



THE FACULTY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

## **EXAMINERS' REPORTS**

# **2008**

## THE FACULTY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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**MODERATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE  
2007 - 2008**

**Moderations English Language and Literature 2007-8: Chair's Report**

**Part I**

**A. STATISTICS**

The examinations went well this year. There were 246 candidates in English and one candidate for the Preliminary Examination in English Language and Literature at the end of the summer vacation. In the event, this candidate withdrew before the examination.

Medical certificates and other submissions were presented on behalf of 20 candidates. All were taken into consideration.

**1. Numbers and percentages in each category**

| <b>Category</b>    | <b>Number</b>  |                |                | <b>Percentage</b> |                |                |
|--------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
|                    | <b>2007/08</b> | <b>2006/07</b> | <b>2005/06</b> | <b>2007/08</b>    | <b>2006/07</b> | <b>2005/06</b> |
| <b>Distinction</b> | 58             | (56)           | (56)           | 23.6              | (22.8)         | (22.6)         |
| <b>Pass</b>        | 188            | (189)          | (189)          | 76.4              | (76.8)         | (76.2)         |
| <b>Fail</b>        | 0              | (1)            | (4)            | 0                 | (0.4)          | (1.2)          |

**2. Percentage of scripts marked at 70/70+ (Paper 1, period papers, plus over all papers)**

| <b>Paper</b>   | <b>2008</b> | <b>2007</b> | <b>2006</b> |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>1</b>       | 18.7        | 16.3        | 12.6        |
| <b>2a/4a</b>   | 23.5        | 21.7        | 23.1        |
| <b>2b/4b</b>   | 19.5        | 24.4        | 28.0        |
| <b>3a</b>      | 13.4        | 21.9        | 20.4        |
| <b>3b</b>      | 24.3        | 8.0         | 20.0        |
| <b>Overall</b> | 20.3        | 20.8        | 22.6        |

**3. Preliminary Examination in English and Modern Languages**

The 27 candidates all passed, 6 achieved Distinctions in English

**4. Preliminary Examination in History and English**

The 8 candidates all passed, 3 achieved Distinctions in English

**5. Preliminary Examination in English**

Please see opening paragraph of this report.

## **B. NEW EXAMINING METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

Paper 1. This was the last year when 'reading time' is allowed for this paper. In 2009 the examination will simply last two and a half hours, with candidates being allowed to use that time in any way they choose -- though wise ones, of course, will use it to read the paper carefully and make notes on it. This year, the fifteen minute reading period (during which no writing at all was allowed) followed by a further 15 minutes of reading and note-taking (when the candidates can only make notes on the examination paper and not write anything examinable in response to it) seemed gloriously convoluted. Next year's arrangement will be better for all concerned, including the examination hall staff (who were invariably helpful, clear and organised throughout the whole of the examinations process).

## **C. RECOMMENDED CHANGES IN PROCEDURE**

One important innovation this year was that the *Circular to Candidates and Tutors* made the Marks Criteria explicit by describing the kinds of qualities that a candidate must demonstrate to fulfil the various levels of achievement (or failure). Such explicitness was an attempt to bring Mods into line with Schools and the M.St.

In addition, there was an added check on the compatibility of marking. Where marking runs were split, five scripts were swapped to assess any great divergence of opinion. This would seem to be a good procedure to take forward into the future.

As a further measure of good practice and transparency, information from the Proctors was clearly acknowledged on the marks list sent to tutors this year. This relates to the Board being made aware of illness, or dyslexia, or dysgraphia, etc. Although there is no standard practice recommended by the Proctors, each candidate who had submitted information to the Proctors had 'Proctors' letter received' noted on the relevant college's marks print-out.

## **D. PUBLICATION OF CONVENTIONS**

During the marks meetings it became apparent that it would be helpful in future if conventions were handed on. In particular, there is no agreed mechanism in Mods for dealing with short-weight. This year the Moderators tended to average the three marks and to make an adjustment of their own depending on how inadequate the individual essays were in terms of their length. But it would be more transparent if some sort of algorithm were devised and agreed upon for next and succeeding years. There were a considerable number of essays which really were on the short side, so it would also seem to be necessary for the moderators to come to an agreed definition of short-weight as well as a mechanism for calculating and penalising it. At present short-weight has become a rather hazy notion and some thought needs to be given to clarifying what is now meant by this hoary old term. Where, for example, does skimpiness and inadequacy end, and short-weight begin? Can it be quantified?

## Part II

### A. GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE EXAMINATION

The new requirements of the Open Source Software (OSS) system caused considerable anxiety in the last moments of processing the results. Whilst the Mark-It database program continues to be well supported in terms of providing marks lists and statistics for the Moderators' meetings, the sudden requirement to provide results in a new format left the Board negotiating with the Exam Schools in order to have a pass list printed. This highlighted an absence of appropriate communications between the OSS administration group and those charged with providing that system with details as to how to make it work.

On another technology-related issue, it does seem rather backward that Moderators are not able to submit their marks and comments in electronic form. This would have the benefit of making marks easier to retrieve during second marking and would enhance accuracy of input. We recommend that Mark-It be sufficiently supported to achieve this change by next year.

Paper 4 continues to raise questions. In 2008 there were no takers for 'Medieval Dream Poetry' and 'Christina Rossetti'. There was only one taker for 'Language and Linguistics', plus other low numbers (4 for 'Beowulf', 3 for 'Heaney').

There was a slight hiccup at the beginning of the first exam when it transpired that a sizeable minority of candidates had not brought their candidate numbers with them. The lesson for next year is that tutors need to reinforce the importance of candidates taking their yellow examination timetables, on which is printed each candidate's exam number, to the examination hall.

### B. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES ISSUES AND BREAKDOWN OF THE RESULTS BY GENDER

|  |                     | 2008        | 2007        | 2006        |
|--|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Total no.</b>                                   | <b>women</b>        | 151 (61.4%) | 152 (61.8%) | 154 (62.1%) |
| <b>Total no.</b>                                   | <b>men</b>          | 95 (38.6%)  | 94 (38.2%)  | 94 (37.9%)  |
|  |                     |             |             |             |
| <b>Distinctions</b>                                | <b>both genders</b> | 56 (22.8%)  | 56 (22.8)   | 56 (22.6%)  |
| <b>Of which:</b>                                   | <b>women</b>        | 34 (22.5%)  | 33 (58.9%)  | 34 (60.7%)  |
|  | <b>men</b>          | 22 (23.2%)  | 23 (41.1%)  | 22 (39.3%)  |
|  |                     |             |             |             |
| <b>Percentage of gender achieving Distinctions</b> |                     |             |             |             |
|  | <b>women</b>        | 22.5%       | 21.7%       | 22.1%       |
|  | <b>men</b>          | 23.16%      | 24.5%       | 23.4%       |

### C. NUMBERS OF CANDIDATES SITTING INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

| Paper                            | 2008 | 2007 | 2006 |
|----------------------------------|------|------|------|
| 2a & 4a (Victorian Literature)   | 217  | 217  | 208  |
| 2b & 4b (Modern Literature)      | 186  | 176  | 175  |
|                                  |      |      |      |
| 3a (Old English Literature)      | 209  | 196  | 191  |
| 3b (Middle English Literature)   | 37   | 50   | 55   |
|                                  |      |      |      |
| 4c (Beowulf)                     | 4    | 3    | 5    |
| 4d (Middle English Dream Poetry) | 0    | 2    | 5    |
| 4e (Classical Literature)        | 25   | 23   | 28   |
| 4f (Language and Linguistics)    | 1    | 2    | 7    |
| 4g (Critical Theory)             | 27   | 21   | 17   |
| 4h (Rossetti)                    | 0    | 4    | 1    |
| 4i (Hardy)                       | 12   | 22   | 13   |
| 4j (Woolf)                       | 7    | 11   | 15   |
| 4k (Beckett)                     | 9    | 5    | 13   |
| 4l (Heaney)                      | 3    | 6    | 5    |

### D. COMMENTS ON PAPERS AND INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

#### Paper One: Introduction to Literary Studies

There is much evidence to suggest that this paper has now bedded down; that students are receiving the right amount of tuition; and that the lectures are stimulating good work. On the whole, the standard has improved since last year, with candidates answering a wider range of questions. There were some very good scripts at the top end of the school, showing evidence of detailed knowledge and mature critical judgement. Quite a high proportion of answers in Section B were a pleasure to read.

At the lower end of the school, there is still a tendency to regard this paper as an opportunity to demonstrate general knowledge, rather than to engage thoughtfully with literary and theoretical questions. Many of the essays in the middle second range lacked spark, conducting derivative arguments or choosing predictable examples. Students should be encouraged not just to attend the core lectures, but to choose their own areas of special interest, and collect materials over the course of the year that can be used as a resource for the examinations. This paper is flexible enough to enable a wide diversity of approaches and methodologies.

#### Section A

Most of the skill in this section lies in a careful choice of material. The best essays were those in which candidates illustrated their arguments with appropriate, well-considered examples, rather than simply reaching for the most obvious texts. The most rigorous essays were those that took a single theoretical perspective and subjected it to close scrutiny from different angles. Candidates wrote well about genre – this topic is one that elicits adventurous approaches, and adapts well to a diverse range of texts.



In 2007, a very large proportion of candidates answered on Barthes. This year there was no quotation from Barthes on the exam paper (deliberately), but candidates still gravitated towards the quotations from Foucault or Iser that would enable them to talk about the death of the author. This is a popular topic, for good reason; but it can produce weak material. Many answers took the form of a bland historical survey, including Wimsatt and Beardsley on the intentional fallacy, then progressing to Barthes, Iser and Fish. This kind of essay is not well-suited to an exam context: it produces superficiality in all but the best candidates. What is needed is a much more focused analysis of specific issues and texts. Intertextuality was another popular topic. Here the work was on the whole good – but candidates tended to talk about a rather narrow range of theorists (Kristeva, Bakhtin), and very few discussed Hartman, Riffaterre, Bloom, or Ricks. It was monotonous to read so many answers on *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* -- more inventiveness could have been used in finding different examples.

Very few candidates wrote about drama and performance in Section A, although there were three questions available. There were remarkably few essays on narratology (though this was a strong feature in the answers to section B), or on racial and national identity. Equally surprising was the scarcity of answers on literature before the nineteenth century – most essays used examples from the first half of the twentieth. Those candidates who chose to write about Medieval, Renaissance or Romantic texts did so freshly and skilfully; and a handful of candidates wrote well about post-colonial and contemporary literature.

## **Section B**

Some of the work on the owl poems was sophisticated and astute. Many candidates used this section as an opportunity to explore definitions of literary language; and the topic of defamiliarisation came up frequently. Some essays were skilful in using commentary to raise theoretical questions. Others were more mechanical, attempting to shoehorn Shklovsky or Jakobson into an argument, when not strictly necessary. Some of the very best work in this section took the form of detailed critical commentary.

A large proportion of candidates chose to write about the passages from Woolf and Chopin, which stimulated some thoughtful essays on narrative methods. Many candidates wrote in the light of Bal's work on focalisation, and did so clearly. The answers on prose were by and large less good – candidates are weaker on rhetoric. But Sarah Kane's *Blasted* elicited some adventurous essays.

## **Paper 2(a)/4(a): Victorian Literature**

This paper continues to be a very popular option, with 217 (plus 20 from the Joint Schools) takers this year. All the 30 questions on the paper attracted at least one answer. The level was generally good, with some outstanding work at the top end, but there were also a lot of unimaginative answers that covered well-trodden ground with little ambition or *éclat*. Comparatively few essays showed complete misunderstanding or severe factual or conceptual errors.

The best answers showed sensitivity to issues of genre and, especially in the case of poetry, language; they were attentive to detail and, at the same time, to the broader literary and intellectual contexts of the texts under scrutiny. Some made elegant use of theory to frame their arguments. Strong answers tended to be well-crafted and carefully structured as well as

intellectually sound. On the other hand, the weaker answer tended, as usual, to present irrelevant material or to engage with the question only partially. Other disappointing answers brought very different texts together without showing any awareness of chronology or differences in form and genre. Weaker candidates were less able to engage in a continuing comparison and contrast between texts, with the result that the evidence tended merely to confirm the existing argument, rather than serve to complicate or develop it. Weak essays tended to give accounts of text that were descriptive rather than analytical, amounting to little more than retellings of plots. A number of essays were burdened by lengthy stereotyped accounts of the evils of urbanisation, industrialisation, technology, the double standard, sexual repression and the like, based on vague and anecdotal evidence rather than sound readings of the textual material in hand. Some scripts attributed evidence to 'a critic', without being more specific than this, making their points impossible to prove. Others tried to back up their argument by using tired clichés about the period. It is worth reiterating that Hardy's poetry belongs to the twentieth-century paper, and so candidates should not base their answers on it in this paper.

The most popular questions by far were the ones on realism, the inner life, faith and doubt, women's sexuality, empire and race, aestheticism, degeneration and the rewriting of woman. Candidates writing on the representation of women are reminded to read the question carefully, as sexuality and gender are two different things. The most popular authors were Eliot, Dickens, Wilde and Hardy; with Gaskell, Tennyson, Browning and Hopkins close behind. Many candidates also wrote on Collins, Clough (surprisingly), Pater, Conrad, Stevenson and, of course, Stoker, Rider Haggard and Kipling (often in combination), Swinburne, Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Wells, Carroll, Lear (this latter often read entirely out of his historical context), Braddon, Thackeray, Ruskin (although surprisingly few) and Kingsley.

### **Paper 2(b)/4(b): Modern Literature**

185 candidates (plus 1 from the Joint School with History, and 7 from the Joint School with Modern Languages) took the paper. The most popular question was Q1, with 72 candidates attempting it. It was followed by Q18 (56 candidates), Q24 (49 candidates), Q13 (45 candidates), and Q3 and Q4 (43 candidates each). No candidates attempted Q11a (influence of non-English literatures), Q11b (influence of theory), or Q17 (non-fictional prose). The most popular authors by far were Woolf, Eliot, Joyce (but there were only a few mentions of *Finnegans Wake* and no discussion of it), Conrad, Beckett, Pinter, Yeats, Forster, Lawrence, and Angela Carter. The canon this year seemed narrower than in last year's Mods scripts.

Too many of the scripts were simply disappointing. In some, narrowness of reference was a problem; in others, superficiality. Many were limited to one author (despite the question asking about 'writers') and tended to be unambitious, limited, hesitant and poorly expressed. Too many essays had a rather desperate and down-loaded feel to them and showed lack of both reach and penetration. Engagement with the question and or quotation is an important marking criterion, and candidates with a good recall of information and ideas too often fell down in this regard. Q24 was too frequently treated as an opportunity to reproduce a tutorial essay on a theme; few candidates argued for the significance of their theme by placing it in a larger context. Q23 too often became an opportunity to write about gender difference, without specific reference to women's or men's experience, let alone their experience of modernity.

Use of critical literature was pretty rare and engagement with critical literature rarer still. Carey's *Intellectuals and the Masses* was the most consulted work of criticism and its prejudices were taken at face value. Some of the worst answers comprised only one text, and often a short one: *Heart of Darkness*, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' or *Jacob's Room*. One text provides simply insufficient material to work with at this level, no matter how sure the grasp of the text in question. Though an exception could be made for *Ulysses*, even discussion of this text benefits from an awareness of contemporaries and predecessors. Narrowness was a besetting problem with many scripts -- narrow range of primary texts in play, narrow response to them.

Candidates would be wise to prepare to answer on a selection of authors rather than just one. However, where candidates introduced a wide range of texts, there was too rarely any indication that they had a rationale for their choice, nor that they had considered the order in which they presented their evidence; very often, their knowledge appeared superficial. In these cases, each new text became an illustration of a theme, rather than evidence in an argument. When successive paragraphs begin 'Another example of X comes in ...', it is a sure sign that there is no real argument. Too many essays were too like the 'A'-level essays we see during Admissions: what have these candidates been thinking about during their first year at university?

Of course, the best answers were exceptionally good: full, searching, probing, energetic, expressed with subtlety. Although Q18 (on social and political responsibilities) occasioned some dull and uncritical work on Orwell, there were several essays on poetry that demonstrated a mature general grasp of the situation of literature and literary discourse in the period; they combined this general understanding with sensitive, relevant, and subtle readings of individual poems.

### **Paper 3(a): Introduction to Medieval Studies: Old English**

Generally speaking, the level of performance in this paper was good, with few candidates handing in severely inadequate scripts but also with fewer than might have been hoped achieving marks in the highest range.

The compulsory commentaries -- both passages attracted plenty of candidates -- mostly showed at least a reasonable knowledge of the content of the text concerned. Some candidates weakened their commentaries by writing in too general terms about the texts, a smaller number of others by trying to construct a commentary entirely around a very small number of stylistic features. The majority, however, struck an appropriate balance between generality and specificity.

There was a noticeable similarity in some of the range of points mentioned by a significant number of candidates, such that it appeared likely that they had their origin in the same lecture course. For the better candidates, this gave a basis on which to write with some imagination and originality, but some others were evidently able to do little more than enumerate the points.

It was not always easy to form a confident assessment of how well candidates understood the Old English text. In a few cases, though, it was evident that the level of that understanding was low. For example, a disturbingly large number of candidates wrote on the passage from *The Dream of the Rood* with the clear conviction that *langunghwila* was something about 'a long time', or that *Is me nu lifes hyht* was about embarking on a 'new

life'. The best commentaries discussed the passages in ways that made clear the candidates well understood the Old English text, but these cases were rather few, and the commentary question therefore seemed frequently likely to have failed to meet one of its intended aims, that of ensuring that candidates were able to engage with the texts in the original language. All the other questions were attempted by one or more candidates, although Questions 6 (both parts), 7 (both parts) and 8 were particularly popular. Other frequent choices were 3, 4 and 5 (a). There were, predictably, some instances of blatant disregard of the particular question asked, but such cases were few. More noticeable was the taking of some questions in senses other than the most obvious, as in the very frequent answering of Question 5 (a) as though it were about present-past relationships within narratives, rather than as narrative's past in relationship to poet's present.

Only a few candidates showed, either in their commentaries or in their essays, an ability to discuss issues of style in an informed way and with understanding. Remarks on style too often amounted to, e.g., attributing to particular alliterating sounds in a line of verse particular effects.

References to secondary literature suggested that a significant number of candidates were between them drawing on some acquaintance with a considerable range of critical writing, which was encouraging.

Work for this paper makes heavy demands on undergraduates in their first year of study, particularly in view of the limited time that can be devoted to it. Against that background, this year's candidates in most cases performed commendably. But it might be hoped that in any future redesign of the Mods course, any Old English component would lead to a more confident ability to read in the original language, and to discuss, whatever texts were studied.

### **Paper 3(b): Introduction to Medieval Studies: Middle English Literature**

39 students took Paper 3(b), of whom 2 were from joint schools. The replacement and revision of the set texts seems, in general, to have been a success (although for fuller discussion of this, see below).

In terms of commentaries, the extract from *The Nun's Priest Tale* was overwhelmingly popular, with 31 of the 39 candidates choosing to write on it. As is always the case, the weakest of these paid virtually no attention to the language and style of their chosen passage, and exhibited no obvious awareness that they were dealing with poetry rather than prose, while the relatively few outstanding answers engaged closely with the tone, register and style of the chosen passage. All candidates translated the prescribed section of the commentary and some did so successfully, but the weaker attempts were little more than transliterations. In addition, candidates unsure of grammatical relationships between words in the Middle English tended simply to reproduce the original word order in Modern English, making no attempt to resolve ambiguities of grammar and syntax. As it stands, I am not sure how useful this exercise is; the vast majority of candidates appeared unengaged with it, rushing off a translation in a few seconds after writing their commentaries. Perhaps a slightly longer section should be set in future.

With the exception of question 7(b) on the lyrics, all of the essay questions on the paper were attempted. Among the new set texts and authors, Hoccleve was particularly popular. 14

candidates chose to answer question 3(a) or (b), and many did so very well indeed, exhibiting a clear grasp of the primary material itself and of critical debate surrounding this author. The introduction of Hoccleve to this paper appears to have been a real success; candidates are genuinely engaged by him. There were also some reasonably good answers on Malory, with many candidates choosing to apply question 9 (on masculinity) to his depiction of knightly conduct. Work on the Canterbury Tales was rather mixed; some candidates wrote startlingly well-informed essays on authority and reliability, basing their answers on a wide range of Chaucerian material, and these were a real pleasure to read. However, the essays offered in response to the specific Chaucer question (2(a) and (b)) were, in general, less impressive. Too many candidates answering 2(a) (on prologues) took it as an opportunity to summarize events in prologues and accompanying tales, without any substantial interrogation of the relationship between the two. Of all the new set texts on this paper, the Mystery Plays appear to have been the most problematic, and to have given rise to the weakest work. With a few notable exceptions, the majority of candidates who chose to write on this topic showed virtually no awareness of the different cycles, discussing 'the Mystery Plays' in the most generalized terms as one homogeneous group. To be fair, there were some reasonable attempts to answer the question on staging (4(b)), but the question on language (4(a)) prompted some remarkably unfocussed writing.

As it stands, it seems that this paper remains problematic. Its difficulties arise, at least in part, from the fact that candidates are unclear as to the most effective approach to take; should they focus closely throughout on the set texts, or should they cast their nets as widely as possible, and demonstrate substantial reading beyond the prescribed texts? Although the former option gave rise to some good work, some candidates in this category risked infringing the rubric requiring them to show 'substantial knowledge of at least three texts' in their two essays. For particularly strong and capable students, the latter option often proved successful (there was some extremely insightful and informed work offered in response to questions 6-14), but for far too many, it verged on disastrous. Candidates seemed to think that if they dropped enough names of Middle English authors and/or titles of Middle English works into their essays, they could dispense with genuine critical argument and engagement.

#### **Paper 4(c): *Beowulf* and its Cultural Background**

There were five candidates for this paper, all of whom received marks in the 60s. Questions attempted by no candidates were 2, 7, 9 and 12. Apart from the compulsory Question 1, each of the other questions was attempted by between one and three candidates. Answers were good rather than outstandingly good. Recurrent tendencies included failing to grasp the most obvious focus of interest in a question (and so to answer it on the basis of a less obvious interpretation), and wandering off the topic in the course of an answer.

#### **Paper 4(d): Medieval Dream Poetry**

There were no candidates this year.

#### **Paper 4(e): Classical Literature**

Twenty-five candidates sat this paper. The level of performance was very high with as many as eight being awarded Distinctions, three a sixty-nine and four a sixty-eight: all three sixty-nines were re-read by another assessor. As few as four gained a mark below 60 while seven achieved mark between 60 and 67. Failure to answer the question was penalised and several

candidates could not resist the temptation to reproduce what evidently must have been their tutorial essays. On a paper which contains eight general questions covering a wide range of topics, there is no excuse for either rephrasing the question to suit one's own preferences or diverging from the subject.

There were several ambitious souls who studied all three epics and succeeded in remembering a myriad of names. It was several of these who opted for the general question on intertextuality. The trend to write on at least one general question, even on two, continued. By far the most popular was the one on the gods, with ekphrasis, intertextuality, and punishment attracting respectable numbers. The most popular authors turned out to be the usual suspects: Homer, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Virgil and Ovid. A few ventured on to Seneca, Juvenal and Apuleius; the last-named elicited especially good answers. Plautus and Longus had no supporters.

Essays for the most part were theoretically informed and showed a serious attempt to engage with the texts, and to deploy quotations where appropriate. There was a display of the original language but no extra marks were awarded for these as it is a Classics-in-translation paper, but much amusement was provided for the examiners as they gazed upon impossible endings and incompatible forms. Conversely, marks were not deducted for such mistakes.

While knowledge of Greek history especially in relation to Aristophanes was somewhat vague, a greater degree of assurance was displayed on the Augustan period in discussion of Virgil and Ovid. In all cases candidates had certainly made the attempt to learn more of the cultural and social contexts in which these works were constructed but because the time span of their creation is so vast and political conditions so very different they inevitably had to be selective, especially if they chose both Greek and Latin authors. Nevertheless they should be commended for trying.

Highest marks were awarded to candidates who showed signs of originality of thought, carefully constructed a clear line of argument and offered a close reading of the text. On the whole, marking this paper was a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

#### **Paper 4(f): Introduction to Language and Linguistics**

Only one candidate took this paper.

#### **Paper 4(g): Introduction to Critical Theory**

27 candidates sat this paper. Candidates answered most questions and engaged with a great variety of critical thinkers and texts. The examiners would very much encourage even greater variety. The overall standard was high. One script was graded below 60; 11 scripts were graded 70 and above. The weaker scripts were competent but formulaic: they showed narrow reading, limited engagement and uncritical reliance on the arguments of others. The stronger scripts displayed: a willingness to venture outside a narrow critical-theory canon; independent thinking; lively argumentation; original comments; imaginative links and a synthetic ambition, and a depth of understanding.

#### **Paper 4(h): Special Authors: Christina Rossetti**

There were no candidates this year.

#### **Paper 4(i): Special Authors: Thomas Hardy**

There were 12 candidates for this paper, rather fewer than in 2007 (22). Overall, the standard of the scripts was very high, with all the candidates performing at an above-average level: four achieved Distinctions.

Most of the questions received at least one answer and the most popular were those on female sexuality and Hardy's treatment of rural life/nature. Other questions attracting a number of candidates included Q.4 (gender), Q.5 (tragedy), Q.8 (the pastoral), Q.10 (the past) and Q.11 (class). Questions 1 (Hardy's religious attitudes), 2 (contemporary social philosophy) and 7 (language) only attracted one answer each and Questions 3 (Hardy's political values) and 9 (serialization) generated no responses at all. The candidates who did very well indeed were those who demonstrated command of an appropriately wide range of Hardy texts – novels, short fiction, some poems, essays, non-fictional prose – in responding to each of the three questions he or she attempted and who wrote about their chosen material with flair, command and incisiveness. Overall, candidates made a particular effort to bring in some of Hardy's poetry (possibly in response to last year's report) and this had a beneficial effect on the quality of their essays.

