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Examiners' Report  
Principal Examiner Feedback  
Summer 2022

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Level  
in English Literature (WET04) Paper 4:  
Shakespeare and Pre-1900 Poetry

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## Introduction

The paper is divided into two equally weighted sections. Section A offers students a choice of a Shakespeare play (*Measure for Measure*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*). In Section B students choose from one of three prescribed anthologies (*Metaphysical Poetry* edited by Colin Burrow, *English Romantic Verse* edited by David Wright and *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* edited by Christopher Ricks). In Section A, candidates are invited to explore a statement about the play and consider contextual factors in their response. For the poetry questions, candidates are presented with one poem from their chosen collection and asked to choose an additional poem with which to explore the question and consider relevant contextual factors.

It was evident that candidates at all levels were capable of engaging with their chosen texts at least on some level and that centres continue to prepare students for the exam in a way that enables many of them to access the higher attainment strands. Relatively few candidates seemed to have difficulties with timing and only a very small number failed to attempt both sections of the paper.

The role of textual reference deserves mentioning here. The Assessment Objective grid states that a Band 3 answer (for example) will offer 'a clear response using relevant textual examples'. Whilst many candidates embed their references in a sophisticated, even elegant way, a reasonable portion do not demonstrate command of this skill in their responses. Candidates are strongly reminded to quote in their essays. As this is an open book exam, there should be fewer problems in managing this important aspect of the assessment.

Candidates also need to make sure that they are addressing the questions. Some answers were prepared, it seemed, then adapted to fit whatever came up in the respective rubrics. Examinees should regularly check back to the terms of the task to ensure that their discussion is on track.

Critical interpretation has to figure in any response for it to be effective because two of the bullet points in the Assessment Objective grid address it:

- Offers clear understanding of different interpretations and alternative readings of texts.
- Explores different interpretations in support or contrast to own argument.  
(Band 3: 11-15 marks out of 25)

Whilst the kind of assertion which begins something like 'A Marxist would consider this fascinating because...' does at least show that the candidate is trying to signpost their engagement with this aspect of the construct, it doesn't always lead to great success, particularly where it is 'bolted-on'. A suggested approach might be to help students to understand one or two lines of analytical interpretation in depth and have them adapt those to the task, rather than try and cover all bases in less detail.

Candidates are once again advised to make sure that they spell Shakespeare at least as it appears on the cover of the text which they have with them. This would also apply for names of characters in the plays and the poets about whom they write in Section B.

### Section A: Shakespeare

Hamlet and King Lear were the most popular choices of texts for this section of the paper, with significantly fewer candidates attempting the questions on Measure for Measure or The Taming of the Shrew.

#### Q1

In this example, responding to a question about sympathy created for the various characters (or lack of it) the candidate writes effectively, producing a succinct, well-supported passage of analysis.

death. Despite breaking the laws, Juliet is seen as a character of high agency as she chooses to love Claudio in the way she wishes. However, this love could not be kept a secret as Juliet's body testifies against her. 'As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time that from the seedness the bare fallow brings to teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb expresseth his full tilth and husbandry' (I, iv, 43). Moreover, Claudio's execution alongside Juliet's loss of a lover creates sympathy in the audience. Claudio is a victim of the lack of moderation and mercy in the play. Shakespeare purposefully

There is much to recommend a purposeful finish, as provided here – the 'vacuum of sympathy' line is very neat.

Shakespeare creates sympathy for ~~the~~ characters but allows this to fluctuate during the play, making Isabella ~~a~~ a sympathetic character in the beginning yet becomes less sympathetic when refusing to save her brother and condemning him as a "coward" for not wishing to "welcome the darkness as his bride". Shakespeare cleverly and successfully adds sympathy to all characters who oppose Angelo by making him a vacuum of sympathy as he ~~a~~ is a hypocrite, ~~the~~ ~~an~~ and terrible man, having previously ~~the~~ abandoned his woman, Mariana.

Q2

There were very few responses indeed to the task on voice. In this extract, the candidate provides a reasonable conclusion which might have been even better if it had been more concise.

