



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**

**FACULTY OF ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

# **EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2023**

**Preliminary Examination  
in English Language and Literature**

**Final Honour School  
of English Language and Literature**

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## PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2023

### Part I

#### STATISTICS

This year there were 211 candidates for the Preliminary Examination in English Language and Literature. One candidate withdrew before the re-sits.

Joint Schools candidates took optional English papers in the following numbers:

- Paper 1: 56
- Paper 2: 9
- Paper 3: 19
- Paper 4: 16

#### Numbers and percentages in each category

| Category    | Number  |         |         | Percentage (%) |          |          |
|-------------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|----------|----------|
|             | 2022/23 | 2021/22 | 2020/21 | 2022/23        | 2021/22  | 2020/21  |
| Distinction | 51      | (56)    | (52)    | 24.17%         | (23.72%) | (22.41%) |
| Pass        | 159     | (179)   | (176)   | 75.36%         | (75.84%) | (77.16%) |
| Fail        | 0       | ( 0 )   | ( 0 )   | 0              | ( 0 )    | ( 0 )    |

#### Marking of scripts

All scripts are single-marked for Prelims. In the Penultimate Marks Meeting, the Board compared the averages of the markers of each paper to determine whether scaling was needed: it was deemed unnecessary.

#### NEW EXAMINING METHODS AND PROCEDURES

No new examination methods were used this year. Due to mitigating circumstances, one candidate was permitted to sit Papers 2, 3 and 4 as take-home online exam papers, submitted via Inspira, and the use of a scribe.

The marking was heavily hit by the University and College Union Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB). Prelims candidates were informed on 29 June 2023 that those who had sat all their exams and submitted all required assessments, and had received pass marks on all work that had been marked, would be allowed to progress to the next year of the course. Any candidate who had failed an assessment for which marks were available by the time of the meeting of the Exam Board would be required to resit that paper in the normal way. If a candidate received an outcome that permitted them to progress to the next year, and subsequently received a fail mark on a late-marked assessment, the Faculty would not retrospectively reconsider the decision to progress them to the next year, and they would not be required to retake the failed assessment. In such instances, the Faculty and the candidate's college would consider how best to support their learning and address any concerns over their academic progress.

Candidates received provisional outcomes of the assessments which had been marked on 31 July 2023. No candidate received a provisional outcome for Paper 4. The MAB ended on 30 September 2023 and marking resumed.

Thirteen borderline candidates had relevant scripts re-read by suitable members of the Board between the Penultimate and Final Marks Meetings. The Board decided that no averages would be

lowered. Four were raised. Three candidates did not receive pass marks when Paper 4 was marked in October but were permitted to progress.

Candidates received the finalised outcomes on 25 October 2023.

### Examination Conventions

As in previous years, the examination conventions and classification criteria were communicated to candidates in email circulars from the Chair of Examiners. Circulars were issued in Hilary and Trinity Term. The circular for Paper 1 also explained how to access the Paper and how and when to submit the completed portfolio.

## Part II

### A. GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE EXAMINATION

The percentage of Distinctions was 0.45% up on last year, part of what looks like a gently ascending trajectory. The table below shows that the papers in which the greatest percentages of marks of 70+ were awarded were Papers 1A and 1B. This could be explained by their being take-home, typewritten, open-book / open-web papers.

| Scripts awarded marks of 70+ for each paper*     |               |               |               |      |               |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|------|---------------|
| Paper  | 2023          | 2022          | 2021          | 2020 | 2019          |
| <b>1a. Introduction to Language</b>              | 57<br>(27.0%) | 64<br>(27.1%) | 60<br>(25.9%) | n/a  | 49<br>(22.0%) |
| <b>1b. Introduction to Literature</b>            | 64<br>(30.3%) | 58<br>(24.6%) | 62<br>(26.7%) | n/a  | 47<br>(21.1%) |
| <b>2. Early Medieval Literature, c. 650-1350</b> | 51<br>(24.2%) | 59<br>(25.0%) | 75<br>(32.3%) | n/a  | 45<br>(20.2%) |
| <b>3. Literature in English 1830-1910</b>        | 49<br>(23.2%) | 49<br>(20.8%) | 61<br>(26.3%) | n/a  | 54<br>(24.2%) |
| <b>4. Literature in English 1910-Present</b>     | 48<br>(22.7%) | 68<br>(28.8%) | 49<br>(21.1%) | n/a  | 48<br>(21.5%) |

\* This table corrects the numbers for 2021 and 2022 which were incorrectly given in last year's report.