There was also a marked and laudable tendency for candidates to show broad knowledge of and to engage with the critical literature on Hardy, which further helped this examiner form an impression of a group of candidates that had absorbed what they were writing about and who were well-prepared, as well as being anxious to write with care and informed attentiveness to detail. Those candidates who were not deemed worthy of a Distinction tended to assemble a fair range of primary materials, to deal with them efficiently but in a rather cursory fashion. They also tended to fail to shape convincing arguments and tended to fall into repetition rather than gather analytical momentum.

#### **Paper 4(j): Special Authors: Virginia Woolf**

Seven candidates took this paper. Question 11a (differences between men and women) was the most frequently attempted, with questions 3, 5, and 10 also proving popular. There were some first class essays, but overall the standard was slightly lower than on other special author papers. The best candidates ranged widely across Woolf's oeuvre, taking in her essays, and less commonly studied works such as *Night and Day*; the less able candidates stayed mostly with the predictable novels: *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando*; *The Voyage Out* was also relatively popular. The weakest essays lacked focus on the exact question, and did little more than present potentially relevant materials without placing them within a clear argument.

#### **Paper 4(k): Special Authors: Samuel Beckett**

Nine candidates took this paper. Question 6 proved the most popular, closely followed by question 5. The standard was high; Beckett's difficulty had prompted the best candidates to engage with larger questions about the nature of literature and literary criticism, which informed close readings of Beckett's plays, fiction, and other prose. The weakest essays presented relevant materials, but failed to place them within a focused and developing argument. For the weaker candidates, question 6 became an invitation to write about gender, whereas stronger candidates kept classification as the focus.

#### **Paper 4(l): Special Authors: Seamus Heaney**

Three candidates took this paper. No single question was attempted by more than one candidate: questions 1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, and 15 were attempted. The strongest essays drew upon a wide range of Heaney's poetry and prose, and were unafraid of making evaluative distinctions within Heaney's oeuvre. No candidate completely mastered the art of organizing his/her material. Sustained considerations of individual poems would have been welcome, and might have given the essays a centrepiece. There was also a tendency, even in the strongest essays, for quotations from Heaney's prose to substitute for analysis of his poetry.

#### **E. NAMES OF MODERATORS**

Dr David Bradshaw (Chair of Moderators)

Dr Stefano Evangelista

Mr Terry Hoad

Prof Lucy Newlyn

Dr Annie Sutherland

Dr Michael Whitworth



## **MODERATIONS JOINT SCHOOL REPORTS**

### **CLASSICS AND ENGLISH HONOUR MODERATIONS 2008**

#### **Examiners' Reports**

There were ten candidates for the Course I Year I and Course II Year 2 examination (ACLE), and two for the Course II Year I Qualifying Test (TCLE), with one candidate resitting the Language paper. Of the ACLE candidates, eight answered questions on Latin and two on Greek; in TCLE, there were two candidates in Greek and one in Latin.

In ACLE, three Firsts were awarded, four Seconds and three Thirds. The three Thirds all had marks below 40 in Paper 4, which was sufficient according to the new classification criteria to prevent them from being placed in the Second Class. The top First had five marks of 70 or above and was nominated for the Passmore Edwards Prize. The TCLE candidates all passed, including the resit.

Changed criteria for classification state that for a First no mark (previously not more than one mark) must be below 60, and for a Second, no mark (previously not more than one mark) below 40. Given candidates' propensity this year to seriously under-perform on paper 4 (see below), this change had a marked effect on classification; obviously on the II/III borderline, but a potential problem on the I/II borderline was also only narrowly avoided. The Moderators would like the Standing Committee to take this year's experience into account when assessing the new ruling. It seems arguably reasonable, if much harsher than before, that a mark below 40 should disqualify a candidate from a Second, but should one mark of, say, 58, really disqualify from a First when all other papers are excellent?

#### **ACLE, Paper 1 English Literature 1509-1600 (excluding the plays of Shakespeare)**

There were some excellent papers, full of acute literary sensibility and an impressive range of allusions. Weaker papers were too generalised, with a narrow range of reference and very predictable arguments. Occasionally papers were marred by very gestural attempts at 'topicality', in which the sense of history was far too vague and nebulous. Better answers, as always, were characterised by precision, wide learning, sensitivity to tone and modalities, and imagination.

#### **Paper 2 English Literature 1600-1660 (excluding the works of Shakespeare)**

The comments for paper 1 apply equally here. A number of students were rather unadventurous in their choice of texts (the same old Jacobean tragedies, for instance); and there was some rather supine work on pastoral, insufficiently alive to the potential dynamism of the mode in the period. Weaker essays were overly descriptive, with far too much story-telling; many did not really attempt properly comparative analyses. Again, however, the best papers were quite brilliant, alive with ideas and a passionate, intimate possession of the material.

#### **Paper 3 Critical Commentary**

It was gratifying to see that answers were attempted on all parts of this paper. In particular, six candidates attempted questions 1 and 2, producing some work of a strongly first class

standard. On the whole, the level of critical and contextual sophistication was high, but too many candidates still attempted to locate passages within diffuse and misunderstood moments of political history. The best candidates framed their comparisons in lucidly analytical terms, but all must resist the temptation simply to juxtapose superficially descriptive summaries of the passages alongside one another.

#### **Paper 4 Unseen Translation from Greek and/or Latin**

This was by far the most problematic paper, with no first class marks attained and some completely inadequate attempts offered, the worst few showing almost no contact with the original text. This contrasted both with last year's performance and with this year's equivalent in ML Prelims, where the same passages were set. In both languages the verse passages were done somewhat better than the prose, suggesting that some candidates may just lack experience of a range of prose authors, but at the bottom of the scale there seemed to be little familiarity with the classical languages themselves. On a more minor point, it would be nice if undergraduates could persuade themselves that 'men' is not usually the best modern English rendering of *homines*.

#### **Paper 5 Greek and Latin Literature; Essays**

The candidates all showed that they had thought about their texts, but divided into the more-or-less satisfactory and the really quite good. Even in the latter group, there was some carelessness in detail, especially when attempting to quote in the original, but the best of these essays showed an admirable intelligence and independence of thought. Among the less good group, there was a certain reliance on watered-down, standard answers, and sometimes a failure to understand what the question was really asking: not all candidates picked up the reference to Antigone as a 'bad woman' (though most did), while in question 14 the nuance of 'any texts' was sometimes neglected. In both groups, candidates needed to guard against the urge to answer some more congenial question than the one which had actually been set. The more general questions in Section C attracted some thoughtful answers, especially on closure; but it would have been nice to have seen some reference to texts other than those of the prescription. Surely these are not the only classical texts that candidates have encountered?

#### **Paper 6 Greek and Latin Literature; Translation and Comment**

The majority of candidates were quite well prepared for this paper, though there were a few rather shaky renderings of the Aeneid. A fair degree of variation was in evidence in the skill with which candidates tackled the commentary form. Most had more or less the right idea, but some could still with profit have reduced (sometimes tangential) generalities, while others, in going for detail, chose to concentrate on rather far-fetched (and sometimes incorrect) points relating to sound and metre, while failing to make more obvious points on thematic links between the passage set and its immediate context.

#### **TCLE, Paper 1 (Language)**

As usual, the paper was set by Assessors and marked by the Moderators. The range was from just satisfactory to fairly good, with no first-class marks. Translation from the classical language was noticeably better performed than the English sentences to be put into Greek or Latin.

## **Paper 2 (Texts)**

Translation from the set texts reached a very high standard, and the comment was almost as good, showing an acute sensitivity to the way classical texts work and a good balance of the general and particular.

## ENGLISH AND MODERN LANGUAGES PRELIMINARIES 2008

### Examiners' Reports

Following the pattern of last year, the Chair of ML agreed to chair the four Joint Schools (EMEL, EML, HML, PML) as well. This was again felt to be an efficient procedure, and the document summarising all Joint School procedures (examiners, arrangements for meetings, marking criteria) is now lodged in the Examinations Office in electronic form; this can be updated each year and circulated to Examiners and Faculty Exams Officers. The only ML Examiners to attend the Joint School meetings are the Chair and Deputy Chair, since the marks have already been reviewed at the pre-final meeting.

The Final meeting was held at the Examination Schools on Tuesday, 8 July at 9am. It was attended by two English and two ML Examiners.

In the June examination there were 27 candidates (20 in 2007) taking English with the following languages:

French: 15

German: 6

Spanish: 6

Distinctions were awarded as follows:

English: 8

French: 6

German: 1

Spanish: 1

The criteria for Pass/Fail and Distinction are as follows:

- To pass in ML: an average of 40 in subject (i) language, and in subject (ii) literature.
- Distinction in ML: an average of 70 across all four papers.
- To pass in English: at least 40 on each paper.
- Distinction in English: an average of at least 67 with at least one mark of 70 or more and no mark below 60.

## **HISTORY AND ENGLISH MODERATIONS 2008**

## **HISTORY AND ENGLISH PRELIMS 2007-8**

### **Examiners' Reports**

There were 8 candidates. All passed, with average scores in the mid- to upper 60s. There were 3 distinctions awarded.

Of the 8 candidates, 6 were female, and all 3 distinctions were gained by female candidates.

Performance levels were generally good and consistent, with very few cases of slippage in individual runs of marks beneath the 60 grade. Two candidates were substantially raised after re-reads, both to distinction level.

Candidates' choice of papers ranged broadly over the options offered. Three candidates chose British History paper VI, but there were no takers for papers III or VII. Old English Literature attracted 2 candidates, with a majority (5) taking the paper in Victorian Literature. Of the History Optional Subjects, 5 attracted between one and 2 candidates each.

The overall level of performance this year, in each of the two subject areas, was felt by the examiners to be encouragingly high.

J.D. Bradshaw

E.J. Garnett

A.L. Sutherland

M.G.A. Vale (Chair)

# **FINAL HONOUR SCHOOL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2007 – 2008**

## **FHS ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2007-8: CHAIR'S REPORT**

### **Introduction**

I should like to thank the Board of Examiners, the Secretary to the Board, the External Examiners and the Examinations Secretary for their professional expertise, hard work and willing co-operation in bringing this year's FHS to a successful conclusion. I am most grateful for their assistance and advice in steering this highly responsible and onerous operation: the FHS is nothing if not a team exercise for the greater good. I should also like to thank the very many members of the Faculty who were willing, despite many other claims on their time and energies, to act as Assessors: I fear that, at times, generosity was taxed heavily, since the FHS is an extraordinarily labour-intensive and demanding exercise.

### **1. Conventions and Procedures**

Thanks to the careful scrutiny by last year's Chair and Board of Examiners of the various circulars to candidates and tutors, we were able to consolidate and develop their tried and tested work. We prepared a separate *Circular to all Tutors and Candidates taking Course II*, which proved a valuable exercise for the examiners, as well as, it is hoped, the candidates, in setting out as clearly as we could the structure of this complex syllabus and its several modes of examination, some of which are in the process of change.

As in previous years it became clear when the first report of the marks became available that a large number of candidates had satisfied the criteria for possible re-reading as borderline II.i/I candidates (the average of their marks was between 67.5 and 68.5). As before, it was felt that this margin was very broad, and perhaps overgenerous, even allowing that the border between I and II.i is unquestionably important. A very great deal of time was spent in the six days between the first and final marks meeting by the internal examiners re-reading most of these candidates: the time was absurdly tight: the re-reading was undertaken in a spirit of generosity and 'needs must', but if this scale of re-reading is to be undertaken next year, there needs to be more time between the two marks meetings. We followed the lead of last year's examiners in computing the number of 'available' marks (the sum total of the difference between high and low 'raw' marks); we also calculated for these candidates the average of their highest 'raw' marks, and also of their lowest. Re-reading was not undertaken when differences between 'raw' marks had already been resolved in the candidate's favour and there were no other opportunities to raise their marks.

As stated in our *Guide for the Board of Examiners .. (2007-2008)*, we followed the marking conventions and classification criteria established last year, with some adjustment to the duties of the External Examiners, which was intended to lighten their load, and to respond to comments made in the reports of the externals in 2006-7 (see further item below).

### **2. The Role of the External Examiners**

Last year's external examiners urged the Faculty to take more responsibility for determining borderline classifications. This view was strongly endorsed by this year's panel. Not only would the amount of re-reading undertaken by the externals be excessive in the limited time

available, were they to re-read all borderline cases, but they felt that ‘policing’ our borderlines on our behalf, and making our difficult decisions, was not part of their remit, which is to appraise the conduct of the FHS, monitor standards and to offer advice on how we might improve. Accordingly, this year the external examiners re-read candidates’ runs of scripts to get a sense of our best performances and our worst, as well as sampling the wide range of ability within the large II.i class.

The internal examiners thus took full responsibility for determining classifications this year. I think it is fair to say that the re-reading that they undertook, although onerous, was generally felt to have been a worthwhile and illuminating exercise.

### **3. Marking and Classification**

This year’s experience fully endorsed the comments made by last year’s Chair that ‘the scale of our examining is so substantial that we need to acknowledge this and move to a situation where in normal circumstances all colleagues examine every year.’ We are, as she observed, heavily indebted to non-postholders, who have no obligation to mark, but in practice mark the core papers as well as more specialised options. The system would, indeed, collapse without them. The biggest single job which falls to the Chair is asking colleagues to be assessors, as well as allocating the tasks to be performed by members of the Board. This year 90 people (excluding the externals) were involved in marking greater or lesser amounts, hundreds of e-mails were sent and the allocation of setters and markers took the best part of two terms. This is said, not out of self-commiseration, but in the spirit of publicising the scale of the operation among members of the Faculty: this year was probably not exceptional. Members of Faculty need to be aware of the scale of the FHS, to support the undertaking, which is being done on their behalf and on that of their students, and to be tolerant of the Chair’s seemingly endless requests, and occasional misunderstandings. The Chair does not enjoy cold calling on colleagues, or wheedling. These requests should not have to seem like asking personal favours. This said, I am enormously grateful for very generous responses from some.

The task needs to be made easier by supplying the Chair with an up-to-date list of who is on leave and when. This year’s Chair had no such list, and received some dusty answers from colleagues who were on leave, and clearly felt aggrieved on being approached. It would also be helpful to know who is serving on other exam. boards or is otherwise unavailable for examining.

The Chair also relies heavily on the list of members of Faculty’s research and teaching interests, which urgently needs correction and updating. Personal knowledge and word of mouth are only a start.

In sum, we are all under increasing pressure from other commitments, some of which are more highly rewarded, certainly more highly regarded, than examining, and the job of finding examiners and assessors is certainly not getting easier, though some colleagues need to be reminded that examining is a routine and essential professional activity.

The time allowed under current arrangements for scrutiny and processing of the marks after the marking has been completed and before the first marks meeting is very tight indeed, and puts intense pressure on the Examinations Secretary to prepare the report of the marks, as well as on the Chair and Secretary to the Board, who have to check that the marks have been entered correctly, as well as analyse the data. The excellent new arrangements instituted by

last year's Chair help to ensure the smooth running of the marks meeting, but put additional burdens on the Chair and Secretary to the Board to scrutinise borderline cases before the meetings.

#### **4. Examination Schools**

I was in general very favourably impressed by professionalism and humanity of the staff at the Examination Schools, who are uniformly concerned as a team to ensure that a stressful period for the candidates is conducted efficiently, and as kindly as the rules allow. The rules are strict: perhaps there could be a little more leeway for invigilators in the case of candidates who become distressed or unwell during papers: at present they are required to remain in the main examination room with the other candidates if they attempt to continue with the paper, although this can seriously disturb other candidates sitting nearby. I understand that the Schools were investigating the possibility of allowing such candidates to continue in a separate, smaller, room where they will not disturb others, and may, indeed, find it easier to write. I very much hope that this may be possible in the future.

Candidates who leave the exam. room because they are taken ill, or panic, are no longer allowed to continue the same paper in college - it is felt that some have in the past taken advantage of this arrangement (although the advantage does not seem so very great, if the candidate has been properly 'sequestered' without access to books or notes). However, if a candidate is taken ill or is otherwise unable to take a particular paper and does *not* present himself or herself at the Schools, he or she is still permitted to take the paper in college later in the day. These two rules seem to me to be somewhat discordant, and could lead to some perceived or real inequity.

The meetings held before the exams began with the Head of Examinations and the Examinations Officer to discuss procedures and potential problems were very helpful and reassuring. The Chair was present for the first half hour of every exam and for the last half hour of nearly all. I was available for contact by telephone throughout, and setters had also supplied contact numbers in case of queries about mistakes on the paper, or lack of clarity in the rubrics. It is not permitted for the Chair or the setter to answer questions from candidates about the meaning of individual words in the questions: candidates raising such queries are invited to try and work it out from context, or choose another question. Clearly there is an onus on setters not to use terms which candidates cannot reasonably be expected to know. However, this year's queries all concerned moderately hard words, or familiar terms of literary criticism, which the candidates could be expected to have encountered, and they could in most cases be worked out from the context.

The Schools are in the process of instituting an ambitious new system (OSS) of electronic record of students' examinations and assessments across the University. Whereas no doubt this will be of great benefit in the future, there was considerable pressure put on us to convert to the new system at very short notice (a week before the first marks meeting). While I am grateful to the Head of Examinations and Assessments for taking the trouble more than once to meet and explain the new procedures, it did feel as though the new project was being somewhat rushed, and that English, the first major FHS to go through the system, was being asked to be the subject of a relatively untried experiment at a time of the year when it would have been disastrous had anything gone wrong, and where matters were out of our hands.



## **5. Exam Performance**

The reports by individual examiners on the separate papers describe our candidates' performance in some detail; it does not seem useful to generalise overmuch here. One area of concern which does seem more prominent this year than before is that some candidates seem to have a hazy sense of the historical context in which the literature studied was written, and even to be unclear of the chronology of texts written within the span of the core period papers.

Our external examiners in their oral reports also remarked on the continuing tendency of many candidates not to respond to the questions directly, and noted that markers respond in differing ways to irrelevance. Although the growing trend of exam papers to be shorter, and to contain more general questions which can be applied at the candidates' discretion to authors whom they consider relevant is encouraging our students to address questions more directly and thoughtfully, 'dumping' still occurs.

My subsequent remarks under this heading will address some particular areas of concern in specific papers.

### **i. Course I, Paper 1: The English Language**

This is the second time in which this paper has been examined by portfolios submitted by candidates in their second year. The Chair still received a considerable number of enquiries from individual candidates about the interpretation of questions, although I followed the precedent set by last year's Chair in not endorsing particular views. One common source of such queries is anxiety about the overlap between topics in the two sections which is a feature of this paper: scrupulous candidates worry about duplication. It is clear that, while in some respects the candidates as well as members of the Faculty are becoming accustomed to a paper which occupies an unusual position in our current examining system, in other ways problems are either continuing, or becoming increasingly apparent.

The portfolios submitted are unwieldy for the examiners to use and very cumbersome to transport around the University; more seriously, this year's markers expressed considerable disquiet about the amount of work they were being asked to undertake and the time taken, especially compared with the old style Paper 1. In addition to the 5000 words written by the candidates, examiners have also to assimilate each candidate's individual choice of passages for commentary. The markers felt this made the paper considerably more time-consuming to assess than the extended essays done for Papers 7 and 8. Moreover, since this paper is taken by all candidates, the sheer bulk of material to be read by each marker is very considerable. It amounts to around 120 portfolios; by comparison, the most popular of this year's Paper 7 options, Virginia Woolf, was taken by 33 candidates; and the most popular of this year's Paper 8 options, Fiction in English, by 49 and American Literature by 54 candidates. The markers felt that each script took on average 40 minutes to mark, yielding a total of 80 hours work for a half-run. Last year's Chair calculated that the marking of the core papers, 2, 3a, 4, 5, and 6 took around half this time (allowing 20 minutes per script). It might be argued that the Paper 1 markers have more time in which to mark, since the portfolios are done so far in advance of the rest of the FHS, but the load is still heavier, and, in any case, next year's Board, in consultation with the Paper 1 Committee, needs to discuss the timetabling of the marking of this paper. Like Papers 7 and 8, the markers of Paper 1 need to be given a firm deadline (one which they think is reasonable) for submitting their raw and agreed

marks.

The Faculty is invited to consider that Paper 1 markers feel that they are being treated unfairly. Two of this year's markers suggested that the load might be distributed around more than four examiners and assessors. Clearly this would address the situation; equally, it should be borne in mind that the number of members of Faculty (certainly of postholders) available and willing to set and mark this paper is perhaps limited. Having more markers might well mean that they would be called on more often to do the work; additionally they would run the risk of becoming identified as specialists, who might not be offered the variety of exam subject marking that they might otherwise have. Medievalists in particular might resent this. No easy solution presents itself.

One problem that was not foreseen when Paper 1 was instituted in its new form is that candidates might, for various reasons, not complete two essays, but only one. If this has occurred for medical reasons, the candidate's college needs to seek dispensation from the Proctors. This raises the problem of how to penalise short weight in this paper when this has occurred without good reason. For this year we adopted the solution of deducting 16 marks, by analogy with the Faculty's conventions of deducting 8 marks for each essay not completed in a four essay paper. However, this question needs more considered thought. Would the Faculty be satisfied, for example, in the case of such a candidate who might submit first class work for one essay, but nothing for the other? Especially when markers are being encouraged to use the full run of marks available in the first class, such a candidate might well end up with a high II.i mark for this paper, which might be felt to be over generous in the circumstances.

It follows from this that candidates penalised for submitting only one essay might well appeal, claiming that they had submitted two, but that part of their work had been lost. At present we have no way of determining the truth of any such claims. The Examination Schools staff give the candidates a general receipt for their portfolios, and do not see it as part of their duties to check that two pieces of work have been submitted. The work is submitted more than a year before they are classified, at which point it is impossible to trace any missing essays. Because of the current timetable, the portfolios do not get checked for any missing work for around three months. Second year portfolios are handed in just at the point when the Examinations Secretary and the Board of Examiners are fully occupied with the FHS in the year above. Of course, I am not doubting the veracity of all candidates - work can go astray despite the best human endeavours - but, if we go back to candidates after such an interval to ask about missing work the markers can have no assurance that a candidate might not have used the intervening time to revise and improve their work (and thus enjoy an unfair advantage). This is something the Faculty needs to consider as a matter of some urgency. One, admittedly partial, solution might be to issue next year's candidates (along with the circular and checklist that they currently receive) a checklist which they have to sign and submit along with their declaration that their work is independent.

This year's Board was also alerted to the possibility that candidates might repeat substantial portions of their Paper 1 work in subsequent papers (especially Papers 7 and 8). Candidates are permitted to write about the same authors on Paper 1 as on other papers, because it is felt that the tasks required for Paper 1 are substantially different, but this is a separate matter from repeating sections of their essays. Candidates should be aware that this incurs a penalty (as does repetition of work in Papers 7 and 8).

## **ii. Papers 4, 5, 6**

It would be helpful if the period groups could check the boundaries of the core period papers to see if there are any changes on inclusion of writers who straddle the boundaries? We need to ensure that advice in the handbook tallies with the circulars to candidates.

## **iii. Papers 7, 8 and Optional Theses**

In general, the administration of the extended essays went well. Markers do, however, need to keep to the agreed timetable for submitting their raw and agreed marks, and they need to return *all* of the material which they have been sent at the same time (this means scripts, as well as mark sheets and comment sheets). If the marks come in later, on the view that they don't need to be done until the rest of the Schools marking, this causes very considerable administrative problems. If all marks came in at once, the first marks meeting would have to be delayed, because of the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed. Moreover, delay in marking the extended essays seriously inconveniences co-markers, who are anxious to agree marks and finish the job.

We had some problems this year when candidates submitted their proposed titles for their Paper 8 essays because of some lack of clarity on the candidates' part (and perhaps some tutors) about what constituted a permissible topic. Candidates should carefully read the instructions given in the *English Undergraduate Handbook: Schools Edition*. Several candidates proposed to write on only a single poet for 8 (d), 'Poetry in English', and others offered to write extensively on material translated into English. The rules on the quantity of translated material which may be included are not very clearly expressed and can be overlooked: in the *Handbook* (2007), they are covered in an Annexe, rather than in the main text, and in two different places (Annexe Two, points 5 and 8); moreover, the rules for candidates taking English sole and the Joint School with Modern Languages are slightly different: candidates for English may offer up to one third of their extended essay on translated texts, whereas EML candidates may offer up to one half. Since the inclusion of translated material is a recurrent point at issue, it would be helpful if the rules could be looked at again, and perhaps displayed more prominently in the *Handbook*.

Titles for the syndicated option on film theory have to be submitted before candidates have seen all the material. This did generate a number of queries from candidates requesting a change of title.

## **iv. Course II**

Course II, as it currently stands, is a labyrinthine syllabus, with twenty-four options to choose, some of which are open to candidates doing Course I, as well as the joint schools. There were nine Course II candidates this year, and Course I candidates, as well as joint schools, took papers in languages other than English. The majority of the B papers had at least one taker (11 of them were only taken by one candidate). Twenty-one Course II papers were set, including the five compulsory core A papers. Twenty different people, both members of the Board and assessors, were involved in the setting and marking. It is, of course, very good news that we are able to offer such a diversity, and that candidates are interested in taking these options up - it may be felt that, however few in number, we are offering a facility to our candidates, which is not widely available elsewhere and is accordingly sufficiently valuable to justify the labour involved. Or it may be judged

excessive. This is a discussion which the Faculty should be encouraged to have in other fora. Both papers in Medieval Welsh were taken, as well as Old Irish, two of the three medieval French papers, Gothic and Old High German. Although we have Faculty members who can assist with some of these, we are very dependent for the setting and marking on the goodwill and generosity of members of other Faculties. Expertise in some of these subjects is now in very short supply, and it is extremely difficult to find second markers, let alone third markers, should they be needed.

It would be helpful if the medievalists teaching Course II could report to the Chair, via the Examinations Secretary, when they are aware that candidates will be taking minority options so that arrangements for setting and marking can be made in good time.