Overall, the voices of the characters <sup>seems to be</sup> created by Shakespeare, ~~arguably~~ ~~perhaps~~ through the use of contrast, depicting ~~their~~ their questionable understanding of justice and ~~more~~ mercy to deliver a criticism upon the audience of 17th Century. So, given the contextual similarities between the play and the conventional life of Shakespeare, the playwright seems to create these voices of the characters, <sup>perhaps,</sup> to ~~deliver a~~ hold a mirror to his public and show them what they would like from ~~aside~~. Therefore, the characters voices, depicting ~~that~~ threat from the puritans, corrupt rulers and ~~no~~ justice for the less fortunate, seems to portray "Measure for Measure" as political play with political purpose Overall.

### Q3

The assertion that *The Taming of the Shrew* lacks suspense was not massively popular. In this case, the candidate writes pleasantly enough, but isn't really gathering marks and it would be more profitable to avoid this kind of narrative approach.

The main plot of the play is the "taming" of the Shrew, Shrew is a slang word for a bad-tempered woman. We see that Baptista is wealthy citizen of Padua. He is in desperate need of a husband for his eldest daughter Katherine. Baptista had two daughters, Bianca and Katherine (Kate), both daughters were total opposites as Bianca was considered as the "ideal woman" in society and had many men trying to win her hand in marriage. However, Bianca ~~couldn't~~ get could not get married until her oldest sister, Katherine was married. Katherine was considered as a "shrew", in that era a shrew an ill or bad tempered woman with a loud mouth

It is often gratifying when a candidate takes the question head on, as here.

The play ~~fails~~ fails to engage the modern audience, because of the lack of suspense. Perhaps because it was written for the contemporary audience.

William Shakespeare's 'The taming of the shrew' gives away the ending of the play (conclusion) in the title itself. The most modern audience knows ~~exactly~~ <sup>exactly</sup> how the ~~parts~~ play is going to end as its sole purpose is to 'tame the shrew' - hence creating a lack of suspense.

In this fully engaged conclusion, the candidate nails their colours to the mast. As they are implicitly being invited to dispute the terms of the question, this sort of thing is perfectly welcome!



Overall, ~~the~~ of all the plays Shakespeare has written, the Taming of the Shrew is without a doubt the most ~~a~~ comedic, suspenseful and engaging play of all. Not only does the application of Commedia *in del arte* ~~encompass~~ <sup>stay</sup> true to where the ~~play~~ <sup>plus</sup> was set, its ~~ending~~ <sup>ending</sup> leaves no conclusion to the induction and leaves the question of who the real shrew is open to eternal contemplation. Who is to be punished by wearing a horrid bridle contraption or dunked in muddy water or even paraded around in a humiliated heap in a <sup>carriage</sup> cage. ~~It~~ It most certainly isn't Katherine, if anyone, it is the person who gave such an inaccurate statement about ~~a~~ <sup>a</sup> fifteen play that, ~~over~~ <sup>over</sup> a couple hundred years later, even gen 2's can enjoy!