### B. COMMENTS ON PAPERS AND INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

#### Paper 1A: Introduction to English Language

All questions in the paper were attempted. The most popular were questions 1, 3, 6, and 9.

Many candidates wrote excellent responses, meeting all four marking criteria to a high standard: 'engagement', 'argument', 'information', and 'organization & presentation'. In many scripts, the analysis was sound and detailed, underpinned by wide reading in the relevant critical and linguistic methodologies. Candidates are to be commended on their hard and insightful work.

Candidates are reminded to focus on *language*; they should not submit analyses that are purely 'literary' in nature. It is also important that candidates think carefully about the effect of linguistic features. They need to ensure they critically analyse passages, rather than simply noting (for example) nouns and adjectives.

Candidates are also reminded that Section A is a commentary, requiring attentive and focused analysis of the chosen passages. The analysis needs to be undertaken with the use of precise terminology.

Stronger answers displayed a sound grasp of basic grammatical terminology, allowing candidates to describe linguistic phenomena precisely rather than impressionistically. It is important that the analysis is also thorough: the candidates should probe a wealth of details from the passage.

It is very important that candidates read widely. This will enable candidates to employ a strong critical vocabulary and to inform their writing fully. Candidates should also provide bibliographies of a good length. It is not sufficient to submit bibliographies that only have one or two items, or which simply list entries from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

If candidates choose to use corpora and tables, these need to serve a purpose. The corpora or tables should help to enrich the analysis and bolster the argument.

Candidates must follow the rubric carefully. It is vital that they include the passages in an appendix. Failing to do so incurs the maximum penalty, and may result in a candidate failing that paper.

Candidates are further reminded that when citing from digital media, names must be redacted; there should not be any identifying features of individuals. This is important for data privacy.

### **Paper 1B: Introduction to English Literature**

Candidates attempted all the questions on this paper, except question 11, which offered for discussion C. S. Lewis's opinion that 'The truth is not that we need the critics in order to enjoy the authors, but that we need the authors in order to enjoy the critics.' Candidates took a variety of approaches in their essays: solely discussing theorists; illuminating literary theories with examples from primary texts; using theories to explore primary texts; focusing on primary texts. The examiners welcomed all approaches and found excellent work in each. The best work engaged with theories rather than simply rehearsing them. Less successful work neglected the question, showed limited ambition in arguments and offered large generalisations about life and literature.

### **Paper 2: Early Medieval Literature, c. 650-1350**

The quality of the work for Paper 2 was generally high this year, with some notably outstanding scripts. In the commentary section, passage (a) (from *The Dream of the Rood*) was the overwhelming favourite, followed by passage (b) (from *Beowulf*). Each of the other passages was attempted, but, as has been the case in recent years, the majority of candidates chose to write on the Old English commentary texts.

The strongest commentary work combined comprehensive knowledge of the passage and the wider poem with detailed analysis of the style of the extract. It was pleasing to see some excellent discussion of features such as poetic diction, structural repetition, variation, envelope patterning, and various rhetorical features (including in this case personification, litotes, and prosopopoeia). The most impressive work in this area not only identified such features but also considered their poetic impact within the passage. There was some impressive work on versification and form, particularly as regards the use of hypermetric lines in the passage from *The Dream of the Rood*. It is heartening to see students engaging seriously with issues of metre and alliteration, albeit the analysis of particular examples was not always entirely accurate. Weaker commentaries tended to focus very heavily on issues of content over style and sometimes showed a shaky grasp of the events of the passage. General discussion of wider themes and contexts or vague comments about the nature of Old English poetic style will not be successful unless tied to specific analysis of aspects of the set passage.

