which suits the candidates and suits the unit is an obvious but essential starting point, so choosing a play which has within it considerable textual ambiguity, and considerable scope for critical/dramatic interpretation, is always a good idea.

### **Assessment and Annotation**

The purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all candidates and all centres. For this reason a mark scheme with six bands is provided to help centres place their students accurately. **It must be stressed as strongly as possible that these mark bands are not grade bands, as a number of centres still seem to think by the way they annotate folders.** All centres need to do is apply the numerical criteria; it is the awarding committee which then identifies grade boundaries.

It was pleasing to see again this year that many centres were happy to use a wide range of marks, with their weaker students being given marks in the bands 0-5 and 6-10. A notional 'pass' in this unit is usually a mark of 7. While encouraging the use of the 26-30 band where appropriate, it is important to stress that there are clear criteria for this band. A few centres seemed to place candidates in this band simply because they were the best candidates in the centre, rather than because they fulfilled the criteria. With AO4 such an important part of this unit, it is impossible for candidates to be in the top band, for example, if they do not show that they are *debating possible interpretations* of the text with *sharp evaluation of these interpretations*.

There was a tendency in some centres for candidates in the upper mark bands to quote a critical opinion in support of a view, and to agree or disagree with the view expressed. This does not amount to the *evaluation* or *sharp evaluation* of different interpretations which is required in these mark bands. **Equally, candidates who began a sentence with 'I think' were sometimes given the annotation 'personal opinion' even if the comment which followed merely stated the obvious. We have no problems with candidates writing in the first person ( even though it is often not necessary) but personal opinion involves more than the use of the first person pronoun: it involves a candidate weighing up two or more possible readings of part of a text and stating a preference after careful evaluation of the evidence.**

Candidates in the upper bands are also expected to show *well structured argument* within the allowed word limits. Whatever re-drafting of coursework takes place, and ideally it should not be extensive, should focus on the structure of argument as well as technical accuracy.

Some centres, often with quite large entries, seemed unwilling to go much below a mark of 17/18. While it is possible for centres to have an entry which is skewed very much towards the top end, we would expect a much fuller use of the mark range under normal circumstances.

There are some types of annotation which are not very helpful for moderators. One is where the teacher randomly ticks the page at frequent intervals, regardless of the quality of what is being said. Such ticking serves little purpose – but where ticks are used to represent the making of a good and relevant point, then they can be useful, when accompanied by a word or two of explanation.. A second unhelpful practice is when the teacher identifies an Assessment Objective by number, and leaves it at that. Each of the mark bands has AO descriptors, so simply putting ‘AO4’ in the margin could be identifying work worth anything from 1 mark to 30! Identifying *which descriptor* for AO4 applies, though, can be very helpful.

### **Assessment Objectives and Tasks**

Reports and training sessions have repeatedly stressed the role of AO4 in this unit. In those centres where there do still seem to be some problems, they stem from a failure to apply to both the teaching of the text and the construction of the task the inevitable logic of what this AO involves.

The way this specification is designed means that in LTB3, easily the most important assessment objective is AO4: it carries half of the weighting for this unit. The fact that it has two strands in the mark criteria reinforces this point.

AO4 assesses candidates’ ability to:

- articulate independent opinions and judgements, informed by different interpretations of literary text by other readers.

Previous reports have teased out what it means to apply AO4 to the study of Shakespeare. Essentially, as teachers and students of English Literature, we are faced with the text of a Shakespeare play which at various points in the text is open to various readings. These readings can be informed by our own judgements, critical responses by specific critics, or the application of broad theoretical approaches. In using these methods students will inevitably refer to contextual ideas and influences. Where centres have understood this, and placed this assessment objective at the heart of their teaching and task-setting, then things generally go well. Those centres which are encouraging and enabling candidates to debate issues about plays, in terms of both the text and the possible performance/reception of the text, are doing what is required.

Theatre directors (and by implication film/video directors too) are aware of dramatic possibilities, but in their case they have to give a version of the play that is, in its performance, consistent. So, whereas the student of the text is in an open position of weighing up the dramatic/critical possibilities, the director has to make clear-cut choices for the play to work. Referring to the possible different readings, and then exploring how a director has made choices in a performance you have seen, is one way, therefore of responding within the idea of AO4. If, however, the performance, or the criticism, comes *before* the text, rather than as a consideration of the debates which the text encourages, then students tend to describe other interpretations, rather than understand how they have arisen.

**The primary text, in this case the Shakespeare play, always comes first. Out of the ambiguity of the play’s text, with Shakespeare rarely giving the definitive rules of interpretation that later playwrights sometimes do, come possible different readings and interpretations. Such readings and interpretations can be critical if we see the text as a pre-production source, and/or dramatic if we also consider performance(s) of the play.**

**AO4 also involves the students in understanding that literature is cultural representation, and as such, unfixed and fluid in its meanings. Characters are not real, leading real lives, but constructs. It is sometimes disappointing to see the work from whole centres suggesting that students have not understood this very basic point.**

Students are required by the official wording to ‘articulate independent judgements and opinions’ – in other words to recognise multiple possibilities in the text while possibly giving some preferred readings. They are not being asked to consider two or more views and say one is right! Meanwhile independent judgement does not refer as such to a blinding individual perspective never thought of before, but to judicious weighing up of other interpretations.