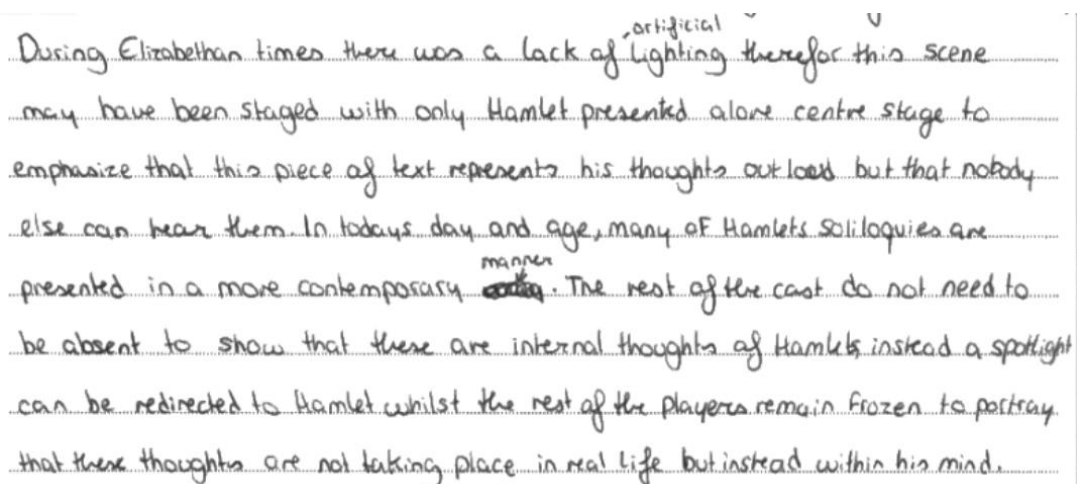
#### Q4

The task on confusion proved more attractive to students writing about *The Taming of the Shrew*. Needless to say, there was a lot of coverage of the Induction and the role of disguise, as well as plenty of discussion of Petruchio's deliberate attempts to bewilder his bride. Some of the stronger answers moved into well thought-out gender concept readings, even for instance referring to Chicago Shakespeare's 2017 production with an all-female cast to support their readings. There was some highly successful discussion of the ending and whether or not it too could be considered 'confusing'.

#### Q5

The question on guilt in *Hamlet* was by far the most popular of the Shakespeare options. Candidates mainly focused their arguments on issues such as the relative culpabilities of the characters, the role of action (or lack of it), how other themes such as responsibility and fate contributed, the significance of generic convention and the importance of the play's sources. Only a few failed to derive much beyond the simply descriptive.

This approach is at least thinking of the presentation of guilt in the play as something which can be enacted on stage or film and that is always to be encouraged where it is relevant.



During Elizabethan times there was a lack of <sup>artificial</sup> lighting therefore this scene may have been staged with only Hamlet presented alone centre stage to emphasize that this piece of text represents his thoughts out loud but that nobody else can hear them. In today's day and age, many of Hamlet's soliloquies are presented in a more contemporary ~~way~~ <sup>manner</sup>. The rest of the cast do not need to be absent to show that these are internal thoughts of Hamlet instead a spotlight can be redirected to Hamlet whilst the rest of the players remain frozen to portray that these thoughts are not taking place in real life but instead within his mind.

This is a very neat meshing of critical approaches.

guilt. Feminists have been very vocal regarding Gertrude's representation of women, but psychoanalytic critics who view all literature based on the idea that they reveal the secrets of the unconscious have also had opinions applying the Oedipus complex to Hamlet. Freud himself argues in his Interpretation of Dreams in 1899 that Hamlet is angry not for the immorality of ~~the~~ the marriage of his mother, but that he would have done the same as Claudius, and is frustrated that ~~"his"~~ "his" repressed wishes of his own childhood cannot be carried out.

## Q6

Though it was less commonly answered, the task on irony in *Hamlet* produced a number of well-crafted responses. This interesting conclusion uses versions of the play quite well and delivers a good closing line.

All in all Shakespeare not only uses irony as a clever narrative device but also as a way to make the play relevant and entertaining to his day. The different interpretations ~~which show~~ allowing each adaptation and performance to be unique leading to everything from the ~~profoundly~~ profoundly dramatic performance of Benedict Cumberbatch in the 2015 National Theatre production, to the volatile and psychotic Hamlet of the Kenneth Branagh movie to the more absurd, ~~and~~ <sup>in</sup> and slightly humorous take on the character shown by Andrew Scott in Robert Icke's production of this legendary play. Sharp irony and wit becoming after all as important as a sword in a play about murder.

Here too, the candidate writes knowledgeably and makes good use of contextual information.

The play within the play is a source of dramatic irony and metatheatricality. Hamlet resolves that "the plays the thing wherein [he'll] catch the conscience of the King". Hamlet's statement reflects the truth that can be found in theatre. At the time actors were seen as "professional liars" and were subjected to verbal and physical abuse. This may have been Shakespeare's way of communicating that actors only reveal the truth. The play within the play may also be considered satirical as it comments on itself. The play is arguably the "climax" of the play, in the five act structure employed by Shakespeare. The play creates suspense and heightens the audiences' anticipation. The play is an example of dramatic irony as the audience knows the content of the play but Claudius and Gertrude do not. Hamlet gives advice to the players before the play. Hamlet's advice is thought to be Shakespeare's own advice to his actors. Hamlet tells the players to "speak the speech... as [he] pronounced it to [them], trippingly on the tongue" and to not "saw the air too much" with their hand. Hamlet tells the players to not over dramatise the lines in order to maintain the realistic aspect of the play while simultaneously mocking actors who "tear a passion to tatters" Shakespeare uses alliteration to emphasise the message behind the words and make the statements more memorable to both the audience and the actors. Shakespeare condemned "black and white" characters, which is one of the reasons his works are revered so many years later. Shakespeare's characters present the depth of humans and are not