Candidates again wrote on an impressively wide range of primary texts in the essay part of the examination. While certain texts and genres continue to enjoy considerable popularity (the Old English riddles, the elegies, *Beowulf*), many candidates chose to focus on less frequently studied material,

often with great success. Work on Old English texts predominated, but there was some notable engagement with Welsh and Old Norse traditions, as well as Anglo-Norman and French texts (notably the works of Marie de France). The strongest work of this kind securely located these texts in their historical and cultural contexts. Where comparison with English texts was undertaken, this was generally done in a sensitive way that showed evidence of careful consideration of the nature and value of such comparative work. At times, however, texts from different traditions or from different points within the long chronological sweep of the paper seemed to be juxtaposed in a less thoughtful and productive manner.

All of the essay questions were attempted at least once. Questions 8 and 15 were the most popular, followed by questions 2, 4, and 11. The strongest essays provided sophisticated arguments in response to the question, supported by close engagement with issues of language and style. Many candidates showed an impressive sensitivity to issues of literary history (including the composition and transmission of texts) and were able to discuss their material in relation to specific intellectual and cultural trends as well as modern critical traditions. Weaker essays often showed a tendency to generalize about “medieval” attitudes and paid little or no attention to previous scholarship. Given the length of the period covered by this paper, it is particularly important for candidates to consider their texts in relation to appropriate contexts.

Once again, there was a number of penalties for rubric violations for scripts which either failed to show substantial knowledge of Old and/or early Middle English in both commentary and essay sections or did not engage in detail with at least three texts across the two essay questions. A number of essays engaged only with very short texts (such as individual riddles). While it is of course legitimate to focus on such texts, it may be difficult to demonstrate the required range when dealing with only one or two very short poems and engagement might seem superficial unless extremely detailed analysis is provided.

### **Paper 3: Literature in English 1830-1910**

All the questions were attempted, and there was no clear pattern in terms of the various ways of answering them that proved most popular. It was clear from reading the work of many candidates that they had read widely and thought carefully about the period’s literature and culture. Essays revealed critical engagement with a pleasingly broad range of works, including several written by American, Indian, and other non-British authors. The best answers also drew on some unusual non-literary writings – including popular advertisements, travel guides, and exhibition catalogues – in original and creative ways. However, it was noticeable how few candidates were willing to apply the sort of interesting theoretical work they had been studying – and in many cases producing – for their Paper 1 portfolios; they should remember that Paper 1 is supposed to help them formulate ways of reading critically that can be applied to their other work across the rest of their degree.

Lack of range was a specific problem in the case of those candidates who chose to write essays that referred only to a very small number of examples. It is worth reminding candidates that it is very difficult to produce work of high quality based on only one short story or poem. However, there were also candidates who had clearly not only read some of the period’s canonical literature but also thought carefully about the various cultural pushes and pulls that helped to shape it (and our own responses to it), including factors such as literary influences, contemporary parallels, and critical reception. Candidates who offered close readings of particular passages – and who explained their broader significance – tended to achieve higher marks than those who relied on paraphrase and critical (and sometimes uncritical) generalization.

Weaker essays often limited themselves to a couple of popular novels (e.g. *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*) and tended to focus on plot summaries and character analysis, although it was pleasing to see

that there were fewer grand claims made than in some previous years along the lines of 'Victorian culture' or what 'the Victorians believed' without these claims being backed up with appropriate evidence. It was noticeable that many otherwise cogent essays did not engage properly with the question, either ignoring its wording completely or cherry-picking a single word or phrase that would allow the candidate to dump a prepared answer of only limited relevance. So, for instance, in answer to the question about feminist ideas and/or challenges to gender stereotypes, several candidates wrote in very generic terms about the representation of gender roles. Weaker essays also tended to juxtapose profoundly different texts in terms of form, genre and tone without taking such differences into account. Candidates are advised to aim for balanced comparisons that explain important points of difference as well as similarities between texts. As usual, the best essays paid careful and discriminating attention to matters of literary genre and form; of the rest, a disappointing number merely treated their chosen works as loose bundles of ideas, and had little or nothing to say about what difference it might make that these works were (for example) published in monthly instalments, or written in blank verse, or performed for a paying audience.

