

UCL Department of English Language and Literature

Sessional Examiners' Reports, 2015-16

(First-Year Undergraduate)

Sessional Examinations 2016: Old and Middle English

Examiners' Report

Performance in this year's Old and Middle English examination was generally good, with the majority of candidates demonstrating a sound range of knowledge and understanding. The strongest scripts were those that offered intelligent and sophisticated answers, always relevant to the question and appropriate to the requirements of the task. These answers demonstrated a sensitive appreciation of the texts under discussion and a good knowledge of context, form, and genre; they also consistently directed their observations to a larger, critical point. In contrast, weaker answers tended towards description and were lacking in critical precision, while very weak responses contained factual errors and problematic generalisations, often discussing the texts in a manner which lacked nuance and sensitivity. One of the main weaknesses of a significant proportion of scripts was the failure to meet the requirements of the commentary exercises (question 1a; question 2a-d). In these cases, responses typically described rather than analysed the extract, or lapsed into a general discussion of the text from which the passage was taken. Students are reminded that a commentary exercise should involve a close reading of the selected passage: a detailed analysis of the extract, and a close examination of its language, style, and themes, are what is required.

The Old English commentary exercise elicited some competent responses. Nearly all candidates were able to identify the passage correctly and could offer a discussion of important themes. Many candidates worked hard to engage with the language and commented on word choice, structure, and imagery. Weaker answers were descriptive, typically paraphrasing what the passage said rather than offering critical analysis. In all cases, a greater critical focus, as well as more detailed analysis and quotation, would be welcome.

Although a number of students performed exceptionally well in the unseen translation, in a considerable number of cases candidates struggled with this element of the exam. While nearly all candidates demonstrated an understanding of the language in general terms and were able to translate individual words correctly, in many cases there was an inability to understand the correct sense and grammar of the passage as a whole. It was particularly disappointing that a significant number of responses failed to identify the cases of nouns properly.

In a considerable number of scripts, performance in the Middle English commentaries was less successful than in other areas of the exam. One of the most common mistakes was the failure to provide a close reading of the selected passage, with responses again lacking a critical focus and veering towards description. The passages from *The Miller's Tale* and *The Second Shepherds' Pageant* were particularly popular choices, although many of these responses would have been strengthened by a greater consideration of genre and tone. Indeed, candidates often overlooked the humour present in these passages, with some responses reading these extracts in a rather moralistic way.

Some of the weakest responses also contained factual errors and problematic generalisations, particularly with regard to the treatment of women in the period, as well as the intellectual ability of medieval audiences. Nonetheless, there were many very good responses, where candidates showed a sensitive and informed understanding of the extract, as well as an impressive knowledge of wider literary traditions and themes.

Overall, the essay component produced the strongest answer in many of the scripts. A significant number of responses answered on *Beowulf* or *The Wanderer*; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was also a very popular choice. Some answers were particularly impressive, offering detailed, knowledgeable and well-informed responses that directly answered the question and put forward original and thoughtful lines of argument. A significant number of essays could have been improved if candidates had thought more fully about the question and ensured that their answer provided a direct response to it. Candidates should ensure that they always formulate an argument and should avoid presenting solely a list of textual examples or observations.

In spite of the fact that the exam rubric now includes a reminder of the need to write legibly, a number of scripts were blighted by very poor handwriting: all candidates must make sure their handwriting can be understood by the examiners. Many answers also contained syntactical, grammatical, and/or spelling errors. Candidates should avoid overly long sentences and should ensure that they spell appropriate terminology correctly ('transience' 'gnomic', 'fabliau' were very often spelt incorrectly). Similarly, a large number of answers failed to adopt an appropriate critical register, favouring colloquialisms, clichés, and informal expressions not suitable for academic writing: this should be avoided.

Sessional Examinations 2016: Narrative Texts / Intellectual and Cultural Sources

Examiners' Report

Candidates produced some good, and in a few cases *very good*, answers for this paper, and generally there was an encouraging display of sensitive, critical engagement with the texts studied on both courses. The best answers showed careful forethought in planning and structuring a response; achieved a good balance between close, analytical detail and an appreciation of wider contexts; compared works precisely and thoughtfully, rather than merely discussing them independently or in series; and displayed accurate and pertinent textual recall.