## Q7

There was a good deal of commentary on the role of Cordelia in *King Lear* and candidates seemed to have a generally sound grasp of her character and its contribution to the play, as in this example.

7) *King Lear* was written in the 1600s, during a time of sizeable domestic strife.

Within the play, Shakespeare explores themes of loyalty, suffering and familial ties through the characterization of Cordelia. Indeed, Cordelia could be interpreted to serve as an archetypal 'Christ-like' figure as she prompts an exploration of the failings of the other characters and is ultimately sacrificed. Considering this, it could be argued that Shakespeare employs the character of Cordelia in order to reveal the duplicitous and conniving nature of characters such as Goneril and Regan due to the use of character foil. Shakespeare's presentation of Cordelia is complex and multi-faceted, whilst some may view her refusal to offer her father false flatteries "Nothing" as disloyalty, it is more accurate to view Cordelia as an emblematic loyal character. Indeed, one critic observed that "Cordelia's primary preoccupation is what John Keats would have called the holiness of her hearts affections" supporting the view that the presentation of Cordelia's character is largely positive in order to serve as a counter-point to the other characters in the play. Therefore, within the play 'King Lear' Shakespeare explores anxieties regarding the role of the patriarchal monarchy at the time through the presentation of Cordelia; her character allows a greater exploration of the presentation of women, loyalty and societal pressures at the time of writing.

Q8

The question of whether or not the characters in *King Lear* are at the mercy of fate was not far behind in terms of the numbers of answers which it drew. This candidate links context and criticism to the language in a proficient manner.

children were seen as innocent kings. However, as Cordelia follows the ~~conventions~~ conventions of a tragic heroine, she is forced to lose her innocence and ~~her~~ holiness through her death, which was ~~in~~ inevitable. Shakespeare foreshadows this when Lear ~~and~~ begs of Cordelia to "laugh at ~~the~~ gilded butterflies" with him. This shows her loss of innocence as "gilded butterflies" are beautiful and covered in gold, but cannot do the one thing they are meant to do - fly. This makes her death ~~her~~ ~~her~~ goodness makes her death ~~even~~ more cruel and surprising.

Shakespeare even characterises Cordelia after Queen Elizabeth, he draws inspiration from Spenser's 'Fuerie Queen' whose main character was 'Gloriana' who was inspired by Elizabeth. This makes Cordelia's death even more shocking to the audience, as Elizabeth - like Cordelia - was seen as a 'Virgin Mary' figure, who the audience believed should not be subject to fate's hardships. Critic McLuskie even ~~says~~ states that in 'King Lear' "women are made to submit - Cordelia - or are destroyed - Conrail and Regan". However Cordelia, ~~the~~ despite being the perfect woman and daughter is still ~~so~~ destroyed at the hands of the uncontrollable fate.