#### **Paper 4: Literature in English 1910-Present**

All questions were answered and candidates on the whole avoided repetition of material between questions. The most popular questions were those on war-writing, the 'moment' and success and failure.

Candidates wrote on an incredibly wide range of authors, but individual answers were often limited either to a single author or to a fixed pairing (e.g. Pynchon/Spark) with very little, if any sense, of wider literary or cultural history. Almost all answers would have benefitted from paying more attention to dates and from showing more awareness of the political and social history of the twentieth century. Woolf, Beckett and Eliot remained extremely popular, across the whole range of their work (other than Beckett's novels and Eliot's plays), but surprisingly few scripts made even passing mention of Joyce or Pound. Other authors who provided the basis for multiple strong answers included James Baldwin, J. M. Coetzee, Christopher Isherwood, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, Kazuo Ishiguro, Philip Larkin, Audre Lord, Toni Morrison, Wilfred Owen, Harold Pinter, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Thomas Pynchon, Claudia Rankine, Jean Rhys, Salman Rushdie, Sam Selvon, Zadie Smith, Gertrude Stein, and Derek Walcott. Metropolitan English and American authors received the bulk of candidates' attention, with much less attention paid to writers from other English-speaking countries. Overall, there was much more expansive coverage of fiction than poetry, non-fiction or drama. There were quite outstanding answers on some authors who seem to have dropped off the syllabus in recent years, including W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Arthur Miller, and James Joyce. The best scripts also seemed to have benefitted substantially from Paper 1B and made intelligent links between twentieth-century writers and theorists.

It is pleasing to see more answers on post-1945 literature, and many individual scripts spanned the arc of the period. Some candidates would benefit from simply covering more material in their answers. A single short poem by Philip Larkin does not provide enough textual evidence for a strong answer. The best answers tended to be more confident and aggressive about pulling apart the original quotations; candidates should remember that these are intended to provoke, not compel acceptance! As always, first-class answers evinced more probing analysis, more working through of the terms of the initial question, and a better sense of important critical terms and perspective. Criticism was used critically only in the strongest answers. This year the first-class work was also notably better as writing. Too many answers in the 2.1 range were marred by basic writing errors, including misspelled words ('ammounts', 'playwrite'), the inaccurate or unreflective use of critical terms ('postmodern', 'feminism', 'experimental'), lack of accurate quotation from primary texts, an inadequate use of paragraphing, and repetition of sentences near-verbatim in different parts of the essay.

**C. NAMES OF MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS**

Professor Kate McLoughlin (Chair)  
Dr Daniel Thomas (Deputy)  
Professor Robert Douglas-Fairhurst  
Professor Stefano Evangelista  
Dr Ayoush Lazikani  
Dr Hannah Sullivan



# FINAL HONOUR SCHOOL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2023

## CHAIR'S REPORT

### Part I

#### A. STATISTICS

(1) 241 candidates completed their degree, of whom 28 took Course II.

| Class | Number  |         |         |         |         | Percentage (%) |         |         |         |         |
|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|       | 2022/23 | 2021/22 | 2020/21 | 2019/20 | 2018/19 | 2022/23        | 2021/22 | 2020/21 | 2019/20 | 2018/19 |
| I     | 72      | 79      | 94      | 93      | 79      | 29.88%         | 37.26%  | 42.2%   | 41.7%   | 33.9%   |
| II.I  | 162     | 128     | 128     | 127     | 154     | 67.22%         | 60.38%  | 57.4%   | 57.0%   | 66.1%   |
| II.II | 3       | 2       | 1       | 2       | 0       | 1.24%          | 0.94%   | 0.4%    | 0.9%    | 0       |
| III   | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0              | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       |
| Pass  | 0       | 0       | 0       | 1       | 0       | 0              | 0       | 0       | 0.4%    | 0       |
| Fail  | 3       | 3       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 1.24%          | 1.42%   | 0       | 0       | 0       |
| DDH   | 1       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0.41%          | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       |

Of the Firsts, three were achieved via the 'alternative' route requiring 4 marks of 70 or above and an average of 67.5 or above.

