Edward, “a brainsick king”, “dotes upon the love of Gaveston” and would prefer to “die or live with Gaveston” than rule over his country as a King should. He finds it hard to combine his life as a man with his life as a King, commenting that “the griefs of private men are soon allayed / But not of Kings.”

His understanding of the role of a king is that he should be “cruel and grow tyrannous.” He effectively gives Gaveston some of his power, saying “And in our name command.” Others recognise that this is not what is required of a King; Edward “is the ruin of the realm.” However, he does have some sense of pride in his kingship – “Was I born to fly and run away?”

Gaveston is “the favourite of the king” but is also described as “base and obscure”, a “night grown mushrump” and as a “base minion”. He is a manipulative character, believing that he can “draw the pliant King which way I please.” Mortimer Junior is angry that “one so basely born / Should by his sovereign’s favour grow so pert.” He is described as a “flying fish” and a “canker” – both of which are near the bottom of the Great Chain of Being.

When Gaveston is banished, he accepts his fate but Edward declares “I from myself am banished”

Mortimer is a Machiavellian character who tells Isabella “Be ruled by me and we will rule the realm.” He knows that “the king must die, or Mortimer goes down. He will even ensure that Lightborne “be murdered when the deed is done.”

Kent recognises Mortimer’s true colours – “Art thou King? Must I die at thy command?” He demonstrates the real qualities of a King when he joins the rebels because “of love to this our native land”

Isabella thinks that “misgoverned Kings” are the cause of the problems and that a king “of [his] own people patron shouldst thou be.”
**KEY THEMES**

**The Wheel of Fortune:**

This is a key issue in the play. A variety of characters refer to this idea throughout the play as a whole.

- **Baldock** knows that “all live to dies, and rise to fall.”

- **Mortimer** is arrogant enough to believe that he can control fate. He thinks that he “now makes Fortune’s wheel turn as he pleases.”

- Finally, he realises that this is not the case; that Fate turns the wheel and that nothing that he does can alter things. “There is a point, to which when men aspire, / They tumble headlong down”.

**Treachery:**

Betrayal is a major theme – most of the characters betray someone or something during the course of the play.

- **Isabella** and **Mortimer** “do kiss while they conspire.”

- **Edward** “must ... now resign my crown / To make usurping Mortimer a King.”
LITERARY CONTEXTS

Having looked through the specification again, I thought it as well to pass on to you the relevant sections. This is all taken directly from the specification, so please do take note of it.

Three possible literary contexts for Edward II are:

- The plainness of the style, a contrast to other works by Marlowe and other contemporary dramatists
- The use of older Morality play forms, as occurs also in Dr Faustus
- The Elizabethan moral frame of a scheme of divine redemption which Marlowe seems to put into doubt.

The social/moral context may be explored broadly with reference to Elizabethan drama in two ways:

- The loss of certainty in a divine scheme of Redemption
- The increased significance in the plays of the effect of will, of making choices as a base for the ensuing tragedy.

The specification also makes it clear that theatre visits highlight key areas of the performance, so don’t be afraid to refer to having seen it (but don’t harp on about it!)
THE CONTEXTS OF Edward II

**Historical: Kingship**

An Elizabethan audience would have seen many plays dealing with the issue of Kingship, eg Shakespeare’s Richard II. Elizabeth I had no heir and the issue of who would succeed her was beginning to preoccupy the court. Although a modern audience would not be as concerned with this issue, it was of passionate interest to the audience at the time.

**Moral**

Ethical issues such as justice, loyalty, dishonesty, judging character against behaviour etc have always been a concern to audiences. However, some of the issues of the play and the attitudes and values surrounding them have altered – homosexuality is no longer severely punished and arranged marriages tend to be frowned upon. Whilst some issues are universal, attitudes and values relating to them may alter over time and across cultures.

**Literary – Edward II as a morality play**

Comparison with morality plays leads an audience to think in terms of good and evil, particularly in a religious context.

**Literary – Edward II as a tragedy**

Comparing Edward II with other tragedies allows the audience to focus on what happens to the main character at the end of the play and also on how different audiences and individuals might respond to Edward.