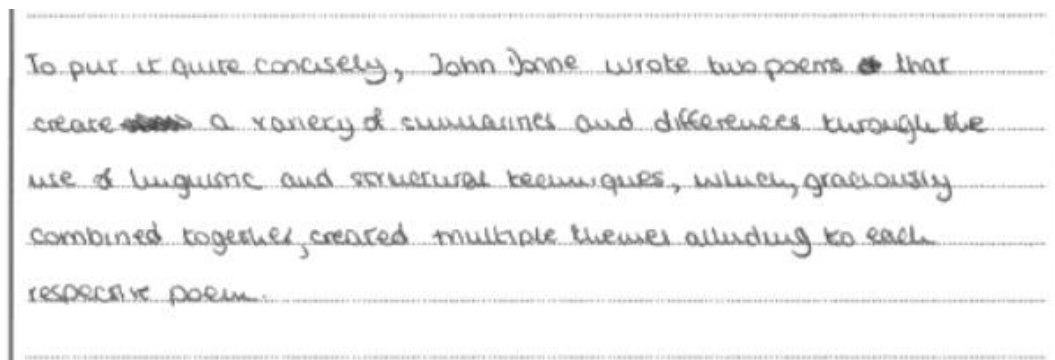
## Section B: Pre-1900 Poetry

Here too, many candidates dealt well with their texts and seemed confident in their exploration of meaning and the poet's craft. This said, achievement at AO3 and AO5 remains a clear area for development – whilst candidates generally have some sense of context and critical approaches in Section A, these issues are often less assuredly addressed when it comes to poetry in this exam.

### Q9

The task on sin, naming *A Hymn to God the Father* by John Donne was attempted by just over 10% of the entrants. Other poems frequently chosen to complete the task included *The Flea* and *Batter My Heart*...

This excerpt comes from what was a fairly successful answer overall but it is a good example of what might be termed 'Generic Poetry Essay Conclusion'. The candidate could have improved this by referring to the terms of the question or offering a summation of their thesis specifically about the notion of sin and how it is presented.



To put it quite concisely, John Donne wrote two poems that create ~~some~~ a variety of similarities and differences through the use of linguistic and structural techniques, which, graciously combined together, created multiple themes alluding to each respective poem.

### Q10

The use of imagery and symbolism in *To My Mistress Sitting by a River's Side: An Eddy* was slightly more popular. Candidates clearly understood the ideas and many made use of their conceptual awareness of 'conceit', amongst other things. There was much musing on contextual factors and the nature of relationships in contemporary society, including more than one candidate who chose to see 'Eddy' as the name of a female character. Alternatives for second poems included *The Flea* and *The World*.



## Q11

The opportunity to consider the expression of regret in Byron's *So We'll Go no more A Roving* was seized upon by close to 30% of the candidature. Common choices of second poems included *Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples* and *On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year*, as in this impressive conclusion to a very lengthy disquisition.

Overall, within both "So, We'll Go No More A Roving" and "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" Byron explores the process of regret as a result of ageing, youth and lust from differing vantage points. "So, We'll Go No More A Roving" is cheerfully irreverent and transgressive in its lament and regret for Byron's hedonistic impulses, however the cyclical structure suggests this is not a cycle that Byron wishes to break. Considering this, the poem is radical insofar as it embraces facets of Byron's life deemed as transgressive by society, whilst it exhibits an ostensible display of 'regret' for the process of ageing and the loss of the wildness of youth, it also acknowledges that regret is a fundamental and common aspect of life. On the other hand, "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" is more serious and meaningful in its exploration of regret. Byron exhibits an acute longing and regret for the wildness of youth as he perceives it to have stripped him of his honor, the

repeated contextual references to Greece where he had gone to fight indicate his sheer desperation to counter-act the overwhelming regret which underpins the poem. Overall, whilst both poems approach the precise nature of regret that the speaker endures, both explore the theme through themes of loneliness, youth and isolation.

## Q12

The task on isolation in Shelley's *Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples* was the second most answered on the paper. It was frequently compared with *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* and *Sonnet on the Sea*. Here, the candidate makes a good start, focusing confidently on AO1.

Both poets ~~so~~ present isolation as leading to regret. Shelley ~~presents~~ nature suggests nature is full of life, ~~he does~~ the speaker uses vivid colours to describe nature, it has ~~the~~ "blue isles" and "purple ocean" and even suggests that "nature, ~~can~~ "breathes" ~~the~~ "light" [breathing] is "light". The bright, ~~and~~ rich colours highlight ~~the abstract~~ actively life, and its personification and nature's personification highlight nature's agency and activeness, as "breathing" is vital to human life, however is harder for the speaker to breathe than the nature. Moreover the phrase "inexpended birds" implies hope of a new future while the speaker is simply "alone". Shelley wrote 'Dejection' after the death of his daughter Clara which he partly blamed on himself. ~~He~~ After his death he felt completely

To prove that more than one approach will work, here is a good, straightforward opening of the kind which demonstrates the candidate is likely to be clear.

