Most of the 86 candidates performed well, doing good preparation in the more popular areas and turning in scripts of a reliable character, with answers that made reference to a good range of literary sources. All but four of the 24 essay questions were answered; of the single commentaries, the passage from *The Nun’s Priest Tale* got the most trade, being attempted by 57 candidates; that from *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* only by three; the remaining number of commentaries was fairly evenly split at 15 for a *Legend-Troilus* comparison and 11 for one between *Lak of Stedfastnesse* and the *Boece*. In all, Chaucer’s diversity found its match in the answers and a commendable critical-analytical level was achieved. The best commentaries were based on close reading rather than ‘the big idea’. The best essays were planned, made apposite reference to two or three pertinent texts, and offered a conclusion. Those who had read Chaucer widely and also in historical, as well as in literary background, were empowered to deliver answers which were fluent, poised and inventive. Less successful scripts gave no textual illustration for any statement, or fitted prepared essays to the wrong question. A few candidates would appear to have answered on the basis of one term’s study alone. Some, despite the six hours allowed, did not seem to have given themselves the time to be observant in commentary or coherent in essay. Several scripts were illegible. Some essays featured no paragraphing, some critical terms were misused and new words (‘conclusory’, ‘submittal’, ‘admittal’) created. Students are also reminded to be accurate and precise in their use of pronouns, particularly regarding gender and number. Where possible, singular pronouns (‘she’, ‘he’, ‘it’) should be used for single referents, and plural pronouns (‘they’) reserved for multiple referents. There was some confusion about the gender of the Nun’s Priest. Some candidates see medieval people as licentious prudes. Quite a few wrote on the medieval oppression of women where they might better have focused on types of literary representation. Even so, there was a reluctance in some scripts to allude to matters controversial, such as the anti-Semitism of *The Prioress’ Tale*. There was a more alarming tendency to misunderstand irony by taking moral comment literally. That said, most scripts were thoughtful, careful, and measured. It is fair to say that Chaucer was well handled this year.
All the questions on the paper except two – on editing led by cultural tastes and on Original Pronunciation – were attempted. The most popular questions in SECTION A were Hazlitt’s quote on the unruly chaos of strange and forbidden things in *Macbeth*, followed by demonization in *Macbeth*, childhood in *The Winter’s Tale*, and intimacy in *1 Henry IV*. Candidates were exercised by demonology, Gunpowder, and gender in the case of Macbeth, while Falstaff, Hal, and Bolingbroke attracted a number of intelligent responses, with candidates showing a sure-footed grasp of the differences between history and the literary imagining of history. While all four set text commentaries were attempted, only a handful of candidates chose to tackle the *Dream*, *1 Henry IV*, and *The Winter’s Tale* commentaries, while *Macbeth* (the dagger soliloquy) attracted 8 answers.

On the upside, several of the top scripts did commentaries, which suggests that commentaries continue to engage some of the best students in the class. In SECTION B the most popular answers were on the dynamic of Shakespeare’s families, his use of sources, chastity (with reference to the poems in particular), the outcast, chameleons, and foreigners.

The examiners were generally impressed by the sophistication of answers across the board and applauded the fact that there were no rubric violations in the run. Only one script came close to falling foul of the minimum requirement of coverage, by answering twice on the same play in SECTION B. Even so, remarkably, there was no substantive overlap of material. The best answers dealt with a range of plays and generally rose above the texts taught in seminars. The spring term seminars inevitably loomed large in SECTION B answers, but only a handful of scripts were obviously reproducing seminar teaching by rote. The stronger ones engaged with the materials taught in seminars but used them to good effect to answer the questions; rather than twisting the question to fit prepared seminar teaching.