#### B. NEW EXAMINING METHODS AND PROCEDURES

8-hour OBOW ('open-book, open-web') exams were again used for Course I, Papers 2-5 and Course II, Papers 1, 2, 3 and 6(a), with word limits of 1,500 words (or 2,250 in the case of Course II, Paper 2).

Two compulsory papers for Course I - Papers 3 and 5 - were unaffected by the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB), and these were marked in the usual way using double-blind marking, and, in cases of 'Agreement Not Found' (ANF), third marking.

Other papers were variously affected by MAB, as follows:

i) Two raw marks and no agreed mark

- Paper 1 Shakespeare: 65 scripts
- Paper 6 Special Options: 29 scripts
- Dissertations: 22 scripts

ii) One raw mark only

- Paper 2 1350-1550: 9 scripts
- Paper 4 1660-1760: 76 scripts
- Dissertations: fewer than 5 scripts

At the Board's first special meeting to consider possible mitigations of MAB (26 May), it unanimously *rejected* using single marks for any paper for final classifications. At the same meeting, the Board *approved* a scheme (recommended by the Faculty's MAB Working Group and approved in principle by the Division) for averaging in cases with two raw marks and no agreed mark (i., above). Detailed protocols for agreeing matching marks, averaging raw marks across borderlines, and reading scripts with widely divergent marks, were adopted.<sup>1</sup> Finally, it was agreed that any candidate who had a provisional mark arrived at by averaging and was on a provisional classification borderline would have the averaged script read by a Board marker to confirm or change the averaged mark.

At the Board's second special meeting (12 June) it addressed the case of scripts with one raw mark only (ii., above) by agreeing to use a single mark for any one paper for the purposes of *provisional* classification, with the proviso that upon receiving final agreed marks after MAB, the new agreed mark would be used for final re-classification if it would *raise* the mark.

When applied, the mitigations worked well. No candidate was provisionally classified with an averaged or single mark in more than one (1) paper. Any candidate with an averaged mark whose profile fell close to a boundary for a higher classification had their affected script sent on for third marking. The guarantee that no final mark or classification would be lower than the provisional ones reduced candidate anxiety over results and onward progression, as did the ability to confer degrees with no delay. The impact of MAB fell most heavily on the Faculty's administrative staff, and I wish to record my deep gratitude for the dedication and professionalism of Andy Davice and Tara Hathaway, without whose support and expertise the Board's task would have been impossible. Members of the Board also deserve special commendation for their supportive scrutiny of process, commitment to maintaining the highest standards in examinations, their respect for the principled aims of the MAB, and for taking on the extra work necessary to moderate averaged marks.

Examiners' and assessors' marking profiles were monitored as a 'watching brief' by the Chair, but demands on administrators' time and missing marks, both due to MAB, prevented the compilation and scrutiny by the Board of the usual statistics for all papers at the summer marks meetings; the Chair determined that no scaling of marks was necessary.

There was this year only one new examining procedure unrelated to MAB: on the recommendation of last year's Board, the raw mark spread requiring third readings of scripts ('ANF') was reduced from 15 to 11. This brought the Faculty into alignment with Divisional practice, and was welcomed by examiners and assessors, with no discernible change in the amount of third marking.

### **C. Any changes in examining methods, procedures and examination conventions which the examiners would wish the faculty/department and the divisional board to consider.**

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<sup>1</sup> confirm matching pairs of marks; average two 2:2 marks; average one high 2:2 and one 2:1 with absolute difference of  $\leq 8$ ; average two 2:1 marks with absolute difference of  $\leq 5$ ; average one high 2:1 mark with one 1st mark with an absolute difference of  $\leq 8$ ; average two 1st marks with an absolute difference of  $\leq 8$ ; and moderate (read) any single mark of  $< 50$  and borderlines (one  $\leq 57$  and one  $60+$ ; two 2:1 marks with an absolute difference of  $6+$ ; one mark of  $\leq 67$  and one of  $70+$  and two 1st marks ( $70+$ ) with an absolute difference of  $9+$ ).