**Religious**

Linked to the ideas of morality plays.

**Language**

The language used in this play is unusual for the time.

Different contexts lead the audience to different interpretations of the play. AO5 asks you to consider a range of contexts.
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Edward II
by Christopher Marlowe

Critical approaches

Historical

Writer’s context

Moral

Religious

Language

Literary

CONTEXTS

Contexts of the play
**Historical / Religious Context**

**Kingship in Edward II**

Elizabethans generally accepted the theory of the *divine right of kings*, according to which God chose the king independently of the wishes of the nation. This suggested a right to rule which was passed down through the generations. These kings were accountable to no person except God and it was, therefore, sinful for their subjects to resist them.

Read the speech made by James I to Parliament to see exactly what the *divine right of kings* entailed.

At the beginning of the play, Edward is introduced through Gaveston's words.

> My father is deceas’d, come Gaveston.
> And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.
> Ah, words that make me surfeit with delight!
> What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston
> Than live and be the favourite of a king?

Edward has just ascended the throne.

**What do you think his priorities should be?**

**Do you think a King should have favourites?**
The Barons believe that Edward neglects his kingdom because of his relationship with Gaveston and insist that he give it up. Edward’s response is:

I cannot brook these haughty menaces:
Am I a king and must I be overrul’d?

What is his attitude to a) the Barons? b) his own powers?

Just after this, Mortimer makes it clear that if Edward does not give Gaveston up, the Pope will:

Curse him if he refuse; and then may we
Depose him, and elect another king.

Why should the Pope oppose Edward’s wishes?

Who would now have the right to elect a king?

Edward soon makes peace with his wife, Isabella, offering her a second marriage and is reconciled with the barons.

Why do you think that Edwards makes his peace with his wife?

Has he “won over” the Barons at this point?
Much later in the play (Act 4, Scene 4), Isabella explains how other people might see Edward:

Misgovern’d kings are cause of all this wrack:
And Edward, thou art one among them all
Whose looseness hath betray’d thy land to spoil,
And made the channels overflow with blood;

What problems might a weak king cause?

Does the term “weak king” apply to Edward?

Edward cannot help how he feels about his favourite. During the course of the play, he is subjected to a vast range of degrading treatments. By the end of the play, his ideas about kingship are reversed:

Know that I am a king - O, at that name
I feel a hell of grief! Where is my crown?
Gone, gone: and do I remain alive?

Is there anything left for Edward if he is not king?

Edward certainly had the divine right to rule; but did he have the qualities of a king?
The state of Monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God’s lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himself they are called gods. There be three principal similarities that illustrate the state of Monarchy: one taken out of the word of God and the two other out of the grounds of policy and philosophy. In the Scriptures kings are called gods, and so their power after a certain relation compared to the Divine power. Kings are also compared to the fathers of families, for a king is truly parens patriae, the politic father of his people. And lastly, kings are compared to the head of this microcosm of the body of man.

Kings are justly called gods for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of Divine power upon earth; for if you will consider the attributes to God you shall see how they agree in the person of a king. God hath power to create or destroy, make or unmake at his pleasure; to give life or send death; to judge all, and to be judged nor accountable to none; to raise low things and to make high things low at his pleasure; and to God are both soul and body due. And the like power have kings: they make and unmake their subject; they have power of raising and casting down; of life and death; judges over all their subjects and in all causes, and yet accountable to none but God only.

The higher we are placed, the greater shall our fall be. Ut casus sic dolor: the taller the trees be, the more in danger of the wind; and the tempest beats forest upon the highest mountains. Therefore all kings that are not tyrants, or perjured, will be glad to bound themselves within the limits of their laws; and they that persuade them the contrary, are vipers, and pests, both against them and the commonwealth. For it is a great difference between a king’s government in a settled state, and what kings in their original power might do in Individuo vago. As for my part, I thank God, I have ever given good proof, that I never had intention to the contrary. And I am sure to go to my grave with that reputation and comfort, that never king was in all his time more careful to have his laws duly observed, and himself to govern thereafter, than I.