The best scripts addressed the plays and poems with considerable confidence. They knew the texts well and were able to discuss them in context. There were surprisingly strong answers on Shakespeare’s multiple uses of Ovid and a number of scripts ably related the literature to the politics and religious debates of the period. In other words joined-up intellectual answers, a few of them almost instantly publishable, for their erudition and stylish way of marshalling their materials. The stronger candidates eschewed moralizing about race and anti-Semitism, embedding their discussions of the same instead in an awareness of historical time and period. Candidates were refreshingly bold and uninhibited in their discussions of *Othello* (race), *Richard III* (disability), the *Tempest* (colonialism), the *Shrew* (gender) and so on. There was a prevailing mood of tough-minded scrutiny and analysis of the plays and poems as literature rather than polemical tracts. In addition to the set texts the main plays covered included the ones above as well as *King Lear*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Richard III*, plays taught in spring seminars but clearly striking a chord with candidates and done rather well. Other plays that put in sporadic appearances included *Hamlet*, *All’s*
Well, Much Ado, The Merchant of Venice, Timon, Pericles, Comedy of Errors, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, Measure for Measure, Cymbeline, Julius Caesar, Antony & Cleopatra, and Coriolanus. Even Sir Thomas More featured briefly. A number of candidates answered on the long poems and also the Sonnets, and did so with considerable aplomb and sophistication. A range of critics were mentioned and used with flair, woven into the examinees’ discussions without undue deference to them. They included Janet Adelman, C. L. Barber, Ayanna Thompson, James Shapiro, Anne Barton, Stephen Greenblatt, Terry Eagleton, Wilson Knight, L. C. Knights.

The bugbear of this year’s run was length. In the course of the year the class were advised repeatedly that they need not write more than they would normally for a three-hour paper. Too many of the scripts were too long and, in some cases, hugely overlength. A handful of the very long scripts were Firsts, but in most instances length worked against the candidates. Spelling was less of an issue than it seems to have been in the past and there was only one instance of a script verging on the illegible.

There was a broad tendency to draw on unused SECTION A plays in SECTION B, something specifically allowed by the rubric.

**CRITICAL COMMENTARY AND ANALYSIS**

**Examiners’ Report, 2017**

There was a pleasing spread of responses across the range of passages in the paper, and the best answers were sensitive to the varieties and genres of writing represented in these extracts. Stronger commentaries not only responded deftly to the passages on their own terms but were, in addition, alert to historical context when assessing the uses of language and literary conventions: the best candidates noticed that the witty fop was a comic characterization in a Restoration comedy; that the hardboiled detective in the Raymond Chandler novel was a tough, laconic, wisecracking stereotype (rather than a racist misogynist); that the nineteenth-century American backwoods couple suffering from excessive gentility in their log cabin were inhabiting a parody of a Western. The best candidates were open to different kinds of writing and to investigating them sympathetically, instead of reaching for moral verdicts about the perceived political incorrectness of the writers or their characters. The risk with these sorts of politicized judgements is that they look anachronistic and presentist or insensitive to literary history, and often get in the way of close engagement with language, form, genre, style, imagery, voice, and tone – the kinds of considerations that stronger answers typically address.

Some of the best, most exhilarating answers began with a critical hypothesis about the whole passage (or both passages in a comparison) and would then proceed through a critical argument that nuanced or refined that initial hypothesis. By contrast, weaker answers would more often than not respond passively to the passage, either by paraphrasing it, or by analysing it line by line,
recording improvised thoughts as they occurred to the candidates, or by casually and at times inaccurately deploying critical terminology (especially “allegory”) for its own sake rather than to advance an argument. Merely identifying asyndeton or alliteration or sibilance is insufficient; stronger responses substantiated these terms with solid, compelling evidence that fitted into an overall, coherent reading. Better answers tended to show some degree of planning (which is particularly desirable in the six-hour format) and were often shorter, tighter, more lucidly written and more critically incisive. The most original readings achieved a gratifying balance between subtle, sensitive close analysis and a persuasive, coherent, and evolving critical argument.

RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

Examiners’ Report, 2017

There were 28 candidates. In Section A, the most popular set author by some way was Donne, with 14 answers. The most popular Donne question, with 9 answers, was 3(a), on Donne’s obsession with unity across his erotic and religious writings. The least popular Section A questions, with no answers, were 1(c), on Sidney’s Arcadias; 2(a), on kinds of realism in The Faerie Queene; and 4(a), on plainness and perspicuity in Jonson’s verse. Although The Faerie Queene was used by several candidates in answers to 2(b) and (c), the examiners were disappointed that only 1 candidate in the whole cohort wrote on either Arcadia. 6 candidates took up the opportunity to answer two questions from Section A; of these, 5 wrote on Donne and one other set author.