## **6. Medical Cases**

For the first time confidential minutes (without names recorded) were taken of the business of the Medical and Special Cases Committee. Because this has traditionally not been done, the Chair has little guidance from precedents and no sense of inherited wisdom, although the intention must be, so far as is possible, to treat affected candidates with parity. (Last year's Chair also expressed the lack of record). It is hoped that the taking of minutes will assist future Chairs and their committees in their deliberations. I also compiled an inventory of such guidance as we have from diverse sources (previous Chair's reports, the Proctors' *Notes for the Guidance of Examiners and Chairmen of Examiners*, the *Examination Regulations* and correspondence with the Head of Academic Policy Support, EPSC). When all put together in this way, it becomes apparent that there is the risk of some conflicting advice. Thus, the convention noted in Chairs' reports that, where candidates have missed a paper, in each case with proper medical documentation, that paper is awarded the Honours pass mark of 40, seems to be at odds with instructions given in the *Examination Regulations* (current edition, pp. 32-33), Section 11.7(1) which says that if a candidate has submitted enough work to allow us to determine his or her class, we can award the class the performance merits, rather than inventing marks for non-existent papers

## **7. Dyslexia and Dyspraxia**

Last year's Chair, and the external examiners, drew the Faculty's attention to the difficulty in knowing how to deal with candidates diagnosed with dyslexia or dyspraxia. Under current rules the instruction to examiners is that they should not make any adjustment to the mark for the work itself, but should note the dyslexia/dyspraxia and refer it to the examining board for later discussion. It is not clear whether this means that the discussion should take place in the deliberations of the examining board or be referred to the medical cases sub-committee. We took the view this year that they should be considered by the sub-committee, since this group was in general assessing whether adjustment of marks would be appropriate because of individual circumstances. But the referral to the sub-committee is emphatically not meant to assume a view of dyslexia/dyspraxia as a medical condition. Additionally, the judgement which the sub-committee (and by extension the board of examiners as a whole) is being invited to make relates to a developmental difficulty about which they may have little professional knowledge or expertise. English is the first subject to have drawn this to the attention of EPSC, which is considering the matter as it affects all subjects, not just English, but, pending their decision, this year's board followed last year's conventions.

This year notification of dyslexic candidates to the Chair was again somewhat haphazard: I

was informed by the Proctors of severe cases for whom significant allowance had been made and late referrals; others only became apparent from the examiners' mark sheets, where the candidates' cover sheets had alerted them to a dyslexic candidate. Lists of certified dyslexia and dyspraxia cases are still not routinely passed on to the Chair of FHS after Moderations.

## **8. 'Gender Gap'**

Our results show a slight preponderance of first class marks going to men rather than women; all papers are affected by it, apart, this year, from Paper 1 and Paper 3(b). There seems to be no discernible pattern in the statistics, which concern exam papers as well as extended essays. Paper 6, which has caused concern in the past, was no worse affected than the other core papers. We continued the practice of varying the last paper on the Schools timetable, in case this has a bearing on results. The gender studies group continues to monitor our performance.

## **9. Prize Winners**

Gibbs prizes were awarded as follows:

- a) best optional thesis, Maria Del Mar Galindo, Christ Church
- b) best extended essay in Course I, Paper 7, Annie McDermott, Somerville
- c) best extended essay in Course I, Paper 8, Kirsty F. Stanfield, Mansfield
- d) best extended essay in Course II, Gemma Fay Skevington, Mansfield
- e) best overall performance, Course I, Adam Gyngell, Magdalen
- f) best overall performance, Course II, James P. Wright, Trinity

The Charles Oldham Prize for best performance in Paper 2, Shakespeare, was awarded to Maria Del Mar Galindo, Christ Church

H. L. Spencer

## EXAMINERS' REPORTS

### COURSE I

#### **Paper 1: The English Language (paper taken in TT2007 by 2008 finalists)**

There was a lot of excellent work on this paper, both on Section A and Section B. Popular topics on Section A were standardization and World English, although most questions were in fact done. The best answers were tightly substantiated, closely referenced, and displayed a real engagement with the topic chosen. Essays, and interpretations of the questions, could be noticeably individual, and there was little sense of the rote learning which could hamper achievement in the older exam format. While this paper in its new portfolio format is undoubtedly much more time-consuming to mark, it is also often very refreshing in terms of the context and originality of many answers. Section B answers likewise demonstrated a good range, with some inspired selections of passages. Candidates who were willing to engage with the questions set, and especially with the requirement to discuss the linguistic choices or language strategies deployed within the texts selected, tended to do markedly better. Weaker candidates could content themselves with a generalised and often vaguely descriptive account of the texts, with little evidence of secondary reading or analytical endeavour. The weakest seem to regard the passages as simply exercises in critical commentary or for the display of native wit, unhampered by theoretical insights or formal study. Commentaries on literary discourse and journalism alike suffered markedly from this problem. The majority of candidates, however, performed adequately or really well on this section, and were happy to extend their discussion outside matters of lexis alone (the favoured territory of the weaker candidates). There was a good spread of method and technique, suggesting that teaching methods vary but in clearly productive ways. The commentaries could often show candidates at their best, handling comments on style and language with precision, and supporting their comments with close reference to both primary and secondary reading.

Technical problems continued to hamper certain candidates. While all candidates were issued with a checklist for submission, which resulted in fewer candidates than was previously the case forgetting to include the passages they had decided to comment on, there were still conspicuous weaknesses in terms of presentation. Weaker candidates often decided to abandon footnotes and a bibliography altogether; problems of time management or simple carelessness led to a series of papers where both footnotes and bibliography were incomplete or inconsistent. Proof-reading could likewise be neglected, and the number of candidates who neglected to number lines (in their commentary passages) and pages (in their Section A and B submissions) proved a particular bete noire for the examiners this year. The failure to identify the texts selected for comment (and at times even the question being answered) also proved problematic; for some candidates, it was unclear what the premise of their argument was with reference to the passages they had provided. Candidates should ideally explain at the start of the commentary what their texts are, why they have chosen them, and how they think they are answering the question. Too often the examiner has to thrash back and forth, turning the pages over and looking for information the candidate seems determined to withhold.

It was pleasing to see the wide range of sources which candidates were happy to use. Electronic corpora featured highly, with often illuminating use being made of LION and the OED Online to examine the usage of words and meanings at particular points in time; many

did well with topicaliser.com and with the BNC portal (though a few candidates mistakenly used BNC evidence to evaluate pre-twentieth century usage).

Overall, this paper in its new format seems to be working well. There is clearly a willingness to engage with a far wider range of sources and approaches, and to provide clear and detailed essays which, at their best, fully demonstrate the strategic importance of language, and language choices, in the mobilisation of particular meanings or ideologies.

### **Paper 2: Shakespeare**

The standard seemed higher than in recent years. The paper elicited many essays of considerable sophistication, and even run-of-the-mill work was thoroughly versed in things like mixed genres, inconclusive endings, and rhetorical display. Many students showed a good awareness of textual/bibliographical studies, although it would be nice to see treatments that seek beyond the well-trying cases of Hamlet Q1/Q2/F and Lear Q/F, not only rehearsing differences but exploring why textual variations *\*matter\** - what might be at stake for play, character, dramatic moment, or indeed the playing company.. Last year's report reminded candidates that Shakespeare criticism has moved on since the eras of Bradley and Tillyard, and although these old stalwarts made occasional weary reappearances, there was a conscientious effort to describe and employ contemporary critical approaches: one of the most frequently cited critical texts, by a pair of local authors, was published late last year.

The present vogue for a historicist approach produced much finely-documented work on the English and Roman history plays. Candidates in general wrote less well about the tragedies, and few of those who tackled the Auden quotation bothered to think about the claim it made. The question about romance was also seldom properly answered, because candidates seemed not to know about the genre and could not comment on the way Shakespeare takes a narrative form and makes it work as drama. Work on the comedies is still largely stalled in the stale critical diatribes of the 1980s, with very many more or less indistinguishable essays on the plight of female cross-dressers and much 'othering' of Shylock and similar outcasts. An initially interesting argument about the Christianising of Plautus in 'The Comedy of Errors' lost its lustre when it turned up, very similarly phrased, a dozen or more times. The poems were exceptionally popular, and the question about Ovid had many takers who used it to sound off about sexual violence in 'The Rape of Lucrece'; few of those who wrote about the sonnets paid much attention to the terms of Kott's quotation.

Some of the finest essays attempted a general over-view of Shakespeare's achievement or his interests, making ingenious use of the Jespersen quotation about language. The history of Shakespeare's reputation also produced a good deal of first-class work. Theatrical history was extensively cited, with the opinions of directors and actors featuring almost as often as those of literary critics. Oddly, there was little outstanding work on filmed adaptations of the plays: too much of the writing on this was content to be merely descriptive, though the best answers did have a sense of the relevant cultural and political contexts that influenced the treatment of the plays by Kozintsev or Kurosawa or Olivier. One candidate only answered the final question on the paper, about Shakespeare and contemporary dramatists: the regulations demand that such a question must always be included, but it seldom has takers and the rules should perhaps be rethought.

### Paper 3a: English Literature 1100-1509

Overall, the standard of work on this paper was encouraging. At the top end of the school, scripts were critically sophisticated, attentive to precise textual detail, and showed tenacious argument. There was some lively attention to critical debate and recent critical issues. Having fewer questions with fewer named authors resulted in improved overall range, engagement, and quality.

Early Middle English was chiefly represented by *Ancrene Wisse* and related texts, early romances, and the *The Owl and the Nightingale*, though there were also some answers on *Lazamon* and early lyrics. The works of the *Gawain*-poet and Chaucer were understandably popular but candidates opted for a wide range of questions (not just those that named the authors) to write on these texts with the result that answers were seldom predictable. Writing on devotional literature was generally well-informed: while the most popular choices were Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, answers on these writers were also often supported with material from the *Cloud* author, Rolle, Hilton and continental writing. Some essays, devoted only to Kempe, lacked precise purchase on the book and/or bypassed its important critical debates. Answers on Hoccleve were also popular and often especially supple and agile, as were those on Henryson, Dunbar and other fifteenth-century writers, including Lydgate. There were some excellent answers on romances, *Piers Plowman*, and Gower; the last only a handful, but of very high quality.

There was very little evidence of sketchy work, or scripts where candidates had only cursory knowledge of the subject. Where answers were adjudged below a 2:1 mark, this was generally because they failed to address the terms of the question rather than because the quality of the answer was poor in substance. While there was some sprightly and scholarly writing on Chaucer's dream visions and sources, for instance, there was clear evidence of recycling either a term essay, or a question from a past paper, or (rather Chaucerianly) addressing a question on dream vision in general that did not exist. Candidates writing on drama often fell victim to the temptation to write down all that they knew without sufficiently taking stock of the precise terms of the question. That said, there were some excellent answers both on mystery and morality plays, often in response to questions that did not explicitly invite answers on theatre.

While there was good evidence of engagement with texts in Middle English with some very deft analysis and close reading, one work conspicuous in fostering weak responses which often did little more than summarise critical history or recycle argument in the most generalised way, was *The Owl and the Nightingale*. While there was some spirited work on this poem, especially when placed alongside other debate poetry or Henryson, there was also a steady stream of answers which showed very clearly that the poem had been read only cursorily in translation. This is not to suggest that one cannot write very well indeed on this poem on this paper, but it needs to be studied in the same depth as other works not so readily available in a translation. Candidates are reminded that a knowledge of texts in the original Middle English (rather than translation) is expected and, indeed, rewarded. This applies across the board; while the *Owl* stood out on this issue, it was by no means the only work which some candidates had clearly read only in translation.

The quality of writing across the paper was mixed. It is not accidental that scripts which were awarded the highest marks were those in which the prose was fluent and articulate because its syntax was reasoned. Answers which consisted of a series of declarative statements held together by dashes inevitably presented a poor argument. It is not necessary



to write reams on this paper to secure the highest marks, but it is necessary to write precisely and cogently.

### **Paper 3b: English Literature 1100-1509**

The general standard was very good, and we placed almost one fifth of the candidates in the first class. This was partly because of the almost universal competence with which candidates identified the passages they wrote on, and their context. There was a gratifying spread of work across the five optional texts, though relatively few wrote on the Chaucer Proem passage, and its mythological context was sometimes poorly understood. *Pearl* was the optional text the most commonly though generally the least interestingly done. Commentary on the language was a bit thin, beyond some rather routine observations about stanza-form and metre, and particularly on rhetorical terms ('anaphora' was very commonly used as a synonym for verbal repetition of any kind). By contrast, some candidates applied a dazzling array of pretty arcane terms, but at the same time seemed to misunderstand the basic meaning of some parts of some texts (students might be reminded that explanatory interpretation can be a legitimate part of a commentary exercise such as this one). Those who wrote on the first *Troilus* passage, for instance, commonly claimed that the adjective "thriftiest" referred to either Troilus or Criseyde, when in fact it refers to neither. Closer attention to the meaning of individual words (including "thriftiest", for example) would be good (nobody commented on the strange word 'jo' in the second *Troilus* passage). On the other hand, analysis of the syntax of the Chaucer passages, and of the vocabulary of Henryson, was very impressive in some cases. This paper is evidently working very well. There were hardly any mini essays on the set texts; the great majority of candidates clearly engaged with the extracts in a fresh, informed and dynamic way, and there were some illuminating and stylish pieces of commentary. [We wonder, though, if it is time to vary some of the texts, especially *Pearl*; or perhaps *Ancrene Wisse* might be replaced by *The Owl* and *the Nightingale*].

### **Paper 4: English Literature 1509-1642**

The overall standard of work on this paper was very pleasing – better than last year on the whole. In the middle of the school there was a lot of competent, engaged writing and at the upper end some really creative, imaginative work showing an impressive breadth and depth of reference and reading. It was a pleasure to award a significant number of first-class marks and a generous number in the upper 2.1 division. Marks in the 2.2 range were invariably awarded for answers that were irrelevant or poorly structured: some candidates continued to neglect or avoid the terms of the question. Candidates should always take care in reading and selecting questions – sometimes good answers received lower marks because the answer provided would have suited another question much better. There appeared to be less 'downloading' of prepared work – a lot of answers were fresh and lively and genuinely addressed the terms of the questions.

The number of general questions (23/30) which invited candidates to write on any author/authors of their choice elicited some very good work. Candidates responded with inventive juxtapositions, ranging across the period and bringing together different genres as well as different writers. It was good to see candidates writing about less familiar texts: for example, *The Yorkshire Tragedy* and *The Island Princess*. The most popular questions were: Q5 (subversive rhetoric); Q11 (personal identity); Q15 (order/disorder), and Q30 (a choice of quotations) – all of which required the candidates to make their own choices of texts and writers. The questions specifically on Marlowe and Donne were popular but these writers

were also used across the paper. It was good to see candidates writing on Marlowe's *Amores* and *The Massacre at Paris* and Donne's *Satires* as well as more familiar material. Although Thomas More's writing (invariably *Utopia* but also sometimes *Richard III*, and occasionally the *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* and one or two of the controversial writings) was used in a variety of questions, responses tended to be unimaginative, with candidates all saying pretty much the same things. A lot of people wrote on Herbert and these answers were not, on the whole, generally quite as good as in some previous years. They often suffered from limited theological understanding, restricted range of poems and lack of clarity about form. There were some good answers on Masques and one or two on sermons. Only Q25 wasn't attempted by anyone: it asked for a comparison of the use of Greek and Roman mythology in Kyd, Lyly and Marlowe. In Q8 and Q28, no-one attempted the (b) options; in Q1 no-one offered to write on the pairing of 'libertinism' and 'fear of damnation'.

#### **Paper 4a English Literature from 1832 to 1900**

There were seven candidates this year. Many focussed on the same questions, with question 10 attracting four answers, questions 5 and 22, three each, and question 17, two. The standard was generally high. Pleasingly, the range of authors chosen and the approach to the questions appeared to reflect the differing interests and emphasis encouraged by the joint schools.

#### **Paper 4b English Literature from 1900 to the Present Day**

Essays addressed a wide range of themes and topics – almost every question on the paper was attempted – including Modernist undecidability, the Modernist politics of impersonality, the role of the city, modern reinventions of the novel and postmodern rewritings, gender politics, confessional poetry, Empire and postcolonial fiction. The most impressive scripts not only presented a wide range of textual material, but used it to develop the argument; in the less impressive, the references to texts tended to confirm repeatedly an argument that was announced at the outset. The best candidates were aware of the importance of form and style in texts in this period, and read these in the light of material and historical contexts. Several of the successful candidates made swift passing reference to literary theory and literary critics to clarify their arguments.

#### **Paper 5: English Literature 1642-1740**

Although there were some scripts which showed evidence of hard reading and hard thinking, the overall impression created by this year's scripts is one of incipient crisis. The most alarming feature of the scripts was what they revealed about the weakness as readers of all but the very best of our students. This showed itself in two ways: first, the inability of many of this year's candidates to read and make sense of the quotations incorporated in some of this year's questions, and second, in the scarcity of intense literary analysis in the essays of, not just the weakest candidates, but even of those who found themselves comparatively high up the class list.

In general this year's candidates also showed too little awareness or understanding of genre. Some candidates referred to Swift and Bunyan as novelists; others wrote on *The Dunciad* and *Rape of the Lock* without thinking about mock-epic, even if they were aware of the existence of heroic couplets; most people who wrote on *Paradise Lost* as epic knew nothing about the epic tradition; the 'country house poem genre' was regularly invoked without anyone seeming to have much sense of what it might be (even though they were usually writing about how Marvell *re-made* it). This in turn affected many candidates' faltering awareness of issues such as neo-classicism, ancients vs. moderns, and Augustanism.

Without understanding genres, conventions and how they relate to expectations of style and subject-matter, many candidates were unable to answer many of the questions on the paper with subtlety or indeed comprehension. Chronology was often very confused, with people suggesting that (say) Milton and Swift were contemporaries, or that *The Rambler* and *The Idler* antedated *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*.

One might have hoped that, if attention had been distracted from textual detail, there might be some compensating richness of contextual insight. If so, one would again have been disappointed in this year's scripts. Extraordinary historical errors abounded. Intellectual context consisted usually of only a few names, and the descriptive comments occasionally tagged to the names usually revealed shocking misunderstandings. In too many cases, essays which embarked on explorations of intellectual context gave the examiner no reason to believe that the candidate had read a single word of the author in question (this was particularly true of those who decided, rashly, to write at length about Hobbes).

If similar failings were observed in scripts written on the other period papers, this is perhaps something that should be taken into consideration by the syllabus committee. In the meantime, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the design of our present syllabus has (perhaps over many years, and probably with innocent intentions) encouraged students increasingly to neglect the basic skills required to study English literature, and to feign the possession of an improbable degree of intellectual sophistication.

The perennial problem of prepared essays being offered notwithstanding the terms of the question recurred this year, although an aggravating feature was that often there was a question on the paper to which what was offered would have been a perfectly good answer, if only the candidate had had the wit to spot it. This was another illustration of the inability of many candidates to read and understand the question paper.

The usual authors predominated: Rochester, Behn, Defoe, Swift, Pope, Etherege, Milton, Marvell, Wycherley. It was good to see some answers on Aubrey and Walton. The comparative fewness of answers on Dryden is puzzling and disappointing.

A number of candidates referred to this paper as the 'Restoration' paper, suggesting that its centre of gravity is now thought to be in the seventeenth century. Certainly there were very few answers on literature after *Gulliver's Travels* (apart from *The Dunciad*, although even there it was usually not clear if the candidate was referring to the poem of 1728, of 1729, or of 1743). If Paper 6 is treated by our undergraduates as being really a Romantics paper, there is a danger that the middle of the eighteenth century will become a desert.

#### **Paper 6: English Literature 1740-1830**

There were 242 candidates of whom 12 were English & Modern Languages, 4 were History & English, and 3 were Classics and English. The standard of work was very varied. The best scripts showed a real understanding of the period, together with an ability to write thoughtfully in response to the questions, developing arguments that were at once detailed, penetrating and full of literary insight. There was some very impressive work on challenging topics, which the stronger candidates had obviously relished – their personal engagement with the literature of the period gave their work a liveliness and acuity that set their essays apart from the merely conscientious. The least successful scripts, in contrast, tended to be very narrow in range, sometimes referring to as few as three short texts, and often displaying an alarming vagueness and absence of argument. Such scripts suggested

the work of candidates who had simply not managed to do enough work on the paper – whether for personal reasons or perhaps because of competing pressures in the term when they had studied Paper 6. Between the extremes were a large number of very competent scripts, which demonstrated a great deal of hard work and impressive knowledge of biographical, political, literary or critical contexts, but were not always successful in making the literary analysis of the primary material sufficiently central to the argument, nor in presenting as wide a range of reference to the primary texts as those in evidence in the best essays.

Paper 6 elicited a good variety of responses. Every question on the paper was attempted by at least one candidate; several questions inspired answers on different topics and authors. Although many candidates chose to answer questions with reference to a single author, these included a large range – Sterne, Johnson, Smollett, Fielding, Richardson, Smart, Sheridan, Blake, Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Keats, Byron, Peacock, Shelley, Mary Shelley, Austen, De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Clare. There were also a number of standard pairs, including Gray and Collins, Goldsmith and Crabbe, Sheridan and Goldsmith, Lennox and Austen, Burney and Austen, Burke and Paine, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Walpole and Mary Shelley, De Quincey and Hogg, Equiano and Prince, Hays and Barbauld. Less familiar pairings (such as Johnson and Blake, or Sterne and De Quincey), offered to explore contrast rather than to suggest similarity, sometimes produced more interesting essays. There were also discussions of texts by Akenside, Blair, Young, Bowles, Colman, Cleland, Inchbald, Gibbon, Macaulay (Catharine), Cowper, Burns, Warton, Macpherson, Mackenzie, Price, More, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Radcliffe, Beckford, Lewis, Boswell, Southey, Edgeworth, Robinson, Williams, Yearsley, Haydon, Lamb, Landon, and Smith. Some candidates demonstrated a wide knowledge of the period and gave every indication of having chosen their material in order to answer the question as fully as possible, often including examples from less well known texts as well as an excellent grasp of major authors. Others were more inclined to select the question that could most easily be made to seem relevant to what they wanted to write. Despite a general willingness to choose questions that required some ingenuity in response, there were many candidates who seemed to overlook some parts of the question, preferring to latch onto a single word as justification for writing out a carefully prepared essay, or who simply forgot about the question almost as soon as they began. Those who had evidently thought about the questions and wrote imaginatively and intelligently in response to them produced the most convincing answers.

## **Paper 7**

### **(a) (i) The *Beowulf* Poet**

There were 4 candidates for this paper with three marks being awarded in the first class and one in the 2:1 class.

### **(a) (ii) Alfred**

There were two candidates for this paper.

### **(a) (iii) The Exeter Book**

There were two candidates for this paper.

### **(b) (i) Chaucer**

3 candidates sat the paper. Answers were competently handled, with marks being awarded in the 2:1 class.

**(b) (ii) Langland**

There were four candidates for this paper and all of the work was of a very good standard, with one first class essay. All of the work showed serious engagement with this difficult poem. There was very well-informed work on the poem's wrestling with social and theological issues and also astute writing on Langland's poetics. Candidates were also clearly aware of the importance of the different versions of the poem.

**(b) (iii) N-town**

There were no candidates for this paper.

**(c) (i) Spenser**

This paper was done well; all the essays were characterised by an impressive range of reference across Spenser's works, and an attentive yet independent application of recent critical approaches to Spenser.

**(c) (ii) Milton**

There were ten candidates for this option, seven of whom ended up with marks in the first class. There were takers for each of the themes with the exception of the first two. The best essays covered a good range of Milton's works and demonstrated some helpful contextual knowledge (Biblical and theological, historical, musical, rhetorical). There was some impressive work on the Restoration Milton and good knowledge of Milton's text. The essays were on the whole enthusiastic and nicely argued and some had very long and impressive bibliographies. However, even the stronger candidates were not always attentive to the generic and contextual demands of Milton's writings, unproblematically reading the divorce tracts or *Prolusions* alongside *Paradise Lost*. This lack of sophistication was surprising, and prevented some candidates from doing justice to their industry and ideas.

**(c) (iii) Jonson**

Many of the essays showed an admirable range, working with materials well outside the most familiar dramatic works by Jonson, and covering all his genres. This breadth of range, however, led some essays to run into problems of coherence or a lack of substantial or in-depth treatment of particular works or an evasion of generic questions. The best essays commented with authority on Jonson's engagement with the classical literary tradition as well as contemporary contexts such as early modern print culture, textual transmission, literary intertext, and politics, and were able to give close attention to language as well. They also showed good command of the critical literature. Weaker essays mechanically applied critical approaches (Bakhtin, Greenblatt) without adequate self-reflection, or failed to establish relevance to the chosen theme. In terms of presentations, all essays were fine; though several would have benefited from being divided into sections.

**(d) (i) Marvell**

The Marvell option continues to attract well-informed and enthused candidates. This year there were four candidates for the option and their work produced strong close readings on the lyrics and also some sharp critical interplay between Marvell's lyric and satiric verse. The strongest essays showed originality, range in primary works, and depth, using Marvell's language closely; the weakest essays suffered from poor organization or lack of development of key ideas. Essays seeking to 'decide' Marvell's political allegiance fell flat as they needed to show more than coverage of the main lines of critical opinion.

**(d) (ii) Dryden**

The essays submitted for this option were all securely in the upper second class. Candidates showed themselves to be at least competent in addressing questions of historical context, and occasionally considered the wider literary culture of Dryden's time with first-class insight. Close attention to Dryden's language, however, was less in evidence, and it is surprising in this regard that the completion of the Hammond / Hopkins annotated Dryden seems to have had very little impact on the way our undergraduates read this poet. A clear argumentative structure was missing from some submissions: candidates need to avoid stitching tutorial essays together.

**(d) (iii) Eliza Haywood**

There was one candidate for this paper.

**(e) (i) Wordsworth**

Nine candidates chose Wordsworth as a Special Author and all appeared to have relished the challenge. The choice of theme and its treatment was very varied, with essays ranging from consideration of Wordsworth's philosophical and poetic aspirations to his regionalism, politics and comedy. Although there was impressive analysis of *The Prelude* and *Lyrical Ballads*, essays also focused on the *Salisbury Plain Poems* and *The Borderers*, *Peter Bell* and *The Ruined Cottage* as well as later lyrics and *The Excursion*. The better essays (which were in a pleasing majority) demonstrated impressive close readings and sophisticated critical awareness within a carefully controlled argument. Knowledge of the relevant scholarship was also in evidence. Overall, these essays represented imaginative, adventurous work which was a pleasure to read.

**(e) (ii) Austen**

A popular option, to judge from the number of candidates, but a distinctly mixed bag of essays: a few first-class essays (but no very high first-class marks), and a great deal of routine, dull work huddling around the upper-reaches of the lower second class.