Disappointingly, a large number of scripts contained rambling, unfocussed essays: candidates need to venture a coherent reading, not just parade detailed knowledge or offer a torrent of illustrations. The obvious imperative to *answer the question* escaped some candidates: if you are asked to discuss the "representation of struggle" or the "representation of optimism", you must not simply list examples of struggle or optimism, but consider how these ideas or themes are presented and treated differently by different authors. Likewise, a question on "how texts engage with conceptions of gender" is not an invitation to download an essay on gender, but a prompt to write on the different engagements with gender in different texts, paying close attention to the historical contexts in which those ideas of gender or gendered identity are constructed.

The best answers combined local precision with breadth, making compelling or unexpected connections between works. A number of scripts were marred by a narrowness of range, duplicating the same work or works across two answers (especially in the case of the Narrative Texts paired for the commentary in Section B, which tended to recur in answers for the essay in Section C). Candidates might ideally, and not unreasonably, aim to write on four Narrative Texts across Sections B and C.

For the commentary exercise in Section A and Section B, some scripts were hampered by a tendency to treat the passages for close reading as an opportunity for paraphrase, or as the occasion to offer an encyclopaedic summary of the work as a whole, leading to answers that were totally disengaged from the excerpt itself. It is obvious to examiners when candidates do this, and a number of scripts were accordingly held back from higher marks. Other answers fared less well by bringing in a pre-conceived assumption about the text from which the commentary passages had been excerpted, as if applying a prepared template; the best answers, by contrast, engaged with the intricacies (and discontinuities) of the passage in question. These scripts also situated passages within the works as a whole, while retaining a focus on the extract itself, and, for the Narrative Text passages in Section B, ventured a sustained comparison, treating the two extracts in parallel and making productive cross-references between them.

The traditional glut of stylistic and presentational problems recurred this year. Titles of works must be underlined (or placed within inverted commas), and should be reproduced correctly: the title of Eliot's poem is, crucially, "The Waste Land" (not "The Wasteland"), and Sterne did not write the life and opinions of "Tristram Shady". Basic errors (such as missed apostrophes, or run-on sentences) reappeared, at times with alarming frequency, and a strangely informal register marred some scripts. Candidates are reminded, as per the instructions on the paper itself, that handwriting must be legible.

Sessional Examinations 2016: Criticism and Theory

Examiners' Report

The examiners were struck by the quality of close readings on display in all three questions on this paper, and by the candidates' ability to construct original arguments under exam conditions using difficult unseen works. The best scripts drew on vocabulary, form, structure, and, importantly, tonal complexity, and sought to combine a range of textual features into a coherent reading. They displayed evidence of attentive reading and planning, marshalling their evidence into a persuasive, cohesive whole, and occasionally performed dazzling feats of close-reading (with a couple of scripts in particular displaying outstanding intellectual verve and perspicacity). Less persuasive answers lent towards paraphrase rather than analysis, and these answers were also often arranged in a linear fashion, explaining line by line the bare linguistic meaning of the passages, rather than being organized on the basis of ideas thrown up by the text.

One tendency noted among the less strong papers this year, and even at times better ones, was an over reliance on the identification of poetic and rhetorical (in particular) devices. A candidate would correctly name a stylistic figure, but then fail to discuss its effect, or to what purpose it had been deployed. Additionally, it was often unclear as to why alliteration, sibilance or enjambment – in and of themselves – might connote despair or ennui, joy or entrapment. Rather than noting and listing

the existence of such devices in the texts, candidates are encouraged to construct readings that use such stylistic analyses to develop coherent interpretations, and that display an awareness of complexity and nuance in the unseen passages. Merely identifying linguistic features does not amount to an argument.

Some of the students who answered on the passages of Question 2 fell prey to the error of assuming that the narrator was deficient, rather than hailing either from a different time period or a different culture to their own. Candidates are reminded that their use of English may be 'standard' but it is neither universal nor innately superior.

For Question 3, which invites commentaries that consider the 'approach to criticism' shown in the Criticism 'study pack', better answers paid close attention to the specifics of the text to hand, where less convincing readings tended to speak in generalising or vague terms about the author and his or her writings. As in questions 1 and 2, candidates are advised to pay close stylistic attention to the phrasing and lexical choices of the extracts in Question 3, and candidates must also place the excerpt in the wider context of the work from which it is taken. The best answers for Question 3 gestured towards the paradoxes, problems or interpretive difficulties of the criticism espoused by the author in question, where weaker answers presented ad hominem criticisms or flatly derided the author's theoretical ideas. These answers generally failed to understand the complexity of the author's writing.

Candidates are reminded of the importance of legible handwriting. There were a number of papers that examiners were very nearly unable to penetrate.