In Section B, the most popular question was 12, on proto-feminism in Middleton or other dramatists, followed by 6(b), on looking backwards and forwards in Marlowe; 10, on revenge tragedy; 11, on space in Webster or other dramatists; and 15(b), on divine and political order. There were no answers to 8, on love-lyrics; 17, on class in poems of rural life (though various other questions were used to write on country-house poems); 19, on travel writing; 22, on mid-seventeenth-century lyric; 24 (a) and (b), on Milton; or Petrarchan influence, confinement, or cosmography (from 25, the portmanteau question). The absence of answers on travel writing or mid-seventeenth-century lyric may indicate that students chose to work on seminar texts more than materials covered in lectures. Even so, the fact that only 1 candidate (using question 15(b)) wrote on Milton was surprising given that works by Milton were covered by two out of the four autumn term seminar groups. On the other hand, it was good to see answers on some authors and works that have tended to come up less frequently in the past, including Isabella Whitney, Aemilia Lanier, Southwell, The Unfortunate Traveller, A Mad World My Masters, Sir Thomas Browne, and more.

Weaker papers tended to be marked by a failure to adapt prepared materials to the question, rather simplistic thinking, and poor style, including inaccurate or inappropriate word-choices. Some candidates were limited by an inability to quote, so that discussion was too general and assertions were not well
supported. Others seemed to struggle with time management, and in some cases to be stretching a rather narrow body of material across their three answers. A few scripts showed a poor grasp of history, treating materials from disparate parts of the span of the course as if they were contemporary. Some essays seemed unplanned, making them rambling and digressive.

Happily there were also a number of papers which demonstrated skill in planning and in mounting cogent and persuasive arguments. The examiners were particularly impressed that many candidates this year were able to deploy quotations from works studied, both as materials for close reading and as solid evidential foundations on which to build a case. Some candidates also demonstrated an excellent grasp of historical contexts and critical debates, and some made effective use of their experience of dramatic productions of the plays discussed. The examiners particularly enjoyed papers that were enterprising and original, actively engaging with the questions to produce lively thinking and writing.

Unfortunately there was some very difficult handwriting, including in some of the strongest scripts. Candidates are reminded that they must write legibly.

THE RESTORATION AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Examiners’ Report, 2017

This was a good run of scripts; Pope, Behn, Richardson and Rochester all fared particularly well, being answered on fairly frequently, and often very engagingly. In the mandatory Question 1, passages on set texts, Richardson’s Pamela provoked particularly lively explorations of the role of letters in the narrative and of the activity of Mr B as a reader (and mis-reader) of Pamela’s letters.

The best candidates exhibited a good range in their choice of books (i.e. they did not lean too heavily on the set texts) and wrote intelligently and maturely about them. They were also good at situating them within the broader literary culture of the period. Often the scripts showed a greater awareness of the social context of literature than is sometimes the case with scripts for other period papers in the Department. It was notable that a majority of candidates discussed at least one of the set texts outside the compulsory set texts question. This was, of course, entirely permissible, but suggests some hesitancy about exploring the range of material available from the period. Some few major authors (Swift, Fielding) featured hardly at all. Others, notably Sterne and Behn, seemed to be found particularly complex and stimulating.

Less impressive answers tended to be narrower in scope and less happy in their ideas and expression; some simply failed to give sufficient attention to the question. On occasion it was obvious that candidates were pouring pre-prepared material into an answer without making much effort to adapt that material to the particular remit and demands of the question.
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

Examiners’ Report, 2017

This was the first year of examination of this new course. There were 11 candidates. In Section A the most popular set work was the Montagu/Pope pairing, with 5 answers. The least popular, with no answers, were Burney’s *Evelina* and Cowper’s *The Task*. In Section B a fairly good spread of answers was attempted; the most popular was 22b, on the treatment of marriage, with 3 answers. 5 candidates used set works in Section B as well as Section A. As was perhaps inevitable given the relatively small number of students taking the course in 2016-7, there was a limited range of topics as well as texts covered by candidates. It was clear that candidates were particularly reliant on material covered in seminars.

Weaker answers were poorly planned and made rather basic or obvious points. They sometimes lacked coherence or were of limited relevance to the question. Some candidates only seemed to know a rather limited range of material and to be struggling to stretch it across three answers. In general the examiners would have liked to have seen more evidence of adventurousness in reading beyond seminar texts.

Stronger essays showed thorough knowledge of the texts, often supported by effective quotation or close reference. Quotation can be a vivid aid to an argument and is a highly effective way of focusing a critical observation. It can reassure examiners of a reader’s close knowledge of a text. However, misquotation – especially of verse – is unhelpful.