The best essays showed wide reading in primary and secondary material, and without exception maintained a clear literary focus (a snare for the weaker candidates was the lure of merely retailing opinion about Austen's various recent visual incarnations). The very best essays incorporated subtle, acute close reading of Austen's prose. Even amongst the best essays, however, there was little sense of intellectual adventure.

The weaker essays engaged in debates which they did not understand, often exhibiting poor presentation and weak powers of argument and organisation. Their awareness of secondary literature was often very out of date. Perhaps some of the teaching we offer for this option is stale or not well-focused? It was good that so many candidates had been encouraged to look at the juvenilia, but it was clear that many of those who did so had no very good understanding of why it might be interesting or valuable to engage in study of such works. It was also striking that the Cambridge edition of Jane Austen seems to have exerted no influence over these essays, and this may be because candidates had not been directed towards it and had not benefited from an explanation of the advances it represents.

**(e) (iii) Byron**

There were seven candidates for Byron. Most of the essays were ambitious in scope and tackled a considerable range of Byron's poetry. Some candidates pursued Byron's politics,

others his adoption of roles, his impact on contemporaries, his choice of poetic form, his fascination with the real and ideal, and his inherent inconsistencies. At times, parades of critical opinion tended to overwhelm the voice of the candidate, but the better essays succeeded in presenting original, sophisticated insights from a well-informed position. Not all essays seemed alert to Byron's irony and wit, and so gave the impression of diligent competence rather than sparkling brilliance. Some of the essays responded very cleverly to the title and developed arguments that suggested really enthusiastic engagement with Byron's work.

**(f) (i) Tennyson**

There were 7 candidates and the work was rather various in quality. Three essays were awarded first-class marks, one of them a very strong first-class mark. Two essays were awarded 2.2 marks. The best work was lucid, well-informed, critically sophisticated, and subtly based in textual detail. The weak answers were irrelevant (stock essays which neglected the terms of the themes) and curiously blunt in their reading of particular poems

**(f) (ii) Dickens**

There were 12 candidates and the work was on the whole very competent. Three essays were awarded first-class marks; none fell below 60. Compared with previous years there were welcome signs of a willingness to discuss Dickens's novels as works of art rather than mere receptacles for 'views'. That said, there is still scope for a greater responsiveness to the texture, structure and tone of prose fiction. The best essays dealt learnedly with such matters as Dickens's revisions of his early work, the use of immediately topical allusion (Bleak House as the anti-type of the Crystal Palace, for example), and dramatic adaptations of these non-theatrical texts, without ever losing a sense of how the novels work as novels.

**(f) (iii) Wilde**

There were eighteen candidates for this option. Biographical interpretations of the texts were not much in evidence this year, and where these appeared, they were generally introduced alongside a sophisticated consideration of Wilde's intellectual context and engagements with form. The best essays displayed knowledge of the whole oeuvre as well as of the evolving aspects of Wilde's work. The weaker essays tended to be more limited in the range of texts discussed, or else to settle for a series of points rather than develop a sustained and coherent argument. Overall, the quality of the essays submitted for this paper was very high indeed.

**(g) (i) Conrad**

Seventeen candidates took this paper. Overall the work was solid rather than distinguished. The stronger candidates were able to demonstrate a wide-range of knowledge across Conrad's oeuvre and use diverse sources (letters, essays, short stories, novels, prefaces, etc.) with skill and critical sophistication. Unlike the weaker candidates, who tended to focus on a predictable selection of themes and to restrict themselves to elementary forms of character analysis, the candidates at the top of the range were also able to address the formal challenges of Conrad's methods and consider how these complicate his preoccupations and/or his relations to his immediate historical context. All but questions 1, 7 and 8 were attempted.

**(g) (ii) Yeats**

Students chose topics chiefly related to Yeats' symbolism and aesthetic interests. For the most part, these essays offered fairly conventional responses; occasionally, a candidate was

able to extend the scope of their essay to include Yeats' efforts to aestheticize history and politics. Too much time was spent with the Maud Gonne poems rather than extending the topic out towards Yeats' narrative poems, (except *The Wanderings of Oisín*) or even his drama. Except for one or two candidates, little attention was given to the French tradition of symbolism.

Candidates who answered on topics related to history or politics often did so in a rather pedestrian manner; there was often little integration of literary concerns and the essays read as a series of summaries of Yeats' interface with historical and social contexts.

Of the 21 essays submitted, most fell within the mid to high 2.1 mark range; 3-4 candidates achieved first class marks. Only attempted to respond to the topic of Yeats' drama. The best essays were those that managed to thread literary analysis through less hackneyed themes (i.e. not Yeatsian mythology or symbolism, or Irish politics).

### **(g) (iii) Woolf**

Thirty four candidates took the paper. Q10 proved the most popular theme (11 candidates), with Q5 being next (9 candidates); no candidate used Q2, Q3, or Q8. The best scripts were characterised by the ambitious exploration of larger ideas about literary representation and Woolf's relation to it, and made their points by detailed reference to a wide range of her texts. A very few made reference to manuscript materials, and many made relevant and apparently independent reference to the diaries and letters. Many scripts of middling quality identified relevant binaries and accumulated relevant evidence of their presence in Woolf's works, but did not ask sufficiently searching questions of them.

The weakest scripts either did not have an argument to present, or did not know how to make its structure readily apparent. Several candidates did not know when to make paragraph divisions, or how to begin paragraphs with appropriate topic sentences. Given that Woolf criticism for the last twenty-five to thirty years has been dominated by questions of gender, power, and language, treated from various critical perspectives, it was surprising to find several candidates writing essentially formalist appraisals of Woolf as an experimental novelist. The best of these were very good, and showed an admirable independence, but could have been proved significantly by indicating that they were aware of the larger critical tradition, and had consciously chosen formalism as an approach. It was disappointing to find several scripts, even those that were otherwise ambitious and articulate, covering as few as three of Woolf's novels. *To the Lighthouse* was probably the most frequently cited. Given that many candidates will have been asked to read *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* for Mods, it should reasonably be expected that they would significantly extend their range for Finals.

It would aid the examiners greatly if all candidates could number their pages.

### **(h) (i) Walcott**

Three candidates took this paper. Two of these showed first class potential, ambitious in scope and range and drawing on a variety of Walcott sources. The themes developed included the modalities of postcolonial mimicry in Walcott's poetry, his tangled affiliations to the English language, the Adamic role thrust on national poets, the figure of the castaway, the residual melancholia of postcolonial poetry, the belated poet's anxiety of influence. At best, the essays were well-crafted and organized, and clearly contextualized and temporalized the given quotation, and one of the candidates elaborated on the historical specificities of Walcott's postcolonial condition. The essays, however, displayed a worrying



inability for sustained analysis in an extended thesis: critical claims were not substantiated and arguments quickly lost depth and focus. The essays were not all prepared to an acceptable academic standard. In one case, sheer carelessness was evident at the level of style and grammar and in the essay's blatant misreading of the title quote.

**(h) (ii) Roth**

This year, fifteen candidates submitted essays for this option (fourteen Single Honours, one Joint Schools). While there were very few seriously substandard pieces, the general standard was not as high as one might have expected - certainly not as high as that of the 2006-2007 cohort. The worst examples were little more than *bricolages* of critical truisms about Roth, the best were thoughtfully directed, sparky, and elegantly phrased; very few, however, engaged in what one could describe as independent research. The examiners noted the absence of any detailed discussion of those authors with whom Roth's work avowedly converses (Kafka, Thoreau, Fitzgerald, Bellow, Malamud, Levi, for instance); more importantly, given the particular emphasis on social and literary traditions in so many of Roth's novels, only the very best essays showed the requisite knowledge of American literary history, and of the contexts of contemporary American fiction.

The choice of primary Roth texts, too, was not always markedly original: *Portnoy's Complaint* and the Zuckerman books were often focused on at the expense of all else, and there were alarmingly few references to any of the fiction before *Portnoy*, apart from a few passing nods in the direction of *Goodbye, Columbus*.

Overall, the examiners did not feel that this level of preparatory input compared favourably with that expected of candidates working on the older and more 'canonical' authors available on Paper 7 – which was disappointing, given the richness of Roth's canon, and that of the cultural and literary circumambience with which it argues and converses.

**(h) (iii) Friel**

There were five takers for this paper, ranging from the good (middle to upper 2:1) to the very good (there were two agreed first class marks). Of the ten questions set, only three were attempted; perhaps predictably, three of the five candidates took the quotation about language for their topic. But there was in general an impressive range of knowledge of the detail of the plays, and of their engagements with public events, both contemporary and historical. This option seems to work well.

**(i) (i) Emerson**

2 students submitted extended essays, one on Emerson as a philosopher of the unsettled (question 7) and one on Emerson as poet of America (question 8). The quality of the two papers was middling (neither was judged a first). A real problem with both was coming to grips with the considerable body of Emerson studies (and with the several different Emersons the critical tradition has envisioned), framing a useful intervention, and delimiting a workable argument. The better of the two managed some hold on these difficulties, the other (though valiantly attempting an original philosophical analysis) very little. Both would have also been considerably strengthened by extended close readings of selected texts.

**(i) (ii) Dickinson**

The best candidates showed a laudable ability to read the poetry contextually (Transcendentalists, American Civil War, Calvinism, New England, etc.), though weaker candidates tried valiantly to make something 'historical' from what was evidently only the briefest acquaintance with American history, and that seemingly gleaned from the same few lectures. Some very good work was done on both the composition and the publication histories of Dickinson's oeuvre, the fascicles providing particularly fertile ground for subtle and sophisticated analyses. Again, the best essays evidenced strong, acute readings of Dickinson figurative language, but not infrequently the poems were read as though they were little snippets of cryptic prose there to be decoded. A thoroughgoing knowledge of the letters came through in the strongest essays. While some candidates claimed to find the history of Dickinson criticism at best irritating, at worst silly, others intelligently engaged with and deployed this same criticism to illuminate rather than overwhelm the poetry, producing essays of considerable subtlety and acuity.

**(i) (iii) Faulkner**

13 candidates took this option. In general, the extended essays were very competently done, with 3 candidates achieving first-class marks and the other 10 managing 2:1s. There was a welcome range of primary texts by Faulkner discussed this year, with more attention than in previous years given to his later (post-1945) writing. The best candidates combined close attention to Faulkner's idiosyncratic language with a detailed knowledge of the context out of which he was writing, though it has to be said that in general the students were more comfortable in addressing aspects of Faulkner's modernist rhetoric (such as stream-of-consciousness) than in analysing how these are played out within the peculiar environment of the American South, and questions of racial representation, in particular, were handled very tentatively.

**Paper 8**

**(a) Fiction in English**

With many of the novelists in the erstwhile 'great tradition' taken care of by Paper 7, minor or marginal or unjustly overlooked figures have attained prominence here. Short stories were remarkably popular, as was genre fiction (particularly fantasy and the detective story). There was a predictable - and predictably like-minded - quantity of work on post-colonial writers, some of which, given its sociological bias, might have worked better on a different paper.

There is a clear disadvantage to the freedom of choice allowed by the present regulations. The bias towards non-canonical literature often resulted in essays that lacked critical complexity: fiction that is so untaxingly fluffy or even trashy does not lend itself to serious interpretative investigation on. It was rare to find essays alive with aesthetic response, able to write about literary works in a way that complicates and enriches our perception of them.

Two other general points need to be emphatically made. One is about scope: it is simply not enough to deal with three or four novels (or stories), as the least good candidates did. The essay should reflect a whole term's work, which ideally ought to be both broad and deep. Secondly, the paper is about fiction as a form, not simply about the individual writers of fiction chosen by the candidate, and the best work showed an awareness of literary history or of more theoretical considerations that opened out behind the specific texts being examined.

**(b) Drama in English**

There were 22 candidates and the overall standard of the work was high. Six essays were awarded first-class marks, two of which were extremely strong first-class marks. 13 candidates wrote on 20<sup>th</sup>-century drama, 3.5 on Medieval drama (0.5 indicates comparison with another period), 3 on Renaissance drama, 1 on Early Victorian drama, 1 on 18<sup>th</sup>-century drama, and 0.5 on Restoration drama. In some cases there were problems with structure and conceptual framing, and some candidates failed sufficiently to respond to plays as plays. On the other hand, in the best essays there was clear evidence of independent thought and extensive primary and secondary reading.

**(c) Prose in English**

This option attracted healthy numbers of candidates, whose essays addressed the field from medieval prose to the writing of today. There were some enterprising choices of subject which showed a welcome spirit of intellectual adventure, and from the technical standpoint a few essays were almost text-book examples of what a very good undergraduate can achieve within the constraints of the Paper 8 format. The standard of writing and presentation was, overall, very good. There were two or three quite outstanding essays, which brought together energy of inquiry, lucidity of thought, and precision of argument and presentation.

Candidates should bear in mind that it may be harder for them to demonstrate their abilities as subtle and discriminating readers on material which is itself crude, coarse, or given to over-simplification. It is of course entirely legitimate to choose to write on such material. But to do so may entail disadvantages.

**(d) Poetry in English**

Overall, once again this proved an enjoyable and varied paper to mark. The best work was courageous and confident in its close readings and contextualisation. The majority of answers focused on nineteenth and twentieth century texts but there was sharp and original work elsewhere. Candidates need to keep an eye on the overall balance of their essay when constructing their titles; some essays this year attempted to broach too wide a range of authors and were unable to do full justice to all their proposed materials within the word limit. However, having said that, all candidates for this option are also reminded that the work on this paper must be fully comparative and that it is not acceptable to focus only on one author.

Next year's candidates are also encouraged to ensure that their work is clearly presented and that they have allowed time for proof-reading.

**(e) American Literature from the Beginnings to the Present Day**

This option continues to be very popular and this year it attracted 52 candidates, of whom 18 were awarded first-class marks and 32 achieved 2:1s, along with two 2:2s. Candidates clearly enjoy the wide range of choice offered to within this open-ended format whereby they select their own themes, and at the top of the range the essays were very good indeed, combining insightful analysis of particular texts with a wide-ranging examination of broad issues in American literature and culture. However, many of the less successful essays attempted to make hasty generalizations from an insufficient knowledge base; one model that repeated itself several times was the attempt to claim a place for a favoured author or authors in the "canon" of American literature, but without any comment on how that canon had been shaped and the forces that have worked in various ways to consolidate it. Another model preferred by some candidates was the close analysis of a particular pair of authors in

hermetic isolation, without any consideration of their place within an American literary context. Still another problematic model was the one where tutorial essays had clearly been spliced together, without much attention to a clearly defined overall argument within the extended essay as a whole. In general, however, the most successful of these essays managed to combine close formal readings with the cultural range and force of argument that one would expect from articles in the best scholarly journals.

**(f) Women's writing**

The eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries were represented in this year's essays, with madness, identity, and performativity being the key preoccupations. At the top end, there was evidence of genuinely original and intensive research and some excellent close reading in a handful of essays. Those essays that showed clear and ambitious structure and argument and a subtle use of terms performed better than those that were reliant on or reproduced familiar feminist treatments and arguments, and/or that followed a straightforward progression from one author to another. Range of knowledge (for example, of unusual elements of an author's oeuvre, or of historical/contextual factors) also tended to benefit candidates.

**(g) The History and Theory of Criticism**

The popular topics this year included several essays on Derrida/deconstruction, some of which addressed Derrida's relations with other twentieth-century theorists such as Foucault, Blanchot, etc. The question of the literary – or the singularity of literature – produced interesting work, though it was disappointing how many essays did not engage with the implications of this for literary criticism. The best essays were analytic, professionally presented, and managed to strike a happy balance between close readings of the candidates' chosen theorists and consideration of larger questions in and for literary theory. It was noticeable this year how many candidates fell into the trap of ventriloquizing the ideas and style of certain theorists rather than preserving a critical distance (and indeed keeping a sense of humour); at its worst, this produced essays that were flat and dull. At the same time the qualities which they might have emulated – the playfulness of Barthes, or the wittiness of Derrida – were sorely lacking. Candidates should be encouraged to follow their own lines of enquiry within what has the potential to be a rich and surprising set of ideas and materials; it was surprising how many candidates chose to write on old debates and critical orthodoxies as if these were definitive answers to important theoretical questions, rather than starting points for debate. Occasionally, candidates seem to have misunderstood the nature and scope of the paper, and should be reminded that it is important that they engage closely with the history and/or theory of the criticism rather than simply working up a literary topic from one of their period papers. In all cases credit was given for originality, scholarly accuracy, and a willingness to consider theory in its historical and material contexts.

**(h) Postcolonial Literature**

The examiners found the overall standard of this paper uneven, though the level of effort was high and candidates seemed well-acquainted with the key movements, figures, and the current debates of postcolonial criticism. A wide variety of interesting literary/cultural topics and problems were evoked: the postcolonial *bildungsroman*, the emergence of world literature, gendered resistance, the representation of childhood, representations of women, the globalization of the postcolonial novel, the role of the sacred in a desacralized world. The best essays used historical and critical material judiciously to frame and complicate original arguments and also showed a grasp of political issues relevant to the production and

reception of texts. The weaker essays lapsed too quickly into close readings of chosen texts, tended to be more descriptive than analytic, and could not sustain the theses. There was an interesting range of writers discussed this year, but postcolonial poetry and drama were largely overlooked. As noted in Examiners' reports in previous years, the paper needs strong formal and methodological orientation, and is ideally taught centrally in classes and lectures.

**(i) (ii) Medieval and Renaissance Romance**

Most of the work for this paper was concentrated in the earlier period. Essays were occasionally excellent, and at least competent, showing evidence of a range of reading, a close engagement with questions of genre and context, and a familiarity with recent criticism.

**(i) (iii) Scottish Literature pre 1600**

There was one candidate for this paper.

**(i) (viii) Classical Literature**

There were three candidates for Tragedy with a spread of marks ranging from a mid-ii.2 through to a high ii.1. This range reflects the uneven quality of the work submitted. The best work in this category demonstrated an original approach to a common tragic motif, combining an impressive stylistic analysis of the material with a creative flair for interpretation. Weaker work was generally thin on material and lacked clarity of argument. Generally candidates demonstrated a sound knowledge of the texts, but were rather less familiar with recent bibliography on important areas.

There were four candidates for Epic. The topics chosen were generally of interest and of an appropriate scope, though at least one essay would have benefited from greater definition. The work submitted was generally of a better standard than the tragedy submissions, with candidates evenly distributed over the ii.1 and first classifications. While the topics themselves were largely familiar, they were handled well for the most part, though those candidates seeking a first should ensure that they have mastered the bibliography and know what has been written on the topic before. Writing skills and argumentation varied considerably, however, usually reflecting the candidate's grasp of the material and the strength of the thesis.

**(j) (iii) Film Theory**

Of the 8 candidates, 2 achieved firsts, 5 achieved 2.1s and 1 achieved a 2.2, with no thirds. The range of titles set was, as always, striking, from the relationship between Godard's early films and *les evenements* of 1968, through authorship as plagiarism to historical epics in Chinese cinema. Although the course covered six major theoretical approaches to studying film, only half of the essays made use of the theories covered. The students were all enthusiastic, and all embarked on ambitious projects in their essays. Agreement between raw first and second marks was very high. Some of the students' essays lapsed, at times, into simple praise for certain film-makers (a perennial problem with students beginning film studies), although writing style was uniformly impressive. During teaching, the eight students (increased to nine by the presence of a very capable visiting student) worked well in seminars, and tackled the sometimes bafflingly alien subject with gusto, often needing only to be reassured that they were making great progress.

#### **(j) (iv) Principles of Film Appreciation**

The students performed very successfully on the option (a 6,000 word essay): five out of the nine students received distinctions and only two students scored below 68 (there were no marks below 60). Given that the students had not formally studied any film before these results are very pleasing. The learning outcomes of the option were clear, precise and carefully bounded and the students benefited from this: they allowed the weaker students safely to achieve solid results while providing a sturdy springboard for the strong students to jump into excellence. Some of the essays were outstanding, confidently handling close analysis and conceptual speculation. They were original and elegantly written (and not a whiff of plagiarism), deftly weaving the scrutiny of film style into sophisticated interpretations.

#### **(k) Victorian Literature**

There were seven candidates this year. Many focussed on the same questions, with question 10 attracting four answers, questions 5 and 22, three each, and question 17, two. The standard was generally high. Pleasingly, the range of authors chosen and the approach to the questions appeared to reflect the differing interests and emphasis encouraged by the joint schools.

#### **(l). English Literature from 1900 to the Present**

There were nine extended essays to mark in this cohort ranging across the century and across the kinds of literature available (with quite an emphasis on drama and on literature as a mirror of social ills). The work on the whole was well done with two candidates producing essays rewarded with first-class marks for their sophistication and clarity, and their ability to move beyond other critical writing or to avoid being overwhelmed by it. At the lower end the work was still of a standard to warrant an upper second though it relied more heavily on critical assumptions which went unchallenged. The more successful scripts understood that the structure of an argument needed cleaving to in the first paragraph and sticking to throughout.

### **9. Introduction to Medieval Studies**

There was one candidate for this paper.

## **COURSE II**

### **Paper A1 (English Literature 600-1100)**

Eleven candidates took this paper. A fair range of questions were answered: most popular were the questions on hagiography, manuscript context (perhaps as a result of the new A4) and the use of heroic diction in Christian poetry, which solicited some excellent answers on the *miles Christi*. Almost half the candidates wrote on question 2 ('we should consider the extant texts of Old English poetry as treating concerns contemporary to the era of their manuscript production'), but rather disconcertingly, most ignored the issue of manuscript production altogether and those that did mention it were unclear about dates. At the top end of the scale, candidates showed a wide and impressive knowledge of Old English poetry (biblical poetry, saints' lives, allegories, riddles and even charms) and familiarity with manuscript context. Prose was much less well represented than poetry (with only Aelfric attracting any number of answers) and, perhaps more surprisingly, no one wrote on wisdom poetry, 'elegies', or the *Exeter Book* as a manuscript. The best candidates quoted with ease and accuracy from a range of Old English texts, but at the lower end of the scale, there was a tendency to pile on the names and dates of secondary critics, while including only the

occasional (half-remembered) quotation in Old English. There were pervasive problems with exam technique, especially irrelevancy to the question and lack of attention to its 'precise terms'. It would be worth exploring whether Course II students sit as many collections as their fellow students in Course I.

### **Paper A2 (English Literature 1100-1530)**

Eleven candidates sat this paper and the marks ranged from lower second to first class, with some very strong work at the top end, and little irrelevance or evidence of downloading. The most popular question was the David Aers quotation (on how writers of the period exemplify and negotiate conflicts over 'appropriate forms of Christian discipleship'), which elicited some sophisticated answers on Wycliffite writing. Drama and talking animals were also popular choices. In general candidates showed good knowledge of historical context, and ranged widely across texts rarely covered by Course 1 students; in fact seemed rather to shun 'Gawain Poet', romance and Scottish writers. There were no answers on early Tudor material.

### **Paper A3 (a) Chaucer, Langland and Gower**

There were 11 candidates, and the standard of work produced ranged from First Class to 2.2. The best answers contained fresh, exciting work in which creativity and nuance had been developed on the basis of substantial, informed preparation and wide reading in both primary and secondary materials. In such answers, literary theory and knowledge of multiple historical contexts were used thoughtfully and illuminated one another. As was to be expected, candidates generally confined themselves to writing about the *Tales*, *Troilus*, the *Legend* and the dream visions, but the strongest were able to contextualise these in varied and substantial ways, being able to discuss in detail Chaucer's knowledge of classical or patristic sources, or the problematic status of 'scepticism' or 'humanism' in relation to his work. In the best answers, all of this knowledge was used pertinently to support nuanced close readings of the works themselves. Weaker answers either flattened out the complexity of Chaucer's writing, or showed an insufficiently detailed knowledge of it, settling in consequence for conventional readings that kept the text itself at a safe distance. Some of the weaker candidates tried to twist questions so as to be able to recycle a fully-prepared generic essay on some aspect of Chaucer's writing. Alternatively, weaker answers showed no knowledge of the possible contexts (whether literary, political, intellectual or cultural) of Chaucer's writing. The examiners wish to remind candidates that they should not present their essays in the form of lists, with numbered paragraphs: an argument, with all of its elements integrated and developing from one another, is required.

### **A3 (b) Chaucer, Langland and Gower**

There were 11 candidates and, as was to be expected, the standard of work achieved mirrored that of A3(a). In the strongest answers, the two-hour format was used productively to launch subtle, wide-ranging discussions of Langland, Gower or both, but in this paper there was a noticeable difference between candidates who were able to keep their material under control over two hours, and those who were not. In one or two cases, candidates seemed to derive no benefit from the extra time, and thin material was thus made to appear even thinner, with repetition and padding. In several cases, candidates appeared not to know the texts well at all, opting instead for critical generalisations. The best candidates had made excellent use of the opportunities provided by this paper to get to grips with Langland and/or Gower in different ways, familiarising themselves with, for example, Gower's Latin works (whether in the original or in translation), or his knowledge of contemporary political

theory, or Langland's knowledge of the liturgy. This year, however, there seemed to have been little enthusiasm for the comparative study of different versions of *Piers Plowman*.

#### **Paper A4 Old and Middle English Texts [Old Regs]**

There was one candidate for this paper.

#### **Paper A4 Introduction to Textual Criticism**

This paper was examined for the first time this year and the results were very encouraging. There was very little sketchy, or under-prepared work, and candidates showed an impressive command of codicological knowledge and issues of textual criticism. Answers on the Old and Early English texts were especially sharp and well informed. All of the essays were of a very good standard; the best of them based on a wide range of material and debate. The best commentaries combined examination of the materiality of texts with sharp attention to lexical detail; they assessed nuance of meaning in glossarial provision, emendation, and choices made in translation. They also addressed specifically and precisely the different tasks to which they were directed by the rubrics. There were some commentaries which were extremely well-informed about the text on which they were based but lacked the close attention either to the details of the particular passage or the direction of the task and read more like essay work. The commentary tasks are designed to prompt students to close attention of the material in front of them and to analyse it in light of their wider knowledge. Overall, however, this is a paper which is fostering vibrant scholarly work.