Although not discussed by the Board, but because the issue was raised by an external, it seems pertinent to quote from the report of last year's chair: 'The examination conventions currently state that "candidates who have failed a paper, or fail to attend an examination without permission, are not permitted to resit that paper." However, the Examinations and Assessments Framework, which details the University's policy on examinations, states that "Students are normally entitled to one resit of any failed assessment unit of a University Examination" (an "assessment unit" in our terms means a paper). This apparent discrepancy between our conventions and the EAF is problematic and we suggest that the Faculty give it some attention.'

#### **D. How candidates are made aware of the examination conventions**

The examination conventions are provided in the Course Handbook. They are also included, along with other guidance, in the Circulars to Tutors and Candidates. In addition, the Faculty produced an online Frequently Asked Questions page, and directed students to the University's guidance about using Inspira.

### **Part II**

#### **A. GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE EXAMINATION**

The standard of performance was, as ever, high. In its deliberations, the Board remarked and reflected often on the fact that this year's cohort had borne the brunt of the Covid pandemic, from school-marked A-levels through college lockdowns. Those disturbances might be reflected in the headline results statistics. Whereas it was noted in last year's Chair's report that the percentage of firsts (37.26%) had 'returned to pre-pandemic levels', that percentage slipped significantly further this year to 29.88%, slightly over 4% fewer than in 2018/19. And, although numbers are very small, it is noticeable that after several pre-pandemic years without course Fails, there were a small number of Fails in 2022/23 and 2021/22.

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

In Course I, all the papers are compulsory, though Paper 6 includes 27 options, which were usually taken by up to 15 students each, and Paper 7 is the dissertation.

In Course II, taken by 28 students, Papers 1-4, 6 and 7 are compulsory, with Papers 6 & 7 being the same as in Course I, and Paper 3 being the same as Course I, Paper 2. Course II, Paper 5 offers a choice between 'The Material Text' (taken by 21 students this year) and 'Shakespeare' (taken by 6 students) which is the same as Course I, Paper 1.

In the following tables, Course II students are included in the data for the Course I Papers that are shared with Course II. Numbers for the other Course II Papers are too small to be presented as statistics, but suitable indications of strengths and weaknesses in the examined work are found in Examiners' Reports (below). Similarly, enrolments in the individual options for Paper 6 Special Options are too small to allow statistics for each; a single set of aggregated statistics is presented here, and option-specific narrative descriptions are found in the Examiners' Reports.

| <b>Paper 1 Shakespeare<br/>(Course II Paper 5)</b> |                   |          |
|--|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                                       | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+  | 61                | 28.11%   |
| 60-69  | 141               | 64.98%   |
| 50-59  | 15                | 6.91%    |
| 40-49  | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <40  | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <b>Overall</b>                                     | <b>217</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 2 1350-1550<br/>(Course II Paper 3)</b> |                   |          |
|--|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                                     | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+  | 46                | 19.33%   |
| 60-69  | 165               | 69.33%   |
| 50-59  | 23                | 9.66%    |
| 40-49  | 1                 | 0.42%    |
| <40  | 3                 | 1.26%    |
| <b>Overall</b>                                   | <b>238</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 3 1550-1660 (Course II Paper 6)</b> |                   |          |
|--|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                                 | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+  | 60                | 28.57%   |
| 60-69  | 146               | 69.52%   |
| 50-59  | 3                 | 1.43%    |
| 40-49  | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <40  | 1                 | 0.48%    |
| <b>Overall</b>                               | <b>210</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 4 1660-1760</b> |                   |          |
|--------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>             | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+                      | 67                | 31.90%   |
| 60-69                    | 126               | 60.00%   |
| 50-59                    | 16                | 7.62%    |
| 40-49                    | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <40                      | 1                 | 0.48%    |
| <b>Overall</b>           | <b>210</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 5 1760-1830</b> |                   |          |
|--------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>             | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+                      | 42                | 20.10%   |
| 60-69                    | 155               | 74.16%   |
| 50-59                    | 11                | 5.26%    |
| 40-49                    | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <40                      | 1                 | 0.48%    |
| <b>Overall</b>           | <b>209</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 6 Special Options (Submission)</b> |                   |          |
|---|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                                | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+   | 90                | 39.13%   |
| 60-69                                       | 129               | 56.09%   |
| 50-59                                       | 11                | 4.78%    |
| 40-49                                       | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <40   | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <b>Overall</b>                              | <b>230</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 7 Dissertation</b> |                   |          |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+                         | 98                | 41.53%   |
| 60-69                       | 121               | 51.27%   |
| 50-59                       | 17                | 7.20%    |
| 40-49                       | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <40                         | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <b>Overall</b>              | <b>236</b>        |          |

