Internal Examiners' reports, 2011-2012

Paper	page no
Chaucer and his Literary Background	2
Shakespeare	3
Commentary and Analysis	4
Old English I	4
Old English II	5
Middle English I	5
Middle English II	5
Renaissance Literature	6
Restoration and 18 th Century	6
Romantics	7
Victorians	7
Moderns I	7
Moderns II	8
American Literature to 1890	8
London in Literature	9
Literary Representations and the History of Homosexuality	9
History of the Language since Chaucer	10
Modern English Language	10
Literary Linguistics	10

Chaucer and his Literary Background

72 candidates sat this exam this year. Chaucer's works had clearly been read in part by most and by some to a substantial degree, and there was much creative and responsive besides dutiful or occasionally time-serving criticism of what the 'Father of English Literature' wrote.

Out of the two single commentary choices in Question 1, the more popular (with 29 answers) was that from the party at Sarpedon's in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book V; the passage from *The Man of Law's Prologue* (with 22) was also popular. Of these, the latter was handled more skilfully, with some *Troilus*-commentaries showing surprisingly little empathy for the subject, Troilus, or even interest in him. The commentary comparisons in Question 2 were attempted in smaller numbers, but often inventively. Although the comparison of monk-portraits in *The General Prologue* and in *The Shipman's Tale* attracted 17 answers, that between Chaucer's shorter poem *Fortune* and a passage in his *Boece*, inviting a discussion of fate and free will, gathered only 4. This albeit philosophyoriented commentary exercise was handled at the extremes in equal numbers, either brilliantly or in a plodding way. What could be seen in these commentaries generally is that few of them engaged with the human situation as a prelude to a close critical reading, and that most candidates, instead, seemed to be more comfortable looking through the passage for symbols or big ideas.

Out of the essays, from Question 3 onwards, the most popular question (with 14 answers) was on the coherence of Chaucer's Dream Vision poems. This however produced answers which were generally weak, in which 'coherence' was read liberally to include the discussion of anything unstable or unfinished in a work, rather than the structure of the poems. Almost as frequently answered (with 12) was the question on religion being both everywhere and nowhere in Chaucer's works; again, although a few candidates did some unusually good things here, most used the question more broadly as an excuse for a part-sociological resumé of Chaucer's religious hypocrites. One question on Chaucer's subversion, and another on his response to romance, were comparably popular (11 answers each); as were questions on 'metamorphosis' in the Dream Vision poems, on Chaucer's suffering heroines, and on youth and age (10 answers each), and on Chaucer's attitudes to marriage (9), the relation of fate or fatalism to literary structure (8) and fame (7). The remaining questions drew less attention, with four (out of 29) unanswered, although the question on astronomy was tackled by two, gardens in Troilus and Criseyde by one. Generally the essays were distinguished by a tendency to answer on The Canterbury Tales in well-defined areas, where often two Tales might be paired and treated as contrasts. Paul Strohm's lecture at UCL was taken on board, with many essays invoking his categories of 'vertical' versus 'horizontal', 'mercantile' versus 'monastic' time. Critics taken from reading were added in convincingly, with some candidates using an up-to-date secondary in a creative way; there was an over-reliance on early critics to the exclusion of more recent material in other essays.

Where improvements may be made by next year's students, we would have liked to see candidates using the six-hour stint to edit and structure their answers rather than issuing thoughts as if writing an exam-room Chaucer blog. Sometimes we wondered how much was taken in by those went to lectures, or understood by those who didn't. As well as this, writing could have been better, even allowing for mistakes made in the heat of the moment. There were some problems with spelling, which inevitably, though perhaps unfairly, suggested a low level of literacy. Mixed metaphors might be avoided, along with other awkwardness and occasionally clumsiness in expression. In general, however, this exam produced work to a high standard. Both examiners were pleased to see Chaucer discussed through a wide variety of responses, with some candidates writing as literary historians, others with the flair of modern critical theory.