#### **A5 The History of the English Language to c.1750**

The most popular questions were those concerned with Chancery English and with the rise of the dictionary. Answers to these questions were generally satisfactory, with some candidates engaging with recent critical work on standardization and questioning the existence of a 'Chancery Standard'. The weakest candidates simply adopted this formulation uncritically and provided largely descriptive accounts lacking in examples and technical terminology. The strongest candidates tended to tackle linguistically more demanding topics, such as the origins of the pronoun *she*, and showed an ability to master the phonetic detail and an awareness of competing theories.

#### **B2 Middle English Dialectology**

There was 1 candidate for the exam and 1 for extended essays.

#### **B3 Modern English Philology**

There was one candidate for this paper.

#### **B4: Linguistic Theory**

There was one candidate for this Paper.

#### **B10 The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England**

There was one candidate for this paper.

#### **B11 Gothic**

There was one candidate for this paper.

#### **B13 Old High German**

There was one candidate for this paper.



**B15 Old Norse**

There were two candidates for this Paper.

**B17 Old Norse-Icelandic Literature**

There was one candidate for this Paper.

**B18 Old French Language 1150 - 1250**

There was one candidate for this paper.

**B19 Medieval French Literature 1100-1300**

There was one candidate for this paper.

**B20 Medieval French Literature 1300-1500**

There was one candidate for this paper.

**B21 Medieval Welsh Language and Literature**

There was one candidate for this paper.

**B22 Medieval Welsh Language and Literature II**

There was one candidate for this paper.

**B23 Old and Early Middle Irish Language and Literature**

There was one candidate for this paper.

### Marking Conventions for FHS 2007-2008

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| First        | Average mark of 68.5 or greater.<br>At least two marks of 70 or above.<br>No mark below 50. |
| Upper Second | Average mark of 59 or greater.<br>At least two marks of 60 or above.<br>No mark below 40.   |
| Lower Second | Average mark of 49.5 or greater.<br>At least two marks of 50 or above.<br>No mark below 30. |
| Third        | Average mark of 40 or greater.<br>Not more than one mark below 30.                          |
| Pass         | Average mark of 30 or greater.<br>Not more than two marks below 30.                         |

### Number of Candidates and Gender

Total 234, comprising 146 (62.39 %) female and 88 (37.61 %) male.

### Number and Class Distributions by Sex

| Class | Female No. | Female % | Male No. | Male % | No. All | % All |
|-------|------------|----------|----------|--------|---------|-------|
| I     | 27         | 18.5     | 24       | 27.3   | 51      | 21.8  |
| Ii    | 118        | 80.8     | 60       | 68.2   | 178     | 76.1  |
| Iii   | 1          | 0.7      | 3        | 3.4    | 4       | 1.7   |
| III   | 0          | 0        | 1        | 1.1    | 1       | 0.4   |

### CANDIDATE STATISTICS FHS 2006-2007 Number of candidates taking each optional subject

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>7 a(i) The <i>Beowulf</i> Poet</b>                                 | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>7 a(ii) Alfred</b>   | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>7 a(iii) Exeter Book</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>7 b(i) Chaucer</b>   | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>7 b(ii) Langland</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>7 b(iii) N-Town Cycle</b>  | <b>0</b>  |
| <b>7 c (i) Spenser</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>7 c(ii) Milton</b>   | <b>10</b> |
| <b>7 c(iii) Jonson</b>  | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>7 d(i) Marvell</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>7 d(ii) Dryden</b>   | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>7 d(iii) Eliza Haywood</b>   | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>7 e(i) Wordsworth</b>  | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>7 e(ii) Austen</b>   | <b>19</b> |
| <b>7 e(iii) Byron</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>7 f(i) Tennyson</b>  | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>7 f(ii) Dickens</b>  | <b>13</b> |
| <b>7 f(iii) Wilde</b>   | <b>15</b> |
| <b>7 g(i) Conrad</b>  | <b>16</b> |
| <b>7 g(ii) Yeats</b>  | <b>19</b> |
| <b>7 g(iii) Woolf</b>   | <b>33</b> |
| <b>7 h(i) Walcott</b>   | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>7 h(ii) Roth</b>   | <b>15</b> |
| <b>7 h(iii) Friel</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>7 i (i) Emerson</b>  | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>7 i (ii) Dickinson</b>   | <b>12</b> |
| <b>7 i (iii) Faulkner</b>   | <b>14</b> |
| <b>8 a Fiction in English</b>   | <b>50</b> |
| <b>8 b Drama in English</b>   | <b>20</b> |
| <b>8 c Prose in English</b>   | <b>14</b> |
| <b>8 d Poetry in English</b>  | <b>24</b> |
| <b>8 e American Literature from the beginnings to the present day</b> | <b>51</b> |
| <b>8 f Women's Writing</b>  | <b>9</b>  |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>8 g The History and Theory of Criticism</b>            | <b>10</b> |
| <b>8 h Postcolonial Literature</b>                        | <b>11</b> |
| <b>8 i (ii) / B 7 a. Medieval and Renaissance Romance</b> | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>8 i (iii) / B 7 b. Scottish Literature pre-1600</b>    | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>8 i (viii) / B 26. Classical Literature - Epic</b>     | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>8 i (viii) / B 26. Classical Literature - Tragedy</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>8 k Victorian Literature</b>                           | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>8 l Modern Literature 1900 – Present Day</b>           | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>8 j (iii) Film Theory</b>                              | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>8 j (iv) Principles of Film Appreciation</b>           | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>B2 Middle English Dialectology - Essay</b>             | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B2 Middle English Dialectology - Paper</b>             | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 3 Modern English Philology</b>                       | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 4 Linguistic Theory</b>                              | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 10 Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England</b>            | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 11 Gothic</b>  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 13 Old High German</b>                               | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 15 Old Norse</b>                                     | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>B 17 Old Norwegian and Icelandic Literature</b>        | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 18 Old French Language 1150 - 1250</b>               | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 19 Medieval French Literature 1100-1300</b>          | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>B 20 Medieval French Literature 1300-1500</b>          | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>B 22 Medieval Welsh II</b>                             | <b>1</b>  |

## **EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS FOR FHS**

**To the Vice-Chancellor**

**13 July 2008**

**Professor Julia Boffey, Queen Mary University of London**

**Report of the External Examiner for the Honour and Pass Schools of  
English Language and Literature**

### **Appropriateness of academic standards set for awards**

Finalists at Oxford face the increasingly unusual challenge of a largely end-weighted system which relies almost entirely on written exams. The dissertation is currently optional (with a mark that counts only to the candidate's advantage) and the portfolio of essays for paper 1, although submitted at the end of year 2, does not generate feedback or disclosed marks until the end of the candidate's final year.

The range of papers demands from students wide reading across periods and genres. The exams elicit from almost every candidate a set of answers which demonstrate hugely impressive knowledge across the field of English language and literature. The best work I read, in both scripts and dissertations, was superb; at almost all levels candidates wrote well and argued effectively, and seemed well informed in relation to both primary and secondary material.

21.8% of the total were awarded 1<sup>st</sup> class degrees: a proportion which is I gather roughly consistent with 2007 (this was my first year as an external examiner). For a first, the classification criteria require at least two marks of 70 or above along with an average mark of 68.5 or greater, and no mark below 50; one or two cases this year alerted the Board of Examiners to the possibility that these guidelines might helpfully be refined to allow for performances that meet one or other of the first two criteria but not both. The high proportion of upper seconds (75.6%) and correspondingly small numbers of lower seconds and thirds (2.1% and 0.4% respectively) are not these days greatly out of line with the distribution of awards in other institutions.

### **Extent to which assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students and have been fairly conducted**

All processes I saw seemed rigorous and fairly conducted; a final-exam system of this sort ensures unusual equity of treatment.

Considerable attention was paid at the first marks meeting to cases of candidates on the II.i/I borderline (that is, with averages of 68.5 or greater, and at least two marks of 70 or above). The very careful scrutiny given to candidates with averages up to a whole mark below 68.5 gave rise to a fair amount of re-reading, undertaken this year by internal examiners and moderated by the externals. The extent of this seemed to me surprising, not to mention burdensome for already hard-pressed examiners, and I would suggest that a firmer line on internally agreed marks (some of which have already had a third reading), and some accommodation in the guidelines of performances which might be anomalous in relation to all the criteria, might be helpful.

Assessment processes in relation to extenuating circumstances, to dyslexia and dyspraxia, seem vaguely defined (although they are I gather currently under university-wide scrutiny). It was helpful this year to have from the Chair a written account of precedents; some prescribed procedures would be still better.

Plagiarism is unlikely to arise in written exams, but a couple of cases this year (one in which internal examiners noted excessive dependence on a secondary source, and another in which a candidate had repeated the same material in two different parts of the exam) suggested that some clear instruction and reminders about it might be helpful to candidates.

The portfolio of essays for paper 1 is submitted and assessed at the end of year 2, the marks being held over until the classification process at the end of year 3. Since it is currently not clear what happens when a candidate doesn't submit all the work for this paper, it would be helpful if students could be encouraged to sign a checklist and declaration that all the work has been submitted.

### **Standards of student performance in programmes or parts of programmes**

Standards of performance are strikingly high, especially in terms of general knowledge of a wide field of literature, the crafting of arguments, and informed ability to discuss language as well as other aspects of texts. Some of the optional theses I read were of an excellent standard; others needed polishing of various kinds.

The lack of variety in the forms of work assessed sometimes occasions a sameness of response, whether in the kinds of essays that an individual candidate produces, or in responses from the whole body of candidates to particular questions. It was refreshing to see the range of challenge posed by the combination of papers 3a and 3b, where the first paper invites essay answers, and the second some commentaries on extracts from prescribed texts.

The examiners on paper B3a this year reported that setting fewer questions than in previous years seemed to produce better answers, presumably because it stopped candidates being lured into writing prepared answers.

References to secondary criticism and literary theory in the exam scripts I read sometimes seemed perfunctory. If the optional thesis is made compulsory candidates will have greater opportunity to explore and make visible their engagement with these. Introduction of a compulsory dissertation will also make it easier to gauge candidates' capacity to produce the research-led work one hopes to see from those applying for postgraduate study.

### **Comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in some other higher education institutions**

Candidates are I suspect better informed about a wider field of literature than at almost any other institution in the UK. I would welcome the opportunity to see *more* of what these candidates can do: more substantial projects (in the form of compulsory dissertations), and writing of more various kinds. A greater range in forms of assessment, and thus the opportunity to award higher marks than are routinely gained in written exams, would make it possible to confirm first-class performance more securely.

**Issues which should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University:**

**Faculty/department**

Some attention could be paid to the imbalance of workload amongst examiners and the need to employ non-postholders as examiners (both of these issues were flagged in the Chair's report).

Increased care in the award of marks around the II.i/I borderline, and in the agreement of such marks, might help to reduce the number of borderline cases for consideration and the difficulty of reopening agreed marks at the examiners meetings.

Some reconsideration of the classification guidelines in order to accommodate anomalous performances (e.g. those including many marks of A although a final average below 68.5) might be worthwhile.

**University**

Some clarification of the following would be helpful:

- procedures relating to extenuating circumstances, and to cases of dyslexia and dispraxia;
- guidance for examiners on what constitutes plagiarism.

**Good practice for dissemination:**

The breadth of study undertaken by candidates; their rhetorical skills and ability to discuss language as well as other aspects of the texts on which they write

The rigorousness of marking procedures, and clear documentation of marks awarded.

Full statistical data about marking and performance; extremely full examiners' reports.

**To the Vice-Chancellor  
Dr Raphael Lyne, University of Cambridge  
7<sup>th</sup> July 2008  
Report of the External Examiner for the Honour and Pass Schools of  
English Language and Literature**

**(a) Appropriateness of academic standards set for awards**

The division of labour among externals meant that I read full runs of scripts from candidates at the very top of the list, and at the bottom. (Since obviously anomalous candidates were excluded, this meant that I read an overall 2.1, as well as a 2.2 and a 3<sup>rd</sup>.) I therefore saw very varying levels of achievement. I was impressed by the standards in evidence, and especially by the range of material that candidates handled – sometimes with astonishing deftness – for their Finals. I feel confident that the students are being assessed appropriately.

Much of the time at examiners' meetings is spent on candidates whose marks do not class them securely at the first meeting. The 1<sup>st</sup> / 2.1 borderline is the widest, but I did not see any scripts there. The discussion at the meeting made it clear, however, that it was patrolled intelligently. Very few 2.2s are awarded, and when medical and anomalous cases are taken into consideration, the straightforward 2.2 is even rarer. This is my first year as External in Oxford, and I have seen very few runs of scripts at this level, so any remarks I have must be tentative. However, I felt in advance that the numerical guidelines for determining classes, which are those of the Humanities Division rather than the Faculty, were generous. An average of 59 (including two marks – out of eight – over 60) makes it quite possible that candidates will get 2.1s when a majority of examiners consider them to have performed at a 2.2 level. My reading at this level suggests that in these cases, a 2.2 might be a truer reflection of a candidate's overall achievement. I am aware of the fact that these students have to pull together two years' worth of work for their Finals, and that this might justify an apparent leniency. I also note that very few candidates might be considered to have been saved by the regulations' generosity.

**(b) Extent to which assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment, and have been fairly conducted**

Every script I read was accompanied by the comment sheets of its two first markers. I am pleased to say that there was no rationale, of any mark for any paper, which I could not follow, even when the first two marks differed considerably. The agreed marks between examiners also all seemed logical. The examiners seemed to me admirably scrupulous and insightful. Business at the examiners' meetings was conducted in an excellent fashion. The administrative support was excellent. The Chair and Secretary were incisive, well-prepared, and humane. The meeting of the Medical and Special Cases committee, on the day before the first meeting, was also handled well. Useful precedents from last year were cited, and others generated for next year.

This year's handling of the 1<sup>st</sup> / 2.1 borderline followed a somewhat different pattern from previous years, I gather, and my sense is that it worked well. However, I think that some questions remain about quite how to handle this, and I have included a tedious essay on the matter below, under (e).

### **(c) The standards of student performance in the programme**

It is noteworthy that (despite my uncertainty about the very bottom of the class) even very far down the large 2.1 group candidates are achieving individual high marks somewhere in their run: a large majority of candidates produced some very good work at some point. In my first year, I have only assembled a small sample from which to draw more specific conclusions. However, some characteristics of the top scripts were consistent enough to make them (I think) worth mentioning. The most striking thing was the range of their work. The highest achievers write an amazing amount in three hours, and can refer to dozens of literary works in a detailed and focused way. They are capable of beautifully turned arguments, and they write excellent prose. Their confidence and astuteness in dealing with their breadth of reading is remarkable. However, the top candidates were better at examinations than at extended essays. Although there was some excellent work in these pieces, there were few moments where candidates stepped back from their arguments to evaluate them, to assert their significance (implicitly or explicitly), or to test their approaches against other critical or theoretical approaches. (There were few true introductions, for example, and few true conclusions, to the dissertations.) These extended essays might have been an opportunity for these skills to flourish.

### **(d) Comparability of standards and student achievements with other HE institutions**

Not surprisingly, I think the range and fluency of work I saw was outstanding, whereas the critical positions taken by students appeared less considered than the best I have seen elsewhere. Overall, I felt that the achievements, as reflected by the classes awarded and taking into account the differences between courses, were clearly comparable to other HE institutions. This is a demanding degree and it gets excellent work out of many students.

### **(e) Issues which should be brought to the attention of committees (in the Faculty)**

#### *Classing guidelines and re-reading*

The 1<sup>st</sup> / 2.1 borderline was much discussed. I have a number of thoughts about it. Again my remarks must be prefaced by the fact that I am doing this for the first time, and that this should be remembered, especially where I have a slightly different view from the other externals.

At present the guidelines for classing from the Division award a First for an average of 68.5, where the candidate has two marks over 70. There is a borderline category, where candidates are re-read, if they have achieved the average without getting enough 70 plus marks, or where they have an average within one mark (i.e. 67.5 or above) of the required level. In practice, this means there are a lot of borderline candidates, all of whom arise from the second category, i.e. they have an average below 68.5 but above 67.5.

My first observation is that these guidelines prize the average far more than the number of first-class marks, but that examiners often seem instinctively to want to attribute relatively higher weight to first-class marks in a profile. If the average is to be paramount, then the difference between 69 and 70 should be the same as between 64 and 65; between 60 and 59 should be the same as between 57 and 56. I am not sure this is clearly the case at present. It may not be a simple matter to change this, since the apparent decisiveness (conceptual rather than mathematical) in opting for a 70 rather than a 69 might reflect something about how qualitative judgments have to work in this subject. On the other hand, it may be easier



to adapt this practice than to change the division-wide guidelines (which are in tune with how most universities class their candidates – not mine, incidentally, where profile and aggregate both count).

Adjustments in practice here may not make any difference to the fact that the 1<sup>st</sup> / 2.1 borderline is very wide and causes a great deal of re-reading. My feeling is that with 8 or 9 marked elements (read twice, and then third-read if there is a major disagreement) the numerical average should be relied on rather more, and that leeway of one whole mark is unnecessarily wide. By making the cut-off 67.75 percent, for example, it would shrink by 25% on average; and this would be a rather meek change to guidelines. More nuanced versions of this, where a lower aggregate might earn a re-reading because of a certain number of first-class marks, could be devised.

Even in this case there would remain the question of what to do with the borderline candidates. This year the majority opinion among the externals was that determining the borderline should be an internal matter, and that externals were there to assess standards (and thus should read a different selection of scripts). I think this is a powerful argument, but I also have some practical thoughts that incline in a different direction. It seems best to record them here so the Faculty can decide on its practice for next year and beyond.

This is, effectively, the only sheep-and-goats borderline there is in FHS English. Candidates who end up there should be treated consistently. Although the internal examiners reading at this borderline did an excellent job, there is a case for giving a smaller number of people responsibility for multiple readings, so that candidates can be judged in comparison with others at the same level. It would be too much to ask an internal examiner to read 50 or more scripts at this point. Externals expect to do this, and can make themselves useful addressing difficult decisions in the light of experience elsewhere. This borderline is also one of the best places for standard-checking, so the re-reading can perform a double function. (I was perturbed somewhat by the idea that some candidates' runs would be re-read twice, once for classing and once for standard-checking; this seems unnecessarily heroic.) This, then, is a case for the old way, where externals read borderline candidates. It is offered as a contribution to a discussion within the Faculty, and I recognise the strength of arguments on the other side.

In addition, this year's board narrowed down the borderline category somewhat by assessing whether the marks of the first examiners were relatively secure (i.e. close together, clearly agreed) or whether the candidate had prompted disagreement. In the former cases, re-reading was less likely, because the candidate's absence from the first class was deemed safe. I think this worked as a good practice in the circumstances, but could reward some thought before it becomes established in future years. It might be argued that candidates turn up in the borderline category not because their examiners have disagreed or been indecisive, but because certain combinations of marks (whether resulting from indecision or the opposite, of unanimity or the opposite) are deemed by the guidelines to be too close to the higher class for comfort. Hence they are re-read across the board, and not just individual papers – to ensure that the numbers are properly representing the overall achievement of the candidate. If that is the Faculty's understanding, then weeding out on the grounds of agreement / disagreement might not be as good a way of limiting re-reading as, say, narrowing the borderline.

Whatever is decided about this borderline, it should be set out in the guidelines for classing so it can be followed explicitly at the meetings. As I said above, this seems a situation where unanimity among the externals is not obviously helpful to the Faculty. I did not dissent from this year's practice at all, but having thought of some arguments aiming elsewhere, I felt I should contribute them to the discussion.

#### *Re-using material*

This year one of the re-read candidates turned out to have re-used material in one of their extended essays. (About 75% of a Paper 1 portfolio essay reappeared as about 25% of a Paper 8 dissertation, hardly altered at all.) This will always be a rare occurrence, but I think the guidelines should have a clear statement of how such cases should be treated. (It might also happen if a candidate wrote on, say, Milton in an exam and an extended essay.)

#### *Communication of marks*

It was not clear at the meeting whether candidates and tutors were informed about all the adjustments and allowances (short work, rubric infringements, medical cases) that pertain to their marks. Since some of the numbers really needed that explanation, I hope that this is routine, or that it will be.

#### *Intermitting candidates*

A few candidates took FHS English after intermitting one or more years. These were anomalous cases and were dealt with very intelligently. I felt that these candidates' exam entries and statuses were not always obvious. It is not clear to me where greater clarity might help: perhaps in the dealings between college and faculty? It did seem that this issue has been sharpened by the presence of the Paper 1 portfolio submitted well before final exams.

To the Vice-Chancellor

Professor Susan Fitzmaurice, University of Sheffield

July 10, 2008

**External examiner's Report for the Honour and Pass Schools of English Language and Literature**

Please note that this report includes comments specific to **Paper 1** (*The English Language*).

**(i) Appropriateness of academic standards set for awards.**

The academic standards set for the award of the degree are appropriate and consistent with those set in past years. The degree classification procedure produced 21.8 Firsts (21% in 2007), 75.6II.is (77.4% in 2007), 2.1% II:is (1.6 in 2007) and 0.4% IIIs (0 in 2007). The degree requires students to demonstrate familiarity with a wide range of literary genres in a range of historical periods. They are assessed principally by final examination but have some opportunity to conduct research on different kinds of literature in extended essays.

**(ii) Rigour of assessment processes, equity of treatment for students, conduct within institutional regulations and guidance.**

The assessment processes are appropriately rigorous. At the first marks meeting examiners were provided with detailed profiles (including raw and established marks) for all candidates and cases on class borderlines were clearly identified in line with the classification criteria for the I/II:ii borderline described in a document prepared by the Chair and Secretary for the Board of Examiners. The procedure yielded a number of cases for reconsideration; internal examiners were asked to reread complete runs on the I/II:i borderline for possible reclassification as Firsts. The internal examiners' work resulted in raising the percentage of classified Firsts to 21.8% from a preliminary percentage of around 16%. Had all the borderline candidates been raised to Firsts, the final proportion of First class degrees would have been 24%.

The external examiners reread complete runs of scripts of borderline candidates in order to assess the consistency of student performance on borderlines with the published marking criteria, having made it clear that final responsibility for determining degree classification lay with the internal examiners. Rereading revealed that the borderline cases showed uneven performances across papers, and frequently disagreement between original examiners. The performances themselves showed evidence of originality of thought, expression, and often choice of material; however, they also lacked the dexterity in marshalling argument in order to answer the question chosen in a highly focused manner that the clear first class performances exhibited. In terms of the marking and classification criteria prepared for the Board, the examiners felt that the borderline cases were true borderline cases.

It was clear that when disagreement between markers was reflected in a wide range of raw marks (even when disagreements had been resolved by a third reader), candidates had a better chance of their runs being reread by members of the Board and consequently a better chance of being raised to a First. This is an undesirable situation which could be remedied in a straightforward manner by disregarding the raw marks once the marks have been established. I believe that the process of marking is sufficiently rigorous and thoughtful for the Board to feel confident in using the agreed (established) marks alone to guide them in degree classification.

The documentation of case history and precedent practices provided the Medical and Special Cases Committee with relevant information for its deliberations. Medical cases were solved in a straightforward fashion; issues regarding the certification of dyslexia and dyspraxia cases were noted; a couple of cases involving suspected plagiarism were referred to the Proctors, and one case was sent to an external examiner for review. It is important to continue to build case history for medical and special cases to ensure consistent practice as well as the development of sound guidelines for successive Committees.

### **(iii) Standards of student performance**

Oxford students are expected to demonstrate a range of skills as well as considerable knowledge of multiple literary genres and historical periods. The best performances exemplify very clearly what is key to the Oxford English degree. These exhibit extraordinary facility for original, well-argued and brilliantly written focused essays under pressure in a limited amount of time on the one hand and the ability to conduct a sophisticated extended treatment of a set of texts in their literary and historical context on the other. The work that I read included fine treatments of topics such as Shakespeare on film, Sidney and rhetoric, and Tony Blair and spin from a rich variety of approaches and contexts. The majority of students perform solid II:i work; their examination performances are less assured than those of students producing first class work across the board, but their performance in the optional thesis, portfolios and extended essays indicates that they can produce excellent research work.

I also read a good sample of **Paper 1 portfolios**. These consist of a textual commentary and a research essay, completed at the end of the students' second year. Paper 1 was offered for the second time for course 1. The 223 students performed generally well but achieved a slightly lower average mark for Paper 1 (63.6%) than for other compulsory papers (64.7%--65.2%). There were fewer first class marks (14.35%) and more second class work (83.41% combined) than for other papers, and the first class marks tended to cluster around the bottom of the class (top mark awarded was 73). Students tackled questions across the range of the paper and showed ingenuity and flair in selecting texts for the commentary, but they rarely approached their work using specifically linguistic analytical techniques and terminology. More often they employed literary critical skills and the tools of rhetorical analysis to produce very good work which the examiners rewarded with low first class marks. Because the majority of students are primarily interested in literary rather than linguistic approaches, examiners might consider setting a paper that is sympathetic to approaches that are not narrowly linguistic on the one hand and broadening their criteria for awarding high first marks to work that is not primarily linguistic in focus on the other. It would also help matters to expand the team of markers, and pair markers in different combinations. In a very few cases, students submitted partial portfolios; it is important to tighten the submission procedures, perhaps requiring students to certify the completeness of the portfolio.

### **(iv) Comparability of standards and student achievements with those in other higher education institutions**

The Oxford English degree is quite different from English degrees at many other British HE institutions in depending largely upon summative assessment in the form of examination performances rather than on extended research essays. Other institutions require their students to demonstrate mastery of research skills and show evidence of research conventions and practice, and their best students are very well-prepared for postgraduate research work.

Assessment by examination undoubtedly restricts the range of knowledge and types of skills that can be tested. For example, students are rewarded for demonstrating the ability under pressure and in a limited amount of time to marshal a great deal of prepared material in order to produce a focused answer to a complex question. It is hard to see how exam scripts could meet the published criteria for marks of 86+ given the unique conditions in which they are produced and their limitations as assessment exercises. Indeed, one consequence is that the Firsts awarded are generally low (the top First had an average mark of 75.5%). The replacement of the optional thesis with a compulsory dissertation may well generate more high first class marks to reward research skills, good writing and originality.

Having said this, I am satisfied that the Oxford degree has excellent standards and that performance is rewarded appropriately given the expectations set and training provided.