Shelley's poem 'Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples' and Wordsworth's poem 'Lines Written in Early Spring' both present the harmony of the nature surrounding them which highlights the speaker's isolation, yet Shelley's poem has a darker tone than Wordsworth's:

### Q13

The anthology of Victorian poets is the least covered in the exam and there were not that many answers to the question on the passing of time in Hardy's *I Look into my Glass*. Those who did it tended to compare it with *Remember* or one of the Tennyson verses. There was a generally sound awareness of contextual factors such as the alleged complications of Hardy's personal life but here in particular there seemed a marked absence of alternative critical interpretation with many candidates opting for a fairly conventional and uncontested reading.

### Q14

'*The Autumn day its course has run-the Autumn evening falls*' by Charlotte Brontë, though short, does create mood and tone. A handful of candidates chose this option. Here, one of them makes a fairly well-managed introduction.

"The Autumn day its course has run..." by Charlotte Brontë is a short octave poem that follows a strict (AABBCCDD) rhyme scheme conveying Brontë's loneliness, and eventual companionship through the progression of the eerie tone into a rather hopeful one. Brontë's poems alike to this, have been contextualized on the basis of the deaths within her family and in doing so, materialized a co-written poem "The Visionary" that conveys the desolation of both Brontë sisters in their once warm and happy house. However, tone in this poem too, progresses to display a sense of hope towards its end.

## General Comment

Attempting to use more ambitious critical meta-language is a sensible aim but it needs to be accurate and fully understood if it is to get meaningful credit. As an example, in the second line of the extract below (and elsewhere in the essay) the candidate deploys 'lexical' when 'lexeme' (not 'lexis') would be more standard. In addition, it isn't really clear that 'metonym' is being sent in to bat with absolute confidence in line 8.

The skull is more focused on how becoming a cup is a 'nobler substitute' than being buried, the lexical 'nobler' conveying a feeling of pride and purpose in his use as a skull now, and does not care about the past.

In addition, Byron portrays to the reader that regret may be inevitable through metaphors: "And the soul wears out the breast". The use of 'metonym' for aging, Byron describes that the 'soul wears out' the body. This wordplay conveys to the reader that it is inevitable for us to age and that the innate desires of the soul may combat the aging maturing ideas and wishes of the mind. This may be reflective of why Byron may have decided

The role of exam pressure in creating miscues is fully acknowledged and candidates should certainly not feel discouraged from using technical vocabulary, but sometimes something such as 'adjective' would certainly be acceptable, as would have been the case in the first paragraph here.

Another term which is often seen is 'juxtaposition' (or 'juxtaposing', etc.). Application of this word can be variable and candidates are advised to ensure that what they are writing is accurate in terms of its exemplification. For instance, it is hard to accept the claim that Wordsworth 'juxtaposes' the symbolism of the river with nature in 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey'.

A significant number of responses explore rhetorical techniques such as anadiplosis, anaphora and asyndetic listing. Again, this sort of discussion definitely has its place in an exam which specifies 'use of terminology' in its assessment criteria. However, the key here is relevance and it is always important to ensure that there is some purposeful focus on effect or the creation of meaning when venturing into these territories.

## Paper Summary

Future students are offered the following advice:

- address all four assessment objectives, which are the same across both sections of the paper; AO3 (the significance and influence of context; links between text and context) and AO5 (different interpretations and alternative readings) need to be a focus
- context covers a whole series of factors – political, social, cultural, historical, intellectual, literary, biographical – that influence both the writer and the audience (context of production and context of reception)
- in Section A, candidates should carefully consider the starting point assertion (the comment in inverted commas) and the injunction which follows it (the actual task being set). Answers should not deal with the second part of the question only. Often, the assertion is intended to help with AO5 (“exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations”)
- candidates should remember that the play in Section A was written to be performed and consider how the play may be interpreted and performed in different productions, as well as how audiences and critics respond
- in Section B, candidates should make sure they extend the argument by choosing an appropriate additional poem, not just the one they happen to know best from the anthology
- candidates should develop a flexible “toolkit” of technical knowledge that can be applied to drama and poetry, along with a range of literary terminology which they must attempt to use relevantly

Thank you,

Principal Examiner (IAL English Literature WET04\_01)

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