Shakespeare

On the whole, these maintained a good standard. Both examiners felt that papers tended to be factually accurate and to display a good understanding of historical and generic issues; many students made thought-provoking use of performance history, including recent productions they had seen. At best, answers included what was essential but rose above the predictable. An impressive range of Shakespeare's work was on display, though it would have been good to see more on the Sonnets (discussed in conjunction with plays as well as with narrative poems). Some of the best students made impressive use of secondary reading, and a decent knowledge of critical trends was observable across the board. There was, though, less sense than there should have been of how criticism evolves. Here and elsewhere, we certainly wouldn't wish to discourage students from engaging with A.C. Bradley, G. Wilson Knight and other sages of Shakespeare studies, but candidates need to be aware of those critics' place in history and approach them accordingly. For some, the 6-hour format was an opportunity to produce impressively copious or brilliantly succinct essays; others, though, felt the need to repeat themselves or include redundant information. Thus, our first piece of advice for future candidates is to avoid makeweights. Our second is that discussion of title quotations, where these form part of a question, is strongly encouraged; quotations offer candidates a chance to show close, individuated engagement with a topic, and to avoid the problems associated with rote-learning.

Commentary and Analysis

The examiners were pleased with the range and variety of responses to the set passages. All questions on the paper were attempted and there were no cases in which candidates appeared to have misread or misunderstood the general import of a passage. The stronger papers demonstrated candidates' sensitivity to the generic traditions and potential intellectual contexts which may have underpinned selected extracts, without detracting from their focus on the primary texts they were exploring. The higher-scoring papers also demonstrated a degree of self-consciousness when it came to the incorporation of theoretical models or critics, resisting the temptation simply to introduce such sources at random without justifying their inclusion. The examiners emphasise the importance of taking the time to structure answers carefully. The most exciting and erudite papers often approached passages from a particular angle, accumulating evidence towards a particular end-goal which was clearly articulated from the outset. This gave such responses a sense of momentum and structural unity, allowing candidates to avoid the sloppy and unnecessary repetition of points. Those candidates who scored lower grades paid less attention to the structuring of their essays; indulged in the capricious listing of technical or structural features without indicating why these were significant or how they contributed materially to the overall meaning of a passage; engaged in tortuous abstract speculations or digressions; wrote in summary fashion, at one remove from the text, rather than drawing concrete evidence for their assertions directly from their selected extracts; and made broad claims which they did not sustain through a nuanced reading of the passages being analysed. Overall, the examiners thought the general standard of responses was high, with some tantalisingly original and lively answers produced. They were particularly impressed with the fact that, even under the stress of exam conditions. some candidates were able to combine elegant and engaging prose with a refined critical diction, showcasing their literary connoisseurship and passion for the craft of good criticism.

Old English Literature I

The course was not taught in 2012, and this was reflected in the small number of exam papers this year. However, answers were very imaginative, full of intricate ideas and with translations that were mostly good. Passages for translation were chosen from *The Wife's Lament*, the West Saxon adaptations of Bede's stories of the conversion of King Edwin of Deira on one hand, and the miracle of Cædmon on the other, and Wiglaf in *Beowulf* aiding his king in the fight against the Dragon. Commentaries, on the latter two passages, were of a high standard, though a little abbreviated, but well illustrated the dynamics of the passage from *Beowulf* and made imaginative connections with other texts. The standard of essay writing was high. Candidates should ensure that they leave sufficient time to provide conclusions for their essays.

Old English Literature II

A good range of questions was attempted in all three sections of the paper. Essays were written on the battle poems, prefaces by Alfred and Ælfric, *Judith*, *Genesis B* and Old English rhetorical and literary strategies.