**(v) Issues for the attention of supervising committees:**

faculty/department:

- The procedure for Paper 1 portfolio submission. This should be formalized to ensure that students certify that their portfolio is complete.
- Reconsideration of the I/II:i borderline and the procedures adopted for resolving borderline cases. Markers might consider avoiding awarding borderline marks such as 59 and 69 in order to attend early to the matter of creating a large number of borderline cases inviting rereading.

division/wider University

- Workload in relation to task. The Chair reported that the delivery of the degree depends on the participation of a large number of non-post holders as setters and markers. This indicates that the burden of examining is too great to be undertaken properly within the faculty.
- Definitions of plagiarism. The proctors should provide clear and regularly updated guidance to boards of examiners on plagiarism matters.

**(vi) Good practice**

The markers involved in the examination exercise applied rigorous but fair standards. Their comments tended to be informative and constructive, providing appropriate contextualization for the marks awarded. The examiners' reports provide full and constructive advice for tutors and students.

The examiners benefited from good statistical data as a basis for developing a clear profile of student performance across the range of papers, by gender. This is an excellent practice which should be continued and shared with other units.

**To the Vice-Chancellor  
Professor Regenia Gagnier, University of Exeter  
7 July 2008  
Report of the External Examiner for the Honour and Pass Schools of English  
Language and Literature**

**(i) Appropriateness of academic standards set for awards:**

At the Final Marks meeting percentages by final classification were (with some minor recalculation to the statistics to be completed after the meeting) 21.8 Firsts, 75.6 IIs, 2.1 IIIs, and 0.4 III. This was consistent with 2007, with 21% Firsts, 77.4 IIs, 1.6 IIIs.

With the exception of Course 2, which in years 2-3 does not include literature more recent than Shakespeare, the degree requires a demonstrated command of the fullest range of periods and genres. I saw some very good work ranging from Biblical poetry in English, through Old English and Medieval language and literature, through Shakespeare to modern literary genres and film. The key skills demonstrated included, among most of the Firsts, a consistent ability to engage closely with the question, to draw on a range of primary and secondary sources, to make a clear, coherent argument. There was some evidence in moving borderline cases into the First class that the ability to focus on the question may not be as important as it once was, but generally the standards of the course are high, uniquely conservative of the full range of the discipline, and demanding in the skills of written argument.

(ii) Extent to which assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment, and have been fairly conducted:

At the First Marks meeting, there were 38/237 established Firsts, or 16%, rising to a possible 24% if 20 re-reads were confirmed. Externals had commented in previous years on the breadth of the I/II border for re-reading (technically 68.5 but practically 67.5) and the unadvisability of re-opening raw marks when they had been agreed and in many cases already adjudicated by third readings. Noting again the scope for arbitrariness and injustice that such re-readings might allow, as well as the ample avenues for raising marks before the meeting, the External Examiners saw their role not as renegotiation of marks but of consistency with the published criteria. As reported in individual cases in detail at the Final Marks meeting, our view in most cases was that these were genuine borderline cases and not to be raised. When some were in fact raised by internal examiners, the rationale was at least defensible according to the Borderlines I and Iii Procedures 2007-08; however, I would recommend reducing the opportunity for inequity and arbitrariness by not reopening raw marks that have been agreed and even in some cases read by a third reader.

Medical and Disability Cases Committee met and the Chair and Secretary had helpfully collected and collated previous practice. All cases but one were resolved without dispute in the Committee. That one, a potential case of plagiarism, had been referred to the Proctors and was assigned to an External. It was resolved in the candidate's favour before the Final Marks meeting. It seems clear that the emphasis on examination rather than coursework significantly reduces potential plagiarism, compared with other institutions.

(iii) The standards of student performance in the programmes:

Given the demands of the course, which in terms of breadth of historical periods and genres must be the most strenuous in the UK, the students perform at a very high level. However, they are noticeably trained to perform in the particular format of focussed essays in the exam context rather than in extended independent or original research. The course provides limited opportunity to develop extended essays and portfolios that might earn marks above 80. If the optional thesis is made compulsory, that will afford opportunity to break the mid-70 ceiling.

(iv) Comparability of standards and student achievements with other HE institutions:

Oxford students have a wider range of period and genres and a more focussed range of skills due to the heavy emphasis on examinations rather than extended essays, portfolios and theses. At their best, they can write superior arguments, with a range of kinds of evidence, focussed on a topic, and they probably perfect these skills at a uniquely high level. They are demonstrably well-prepared to take exams, where their questions and deadlines are set for them. The best students at other institutions write more substantive research papers and engage with a range of scholarly and professional contexts, possibly giving rise to more originality and independence of thought. They are better prepared perhaps to answer the question: so what? Why does your reading matter?

(v) Issues which should be brought to the attention of committees:

Faculty/department:

- Before the First Marks meeting, internal examiners might reduce the exceptionally large border between First and Iii by agreeing marks clearly on either side of the border. This will reduce the opportunity for arbitrariness later in the process and the time spent re-reading work that has already been agreed and in many cases already read a third time.
- There is evidence from a number of papers that a choice of many fewer questions, e.g., 3, encourages students to focus better than a very long list of questions, e.g. 30.
- The Examiners' Report for Paper 8h (Postcolonial Literature) was confirmed by External reading: with a large range of possible literatures, this paper needs strong formal and methodological orientation and might benefit from being taught centrally.
- The Statistics by Marker report for 2008 shows a notable imbalance in workload for examining. This may be balanced by postgraduate supervision or college duties, but, if not, Conrad, Horobin, Shrimpton, Womersley have exceptionally high loads, especially Horobin with 246 scripts.
- With its emphasis on examinations rather than extended research essays, and on earlier literary and language periods rather than modern and contemporary forms, Oxford's remains a conservative education in the classic sense. Given the role of new media in their lives and futures, are students being well served with the current balance? In her Report, the Chair pointed out that Course 2, which focuses entirely on pre-Shakespeare, had "twice as many examiners as candidates." The most adventurous work, on the other hand, is perhaps in the language paper 1, where several candidates did write about new electronic communications.

Division and wider University:

- In a world where the majority of students are offered continuous assessment and feedback, the drama of assessment at the end of the third year may begin to look less desirable to incoming classes. However, there are benefits, too, to not being prematurely judged. The blind double-marking and even third re-readings of assessed work—practices that have declined elsewhere due to continuous assessment—are probably necessary when all assessment is summative at the end of the degree.
- Also in her Report, the Chair noted that the Faculty was “heavily indebted to non-post holders” for assessment and marking. This is out of line with other institutions, which typically discourage assessment by non-permanent members of staff.

(vi) Good practice

- The internal examiners are with very few exceptions thoughtful and thorough in their comments, rightly taking great pains in their assessment. The Examiners’ Reports are thorough and helpful, a model of good practice.
- In the three years that I have examined, I have seen students’ engagement with secondary literature grow substantially and have seen some improvement in the preparation and use of scholarly bibliography. I assume that this is a result of more conscious tutoring in bibliography.
- The provision of statistical data has improved over the three years I have examined, and it is extremely illuminating. Statistics on average marks by paper are exceedingly helpful and could easily be employed for official purposes of moderation, making double marking redundant. Many highly rated research institutions do this, finding the statistics more robust than the politics of double marking and thus saving staff countless hours. However, as noted in (v) above, summative assessment at the end of the third year probably necessitates intensive double marking and re-reading.
- The stats on numbers of candidates taking each optional subject in conjunction with the average marks by paper show the popularity of modern authors and especially American lit. and the high quality of performance when tested on them.
- The gender statistics are volatile and should be watched and analyzed closely, especially on the Shakespeare paper and optional thesis.



## **FHS JOINT SCHOOL REPORTS**

### **FHS CLASSICS AND ENGLISH 2008**

#### **Examiners' Reports**

Of the nine candidates, three received Firsts, six II.1s. The rise in Firsts was very pleasing (one last year); there was a lot of impressive work, on English, Classics, and link papers. Although the joint school presents only a tiny sample, wider concerns on the fortunes of female candidates make it notable that the three male candidates came first, second, and fourth.

Besides the compulsory Epic paper, 8 candidates offered Tragedy, 4 Reception, 3 Comedy, 2 Satire, 1 Pastoral, and 1 (just before its extinction?) Rhetoric and Literary Theory. 7 offered Latin Core, 2 Greek Core, 4 Ovid, 1 each Hellenistic Poetry, Sexuality and Gender, the Conversion of Augustine, Republic in Crisis. 4 offered 1832-1900, 4 1900 to the present day, 3 1740-1832, 2 Shakespeare, 1 each 1100-1509, 1642-1740, Woolf, American Literature, Old and Early Middle Irish, and an optional thesis.

#### **Epic**

Both examiners were struck by the sheer amount that the candidates are asked to do in three hours, and one, at least, by the disparity between the rubric of this paper and that of tragedy.

In tragedy, candidates only have to do three things in three hours, whereas in epic they have to do four; and given that this includes two commentaries (including one comparison of a passage of classical epic with its rendition by Pope / Dryden AND a long, rich, passage of Milton to comment on), this seems rather a tall order. Only the very best candidate managed to surmount superficiality, especially in the Milton commentary.

In section A, most of the questions went unanswered (save 3, 5, and 9), which was somewhat dispiriting given the enormous effort that went into thinking them up. In section B, most but not all were answered (not 18, 19, 24); particularly popular was the essay about man's struggle to orient himself in time in epic.

There weren't any seriously weak candidates, and one or two stars. The weaker candidates reverted to word-order and sound-effects in the commentary passages; other problems included over-reading and a tendency to make passages meta-poetical in a way that stretched credibility. In the essays they pressed tutorial material into service without making its relevance very clear, but this is a general human failing. The best candidates really knew their stuff and showed a grip of detail, and ability to quote, that would match that of a straight classicist. As with the tragedy paper, there was relatively little evidence of garbled ancient languages.

#### **Tragedy**

Overall, the standard on this paper was good, with candidates in general showing a commendable and occasionally impressive willingness to engage in detail with the comparative demands of the section B essays. Many of the essays were clear-sighted, capably organized and well informed. At the top end, scripts were ambitious and engaged energetically and creatively with the precise demands of the question; at the lower end, there

was some tendency towards drifting off the theme and becoming narrative. As ever, precise and nuanced attention to the terms of the questions yielded higher marks than essays that were off-topic or digressive.

All the essay questions in section B were answered in some shape or form. In section A, one candidate tackled the Seneca gobbet, but no-one felt up to the *Agamemnon*, even though it was only iambics (the watchman's speech at the very beginning of the play). Questions 3–5, 7, and 9–12, also went unanswered. Particularly popular were 15 (analepsis) and 19 (pleasure in tragic language). The usual frailties were on display: in particular, as has already been indicated, candidates who didn't face up to what a question was asking. 'Multiple determination' (18) isn't just asking for a roster of the role of the gods and fate in various tragedies; and 'tragic characterisation' isn't asking for a comparative study of the representation of one particular tragic character. On the other hand, the best of the candidates were able to go considerably *beyond* the terms of a question (e.g. on place and context of performance). Some candidates were also able to summon up quite a wide range of reference to classical texts (e.g. Medea in Ap. Rhod. 4; Simaetha in Theocr. *Id.* 2) and significantly less garbling of classical languages was on display than last year (e.g. the memorable *xenox*).

## **Comedy**

There were three candidates, each of a decent 2.1 standard. All three did the essays on happy endings and on comedy and power; none attempted a commentary.

## **English Literature 1832-1900**

There were seven candidates in the joint schools this year. Many chose to answer the same questions, with question 10 attracting four answers, questions 5 and 22, three each, and question 17, two. The standard was generally high. Pleasingly, the range of authors chosen and the approach to the questions appeared to reflect the differing interests and emphases encouraged by the joint schools.

## **English Literature 1900 to the present day**

Essays addressed a wide range of themes and topics – almost every question on the paper was attempted – including Modernist undecidability, the Modernist politics of impersonality, the role of the city, modern reinventions of the novel and postmodern rewritings, gender politics, confessional poetry, Empire and postcolonial fiction. The most impressive scripts not only presented a wide range of textual material, but used it to develop the argument; in the less impressive, the references to texts tended to confirm repeatedly an argument that was announced at the outset. The best candidates were aware of the importance of form and style in texts in this period, and read these in the light of material and historical contexts. Several of the successful candidates made swift passing reference to literary theory and literary critics to clarify their arguments.

The Chairman and the English co-ordinator discussed the marks in the week before the final meeting. The classifications emerged without difficulty, and were confirmed at a meeting of all the examiners. The external examiners had read all the scripts from candidates at the top and bottom of the school and on a borderline.

The Chairman is very grateful to the English co-ordinator, Dr L. G. Black, and to all who set papers and read scripts, extended essays, and the thesis. He is also very grateful to Mrs R. Chapman for typing many of the lengthy link papers, to Ms H. McGregor for her cheerful assistance, and most especially to Ms A. Johnson, who took the joint school under her wing, and preserved it from confused aberration.

G. O. Hutchinson  
Chairman of Examiners

### **External Examiners**

**Final Honour Schools of Classics and English**

**Dr Raphael Lyne, University of Cambridge**

**7<sup>th</sup> July 2008**

### **Classics and English**

#### **(a) Appropriateness of academic standards set for awards**

I read representative runs of scripts from the top and bottom of the list, and a candidate on a borderline who just received a First. Overall, three candidates received Firsts, and the other 6 2.1s. All the candidates impressed with the range of their work and the variety of tasks required of them (with one proviso, see under (d) below). The examiners discriminated between them fairly and the standards in evidence were both high and appropriate.

#### **(b) Extent to which assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment, and have been fairly conducted**

From what I saw, the individual markers were consistent, insightful, and accurate in their assessments. The business at the examiners' meeting was conducted scrupulously. No candidate ended up on a class borderline so the externals were not called upon to make such decisions.

#### **(c) The standards of student performance in the programme**

As in FHS English, the most striking thing about their performances was the range of their work. Here it was more the range of tasks in which they excelled (or did not), rather than the range of material they were able to get down in the allotted time. The course enables students to compile fascinating and demanding programmes in which they often excel. The best work was concise, tuned in to the nuances of the question, neatly expressed, and always nuanced. The less good work lacked these virtues, but could usually manage a competent survey. Re-reading across the board enabled me to appreciate the work put in to the link papers. While one on its own may have seemed like a modest achievement to its examiners (rightly), seeing three in a row brought home to me how this course stretches, and enables, its students.

#### **(d) Comparability of standards and student achievements with other HE institutions**

The virtues described above, and my confidence in the classing, means that I am more than content with the comparability of standards and student achievement. I did note, however, that of the three candidates I read, two of them had submitted no extended essay. This is (I

gather) not unusual in Classics, but it is very different from English (where three or four of eight assessed elements are non-exam writing of some sort). It seems to me unusual that final-year students are not assessed on any extended written work. The range of work that results is valuable, but the discipline of writing a dissertation brings other benefits. I think that those at the lower end, who can often make a fairly rudimentary job of handling a wide-ranging exam paper, benefit particularly from the chance to consider and investigate more deeply.

**(e) Issues which should be brought to the attention of committees (in the faculties)**

My answer under (d) outlines my feelings about the inclusion, or otherwise, of an extended essay. I assume this is given thought from time to time.

I note that the internal examiners' report observes that the Epic paper asks an awful lot of the students in three hours. I also felt this.

The Classics scripts I saw were not always accompanied by both examiners' comments. These are very helpful indeed, and always appreciated.

**Final Honour Schools of Literae Humaniores, Classics and English, Classics and Modern Languages, Classics and Oriental Studies**  
**Alison Sharrock, University of Manchester**  
**June 2008**

**Papers in classical literature**

I offer my report using the headings recommended in the communication sent from the central exams office.

*(i) whether the academic standards set for its awards, or part thereof, are appropriate;*

Yes.

*(ii) the extent to which its assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students and have been fairly conducted within institutional regulations and guidance;*

The assessment process is extremely rigorous. I would particularly commend the continued practice of double blind marking. In almost every case, I was extremely impressed by the careful attention to detail applied by the examiners, despite heavy loads and complex rules. As last year, I do wonder whether the use of assessors reading small numbers of scripts might cause instabilities in the standards applied, but I am sure there were no serious issues and this is just something to watch. Cases of medical and other special circumstances were brought to the attention of the examiners, who made every effort to ensure that no one was disadvantaged. You can be confident that all students have been treated fairly.

*(iii) the standards of student performance in the programmes or parts of programmes which they have been appointed to examine;*

The overall standard of student performance is, as one would expect, very high. I was delighted, this year, to see some exceptionally scholarly and sophisticated work from the best candidates (something which I missed last year). At the other end of the scale, there were some weak performances in lit. hum., largely due to special circumstances. Setting aside the small number of particular problems, even the weaker students in the pack know quite a lot and can make some use of what they know. The worst failings were cases where adequately intelligent but inadequately unprepared students offered answers, particularly commentaries, on texts that they clearly did not know; there were also, unsurprisingly, cases of failure to focus closely on the question or to address a sufficiently wide range of texts and issues. Some of my comments from last year apply equally well this year: '[m]ost students write extremely well and show wide knowledge of the subjects, in some cases accompanied by a degree of sophistication. Most students were good at avoiding compartmentalisation of their knowledge and skills. The weaker students produced commentaries which did little more than paraphrase the passage (thus at least showing that they were able to understand it, although with the very weakest answers one was occasionally in doubt), while the essays tended to be more descriptive than analytical. A common fault was a preference for generalities over specific examples which might support an argument effectively.'

*(iv) where appropriate, the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in some other higher education institutions;*

As one would expect, the standard of student achievement overall is higher in Oxford than in other institutions with which I am familiar. The proportion of first and upper second class degrees awarded is higher than in my own institution, and could be held to be contributing to the national problem of grade inflation. As regards the first point, however, it is simply an appropriate reflection of the student base and the teaching resources that the proportion of high grades should be higher; as regards the second, it is difficult and perhaps not appropriate for any individual university to solve the problem.

*(v) issues which should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University:*

The main issue with regard to lit. hum. was the difficulties caused by problems from the computer system. From the outside, it looks to me as if Mark-It has many benefits, including the provision of statistical analyses, and that it copes with many complicated rules. Any system like this, however, especially when it needs to be so much personalised to the needs of each Honour School, requires more technical support than was available. There were some cases when only the meticulous attention of examiners ensured the avoidance of quite significant errors.

As regards the coordination between the Joint Schools, I would commend Classics and English as outstanding in its organisation as well as in the quality and in particular the integration of the course. Coordination between Classics and Modern Languages, while somewhat minimalist, seemed to be perfectly effective. I felt less comfortable about the organisation of Classics and Oriental Studies, perhaps in part because there are not always candidates in this School. There were in fact no difficulties, but I did wonder whether if there had been problematic cases than the slightly scrappy arrangements might have made it more difficult to ensure that justice was done in such cases.

There is much concern throughout the university system both over grade-inflation and over the need to distinguish between candidates, including at the level of the individual answer, where we are all encouraged 'to use the spread of marks'. It is perhaps an unfortunate side-effect of the Oxford system (blind double marking, followed in some cases by third marking which is not allowed to go outside the parameters of the first two marks) that it will tend to pull marks towards the centre. I detected a good deal of awareness among examiners of these issues. My impression, although it is only an impression, is that overall the markers (both examiners and assessors) appeared to be somewhat timid at the very top level, but on the generous side at the next level down, such that competent but uninspiring work was given, for example, 71, while truly outstanding work was lucky to get 77. I think that part of the reason for this is that many markers are responding to the request to use the spread of marks, but the really outstanding work is sufficiently rare that any individual marker (of which there are many) will see few or none in some years. At the other end of the scale, it is likewise the case that Oxford markers see very little really poor work. To take in particular the case of translation, the grade descriptor for a third class mark is rather less harsh than most examiners were inclined to be with poor translation. On the other hand, at the lower end of the main pack of candidates, which in practice is fairly near to the 2.1/2.2 borderline, markers could perhaps be a little harsher. As last year, I noticed that the effect of the profile of results in all schools with which I was involved is that the 2.1 category is extremely wide, with insufficient differentiation between the top and the bottom of the class.

For the reasons that I mentioned last year, I would not want to encourage moves away from final examinations towards assessment by essay. For your convenience, I repeat here what I said last year. 'Most papers are assessed by unseen examination, which I consider to be the best method. I did hear some questioning among colleagues as to whether assessing more courses by extended essay could be beneficial in addressing some problems (the relative lack of papers achieving very high first-class marks; the dominance of male candidates among the highest firsts), but it is my personal view that while an extended essay may be an effective form of assessment (although in fact it has many difficulties surrounding it, plagiarism not the least), it is a much less valuable form of pedagogy. The great benefit of exams is the amount that candidates learn in preparation for them.' To this point I would add also my impression that assessment by essay discourages students from making connections across the range of their knowledge. Some papers in lit. hum. were assessed by extended essay this year, but in all cases except for Reception the essay was accompanied by a translation paper, which certainly adds to its rigour. There was also an effort made in the setting of the rubric to ensure that candidates cover a reasonable range. The results were okay, but generally not outstanding. One point, however, I would like to make with regard to all assessed work: it important to raise the bar. On first reading, it can be tempting to compare an extended essay or dissertation with exam work, and thus to be unduly impressed, but one is not comparing like with like. The weakest extended essay which I read (for monitoring purposes) was in my opinion lucky to get away with a lowish 2.2 mark, being messy in presentation and in thought, and not well focused on its question. The description I have just given seems to me appropriate to a low 2.2 mark in an exam, but not in an assessed essay. For completeness, however, I should mention that the best of the extended essays which I reviewed was an excellent piece of work which could reasonably have been given the mark of 80 recommended by one of its original markers.

(vi) *good practice that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

Blind double marking (despite the side-effects); dedication on the part of examiners; impressive range of knowledge and skills developed by students (particularly on four-year courses); relative avoidance of compartmentalisation; some outstanding performances including several in lit. hum. (one of which was from a Course II candidate) plus an excellent candidate in COS.

## ENGLISH AND MODERN LANGUAGES

### Examiners' Report

#### 1. Statistics

##### 1.1 Numbers of candidates, by Modern Language

|                      | <b>2008</b> | 2007 | 2006 | 2005 |
|----------------------|-------------|------|------|------|
| French               | <b>9</b>    | 9    | 14   | 15   |
| German               | <b>5</b>    | 5    | 8    | 8    |
| Italian              | -           | 1    | 2    | 0    |
| Spanish              | -           | 2    | 3    | 3    |
| Portuguese           | <b>1</b>    | 1    | -    | -    |
| Russian              | <b>1</b>    | 2    | 1    | 2    |
| Mod. Greek           | -           |      |      |      |
| <b>Total entries</b> | <b>16</b>   | 20   | 26   | 27   |

##### 1.2 Classes awarded (previous two year's figures in brackets where available)

|                  | I                  | II.1               | II.2         |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| French           | <b>3</b> (4)       | <b>5</b> (5)       | <b>1</b> (-) |
| German           | <b>4</b> (2)       | <b>1</b> (3)       | -            |
| Italian          | - (1)              | -                  | -            |
| Spanish          | - (2)              | -                  | -            |
| Portuguese       | - (-)              | <b>1</b> (1)       | -            |
| Russian          | <b>1</b> (1)       | - (1)              | -            |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>8</b> (10, 15)  | <b>7</b> (10, 11)  | <b>1</b> (-) |
| <b>Total (%)</b> | <b>50</b> (50, 58) | <b>44</b> (50, 42) | <b>6</b> (-) |

##### 1.3 Classes awarded by gender (% of class for this year and last given in brackets)

|        | I                 | II.1              | II.2              | TOTAL |
|--------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Female | <b>7</b> (88, 50) | <b>4</b> (57, 90) | <b>1</b> (100, -) | 12    |
| Male   | <b>1</b> (12, 50) | <b>3</b> (43, 10) | -                 | 4     |

#### 1.4 Percentage of each gender in each class

|        | I         | II.1      | II.2  |
|--------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Female | 58 (33.7) | 34 (64.3) | 8 (-) |
| Male   | 25 (83.3) | 75 (16.7) |       |

Distinctions in the oral use of the relevant foreign language were awarded to 8 candidates, six of them female.

The distribution of Distinctions by languages was: French 3, German 3, Portuguese 1 and Russian 1.

#### 2. Examiners

For English the examiners were: Dr H O'Donoghue (Linacre), Dr M Kean (St Hilda's) and Dr N Shrimpton (LMH), Coordinator. The External Examiner was Prof. R Gagnier (Exeter University)

For Modern Languages the examiners were: Dr M Nicholson, Univ (Russian), Chairman, Dr S Marnette, Balliol (French), Dr B Morgan, Worcester (German) and Dr S. Brandellero, Queen's (Portuguese). The External Examiner for Modern Languages was Dr Roger Keys (Durham University, Russian).

#### 3. Conduct of the Examination

A set of Marking Conventions was drawn up by the Chairman and agreed by this year's examiners. This was complicated by the fact that conflicting variants of the Conventions had been initially drawn up by English and by Modern Languages in the previous year. That matter was resolved at the time, but had left variants and minutes in the files which initially led to some confusion. The conventions agreed by this year's Examiners contain a reference (under 4.1) to rotation of the Chairmanship of EML between English and Modern Languages, which will need to be corrected next year; The Chairman of the ML FHS and the Chairman of the ML Faculty have since confirmed the agreed position that, in the interests of continuity, Chairmanship of Examiners in Joint Schools with ML of Examiners should be fixed and not rotate, with the Chair being provided by Modern Languages and a Deputy by English.

#### 4. Final Marks meeting

The meeting itself went smoothly (but see 5, below), Dr Shrimpton having agreed to act as Coordinator on the English side. It was decided that a letter of congratulations should be sent to the highest First in EML

Concern voiced by the English External Examiner over the high proportion of Firsts awarded prompted discussion, which included the following points: the marks for component papers to which the EML Examiners applied their conventions were awarded and moderated within the parent Schools on the same basis as those for other candidates taking those papers; the tendency for this Joint School to attract strong candidates had been remarked upon in recent years on the Modern Languages side, and the percentage of Firsts awarded this year was in line with that of the past two years. [The top candidate in EML was subsequently awarded the Gibbs Prize for the best performance in any Joint School with Modern Languages.]