Sometimes these interpretations themselves have a context which can *briefly* be mentioned: understanding that Bradley was a late Victorian essentialist might help account for his views and why they must be challenged.

The logic of what is stated above means that good tasks will include the following:

- reference to part(s) of the text, which can be quite specific
- the need to consider different readings of a specific issue or issues and evaluate these readings.

**An important point to make here is that when candidates are asked by their teachers to describe a critical response or to show where a theme occurs they are unlikely to be engaging in any real critical debate, because they are not being asked to.**

One significant problem is that we are still seeing tasks which ask students to ‘explore’ one particular aspect or reading of a play. This can sometimes involve the word ‘different’, but actually has no relevance to the ‘different interpretations’ required in AO4. So, for example, on *Hamlet*, neither of the following tasks does anything but ask for the obvious:

*Discuss the different kinds of loyalty shown in the play*

*What different views of marriage are in the play?*

Not surprisingly, when faced with a question that at best leads to description, that is all the candidates do. Instead of debating possible readings, they describe one.

This report has for a number of years mentioned one very popular but problematic area: namely Iago and his motivation. The problem here is that Iago himself gives many different motives - there can be no critical debate about this. Simply listing his motives will score few marks. Equally strange would be to list his motives and say one of them is the right one! Some centres, keen to look at this area, have managed to come up with tasks which ask candidates to consider different interpretations of Iago, based on the fact that he is a character who self-dramatises so much that he is even inconsistent in his soliloquies. This, though, is a subtle task which not all candidates can manage. What moderators are still more likely to see with this task, unfortunately, is an endless description of Iago’s varied motives but little else. It is perhaps time, with this most popular of plays, to look for other tasks.

Unfortunately too, we are still seeing ‘tasks’ which contain mere statements and little else:

*Rome and Egypt in Antony and Cleopatra*

*Violence in Titus Andronicus*

### *Shakespeare's portrayal of women in Othello*

#### *Shylock – villain or hero?*

The last task above, of course, highlights the danger of expecting either/or configurations to work. Most of us would probably say that Shylock is both of these, and that's the point!

**To repeat some key points: this unit requires candidates to understand that one area or aspect of the play can be interpreted in different ways, depending upon the critical approach to the text and/or the dramatic realisation of it. Understanding this should mean that candidates do not write about characters as though they are 'real', and that teachers do not think that just because a candidate writes 'I think' that this is independent opinion and judgement.**

In terms of AO1 (an important element in this unit, sometimes ignored in teacher annotation) and AO2, what distinguished the good from the not-so-good was often the structure of the responses. The most successful candidates employ succinct and incisive discourse structures, with good academic procedures, such as the use of footnotes, and/or the careful weaving of acknowledged critical views into their own arguments. It was pleasing to note this year that good academic practices were being used by candidates to acknowledge the source of various material they had used.

**At the very minimum, an accurate word count and a bibliography are required.**

It was disappointing for moderators to see that AO1 was sometimes ignored when assessment was made. The quality of writing is only one part of the process, but it was surprising to see how often poorly expressed, inaccurate English was ignored by some centres.

#### **Administration**

The quality of administration from centres was generally good, which made moderation straightforward. Do, though, please check which pieces of documentation should go where. It is especially important that in centres with over 20 candidates **two** copies of the mark lists are sent to the moderator. In centres with under 20 candidates, all folders should go to the moderator by the deadline date.

**Also please note that the deadline date for moderators to receive marks is always May 15, or the last working date before this. This is the deadline for centres, not the deadline for candidates. We understand that increasingly the administration of examinations is being done by non subject specialists, but if subject leaders can ensure that deadlines are met, this is very helpful. There were several cases this year of very late submissions.**

Every year we make the following requests, but it really does help if centres could ensure that:

- when work is sent to the moderator it is sent in rank order, with the highest mark on top of the pile.
- summative comments are available either on the candidate record form or at the end of the submission.
- folders are secured with treasury tags – please do not use plastic wallets. This year saw, for some reason, the re-emergence of the plastic folder as a packaging tool
- word counts are accurate (see below).

## **Word Counts**

The purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all candidates and all centres. If some centres play by the rules, and submit at 2000 words, while others allow their candidates to use more, then this is clearly unfair. It is also unfair if centres allow candidates to give false word counts. **It must also be stressed that candidates who went over the word limit often did themselves no favours. The very best responses seen were very secure in terms of AO1, being concise and relevant.**

This year we again saw significant numbers of folders which were below the required word minimum of 1500 words. In such cases the mark awarded should reflect the inevitably thin quality of the response.

## **Conclusion**

Once again thanks are extended to teachers and their students for the hard work and commitment shown in this unit. Many candidates showed a superb knowledge of their Shakespeare play and a real engagement with the critical issues that it raised. Much of the work was a real pleasure to read. As one moderator put it:

*Overall there were many interesting, personal and enjoyable responses which reflected well on the enthusiasm of both students and teachers.*

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.