The translations were generally of a good standard this year. Many were accurate and stylistically fluent. The best commentaries showed an ability to select and interpret the details of passages within a coherent structure. Occasionally commentaries were marred by verbosity and lack of focus. Some of the essays were of a very high quality indeed. The best engaged closely with the works they discussed, approached their material analytically, and presented a coherent argument. Unsubstantiated generalizations should be avoided where possible and candidates should always ensure that they address the question. This paper offers opportunities for interdisciplinary work: its examiners are always pleased to see answers which take this kind of approach.

Middle English Literature I

There were just three scripts. They were all of a very good standard, and there was some really excellent work evident as well. All the scripts showed detailed knowledge of the texts and a thorough and engaged sense of the medieval period. Weaknesses included a lack of focus on the question, and in one case a rather narrow range of reference across the paper as whole. But the best answers showed an admirable blend of learning and critical sophistication.

Middle English Literature II

Performance in this year's Middle English II examination was very creditable, and, in the case of several candidates, really excellent. A large proportion of the scripts showed a tremendous range of reference, combined with an impressive understanding of the worldview of the medieval period, and thinking that was both profound and original. The best candidates also expressed themselves with spirit, giving the impression that they had enjoyed reading the literature, and were enjoying writing about it in the exam.

A few commentaries omitted to say anything about the style of the passage, or passages, that they were analysing. One or two veered towards paraphrase, rather than analysis. Some of the essays were marred by an inattention to the terms of the question they purported to be answering; occasionally, candidates' (otherwise sound) answers were spoiled by some peculiar ideas or interpretations. The papers of a couple of candidates were let down by poor spelling and punctuation, and/or by incoherence in their self-expression. Overall, though, the examiners were very pleased with the quality of the scripts, and hugely impressed by a number of them.

Renaissance Literature

There were 23 candidates. The most popular questions (with at least 5 answers each) were on sorrow yielding pleasure in Sidney; 'sacred power gone dark' in drama (often answered on Marlowe); misogyny (or not) in Middleton; madness in revenge tragedy; and realism (or not) in city comedy.

Weaker candidates struggled to spread their thin and shallow knowledge across three essays. They did not plan their answers, and did not engage with the questions as asked, instead producing prepared but substantially irrelevant essays.

However, there was much pleasing performance on this paper, with several excellent scripts. The examiners were impressed by the detailed knowledge of texts displayed by a number of candidates, with much skilful use of quotations to illustrate and substantiate points made. There was also some commendable use of lesser known authors and works and of contextual materials.

The strongest answers were well structured, with a clear line of argument. They also addressed the question in hand, defining terms, exploring, and debating, and displaying a commendable ability for thinking in the moment. The examiners very much enjoyed the intellectual vitality of these answers, and were delighted that the Renaissance course has attracted such able students and inspired such admirable work.

Restoration and 18th Century

Performance in this year's examination was creditable throughout the relatively small cadre of candidates. The majority of scripts demonstrated a secure grasp of relevant historical knowledge (particularly regarding the distinction between the Restoration and the eighteenth century) and also of the dominant literary modes and tendencies in the period. There were very few weak scripts, but also disappointingly few strikingly good ones. What was missing, even in the work of candidates performing at an otherwise high level, were moments of individual insight or acute close reading. Sometimes it seemed as if the provision of contextual information (political, religious, and so forth) rather crowded out the space for analysis of more distinctively literary matters such as tone or style. One other notable factor in this year's examination was the comparatively compressed range of texts treated in candidates' essays. It was often the case that the scripts towards the weaker end of the spectrum were also those which mined all three of their essays predominantly from the eight 'set texts', with only the bare minimum of comment on additional texts required to satisfy the rubric of the question. Concomitantly, the stronger scripts tended to offer discussion of a wider selection of texts, and also to have strayed further from the beaten track into some out-of-the-way materials. Candidates should remember that the 'set texts' are intended to offer them an introduction to the major authors and genres of the period; they are not a syllabus, the sum total of required reading for the course. Evidence of candidates' independent curiosity, their delight in

what they have been moved to read, is what examiners this year (as every year) particularly hope to find.