## **5. Entry of marks**

The morning after the evening meeting at which the list was signed, but before the Class Lists had been posted, a sharp-eyed Examiner discovered an error in transcription affecting marks for one ML paper. Marks were checked and adjusted where necessary. All examiners were contacted and agreed orally to the corrections, pending the signing of a new list. On that basis the Junior Proctor agreed to the release of the Class List without significant delay, and the corrected signing-off sheets were duly signed and deposited. This appeared to have been a one-off error.

## **6. Chairman-elect for 2008-9**

Following the Standing Committee's decision that the Chairmanship of this School should always be held by a Modern Languages examiner, next year's Chairman will be Dr M Nicholson, Chair of the FHS in Modern Languages.

### **External Examiner**

#### **To the Vice-Chancellor**

#### **Report of the External Examiner for the Honour and Pass Schools of English and Modern Languages**

**7 July 2008**

**Professor Regenia Gagnier, University of Exeter**

I was given an up to date copy of the Joint Examinations Conventions, which was very helpful, and the Board ran very smoothly this year, from notification of procedure by the Chair (Russian) to distribution of reading papers (English scripts from the highest and lowest Firsts and IIs, and the only Iii) to the Final Marks meeting itself. All was well organized and ran smoothly, which suggests that after some difficulties in previous years the procedures are settled.

Out of 16 joint English/Modern Language candidates 8 or 50% received Firsts, 7 or 43% received Iii, and 1 or 6% received Iii. This was consistent with 50% Firsts last year. As noted last year, this is the highest percentage of Firsts in a course I have seen. We discussed this at length at the meeting and subsequently by e-mail. It was noted that the Gibbs Prize for the best performance in any joint school with Modern Languages (i.e., English, Classics, Modern History, Philosophy and European and Middle Eastern Languages) went to EML's best first and EML's second-best first was also higher than the best of any other Joint School. It appears that EML gets more than its share of strong Modern Linguists, that the combination of the English Literature course and modern linguists produces strong work.

A second plausible explanation for the high proportion of Firsts was admissions: there were no college quotas for candidates, so they are admitted solely on the basis of highest potential. These facts and inferences notwithstanding, it might be useful to collect data on percentages of Firsts across modern languages. Currently English Honours has about 21%, Modern Languages around 28%, and this Joint course 50%. What is indisputable, however, is that the English scripts of the EML Joint School were of a comparable standard to English Honours. They demonstrate the same range, ability to focus on the question, and skill in argumentation.

Other differences among ML noted at the meeting include 1) the giving of exceptionally high (80+) marks on scripts in ML, where English Criteria only recommend these for extended research essays. This, too, may influence the high percentage of Firsts.

2) It was observed that the definition under Examination Conventions 1.10 of short-weight differs from that in English. The Joint Committee might consider recommendations to bring them in line.

## **HISTORY AND ENGLISH**

### **Examiners' Report**

There were seven candidates this year, six of whom were female. None withdrew during the examination and none provided medical evidence to the examiners. One candidate submitted a bridge paper essay to Schools a day late and was fined £50 but the proctors did not recommend an academic penalty.

Three candidates were awarded firsts (two female and one male) and the remaining four (all female) upper seconds. It was pleasing to see such high quality in so small a school (42.9% firsts and 57.1% upper seconds): by comparison, last year there were only two firsts and eleven upper seconds out of thirteen candidates.

Each candidate took two bridge papers: Representing the City, 1558-1640 and Postcolonial Historiography: Writing the (Indian) Nation. Here are the relevant statistics:

#### Bridge papers

Postcolonial paper by exam - 1 candidate II.1

Representing the City paper by exam - 1 candidate II.1

Postcolonial paper by essay - 6 candidates - 3 firsts, 3 II.1s

Representing the City paper by essay - 6 candidates - 3 firsts, 3 II.1s

In this context it is worth noting that in line with the recommendation made in last year's examiners' report, the joint committee considered the viability of the maintenance of an examination paper option for bridge papers and decided that it should be discontinued. The resulting changes to exam regulations that have been approved by both Faculties will ensure that as of 2010 all bridge papers will be examined by extended essay only.

Most candidates did very well in both English and History courses. There were only a couple discrepancies between markers of bridge papers which were adjudicated by external examiners. Overall, the standard of performance in this School was excellent.

As ever we are very grateful to the administrative staff of the two faculty offices, led by Andrea Hopkins, Angie Johnson and Louise Parkinson, and to the staff of the Examination Schools for their invaluable assistance in the conduct of the examination.

Prof. J Boffey (External), Dr S Bridgen, Dr P Kewes (Chair), Dr A Mukherjee, Dr J Pitcher, Dr S Tuck, Prof. A Walsham (External), Dr B. Young.

**To the Vice-Chancellor  
Report of the External Examiner for the Honour and Pass Schools of English and  
History**

**13 July 2008**

**Professor Julia Boffey, Queen Mary University of London**

There were 14 candidates this year, classified as six first-class and eight upper-second: an advance on 2007, when (as I was informed) 13 candidates generated two firsts and eleven upper-seconds. There were no medical cases. It is worth noting that the top-scoring candidate elected to write extended essays rather than written exams.

**Please refer to the History Faculty main school Examiners' Reports for the report of Alex Walsham (History External Examiner for English and History).**

## M.ST.

### Ms Jeri Johnson, Chair OF M.ST. EXAMINERS

#### Part I

##### A. STATISTICS

###### (1) Numbers and percentages in each class/category

###### (a) Unclassified Examinations

| Category    | Number   |         |         | Percentage |         |         |
|-------------|----------|---------|---------|------------|---------|---------|
|             | 2007/08* | 2006/07 | 2005/06 | 2007/08*   | 2006/07 | 2005/06 |
| Distinction | 25       | ( 35 )  | ( 33 )  | 40.3       | ( 55 )  | ( 49 )  |
| Pass        | 35       | ( 28 )  | ( 35 )  | 56.5       | ( 43 )  | ( 51 )  |
| Fail        | 0        | ( 0 )   | ( 0 )   | 0          | ( 0 )   | ( 0 )   |

\*Two students (3.2%) are yet to complete; should re-submitted work not pass, these two will convert to 'Fail's.

###### (2) Vivas

Vivas were not used.

###### (3) Marking of scripts

All essays were double-marked.

#### B. NEW EXAMINING METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The precise criteria for a Distinction have changed in each of the last three years (for various reasons, including the failure to coordinate the notice in the *Handbook* with the Examiners' marking and classification criteria; this failure has now been remedied by a statement in the *Handbook* that the criteria given are for information only and are *not* binding on Examiners). They have included: (i) that a Distinction is achieved by an average of 68 (on the three essays?) and a mark of 70 in the Dissertation; (ii) that a Distinction is achieved by an average of 70 on the three essays and a mark of 70 on the Dissertation. This year's Examiners required an average of 70 *overall* and a mark of 70 on the Dissertation for a Distinction. This meant that three students who would not have achieved Distinctions under (ii) above, did so this year. Criteria (i) would have produced no more Distinctions than were actually awarded this year.

**C. Please list any changes in examining methods, procedures and conventions which the Examiners would wish the faculty/department and the divisional board to consider.**

- (i) The marking criteria were refined and expanded this year, to produce fuller specifications and clearer points of discrimination. These included the definition of, and elaboration of characteristics of work falling within, 'bands': 'Highest Distinction' (over 85), 'High Distinction' (75-84), 'Distinction' (70-74), 'High Pass' (65-69), 'Low Pass' (60-64), 'Fail' (50-59) and 'Low Fail' (40-49). (See attached 'Marking and Distinction Criteria' and 'Guidance to Examiners'.)
- (ii) Internal markers were required to submit raw marks before conferring with other markers, and to specify how agreement was reached between the two internal markers. (This practice had not been being carefully observed.)
- (iii) Statements that the work submitted is entirely that of the candidate were required to be presented with each piece of written work. (This appears not to have happened previously.)
- (iv) A specified date for any required re-sit of any Paleography/Transcription 'test' has been added into the permanent calendar (in the *Handbook*).
- (v) Clarification that *no* feedback is to be provided on candidates' performance in these tests has been given (and must be enforced). (Candidates must pass; marks are not recorded, nor are they considered in any way when determining classification.)

Points (iii) – (v) have been made as a result of individual cases investigated by the Proctors.

**D. Please describe how candidates are made aware of the examination conventions to be followed by the Examiners (Please attach to the report a copy of the conventions and any other relevant documentation [including the relevant standing orders – see *Examination Regulations*, 2006, p. 17, ll. 31-36]).**

The attached document (See Appendix 1), 'Marking and Distinction Criteria', was sent to all candidates early in Michaelmas term.

**Part II**

**A. GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT THE EXAMINATION**

See attached report.

**B. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES ISSUES AND BREAKDOWN OF THE RESULTS BY GENDER**

**Review of grades by reference to gender:**

|             | Percentage: Female / Male |         |         |
|-------------|---------------------------|---------|---------|
| Category    | 2007-8                    | 2006/07 | 2005/06 |
| MSt School  | 73 / 27                   | 56 / 44 | 59 / 41 |
| Distinction | 56 / 44                   | 46 / 54 | 41 / 61 |
| Pass        | 83 / 17                   | 68 / 32 | 59 / 39 |
| Fail        | 0 / 0                     | 0 / 0   | 0 / 0   |
| Incomplete  | 100 / 0                   | 0 / 0   | 0 / 0   |

### **C. DETAILED NUMBERS ON CANDIDATES' PERFORMANCE IN EACH PART OF THE EXAMINATION**

N/A for M.St.

### **D. COMMENTS ON PAPERS AND INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS**

N/A for M.St.

### **E. COMMENTS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF IDENTIFIABLE INDIVIDUALS AND OTHER MATERIAL WHICH WOULD USUALLY BE TREATED AS RESERVED BUSINESS**

This part is physically separate.

### **F. NAMES OF MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS**

Ms Jeri Johnson (Chair)

Professor Vincent Gillespie

Dr. Bart Van Es

Dr Ros Ballaster

Dr Peter McDonald (ChCh)

Professor R. Bush

Professor Thorlac Turville-Petre (External)

Professor Gordon McMullan (External)

Professor Michael O'Neill (External)

Professor Claire Lamont (External)

Professor Peter Nicholls (External)

### **M.ST. AND M.PHIL. IN ENGLISH, CHAIR OF EXAMINERS' REPORT FOR**

#### **2007-8**

This year, fewer candidates received Distinctions (25 (40%)) than in the last two years (35 (55%) in 2007, 33 (49%) in 2008), but about the same percentage as did so in 2005 (29 (39%)). (The criteria are slightly different this year, but see Section I.B. above.) This is still a very creditable performance overall and not out of line with performance in equivalent Humanities Master's courses across the University.

The External Examiners, Professors Claire Lamont, Michael O'Neill, Peter Nicholls, Gordon McMullan and Thorlac Turville-Peter, all remarked the high achievement of the candidates, the 'tremendous ambition' at the top of the range, the careful archival and critical work, the congratulations due to the students for their evident hard work and to all internal markers for the precision and rigour of their marking (described as 'extremely accurate across the board'). We were able to keep the final Examiners' Meeting to a single, morning, session thus sparing them the arduous task of reading large quantities of material over a lunch break as was required last year. The internal Examiners owe the externals profuse thanks for the care and attention they paid to scrutinizing borders and adjudicating (the very few) disagreements and for offering acute observations on the entire process.

The first two Examiners' meetings were convened again by conference call. This worked exceptionally well.

Jemma Underdown, as Graduate Studies Administrator, deserves enormous thanks for her swift, organized, nearly faultless oversight and administration of this year's examination.

She was helped in this by Joan Arthur, thanks to whose institutional memory more than one knotty problem was quickly sorted. This year's Chair agreed to chair the examinations next year before realizing that both Jemma and Joan would leave the Faculty this summer. She is now seriously regretting her decision, for these two made everything run smoothly. Our enormous thanks and good wishes go to them.

### **Administration**

Despite the exemplary work of our administrators, two or three small problems arose this year (see II.C. (ii)-(v) above). These have been put right, and should now be part of the regular procedures for the examination, and should not arise again.

That the board of Examiners were able quickly to assign all (proposed) markers and assessors in each of two preliminary meetings – and that, with the exception of dissertations, the largest bulk of the marking was confined to Examiners and course convenors, and that Faculty were almost universally willing to mark work when asked to do so – meant that many problems from last year were avoided. The Administrator was able quickly to refer a handful of 'do not agree to mark' questions to the Chair and Examiners who then proposed alternatives. This worked well.

Still, the Chair must be provided, early in the year, with a full list of all course convenors (i.e., 'first markers') and the boards of Examiners for Schools and of Moderators for Mods.

It is still true that, as Professor Lee wrote two years ago, 'the process of continuous or on-going assessment which we have put in place for the M. St. in order that the students can have some feedback and sense of progress (and can have marks in place for funding applications) means that there is an intense series of deadlines and a great deal of administrative work to do all through the year.' This year the Examiners met early in Michaelmas term and agreed a schedule of meetings throughout the year that made this entire operation run smoothly. It is strongly recommended that this schedule be followed again this year. While it does require a couple of extra meetings for the internal Examiners, these invariably ran efficiently and accomplished tasks that would have taken the Chair alone (even helped by the Administrator) hours and hours of extra work. Given the course requirement that assessment be provided of each piece of coursework submitted, this is the most expeditious way to ensure that this happen.

(It seems that the English M.St. is a real outlier among Master's courses in the University in so providing such ongoing assessment. On two separate occasions, when the Chair had to contact the Proctors about individual cases, it was clear that our procedures in this respect were considered 'exceptionally unusual', and that this gave the Proctors pause.)

### **Internal Marking and Feedback Forms**

In each case, 'C' papers were marked, first, by the course convenor and, second, by either an Examiner or an Assessor (usually an Examiner). The 'B' essays were first marked by a group of three, each of whom had been involved in the teaching of the paper at some point this year or in the past, and second marked either by one of these three or an Examiner.

The number of assessors used for the marking of dissertations was high, but the vast majority were also marked by an Examiner (in less than 15% of cases was it necessary for two assessors to mark a dissertation). This worked well. It meant that each Examiner had oversight of a longish run of dissertations to ensure consistency of marking. When External Examiners were asked to scrutinize borderline marks (where the first two marks straddled

the borderline), and the high and low dissertations and essays in a degree strand, internal marks were almost invariably confirmed and when not, adjustment was within two points.

Course convenors, as the first markers, need to be reminded that it is their responsibility to produce a *coherent* report (derived from the comments of the first and second markers) to be sent to candidates. All reports to candidates were scrutinized by the Chair this year and, in more than one case, the first marker was asked to rewrite the report to make it internally consistent, and reflective of the mark that had been agreed. This must continue if the report is to be meaningful for the candidates (and if our procedures are not to be open to serious criticism).

Similarly, the section at the bottom of the comment sheet asking how the final mark was agreed (or in what ways failure to agree was occasioned) must be answered with full and specific information. External Examiners remarked how useful they found this when adjudicating. (To the question ‘how was the mark agreed?’, one marker replied, ‘by telephone’. This is *not* the right answer!)

Again, markers need to be reminded that *no* mark should be put on the comment form.

One candidate was investigated by the Proctors for plagiarism in the first ‘C’ essay. At this point, it became clear that candidates had not been required to submit a statement that the work was entirely their own. This has been corrected and such a statement is now required to accompany each piece of work.

Similarly, for the first time three candidates failed the paleography / transcription test. Because no date for re-sits had been included in the calendar as published in the *Handbook*, the Administrator and the Chair found themselves entangled in inappropriate ‘negotiations’ with candidates about their availability for re-sits. A date has now been included in the calendar. Further to this matter, feedback was provided to the failing candidates on their performance on the first test. (This was unfortunate, but understandable, given our provision of full feedback on other assessed parts of the course. This happened when the Chair was unavailable to either approve or prevent.) A Proctors’ investigation clarified that within the University, feedback is *not* provided on sat tests. This will not happen again.

### **Marking and Distinction Criteria**

These were revised this year to add greater specificity to the characteristics expected at each level (see I.C.(i) above, and attached ‘Guidance to Examiners’). This seems to have been useful. The externals repeatedly praised the accuracy of the internal marking; none remarked the need to mark more frequently at the higher range of available marks. It might be noted that eight of the 25 candidates who achieved Distinctions did so with an *average across the four elements* of 75 or above, a ‘High Distinction’ under these new criteria.

Parenthetically, it became clear that some candidates (particularly those from the U.S. that has a true percentage scale (100% being a possible mark; 90-100 for A; 80-90 for B; etc.)) did not understand the marking scale at all. This led to difficulties when a failing mark was given in the test, and candidates thought this translated to a failure to get 40% of the material right. This problem, though, extends far beyond Oxford and is not within our power to correct. Providing some explanation of the marking scale to new, non-British candidates, might obviate some problems and anxieties, however.



### **Essay and Dissertation Titles**

Again this year, ‘topics’ rather than ‘titles’ were required for the HT Week 6 deadline. These were vetted by the internal Examiners, and changes were required of a small handful of candidates (usually because the topic suggested that the dissertation would be too narrow). Thereafter, minor changes were authorized quickly by the Chair.

Scope remains a problem, however, as the External Examiners more than once remarked that candidates who limited themselves to a single text were handicapped; they could not perform as impressively as those who addressed a range of texts. Course convenors could very usefully ensure that candidates fully understand the implication of their chosen dissertation (or even essay) topics.

### **Examiners’ Meetings**

Prior to the each Examiners’ meeting, high and low marks (for essays and, finally, for dissertations), borderline marks (either where two markers straddled the 69/70 borderline or, for the final meeting, where a candidate achieved the average but not the dissertation mark (or vice versa) required for a Distinction) and cases where agreement had not been achieved internally were highlighted. The individual piece of work in question was sent to External Examiners for confirmation, adjustment or adjudication. (The first meeting followed these procedures for the first ‘C’ essay, the second for the second ‘C’ and the ‘B’ essays, the final began by doing this for the dissertations before proceeding to the scrutiny of all final profiles and confirmation of results.)

At the final meeting, one External Examiner asked that externals be sent in advance the full run of work for a borderline candidate, that is a candidate for whom a confirmation or revision of the mark in question would put them on one or the other side of the Distinction borderline. This was discussed, but *not agreed*. It was decided that the point of the adjudication of a piece of work was to judge that piece itself, without the undue influence that might be felt if the full run of work (or, indeed, marks) were known.

It was agreed, again, that the very restricted timeframe for the marking of the Dissertations precluded providing feedback on these to candidates.

### **External Markers**

It was agreed that we would revert to four External Examiners for this coming year. It should be said that the heaviest burden falls on the External responsible for both the Modern period and the English and American studies strand of the degree.

### **Fail, re-sit and distinction**

This year, two candidates failed one ‘C’ essay each. They were told that they could re-submit. The criteria for marking of re-submitted essays remained the same as last year: whatever its quality, the re-submitted essay would be ‘capped’ at a mark of 60. This mark would be added into the average; if the requirements for a Distinction were achieved, a Distinction would be awarded.

Clarification of time for submission might be useful. Candidates who failed an element are required to re-submit by the last Monday of the Long Vacation. Were they to re-submit before the initial examination concluded, the business of having to re-appoint (internal and

external) Examiners for the later re-submission would be obviated. However much we might desire this, it can not really be required of candidates.

### **External Examiners' Concerns**

The External Examiners, while repeatedly praising the outstanding performance of candidates at the top end, raised concern about various aspects of candidates' submissions, and of the course itself, either a specific strand of the course or its entirety.

First they asked that they be sent – at point of initial appointment (and if this did not happen, then *now*) – the full course specifications, and – when available – all individual course descriptions. This would go some way to obviating what they have experienced as confusion about the 'scope of the course' and the requirements for individual courses. One External Examiner commented trenchantly that the sheer diversity *and* specificity of the options make for strange bedfellows, and might lead one to ponder what coherent shape the degree could be said to have, what preparation within a period it could be said to provide. This is an important point, though one unlikely to be remedied given the very nature of the degree: it will, by design, provide an amalgam of diverse 'bits'. The Graduate Studies Board might want to consider this, though, with an eye to reaching some greater coherence in the longer term.

More locally (and as noted above), Externals not infrequently commented on the range and focus of some candidates' work: occasionally, either only a single work was addressed or the focus was exceptionally narrowed. This did not help candidates who were then not able to display any real breadth of knowledge. The Graduate Studies Board might consider specifying that more than one work must be addressed in any essay or dissertation submitted.

On the other hand, it was noted that there was very little 'language work' or work on poetry. In a similar vein, candidates who did least well presented work that was singularly lacking any acute local readings.

This was a particular concern in the English and American strand where it was felt that the rubric needed clarification. Was the course both 'English' and 'American' and if so was work on both sides required? Does it require or, less rigidly, promote 'interdisciplinary' work? Or 'formalist' work in American literature? (Candidates showed little interest in the 'texture' of writing.) As it is at the moment, the course is, as the External remarked, 'neither fish nor fowl'. Candidates' relatively poor performance in the dissertation (50% received marks at 65 or below) might derive, in part, from this lack of clarity.

But, finally, the Externals praised the rigor and accuracy of the marking, and the efficiency of the whole procedure. More importantly, they extolled the general high quality of the work, the ambitiousness and accomplishment of candidates, their obvious hard work, the exceptionally 'high octane' quality of the scholarship at the top end.

Jeri Johnson, Chair of MSt Examiners

10 October 2008

**M.St. EXTERNAL (650 – 1550)**  
**PROFESSOR THORLAC TURVILLE-PETRE**

Dear Vice-Chancellor

I have been acting this year as external examiner for the MSt and MPhil in English Studies 650-1550 in the Faculty of English Language and Literature. This has involved marking scripts in January, April and June, with a Final Examiners' Meeting on 3rd July.

The MSt candidates were very impressive. I was told this was an exceptional year, and the results bore this out, with over 50% achieving a Distinction. I agreed their high marks were fully deserved and entirely in line with marking standards elsewhere. The few Phil candidates were not so distinguished but were all competent.

The internal assessors explained the grounds for their marks, and passed on to me scripts where there was a significant difference of opinion or a problem. At the two telephone meetings and the final meeting we had full discussion of all issues, and I am confident that all issues were resolved fairly.

I asked, and it was agreed, that where-ever possible I should be given the full run of a candidates scripts if s/he was on a borderline, before the final board, so that I was in a position to appreciate the significance of my marks.

Yours faithfully,

Thorlac Turville-Petre  
Professor of Medieval English  
School of English Studies  
University of Nottingham  
Nottingham NG7 2RD

**M.ST. EXTERNAL (1550-1780)**  
**PROFESSOR GORDON McMULLAN**

Department of English  
King's College London  
Strand, London  
WC2R 2LS

By e-mail

16th August 2008

The Vice Chancellor  
University of Oxford  
University Offices  
Wellington Square  
Oxford OX1 2BR

Dear Vice Chancellor,

**M. St. in English: External Examiner's Report**

This was my first year as external examiner for the Master of Studies in English – I had responsibility for work on literature within the period 1550-1780 – and I found it an enjoyable and positive experience. I read scripts with highest/lowest marks and, in the summer, dissertations, and I found the work in each case to be highly impressive and the standards of assessment rigorous and appropriate: each candidate for the MA was given transparently fair treatment, and the external examiners had appropriate scope for adjudication of marks where necessary. Jeri Johnson was a model Chair, efficient, courteous and welcoming, and I appreciated the support offered by Ms Jemma Underdown, especially on an occasion when the post didn't work entirely smoothly (one packet of scripts went astray, but was rapidly and efficiently replaced). I took part in two conference-call 'meetings' as well as the final dissertation meeting in early July. The virtual meetings worked well, despite the initial oddness of the experience, and certainly make sense as an alternative to travel in mid-semester.

What stands out from the process, above all, is the very high quality of the work produced by students on the programme. The essays and dissertations I read were ambitious, highly intelligent, impressively wide-ranging and professionally presented; even those at the lower end of the mark scale were still high-quality essays, only lacking that extra edge of imagination or scope that marked out the bulk of the work I saw as outstanding. The teachers on this course are very fortunate to be able to teach such a consistently able group of students. You would expect as much, of course, when you are dealing with a Master's degree in the Oxford English Faculty, but it was good nonetheless to see such excellent work sustained across the year. Several of the dissertations I read were either publishable or had clear potential for publication, and it was apparent that the various tutors had encouraged impressive levels of archival and critical engagement. Clearly, the teaching staff know how to bring out the best from their students, and it is obvious that many will go on to do doctoral work and pursue academic careers.

The standards of marking are rigorous and the anonymous double-marking works well: markers are clearly both prepared to discuss differences and to sustain those differences if they feel they should. The instances of disagreement over which I adjudicated were entirely understandable, even commendable, in the kinds of debate over essay quality that they reflected. This said, I agree with a comment voiced by another external examiner at the final meeting that it would be helpful to have a little more explanation of the reasons by which agreement was reached in cases where marks were initially a little way apart: the words 'discussed by telephone' don't give quite the level of information that would be preferable! But I should also immediately say that I had a sense throughout of thoroughly appropriate marking standards being applied with great care and consistency.

I wasn't always, I'll admit, entirely clear about the overall logic of the courses on offer, or (perhaps better) of their relationship with each other, but I note that the courses available to students in the coming year are, in several cases, markedly different from those offered this year, and I understand that the necessary give-and-take between the demands of undergraduate tutorial teaching at College level and the availability of staff to provide contributions to degrees delivered by the Faculty means that provision will necessarily change from year to year. I am aware, too, of the history that has led to what seems to me to be the slightly arbitrary date range of the period with which I have been concerned, 1550-1780. In any case, of course, it was my first year as an external examiner and I now have a much clearer sense of the shape of the programme than I did when I began.

If I do have a slight quibble, it is to do with the surprisingly high number of essays – and even dissertations – I read that had as their focus a single text – a play or a novel – and I wonder if convenors of courses might encourage their students to seek a slightly wider textual basis for their writing. The one-play essays I read were, in many cases, excellent, I should say, offering a wide range of secondary reference; I simply felt that at times the students could have opened out and written even more striking work if they had been required to write in a consciously comparative manner. But this is a minor concern. The critical essays I read were, for the most part, excellent, and the bibliographical work especially impressive – so much so that it would perhaps be good if that element were compulsory, providing as it does such a key grounding for the kinds of critical work – both text- and archive-based – that the programme encourages.