The best essays this year were lucid and well-structured, and often showed interest in cultural contexts and in different critical approaches. There were some excellent scripts which were characterised by intellectual vivacity, and conveyed a sense of pleasure in eighteenth-century literature and in writing about it.

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

Examiners’ Report, 2017

This was an off-year for Romantics, which meant that there were relatively few desk exams to mark, but the best were as good as ever. There were some very good individual answers on poetry in particular, with Keats, Blake and Wordsworth eliciting some notably fine performances. Those scripts which blended a mature understanding of the various literary and cultural contexts of the period with incisive and original close readings of particular texts were often the most impressive. What the examiners especially valued - and rewarded - was specificity. Sharply particularised comments were always welcome, so too
accurate and apt quotation. Broad-brush generalities, whether about individual
texts, or authors, or in relation to the period as a whole, did not register in the
same way.

In many scripts there was not much evidence of wide reading, never mind
literary critical or biographical background reading. This tendency has grown of
late. Increasingly even very good students - that is, students who write with great
intelligence and maturity whenever they put pen to paper - seem unwilling to
stray beyond the set text list.

Candidates were on the whole more attentive to questions relating to thematic
exposition than to considerations of structure, tone and genre. Candidates who
were able to talk about the structure of individual poems, or collections of
poems, or prose narratives, often tended to write more impressively than those
who confined themselves to questions of plot and character.

There was a tendency among certain candidates to throw a wealth of generally
apposite material at a question, without actually considering that question
directly, as an intellectual proposition. Candidates should begin by addressing
the question that they are answering. Later on, of course, they might find
themselves moving away from it, to a greater or lesser extent, without
necessarily running the risk of being irrelevant. But at the beginning they would
do well to acknowledge it, and draw out its bearing on their subsequent
discussion.

THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

Examiners’ Report, 2017

78 students took the Victorians examination this year. There was a consistently
high standard to the scripts for this paper: every candidate demonstrated that
they possessed an accurate knowledge of a range of literary works, and were
able to think critically about them and use that knowledge to answer the
questions asked. Some answers felt as if they had been written before the
candidate had seen the paper, and showed very little effort to think about what
was actually being asked.

The finest essays were adventurous in their approach, and original in their close
readings, in addition to being well informed. Some scripts were impressively
scholarly and interdisciplinary, making interesting connections between the
literature of the period and historical and cultural contexts such as evolution and
psychiatry, or exploring the impact of new technologies and scientific ideas on
literary texts. There were also a number of scripts that wrote imaginatively
about narrative techniques, about narrative concealment, and particular genres
such as detective fiction, science fiction and the long poem. Some weaker scripts
clung too closely to the narrative of the novels or long poems on which they
focused, and were reluctant to explore their formal dimensions. Many weaker
answers also showed a lack of interest in the relevant historical context in which
the literature of the period was produced. Even those essays that addressed contextual issues raised in lectures or seminars, thus at least evincing a certain curiosity, displayed little evidence of independent research or thinking about the social or cultural conditions in which authors of the period operated.

MODERN LITERATURE I

Examiners’ Report, 2017

Seventy candidates sat the examination this year. All of the set texts were represented in answers to section A with Woolf, Joyce and Toomer proving particularly popular. A large number of candidates chose to write on the representation of time in *To The Lighthouse* and while this included some excellent answers, there was a certain consistency to the material which made the examiners wish that candidates might develop their readings in ways which ranged beyond the content of seminars and lectures. Section B answers reflected the range of seminar options on offer and there were some imaginative answers which showed independent reading beyond seminar texts.

The best answers had strong, clear and engaging arguments, good textual recall, imaginative flair and a nuanced sense of period and place. They made a concerted effort to address the question and avoided period generalisations or categorical and unproblematic, monolithic statements about ‘modernism’. They did not seek to make a straw man of earlier periods and were attentive to questions of genre, form and style. The strongest candidates showed a wide range of knowledge, exploring beyond the set texts and avoiding any overreliance on a particular author. Mid-ranging answers were coherent, paid attention to textual and/or contextual detail and frequently offered well-informed discussions of important themes. They tended to lack forceful and analytical argument and follow an episodic structure. Some candidates made the mistake of downloading pre-prepared material which, though interesting, did not really address the question. The weakest answers were vague, with naïve and ill-informed statements about the period, poor textual recall, superficial and sometimes rather mistaken readings of literature. Some failed to offer any real critical analysis, falling into the habit of paraphrasing the plots of narrative works. There were a small number of otherwise convincing answers that failed to address the number of texts or authors required: it is perhaps worth reminding candidates of the importance of paying close attention to the rubric of each question they choose to answer.