Romantic Literature

Candidates who sat this paper on the whole wrote well and showed creditable knowledge of the literature of the period. The best candidates were those who answered the question rather than seeing in it only the name of an author whose work they had revised. The examiners were glad to read those which stuck to the point instead of rambling, those which were elegantly written, well-constructed and free of errors in spelling and grammar. Some candidates were too economical with material – even if it does not actually contravene the rubric, a paper which only refers to two novels and two short poems does not usually impress the examiners.

It was noticeable that many of those who answered on the Gothic did so well, referring to a wide range of books: this may have been because those candidates were willing to think about literature in terms of genre rather than theme. Few of the essays on Jane Austen had anything new to say, but De Quincey and Hazlitt both elicited some thoughtful answers. Wordsworth, Rousseau and Wollstonecraft were friends from the first year who featured prominently. There seemed to be more answers on Shelley than usual, though Keats and Byron are still more popular. Stock in Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams seemed to be rising; Peacock loomed larger than Scott.

Victorian Literature

This was a year in which the course was not taught, so the only candidates were 15 finalists who had followed the course as second-years. Probably on account of these small numbers, a third of the questions on the paper went unanswered – the most notable perhaps being the set text question on Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge* (whereas Olive Schreiner had two essays devoted to her). However, most candidates did gratifyingly well on this paper. The examiners enjoyed in particular some excellent essays on Browning, Tennyson, rural life, and London as a 'provisional city'. There was also an exceptionally strong Victorians course essay marked very highly on a highly original topic, which was praised by the external examiner – showing that the course attracts very good and interesting candidates and produces very high calibre work.

Modern Literature I

There was a good standard of answers on this paper. A good deal of candidates took on the ambitious task of writing about Joyce, the majority including discussion of *Ulysses* as well as the earlier work. The most popular Section A question was Elizabeth Bishop's sceptical remark about Woolf's characterisation, with most candidates vigorously taking issue with Bishop. Some of these answers on Woolf – generally the better ones – were

based on an impressive range of reference to (for instance) a large number of her novels, non-fiction, letters, and diaries.

In a paper which covers a long period and a large and disparate body of work, a number of candidates erred by trying to compare writers without establishing cogent links between them, and producing two mini-essays on tenuously linked subjects. Conversely, the comparisons between well-known couples such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, or Conrad and Kipling, were sometimes mounted in over-familiar ways. As usual, candidates who were willing to think about technique and genre, as well as themes, tended to produce more interesting answers.

Modern Literature II

We were pleased with the breadth of authors and texts covered by students on this exam (from Kinglsey Amis to Allan Moore, from Philip Larkin to Tony Kushner), as well as with the fact that all of the set authors attracted a good number of responses. While the novel was the most popular form, poetry, film, and drama all received some thoughtful and persuasive attention. Some candidates put criticism and theory to good use in their answers. However in other cases, where theory took the centre, the texts seemed marginalised and incoherence ensued. As always, the best responses were organised by a central argument or claim, whereas less sophisticated answers resorted to plot summary (or the equivalent). It is, further, extremely important for students to take the terms of the questions seriously, and not attempt to shoehorn prepared answers into unlikely spots.

Many candidates invoked postmodernism, even if not answering the question that required them to discuss the characteristics of postmodern fiction. Rather few invoked the term productively. It was striking that postmodernism was mostly described in terms of what it supposedly rejected (plot, realism, character) rather than in terms of what it created.

A small number of candidates neglected to answer on more than one work in response to questions that specified this. Such candidates lost marks, perhaps unnecessarily. Rather more answers seemed only distantly related to the question: the candidates who excelled were invariably those who seemed stimulated (even occasionally nettled) by the questions and really tried to answer them. They were also the candidates who were unafraid of making critical judgments and sometimes expressing critical preferences.

American Literature to 1890

This year saw an impressive performance from students of American Literature. The examiners were pleased to note the skill with which many candidates situated close readings of particular works within a broader context of history and literary history.