Overall, then, I was very impressed indeed both with the Faculty's assessment processes and with the work I read and I congratulate the Board on their achievement in delivering a degree of such consistently high quality.

Yours sincerely,

Gordon McMullan  
Professor of English

**M.ST. EXTERNAL (1780-1900)**  
**PROFESSOR CLAIRE LAMONT**

School of English  
Newcastle University  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
NE1 7RU

8 August, 2008

To: The Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford

Sent to: Sally.Powell@admin.ox.ac.uk; examiners.humanities@admin.ox.ac.uk

**MSt in English: External Examiner's Report**  
**2007-08: Professor C. Lamont**

This report covers my second year as an External Examiner for the MSt in English, and in it I summarise briefly what I have done and offer some comments on the procedures involved and the achievement of the candidates.

I have read scripts with the highest and lowest marks in their class, and scripts with borderline marks, for work submitted in English Literature in the period 1780-1900 in both Michaelmas and Hilary terms, and the same selection of dissertations in Trinity Term. In addition I read one dissertation for a candidate whose run of marks at the end of the marking process was on a borderline. I took part in the Examiners' Meeting on 11 February, 2008, by telephone 'conference call', and was present in Oxford for the meetings on 13 May and 3 July.

The arrangements for all this were very efficiently made. I am particularly indebted to Jemma Underdown for the clarity of her instructions and her helpfulness over any detail or query. I was very grateful to receive the sheets for the External Examiner's comments electronically, as well as on paper, as in my first year I found myself contriving the former on the basis of the latter, which took unnecessary time. The Examiners' Meetings were chaired with efficiency and fairness, and I was particularly impressed by the Chair's meticulous care, at the Final Meeting, to ensure that no error occurred in the vital matter of turning the candidates' numbers into names. There had been one problem case over two terms, which was competently handled in that the advice of Proctors and the view of an outside expert ('outside' to the examining procedure, not the University) had been sought before the Examiners were asked to consider it. The External Examiners were given ample opportunity at all the meetings to express views on individual scripts, the courses, and the degree as a whole. After experience over two years my view of Examiners' Meetings by 'conference call' is that the important thing is that those on the telephone should be told clearly who is in the room at the outset, and given a chance to recognise each by voice. It is usually the case that participants in the room are asked to give their names before contributing for the sake of those participating by phone. This usually starts well, but as the group-sense of those round the table forms they forget to give their names. Inevitably this is a problem for an External's first year; by the second I recognised almost all the voices anyway.

The range of courses offered in the period 1780-1900 is generous, with a good mix of broadly-applicable and more focused topics. I saw fewer bibliographical scripts this year than last, but the single best came in this category. As I remarked last year, the Bibliography

course is a particularly valuable part of what the degree offers, and on a couple of occasions in their scripts I recognised where candidates who had not taken the course would have benefited from doing so. The high standard of work achieved by the students on the MSt is impressive. I saw no fail script, and even those whose marks were not close to Distinction showed ability. The best students show superb capacity for responding to literary texts both in large and in detail, and many show an impressive grasp of theoretical ideas. All the scripts I read were well presented and written in competent English; at least two showed a virtuoso's handling of the language. Each student had chosen a promising dissertation topic; but not all were as successful as they might have been in handling it. A typical weakness, in a class of good critical readers, was the inability to construct an argument making space for detailed critical reading of either short texts in their entirety or generous passages of longer ones. Altogether it is clear that the degree recruits able students, and that the teaching is providing stimulus for some exceptionally high achievement. In comparison with such courses elsewhere of which I have had experience I would say that while the middle range of candidates may be very similar the number of very good candidates is greater, and of disappointing candidates is much smaller.

I found the internal marking informed and thorough both in the proposal of a mark and in the judicious comments supporting that choice. As other External Examiners have noted, the requirement from two Internal Examiners of three reports does not always bring forth a successful outcome. Often the third, in which the Internal Examiners are asked to explain how they arrived at their agreed mark, is too slight to be of much use. I should add that I am probably disappointed only because the rubric leads me to expect this information. I wonder if the reluctance to disclose it should be respected? When asked to be the third examiner I have always had what I really needed – the independent views of two others, and the mark they agreed on, which usually makes clear which arguments won out in the discussion between them. Plainly we should ask examiners whose initial reports and marks have differed widely to explain how they came together; but in many cases it is clear enough that one examiner has given way to the view of the other, and the agreed mark will convey that.

The comments of the Internal Examiners (and that of the External where it exists) contribute to the feedback given to candidates for the first and second term submissions. I was surprised to learn that candidates receive no feedback on their dissertations, despite the fact that equally detailed responses exist for these. The rationale, I gather, is that the marks and feedback on MT and HT submissions are regarded as 'formative' in terms of the degree. Since the dissertation is the last piece of work required that argument is thought not to apply. I agree with those who have already queried this policy. Many, perhaps most, of these candidates are hoping to go on to doctoral work. It is hard to deny them an equally detailed response for what will for the majority be the most substantial piece of writing they have yet undertaken. This applies particularly to those who just missed Distinction, who may under the present system never know what weakness – often simple enough to state, and remedy – held them back.

I should add that I have been treated in a courteous and friendly way throughout the process, and have enjoyed hearing the stimulating arguments of colleagues and reading some impressive pieces of work by the candidates.

Professor Claire Lamont  
Tel. 0191 284 5118  
Fax: 0191 222 8708  
Email: Claire.Lamont@ncl.ac.uk

**M.ST. EXTERNAL (1780-1900; 1900- Present Day)**  
**PROFESSOR MICHAEL O'NEILL**

24 July 2008

Dear Vice-Chancellor

MSt (English): External Examiner's Report

I was an External Examiner responsible for aspects of the above programme: 1780 to 1900 and 1900-the Present Day. I was present (by phone) at two meetings, and in person at a meeting in July 2008.

*Suggested headings for external examiners' reports:*

**(i) whether the academic standards set ... are appropriate**

*I have little to add to or change from my report for 2007, so much of this repeats previous material*

The academic standards set for the M Studies in English are stringent and impressive. The prescribed syllabus is demanding, requiring students to study and write essays on Literature, Contexts and Approaches, according to the relevant chronological period, and on Special Options; they may also take a course in Bibliography, Palaeography, and Theories of Text, again examined by an essay. In addition, they must submit a dissertation on a subject related to their course of study. It is evident from the quality of the work and the marking that students are expected to develop to a high degree skills of independent research and critical awareness. The design for the MSt, as indicated, involves detailed period study (sometimes of a kind that questions conventional periodicisation); research training; and the writing of a dissertation. The assessments are primarily and, for this level, rightly conducted through the medium of the long essay. Students showed an impressive capacity to sustain complex and thought-provoking arguments, and to conceptualise while analysing texts closely. The best work was of a very high standard indeed, demonstrating flair, rigour, and near-publishable brilliance (I am thinking of some work on the Bibliography and Textual Criticism course, in particular, and in a few dissertations, especially 1900 to the present.) Generally, the quality of teaching and learning seemed to me very high – modules are delivered by able and committed teachers working in areas of research expertise.

**(ii) the extent to which assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students and have been fairly conducted within institutional regulations and guidance**

The assessment processes are rigorous. Double blind marking occurs; student anonymity is maintained and is preserved at the meetings; examiners produced full and helpful reports; it was especially helpful when a third report (or brief comment) was produced, indicating the process by which the final agreed mark had been reached in cases where there had been a substantial difference between the markers. All difficult or borderlines cases were treated at all stages with exemplary thoroughness – sent to Externals for reading, carefully considered at the final meeting. Great credit should go to the Chair of the Board of Examiners and to the administrative staff for all their helpfulness, good judgement, guidance, and efficiency; the telephone-link for the first two meetings again worked well. The final meeting was chaired well, good-humoured and purposeful; due and courteous note was taken of the views of Externals.



**(iii) the standards of student performance in the programme or parts of the programme I examined**

The work I saw was generally of a very high quality. I saw rather fewer samples of work this year, owing to an increase in the number of Externals and a decision to redistribute areas of work; the previous year I was, in effect, the sole External Examiner for 1780-1900, and for 1900 to the present day, a demanding but very enjoyable and stimulating brief. This year I saw only three dissertations. What follows encapsulates, then, my general sense of work seen in the last four years: students produced quite excellent work for the dissertations, work that combined fine close reading skills with theoretical ambition on a great variety of subjects. Work for the Hilary Term B and C Course essays was also impressive. There was some especially fine work produced for the Bibliography course. There was fine work produced for Special Options; this year I was taken by the quality of thinking and insight shown by students taking the course on Coetzee.

**(iv) where appropriate, the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in some other higher education institutions**

The MSt at Oxford compares favourably in these respects with other taught postgraduate programmes of which I am aware. I have examined taught Romanticism MAs in the last 16 years at York and Bristol; both programmes produced very good specialist work and dissertations, but students at Oxford are at least on a par. I have also examined MA dissertations at the University of Malta, some of which are remarkably good, and benefit from being much longer. Again, however, Oxford students are by and large producing comparable and better work. At Durham, for our taught MA in English Literary Studies, the best students produce work of a comparable level, but Oxford impresses through the sheer amount of extremely good work so many of its quite large intake generate. All students are expected to reach a good quality of scholarly presentation and argument. At Durham, our best students for our taught MA write especially well about poetry, and – again, as with last year – occasionally I felt that Oxford students seemed to have turned from poetry to other forms of literature. Oxford's faculty contains a number of famously brilliant readers of poetry, but this enthusiasm and expertise is not transmitting itself to Master's students as evidently as one might expect or wish.

**(v) issues ...**

I think the main issue that arose for me this year was that of my changed role as External: changed, that is, in terms of what I had been invited explicitly to undertake and, after three years service, had grown to expect – that is, responsibility for two large periods. I adjusted to what was required of me (and was grateful for the lightened load in some ways!). But I did wonder whether five Externals are needed (when I started there were three). I do think it is best practice for Externals *at this level* to be consulted very clearly about what their role will be before they accept the Examinership, and to be re-consulted if it is felt that this role should change. This is perhaps especially important when there is such a frequent turnaround of Chairs, though I gather the present Chair will be serving for a second year, which is an excellent innovation and will help to ensure continuity.

**(vi) good practice**

Academically, the range and ambition of modules is an example of good practice, as is the evident encouragement to students to produce independent work at all stages. There can be few institutions where students at a comparable level pursue demanding bibliographical topics so successfully. Also to be commended is the exciting sense of literature as open to a variety of approaches. Administratively, the courtesy and responsiveness with which the

views of External Examiners are received, is excellent. So, too, is the robust marking that takes place.

Yours faithfully

Michael O'Neill  
Professor of English; Durham University  
24 July 2008

**M.ST. EXTERNAL (English & American Studies)**  
**PROFESSOR PETER NICHOLLS**

9 July 2008

Dear Vice-Chancellor

**Report on the MSt in English (American Period)**

Once again I read a range of scripts for the MSt in English Studies and American Studies. The essays I marked showed a good number of mid-70s marks and the quality was impressive. Choice of topic showed wide reading and often an enterprising conjunction of materials. Some candidates were also exploring archival resources with flair and initiative. Most papers were based on an impressive amount of primary and secondary reading, and even candidates in the 65-70 range produced quite elegant essays that showed serious thought and attention to detail. Comments by the internal examiners reflected a scrupulous reading of scripts and as a result the marking was, in my view, accurate and robust throughout. Discriminations in the 60s band were especially precise, indicating a real range of performance by candidates.

I also read a selection of 1900-present dissertations and the full run of those produced for the American period. For the former, most of the marks were concentrated in the upper 60s, though the batch was too small to take as a basis for generalisation. In the case of the American Studies group, however, it was easier to obtain a fairly full picture of how the programme was running. Marks were widely spread, ranging from lower borderline to a top mark of 78. Much of this work was again of high quality, with several dissertations showing an impressive ability to coordinate and explore a range of interdisciplinary materials. At the same time, a number of the dissertations were extremely limited in focus, with one candidate concentrating on only one text. The requirement for work in this area is, it seems, two-fold: candidates should combine English and American Studies elements of their course, and they should demonstrate familiarity with 'the interdisciplinary methodologies of area studies'. As noted, some candidates met these requirements in exemplary fashion (as, for example, in a dissertation of DeLillo, Amis, and 9/11). Others, however, did not, and it was difficult to see how the candidate who attended only to Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* could have received approval for the topic in the first place, especially in view of its lack of any interdisciplinary dimension. Perhaps it is time for the Board to consider how clearer direction about course requirements might be given to this group of students. Clearly, they should be made aware of them when seeking approval of their dissertation topics.

The topics chosen for the American Studies dissertations ranged quite widely, though again I noted the absence of work on poetry and drama, and also an absence generally of close textual analysis. This is clearly an interesting and lively course, but its objectives might be more clearly established. The work of the Board was expertly handled by Dr. Johnson and ably supported by Ms. Jemma Underdown. External examiners were given plenty of opportunity to comment on all aspects of the examination process and the atmosphere of the Board was cordial and receptive throughout.

Yours sincerely

Peter Nicholls  
Professor of English and American Literature  
University of Sussex

## **M.ST. IN WOMEN'S STUDIES**

### **Dr Emma SMITH**

There were 17 candidates for the examination, one of whom was resubmitting a dissertation to complete the examination begun in 2007. The Board of Examiners met on 12 March (without the External) and on 2 July.

### **Results**

There were 2 Distinctions and 15 Passes.

### **Conduct of the Examination**

#### *i Administrative Support*

The Modern Languages Graduate Office gave good support in the early part of the process, but when other graduate degrees also became busier, it was necessary to draw on ad-hoc – but invaluable support – from the Secretary to the Women's Studies Committee. I am extremely grateful to Dr Lynn Robson for heroic service; I reiterate the point, often made, about administrative support for the examination of the degree which, by necessity, requires concentrated administrative time at the same time as other degrees.

#### *ii Appointment of Assessors*

At its first meeting the Board approved candidates' essay titles and began the identification of specialist assessors. Particular demands were made of colleagues in Oriental Studies and in Politics, and there were correspondingly few essays concerning the degree's host disciplines.

#### *iii Examination of assessed work*

As in past years the marking was done as follows: one Examiner marked all essays for the 'Theory and Methods' component, with second marking provided by a range of appropriate Assessors from among the board; each Option essay and dissertations was marked by an Examiner and an appropriate Examiner or Assessor; the External Examiner Professor Robin Osborne marked all dissertations blind. The External Examiner also considered borderline distinctions and all fail scripts. There were no cases in which 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> internal markers failed to reach a consensus, and a couple of cases in which the External's mark raised a dissertation mark. Anonymity of candidates was preserved throughout the examining process.

#### *iv. Marks and classifications*

Distinctions were awarded to candidates who received a distinction mark on the Dissertation, and an average of 70 or more on the Option and Theory essays. A Pass was awarded for those candidates who received a pass mark or above on the dissertation, and an average of a pass mark on the Option and Theory essays. Some examiners felt these classification criteria made it particularly difficult to award Distinctions in this examination, and the question of parity with other disciplines is referred to the Women's Studies committee.

#### *v. Review of examination procedures*

Two issues about the conduct of the degree as a whole arose from the examining process. One was the clear evidence that the majority of students this year have moved towards social and area studies as their focus. This has implications for the range and disciplinary provenance of assessors. It also raises a different version of an ongoing concern about the

degree: the relation between the methodologies introduced in the 'Theory and Methods' component and those used for the dissertation. In many cases it was not clear that the methodological component of the course was, or was understood as, relevant to the dissertation inquiry. These issues are referred to the Women's Studies Committee for ongoing discussion and review. The question of whether the length of the dissertation was appropriate – a little too long for a short essay but a little too short for a dissertation - was also raised at the final exam board.

I should like to thank the internal Examiners Dr Christina De Bellaigue, Dr Theresa Morgan, Dr Jane Hiddleston, Dr Nazia Ghanea-Hercock, Dr Rutvica Andrijasevic and Dr Lynn Robson for their good judgment, humour and grace during the process. We are all grateful to Professor Robin Osborne who was scrupulous in fulfilling the duties of External Examiner, supporting the work of the internal Examiners, and ensuring that candidates were treated with fairness and their work assessed with rigour.

Emma Smith (Chair of Examiners)

August 2008

## **M.ST. WOMEN'S STUDIES, EXTERNAL EXAMINER**

### **PROFESSOR ROBIN OSBOURNE, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE**

This was my third year of examining the M.St in Women's Studies, and once more to do so was a pleasure. The Chairman of the examiners acted with exemplary efficiency, and from the outside there was no hint of the lamentable absence of adequate administrative support from which the degree continues to suffer. I am happy to confirm that in my view the academic standards set for the award of the M.St are appropriate, those for awarding a Distinction in the degree notably stringent in their demand for high performance across the three elements that are examined.

The assessment processes are rigorous and fair, with due consideration of all individual cases where the particular resolution of differences between examiners might unduly disadvantage a candidate.

I read all the dissertations, along with problematic Theory & Methods and Options essays. The range of work submitted in the dissertations was, as always fascinating. This year there was distinctly more work of a social studies nature. Everywhere competent handling of source material and almost always good understanding of the issues under discussion were on display. I offer two criticisms and a suggestion.

It was again notable this year that although some candidates handled feminist theory adeptly and made very productive use of theoretical approaches in the framing as well as the detail of their discussions, many candidates ploughed nothing from the theory course into their dissertations at all. In several cases where what was produced was not much more than a synthesis or a re-hashing of familiar views, this constituted a missed golden opportunity to re-direct the discussion by employing insights from feminist theory. It was particularly disappointing that much of the social science work was feminist-theory-blind. I suspect that the problem is that supervisors do not necessarily think about what it might be to contribute to Women's Studies, in particular, and do not themselves expect links back to the material from the Theory & Methods course.

I was struck by the repeated inability of candidates to construct a paragraph. Even some of the best essays were marred by showing no understanding of what constitutes a paragraph, and in consequence not developing their arguments at all clearly, or even clarifying to themselves what they were arguing. Although I am conscious from my own teaching experience that students do not easily acquire these basic writing skills, time devoted to teaching this would be time well spent, and supervisors might reasonably be asked to pay particular attention to this.

Several candidates were, I think, disadvantaged by going more or less up to the 15,000 word limit. I can't think of a single dissertation which would have been worse had the limit been 12,000 words, and most of them would have been more or less clearly better. Theses need theses and a long word-limit tends to obscure this, as candidates come to think that what theses need is material. The idea that theses need to be long to be appropriately demanding is, in my view, simply false, and I see no problem in dissertations in different subjects at the same degree level being different.

Robin Osborne

July 5, 2008.

## **M.ST. FILM STUDIES**

### **DR REIDAR DUE, MODERN LANGUAGES**

This was the first year of the Master of Studies in Film Aesthetics. There were 13 students who took the exam. Three were awarded a distinction. None failed, with 60 being the pass mark.

The students were required to present two six thousand word essays and one 10,000 word dissertation and to sit a three hour exam at the end of Trinity Term. The essays were written after Michaelmas and Hilary terms.

Of these different pieces of work the second essay, written during the Easter vacation, often turned out to be of the highest quality. The students had then had time to relate the general film aesthetic concepts they had acquired in the first term to more specific themes covered in the second term. The essays written under exam conditions were impressive by their clarity of exposition. Except one, the exam essays were all restricted to a discussion of a limited number of films and theoretical issues and were able to cover those competently.

The quality of the written work was generally high, although relatively many essays and dissertations displayed weaknesses of arguments of various kinds (see below). The students showed that they had understood and thought carefully about the key aesthetic problems covered in the course. In all the written work there was a noticeable effort to articulate problems in a fresh and original way.

Some of the work was excellent both in terms of the quality of knowledge produced and in virtue of its clarity of exposition. There was also an impressive range in the kind of quality displayed by the best pieces of written work. Some essays demonstrated an advanced grasp of narrative film language and an ability to capture this in writing. Other essays and dissertations were conceptually very rigorous. Three of the pieces that stood out were an essay on visual representation in the films of Gus Van Sant, an analysis of montage in the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and a detailed stylistic study of a few films by Jean-Luc Godard.

Some students showed clear progress in the course of the year, gradually acquiring a more differentiated and precise film analytical language.

In the weaker end, the problems often consisted in an insufficiently precise analysis of the films or of the theoretical problems raised by them. This was especially the case when students wrote on topics that have been the subject of extensive debate, regarding feminism and the representation of women, for instance. This difficulty sometimes had its source in a too general essay topic. A different source of weakness was the difficulty that some students found in integrating film analysis and film theory in a fully satisfactory way. The dissertations were at times less good than the best essays, especially in cases when the topics chosen were only indirectly related to one of the course topics.

Chairman of Examiners

Reidar Due

## **M.ST. FILM STUDIES, EXTERNAL EXAMINER**

### **Professor Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Queen Mary, University of London**

The course has got off to a very good start, with excellent work being produced within a very ingenious course framework.

I have a small number of observations starting with a couple which concern the marking scheme and regulations:

1. I note that the pass mark is 60% and the boundary for a Distinction is 70%. I presume that the purpose of this is to indicate that a pass is to be thought of as the Masters level equivalent of a 2/1 BA degree and the Distinction as the equivalent of a first. To insist that the pass for a Masters degree should be at least 2/1 level seems to me entirely appropriate. But I have problems both with the scaling and with the upper borderline. If a pass is 60%, how is the lower end of the scale to be used? Arithmetically the effect of giving a very low mark (say 20%) to a catastrophic exam script is far more serious if the pass mark is 60% than if it were 50%, and a bad failure in one component is more likely to lead to a fail across the board, whether or not such a fail is justified overall. It would then have to be at the Examiners' discretion whether to compensate or not. I am not against giving the Examiners discretion (see 2 below) but a better scaling system would reduce the risk of needing to bring it into play.

I am also not sure what the criterion for Distinction is. Is it first-class equivalent or does it entail the production of work that is really distinguished (which is rare)? I ask this because the criteria used by the Internal Examiners (with which I concurred) led to the award of very few 70+ marks, and then only in the 70-75 range, thus further narrowing the useful band of possible marks in the regular course of events (i.e. when work submitted, although very good, is not absolutely outstanding). Elsewhere (no names, no pack drill) I have come across wider use of the 70-80 band, but in a context where the examiners were in my opinion over-generous in their interpretation of the Pass/Distinction borderline. In my view the benchmark should continue to be set where it is and if that is done the numbers will fall into place more or less of their own accord, but the band will remain restricted, with only 10 percentage points separating the reasonably comfortable pass (say 63%) from the very good indeed if slightly less than outstanding (say 73%). Provided there is clarity about the benchmark this does not matter enormously, but everybody including the students need to be clear what is entailed.

2. I also note that the examiners do not have discretion in awarding distinctions to candidates who, in spite of a high average, do not reach 70 in the dissertation. I see the point of this, if the dissertation is to be regarded as a qualitatively superior component of the course. But in the case of the Film Studies M.Stud., which takes place over 3 Oxford terms, this is not the case. The dissertation is just a longer essay than the others, albeit one in which candidates have a wider licence to roam in their choice of subject. Herein however lies the danger. If the dissertation strays off course, possibly as a result of inadequate supervision, a simple error of judgement, perhaps not even the student's own, can deprive a candidate of an otherwise fully deserved chance of a distinction. There was a case in this year's crop of a student with marks in the mid-70s elsewhere producing a dissertation which fell short of distinction level (though not by much). Unfortunately the student had declined the option of a viva which might have retrieved the situation, but it was a situation that should not have arisen. A viva would have been ideal to enable the student to clamber out of the hole she had dug for herself but even without that option it should have been possible to rescue her.



Not to do with marking schemes:

3. There was not an ideal fit between course content and work submitted. The exam, whose questions were closely tailored to course content, can be adjudged an unqualified success. The answers all demonstrated a command of the core issues raised by the course – even though students did tend to choose the same question to answer. But some of the essays and dissertations did stray somewhat from the core areas. Although generally of high quality, they often addressed topics which were not strictly aesthetic and might have been submitted for any MA in film studies elsewhere in the country. While I think it is a good thing if students apply what they have learnt in the course to broader topics (history, ideology, cultural studies even), this should not be encouraged across the board. Since the course is taught in short blocks it is not easy to specify exactly which component needs to be addressed in the essays but some form of limitation needs to be devised. In general it would probably help if learning outcomes for the options were firmly specified.

4. A small technical point, addressed to the course organisers: Essays need to be better labelled to make it clear which essay was the first to be submitted and which the second.

5. The uniqueness of the course is spelled out in its title, "Film Aesthetics". This phrase can be interpreted in two directions: as film studies with an aesthetic emphasis and consequently relatively light on the institutional aspects of cinema which, rightly, loom large in most generic film studies courses, and correspondingly with an intensified focus on the strictly aesthetic functioning of film; or as an exploration of film as a medium/art form in the light of philosophical aesthetics. On the whole a good balance has been struck, though the course is perhaps slightly weighted in the former direction and a lot of the best work took the form of critical interpretation of films (a dying art in contemporary academia and indeed in the wider world). To ensure the originality of the course being maintained I would recommend the course organisers to consider ways of building up the philosophical side of the course and ensuring that it is seen as integral to what students are supposed to be learning about. This is maybe easier said than done, because there is not much of a tradition to refer to in this country where philosophical aesthetics occupies a central role in thinking about film but an effort to compensate the prevailing ignorance of "classical" aesthetic theory would be well worth the time and trouble expended on it.

In conclusion, I think this is an admirable course, capable of further development, and I am confident it will indeed develop and come to occupy a significant position in the study of film in this country and – who knows? – perhaps general aesthetic thinking as well.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith

1 September 2008

## **MSt Examiners 2007-2008**

### **Internals**

Dr Jeri Johnson (Chair of Examiners)

Dr Ros Ballaster

Professor Ronald Bush

Dr Bart van Es

Professor Vincent Gillespie

Dr Peter McDonald

Dr Emma Smith (Chair, Women's Studies)

Dr Reidar Due (Chair, Film Aesthetics)

### **Externals**

Professor Thorlac Turville-Petre

Professor Gordon McMullan

Professor Claire Lamont

Professor Michael O'Neill

Professor Peter Nicholls

Professor Robin Osbourne (Women's Studies)

Professor Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Film Aesthetics)