I conclude then this point touching the power of kings with this axiom of Divinity, That as to dispute what God may do is blasphemy, but quid vult Deus, that divines may lawfully and do ordinarily dispute and discuss, for to dispute a posse ad esse is both against Logic and Divinity, so is it sedition in subjects to dispute what a king may do in the height of his power; but just kings will ever be willing to declare what they will do, if they will not incur the curse of God. I will not be content that my power be disputed upon, but I shall ever be willing to make the reason appear of all my doings, and rule my actions according to my laws.
The moral context of Edward II

Gradually, the responsibility for choosing a king passed from being that of God to that of man. The moral context of the play has as much to do with how the different characters fit into the moral framework as with the framework itself.

At the end of the play, Mortimer speaks what might be considered to be the “moral” of the play:

Base Fortune, now I see, that in thy wheel
There is a point, to which when men aspire,
They tumble headlong down...

Is there any reference to either God or morality here?

Does Mortimer suggest that life is ruled by fate and chance?

The wheel of fortune is a medieval concept. All men have a fixed position on the wheel which is turned by Dame Fortune. Some people, however, think that they can make “Fortune’s wheel turn” as they please. They are soon proved wrong.
Piers Gaveston:
Gaveston suggests that there can be no greater bliss than to be a king's favourite. He arranges entertainment for Edward in Act 1, saying that he:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{May draw the pliant King which way I please;}
\text{Music and poetry is his delight:}
\end{align*}
\]

**What do these words suggest about him? Might he be cunning?**

**Is he manipulative, aware of the king's weakness?**

**Is he governed by any concern for the king's well-being?**

**Is he a manipulator? A Machiavellian figure?**
Look back to Edward’s explanation about why he loves Gaveston – *because he loves me more than all the world*.

**Do you think that Gaveston is rather shrewd in his analysis of the king?**

---

**Mortimer Junior:**

There is certainly some justification for Mortimer’s anger with Edward. Does this justify his ambition to plot with Isabella to overthrow the king? He makes his feelings plain:

> I like not this relenting mood in Edmund,  
> ...  
> Your king hath wrong’d your country and himself,  
> And we must seek to right it as we may

**Is he interested in reaching a peaceful solution? Or does he have something else in mind?**

---

At the end of the play, consider whether he really had any moral purpose in making his decision or whether, like Gaveston, he was just out to better himself.
Isabella:
In the scene where Edward makes his peace with his wife and offers her a *second marriage*, we might feel sorry for her. But think about what happens when she and Mortimer join forces:

| MORTIMER: Madam, I cannot stay to answer you,  
| But think on Mortimer as he deserves.  
| QUEEN: So well hast thou deserv’d, sweet  
| Mortimer,  
| As Isabel could live with thee for ever. |

### How do you respond? Do you still feel sympathy?


### Do you think that she, too, might be self-interested?


### Might she be out for revenge?


### Does anyone in this play think of anyone other than themselves?


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Elizabethan World Order

Elizabethans had fixed views on their world in which everything fitted into three classes of existence - heavenly, human and natural.

The Great Chain of Being

Elizabethans and Jacobins saw their world as being made up of different categories, ranked in order of status and importance. **Put this list into the order you think they would have occupied. You must be prepared to justify your choices:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>angels</th>
<th>Use this space to draw the hierarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>liquids and metals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>animals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>birds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shellfish and parasites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social hierarchy

The category of man is further subdivided:

- The monarch
- The royal family
- Nobles
- Courtiers
- Citizens
- Yeomen
- Artisans and labourers
- Rogues and the unemployed

(Women are below men in the Great Chain of Being!)

According to this theory, the kingdom, including each household and each individual is a microcosm of the universe.

Elizabethans also ranked human qualities, rating some more highly than others. Try to rank this list in order of superiority as you think the Elizabethans would have perceived them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>reason</th>
<th>ambition</th>
<th>honour</th>
<th>honesty</th>
<th>greed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lust</td>
<td>spirituality</td>
<td>anger</td>
<td>passion</td>
<td>jealousy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you think our society would rank them differently?