MODERN LITERATURE II

Examiners’ Report, 2017

The examiners were impressed by the responses to this year’s Mods II paper, which were, collectively, notable for how well candidates had prepared, the depth of knowledge they demonstrated, and the penetration with which they
analysed individual authors and texts. Many of the scripts, and those in the range 70-75 in particular, were authoritative, notably mature, and critically sophisticated, showing at times remarkable analytical skill, as well as familiarity with quite recherché areas of literature and culture: a few scripts in particular were also astonishingly well-written.

The range and diversity of approaches on display was pleasing, and individual candidates showed critical suppleness by writing markedly different essays within the same paper. Very often the examiners commented on individual lively or unexpected approaches and answers; it is always a pleasure to see a facility for material outwith the course texts, and most of the best candidates confidently range over the chronological period, as well as showing understanding of generic diversity. We enjoyed those responses that managed to articulate compelling and specific arguments about texts or authors, rather than those that tried to include everything a candidate could remember from their revision. Where an answer mounted a limiting or negative case against an author or authors, we were more engaged by those who gave weight to problematic counterarguments and offered a more sympathetically rounded and complex picture, or who attended also to questions of artistic form.

The weaker scripts showed evidence of shoe-horning pre-prepared answers into sometimes ill-fitting questions: this tendency to the procrustean is an understandable response to exam nerves, but candidates should be aware it detracts rather than adds to their performance. At the bottom end answers were sometimes slight, and usually rather predictable, with under-cooked argumentation, little engagement with a critical field, and sometimes an awkward yoking together of material that indicated a paucity of prepared material – as well as occasional embarrassing errors of fact. As always, a reliance on plot exposition was indicative of a weak answer. In a few cases candidates’ handwriting was so hard to read as to make the argument difficult to follow.

AMERICAN LITERATURE TO 1900

Examiners’ Report, 2017

The course was not taught this year. 13 candidates sat the exam.

As these scores indicate, the examiners felt these scripts reflected a good understanding of the work covered on the course. The short stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter were the most popular choices, but there were also a number of fine essays on Melville, James Fenimore Cooper and Emily Dickinson.

The best candidates developed interesting and original arguments that responded in detail and with sophistication to the questions asked. Many excellent connections were made between the culture of the period and the texts discussed, and there were some particularly effective passages on depictions of the American landscape, and the relationship between American and European
literature. These scripts were well written, elegantly structured, and avoided clichés.

The scripts in the 2:1 bracket were purposeful and lucid, but tended to be less original than those that scored First Class marks. These essays often demonstrated a good understanding of the way texts refracted themes important to the evolution of American writing, and American politics and culture generally, and were attentive to the historical pressures shaping writers’ perspectives and intentions.

We would like to note that this is the last time that the exam will include passages for comment, and the rubric will accordingly be changed for next year. We would like to express the hope that this will not mean the end of candidates engaging in close reading. The best scripts all contained excellent examples of detailed attention to the particulars of a line or passage.

LONDON IN LITERATURE
Examiners’ Report, 2017

This was a good overall performance from the 23 candidates who took the exam this year.

Examiners were encouraged by the range of answers, including good work on most periods including the medieval. Many candidates, too, took the opportunity to discuss London on film, with commentary on Mary Poppins and Sweeney Todd (in Tim Burton’s version), and on films by Hitchcock, Lean and Roeg. The better scripts managed to align the perspective offered by London in literature with an informed sense of literary period and context.

Weaker answers tended to translate the works under discussion into an exposition of their inferable socio-political standpoints, and lacked attention to literary structure and narrative complexity, often treating quotations as though they were summaries of the works rather than moments with particular contexts. The thinness of reading on display was perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the overall performance. Few candidates had read widely or ambitiously in the oeuvres of their chosen authors and few drew on the available secondary literature.