While the seminar texts were certainly a starting point, many of the best answers

revealed considerable further reading. Mary Rowlandson's narrative, for example, was compared to later captivity narratives and 'Benito Cereno' discussed alongside 'Bartleby' and even *The Confidence Man*. Several enterprising candidates also chose to write on *Moby-Dick*, which was not a set text. Some of the very best answers were on *The Bostonians*. Range of reading was also a factor when it came to criticism. A few candidates relied rather heavily on one or two (rather ancient) critical interpretations - notably by Lawrence, Slotkin and Bercovich - but the best had clearly read around and were able to assess different critical points of view and offer their own, more nuanced, readings. As always, the best answers were those that really engaged with the question and offered a sustained argument, supported by lots of evidence.

London in Literature

The London paper was not taught this year and only a small number of students took the paper. Many answers displayed a real passion for London literature that extended far beyond the lecture and seminar texts. We were also pleased to see references to London in film, TV and song. On occasion, answers ranged a little too widely and almost randomly, which tended to flatten things out; the best retained a strong sense of history as well as topography and theme. Several answers drew on critical discussion, and we would encourage students to read around and use a wide range of urban theorists in future papers.

Literary Representations and the History of Homosexuality

There was a quite outstanding performance by candidates in this paper. Many students showed an impressive ability to carry through an independent research project while drawing on ideas and approaches they had absorbed from the course, and demonstrating their intellectual investment in the material which it had covered.

The range of work was wide in theme, tending to focus chronologically on nineteenth-and twentieth-century topics. Topics included gay urban spaces, lesbian writers as expatriates, violence in Mishima and Genet, the association of water with sexual liberation, classicism and nineteenth-century ideas of war, the persecution and prosecution of homosexuals in the 1950s, writing the body in 1970s French and American lesbian literature, boy's school stories, lesbianism in 1970s TV, masochism in modernist fictions, modernist women poets, Whitman and epic, and the body in 1970s feminist science fiction. The stronger essays were marked by depth of research, nuance in cultural history and critical vocabulary, good close reading and cogent argumentative structure.

History of the English Language since Chaucer

Five students sat the exam this year, and one submitted a course essay. In the exam papers, answers were spread across various questions with no particular 'clumping' on any one topic or period; for example, answers included discussions of borrowing, standardization, language variation and the influence of particular authors or genres or their attitudes to language change, and ranged in focus from Middle English to the present day. Teaching and discussion in seminars had obviously provided a starting point for some exam answers, but students seem to have been fairly independent in the research and preparation they did for the exam, and it is nice to see discussion of such a wide variety of topics reflecting different interests.

As always, the best work showed detailed knowledge of linguistic history married with clear explanations and thoughtful discussion. Some answers showed a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between language change and historical context, and impressive knowledge of particular texts or periods. The weakest answers tended not to be clearly focused on the questions, and there was some evidence of pre-prepared and only indirectly relevant material which students had unsuccessfully tried to shoe-horn into answers. In a few cases, general discussions lacked more specific detail, and there were also occasional inaccuracies or over-simplifications which caused problems. Overall, though, this was an encouraging batch of papers which showed real care and attention. There were no rubric violations or short answers.

Modern English Language

There were 13 candidates for the Modern English Language paper.

Candidates attempted a range of questions, though one of the most popular ones concerned the syntactic analysis of an English sentence (question 2). While on the whole candidates answered this question competently, there were still quite a few inaccuracies which could easily have been avoided.

Candidates who performed less well introduced irrelevant material in their answers to questions. Again, this can easily be avoided if the rubric is read carefully. The best answers engaged directly with questions, explained points clearly with examples where appropriate, and tried to go beyond description to discuss the key issues critically.

The results this year were very pleasing with the majority of the students performing very well.

Literary Linguistics

Literary Linguistics was not taught in 2011-12, and no candidates submitted course essays this year.