**Reason would be at the top, followed by qualities that are rational such as ambition – they are associated with man. There is a distinction between virtues and vices.**
LITERARY CONTEXT – EDWARD II AS A MORALITY PLAY

Morality plays, which dramatised man’s journey through life with all its temptations, were extremely popular in the Middle Ages. They looked at the moral qualities of evil and goodness and presented both on the stage.

Mystery plays developed this theme using Biblical stories, looking at mankind’s story from the fall to redemption through the birth of Christ.

When the audience first meet Lightborn, he describes his “apprenticeship”:

’Tis not the first time I have kill’d a man.
I learned in Naples how to poison flowers;
To strangle with a lawn thrust through the throat;
To pierce the windpipe with a needle’s point;

How might Lightborn be seen as a Machiavellian character?

Lightborn is established as a villain but there are references that link his character with Morality plays. His name comes from that of a Devil. The name “Lightborn” is also an anglicised version of “Lucifer”.

Look at the language used in his scenes with Edward in the dungeon:

This dungeon where they keep me is the sink
Wherein the filth of all the castle falls
...
My mind’s distempered and my body’s numb’d
And whether I have limbs, or no, I know not.

Is Marlowe suggesting that Edward is in hell on earth? What makes you think that?
There are three possible types of tragedy to consider:

- That of Edward’s fall from grace
- Edward’s personal tragedy
- That which is implicit in the concept of the “wheel of fortune”

Edward’s fall from grace:

Think about the divine right of kings. Should someone be allowed to rule just because of their family background?

Should a king have particular qualities that entitle him to rule?

Is his fall from grace, therefore, a tragedy?
Edward II
by Christopher Marlowe

Edward’s personal tragedy:

Has Edward the right kind of character to be king?

He seems to genuinely love both Gaveston and Spencer, and they him. Could Marlowe be commenting on the injustice of such love being allowed to find fulfilment?

Do we feel sorry for Edward?

Does Marlowe attempt to make the audience feel hostile to Isabella and Mortimer Junior, for example, to make us feel more sorry for Edward?
The inevitability of the wheel of fortune:

**What kind of men are Mortimer and Gaveston?**

---

**Do they reach a pinnacle of success only to have the wheel turn and their hopes and ambitions dashed?**

---

**Is this true of any other character?**

---

**Does Edward have a “fatal flaw”? Is he a tragic hero?**

---

Both Shakespeare and Marlowe used Holinshed’s *Chronicles* as a source of information for their history plays. Holinshed records that:

…they kept him downe, and withal put into his fundament an horne, and through the same they thrust up into his bodie a hotte spitte … so as no appearance of any wounds or hurt outwardie might be once perceived.

Marlowe manipulates 25 years of history into a three hour play, giving the idea that the events happen over the course of just a few months.
Here’s a collection of the EXAM QUESTIONS for this text. How many of them could you do?

Sample Questions

a) How important is Lightborn in establishing the moral framework of Edward II?

b) Remind yourself of these words spoken by the King, Edward II, then answer the following question:

Forgive me for my thought, for having such a thought.
Know that I am king – O, at that name
I feel a hell of grief

How important are ideas about kingship in Edward II?

January 2002

a) Discuss the implications of the idea of The Wheel of Fortune in Edward II.

b) Evaluate the qualities of Edward II which allow him to achieve at least some tragic status by the end of the play.

June 2002

a) What have you found of interest in Marlowe’s presentation of history in Edward II?

b) How significant is Edward’s homosexuality in Marlowe's presentation of the king?

January 2003

a) Discuss the role played by Isabella in a world where men are the dominant sex.

b) In what ways do you consider that Marlowe presents the church as influential and powerful in Edward II?

June 2003

a) “Edward’s tragedy is that he cannot resolve the conflict between his personal life and his duties as a king.”

   Discuss Marlowe’s presentation of Edward in the light of this comment.

b) To what extent would you agree that Marlowe creates no heroes and no villains in the play Edward II?

January 2004

a) Towards the end of the play Edward asks, “But what are kings, when regiment is gone, / But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?”

   Starting with a consideration of Edward’s comment, explore Marlowe’s presentation of Kingship in Edward II.

b) Do you think that Mortimer Junior has more heroic qualities than Edward II?