

SESSIONALS OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH 2012

Examiners' Report

73 students sat the examination this year. The questions in the paper (where students had a choice) attracted the following numbers of responses:

- Qu. 1: commentary on passage a) (from *The Dream of the Rood*): 43
commentary on passage b) (from *The Wife's Lament*): 28
- Qu. 2: commentary on passage a) (from the General Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*): 33
commentary on passage b) (from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*): 43
commentary on passage c) (from Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*): 28
commentary on passage d) (from the Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Pageant*): 38
- Qu. 3 (family and kinship in Heaney's *Beowulf*): 7
- 4 (journeys in Heaney's *Beowulf*): 1
 - 5 (value of speech in *The Dream of the Rood*): 10
 - 6 (identity of individuals in *The Wife's Lament*): 7
 - 7 (breaches of etiquette in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*): 6
 - 8 (validity of things of this world in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*): 4
 - 9 (secular and religious in the General Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*): 4
 - 10 (human and animal in the Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Pageant*): 5
 - 11 (position of women in OE lit.): 5
 - 12 (redemption in ME lit.): 7
 - 13 (landscapes in OE/ME lit.): 1
 - 14 (reputation in OE/ME): 7
 - 15 (superhuman in OE/ME): 9

Performance on this year's exam was patchy. There were some tremendously good scripts, showing a really excellent command of the literature, combined with original thinking and sparky expression of candidates' ideas. At the other end of the spectrum, some candidates omitted answers – automatically depleting their marks considerably – and wrote in ways that were not always easy for their examiners to understand.

Poor self-expression was the most common fault by quite a long way. Candidates should ensure that their ideas are clear, and that they express those ideas coherently, with correct spelling and punctuation. It is also important that candidates express themselves concisely, and not inflate their answers with repetitive or overly wordy writing. It goes without saying that handwriting needs to be legible; if it is not, the flow of examiners' reading is compromised, and points that candidates want to make risk being missed.

For the most part, the translations of the Old English passages were well done; many were very well done indeed, showing thought about what the Old English really means. Commentaries on the Old English passages were often well done too, although some answers could have focused more closely on the passage being analysed, and have replaced paraphrase with comment on the significance of the details that the passage contained.

Some Middle English commentaries also paraphrased the passages rather than analysing their details. Commentaries on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and the Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Pageant* were handled better, on the whole, than commentaries on the General Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which tended to avoid grappling with Chaucer's slippery narratorial persona.

There were some very accomplished and impressive essays, although a sizeable number, also, that did not answer the particular question they professed to be answering. There was some confusion of the 'superhuman' with the 'supernatural', and a failure to set 'the things of this world' in the question on Malory against the claims of the next world. Quite a lot of answers lacked structure and direction, and an adequate sifting of material that was relevant to the subject being addressed from material that was not.

Many candidates showed that they are well prepared for further study of medieval literature in the second and third years of their BA. The papers of some other candidates, however, suggested that they are going to have to work hard to attain a satisfactory level of achievement in the subject.

MC, MBI,

24th May, 2012.