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE I
Examiners’ Report, 2017

This exam was sat by 15 candidates. The quality of answers to Question 1, which requires four translations from set texts, was mostly rather higher than in previous years. The full number of required passages was attempted in nearly all cases and a high standard of accuracy achieved, although translations were often
over-literal: candidates are reminded that a good translation may also be accomplished by going beyond literalness into persuasive idiom. Nobody left out a passage and attempts on meaning were always made, even if this was by guesswork informed by context. The range of passages attempted, from the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard to Cædmon to The Seafarer to The Riddles, as well as two passages from Beowulf, was comprehensive. The commentaries required by Question 2 were handled well. There was a commendable variety of approach in these answers in which Anglo-Saxon and Roman politics, surrealism and sources and analogues were discussed and wider implications of words and their meanings also followed. In comparison the choice of essay questions tended towards the conservative. Although the topics of these had been well prepared, essays avoided Beowulf, The Wanderer and The Seafarer, concentrating instead on The Wife’s Lament and especially on The Dream of the Rood. Structure and accuracy are important: candidates are reminded that they can call the Wife ‘she’ (rather than ‘they’) because this is sanctioned by grammatical endings; also to build an argument rather than sweep through the same material two or more times. Nonetheless, there was much good research and recall of established scholarship on these works, and in this way the essays were generally written with an imagination and understanding which defined this year’s run of scripts as a whole.

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE II

Examiners’ Report, 2017

Four candidates sat the paper this year, producing responses that were generally very strong. Question 1 answers demonstrated confidence with the language and translation process. All four candidates translated The Battle of Brunanburh passage, and all other passages were tackled at least once. The best translations were fluent rather than stilted, and grammatically faithful. Weaker translations resorted to paraphrase and guesswork. That said, it is good that all candidates at least attempted the required four translations, and that no blank space was left. There was an equally good spread of commentaries: all passages except (d) were written on. All candidates handled the commentaries with skill and purpose, making use of insightful close readings to support broader thematic or stylistic observations. These commentaries were without exception focussed and well structured. Candidates wrote essays on questions 3, 10, 14 and 15. Their essays demonstrated enthusiastic and very capable engagement with the material on the course. Students were able to make reference to a wide range of literary sources, and to show awareness of the historical context and political concerns of the period. Some answers were a little too ambitious in the selection of material and tried to cover more ground than is possible in this setting, or veered too far from the remit of the question. Students are reminded to think carefully about the terms of the question and their implications. The best answers were those that combined a thoughtful response to the question with a clear structure and defined conclusion. Overall, students approached this exam with professionalism and ample preparation, and delivered papers of a commendable standard.
MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE I

Examiners’ Report, 2017

Candidates generally performed well in this year’s examination, showing a pleasing level of knowledge and a range of reading. The commentary exercise was successfully done overall, with answers demonstrating a sound level of textual insight as well as a good range of critical reading skills. It was also pleasing to see candidates demonstrate a good level of understanding when reading early Middle English texts. A significant number of candidates chose to compare two extracts, rather than analyse a single passage. While these answers were generally well structured (discussing the two extracts as a pair rather than in turn), in some cases more attention could have been directed towards exploring the more subtle points of comparison or contrast between the two passages. Indeed, in a number of cases, commentary answers would have benefitted from a closer and more precise engagement with specific features of the extract(s): candidates would be encouraged to ensure that they always engage critically with a passage’s language, form, and imagery. The essay questions produced some imaginative and thoughtful responses on a wide range of works. Some answers showed commendable use of primary quotation as well as evidence of reading beyond the syllabus, which was especially pleasing. Typically, the most successful answers demonstrated an accurate and detailed knowledge of the texts, formulated an argument in direct response to the question, and showed a sensitive knowledge of historical context and literary traditions. Weaker answers often failed to engage with the question, had a tendency towards description or generalisation, and lacked clarity and precision. Candidates are encouraged to ensure that they always write clearly, accurately, and legibly.

MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE II

Examiners’ Report, 2017

Performance in this year’s examination was very pleasing. All scripts demonstrated a solid understanding of the texts under discussion and showed a sound appreciation of relevant themes and historical context. The commentary exercise was generally done well: candidates engaged directly with the extract(s) and were able to comment on form and language. The best answers were those which strived to comment critically on the details of the passage(s), often linking such observations to the overall themes and motifs at the heart of the extract. A number of candidates chose to compare two extracts rather than analyse a single passage, and these responses were generally effectively structured and well balanced. The essay questions also produced some encouraging responses. In all cases, answers showed a pleasing level of detailed, textual knowledge and an awareness of wider historical and literary traditions. Some answers could have been strengthened if candidates had thought more carefully about the demands of the question and tailored their responses accordingly. Those answers which
directly responded to the subtleties of the question, avoiding lapsing into a
general discussion of the text, were the most successful.

OLD ICELANDIC

Examiners’ Report, 2017

The translations from set texts were done with much accuracy but apparently
without close understanding of the language of all the passages. The other
questions, commentary and essay, had an argument in common but one applied
to two different texts and with evidence of much prior research in each one. The
commentaries of Qu. 2, focusing on the poetic passages in Qu. 1, showed much
critical acumen in certain areas as well as some knowledge of early medieval
Icelandic cultural backgrounds. The essay question turned the theme (‘courage’)
to good use in the larger question of gender. There was evidence of well-
prepared and considered responses to a well-defined area of medieval literature.

HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Examiners’ Report, 2017

Only a small number of students sat the exam this year, but the standard of
answers was very high. Students wrote on topics including standardization, bible
translations, attempts to correct or improve English, and the nature of the
lexicon in the Early Modern English period. The best answers showed very
detailed knowledge coupled with a real willingness to engage with the question;
some students presented impressively thorough and precise discussions, which
showed sophisticated understanding of the historical context in which English
has changed and the nature of particular linguistic changes. Weaker work was
less critical and less precise, and engaged with the question being asked in a less
direct way; some weaker answers also made generalisations that were not
evidenced by specific examples, or gave superficial or over-simplified
explanations of particular points.

MODERN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Examiners’ Report, 2017

This year there were only three candidates for this paper, because the course
was not taught during the 2016-17 session.

There were 14 questions on the paper. The candidates attempted questions 5
(3x), 2 (2x), 11 (2x), 3, and 6.

The results were scattered across the range. The best answers were by
candidates who had read beyond the curriculum, and, as a result, demonstrated a
deeper understanding of the subject material. The less good answers failed to address the question being asked, lacked precision, or just repeated material from the seminar handouts and presentations without evidence of further critical analysis.

**LITERARY REPRESENTATION AND THE HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY**

**Examiners’ Report, 2017**

There were fifteen course essays submitted this year. The standard of work was very high in general, and even the weakest essays showed evidence of extensive research and careful thought. Given that the work submitted was on such a wide range of topics – including Old Icelandic literature, Anglo-Saxon Saints’ lives, graphic fiction and graphic memoirs, cinema, short stories, theatre (early modern theatre, New York theatre in the late twentieth century) – it is difficult to generalise about the strengths and weaknesses of these essays. The range of material shows how individual candidates are able to research independently, developing their own interests, while also drawing from methodologies, historical and theoretical approaches and from literary material taught in the course. (It was also evident that candidates were drawing from literature taught in other courses.)

Sometimes insufficient attention was paid to the particularities of different genres, so candidates might want to think more about the kind of critical approach needed to talk about film, or short fiction, or graphic writing. Many of the best essays were sensitive to the ways in which particular periods and cultural contexts enabled or frustrated the ‘literary representation of homosexuality’ - the best work showed candidates thinking very carefully about what different words and terms might mean in different historical contexts. Sometimes the criticism of particular works was insufficiently nuanced. Weaker essays sometimes did not introduce the argument and material with sufficient clarity. Many of the best essays were extremely impressive in discussing a wide range of material, while still managing to be perceptive, elegant and persuasive in analyses of particular works.

**LITERARY LINGUISTICS**

**Examiners’ Report, 2017**

As in previous years, the course essays submitted for Literary Linguistics in 2016/17 covered a wide variety of material and topics. This year, students were particularly creative in their choices. For example, there were essays which examined African-American women’s writing, hip-hop, children’s literature, media language, and criminal confessions, and focused on topics as diverse as the distinction between suggestion and coercion, orality, choices in translation and the nature of authorship in aleatory novels. The best of these essays were impressively researched and critically ambitious. Some students showed real
independence in finding helpful secondary reading to inform their discussions. There was quite a lot of variation in how well essays were structured, and how well they made a coherent and focused argument informed by detailed and precise linguistic analysis. In some weaker pieces of work, the aims and purpose were not clearly articulated at the outset, and this made it difficult for readers to understand where the essay was headed; conclusions were similarly varied, and didn’t always make the most of the research and analysis presented in essays. More time redrafting and editing could have significantly improved some of the final pieces.