As the tables show, significantly more marks of 70+ were achieved in two of the 'coursework' papers (6 and 7) than in Paper 1 (also coursework) and the timed (OBOW) examinations. It is also noticeable that the percentage of 70+ marks in two papers (Paper 2, 19.33%; Paper 5, 20.10%) is significantly lower than the combined average for the four other papers for which statistics are available (34.34%).

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

See 'FHS 2023 Examiners' Reports' (attached).

## **D. MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES NOTICES TO EXAMINERS**

69 candidates submitted a total of 74 MCEs (an increase on last year's figures of 51 submitting 65). In accordance with Examinations and Assessments Framework guidelines, all were carefully scrutinised by a Board Subcommittee (consisting of the Chair, the three External Examiners, and two Internal Examiners), which assigned an impact score for Board use in consideration of any mitigation. Based on these assessments, fewer than five MCEs had a material impact on results and/or classification by Board action. In accordance with EAF guidelines, no individual marks were changed, the Board using instead its power to classify without a mark or marks, or to raise a classification. The Chair wrote to these candidates individually to explain the decisions taken.

## **E. PLAGIARISM AND POOR ACADEMIC PRACTICE**

Following routine scrutiny of Turnitin reports by the Examination Administrators, Board investigation of suspected cases, and further investigation and documentation by the Chair, any candidate suspected of alleged wilful and egregious plagiarism has been referred to the Proctors. These cases are at the time of writing all still pending with the Proctors.

Candidates, their tutors, and future examiners should be aware that any piece of coursework run through Turnitin becomes, by default, part of Turnitin's database against which future submissions are checked for matches. This creates the possibility (encountered this year) that reuse of *formative* work that has been scanned by a tutor can produce 'hits' when *assessed* work which uses it is scanned later; this does not, technically, constitute auto-plagiarism. However, this feature also means that Turnitin's database includes an increasingly vast amount of *examined* work from a very wide range of universities and degree courses, any plagiarism of which will be detected.

Fewer than five candidates were penalised by the Board for Poor Academic Practice in one assessment. The Chair wrote to the candidates' Senior Tutors to explain the Board's penalties.

## **F. PRIZES**

Although recipients of those prizes for papers unaffected by MAB have been agreed by the Board, they will not be announced until the full slate of awards, including those for overall best performance, can be made after receipt of the post-MAB marks necessary for final re-classifications and rankings.

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

### **Chair:**

Professor Matthew Reynolds (to May, 2023)  
Professor Peter McCullough (from May, 2023)

### **Internal Examiners:**

- Professor Bart van Es (Deputy Chair)
- Dr Amy Lidster
- Professor Christine Gerrard
- Dr Jane Griffiths

- Dr Julian Thompson
- Dr Margaret Kean
- Professor Matthew Bevis
- Professor Michael Whitworth
- Dr Mishtooni Bose
- Professor Peter McCullough
- Professor Nandini Das
- Professor Nicholas Perkins
- Professor Michèle Mendelssohn
- Dr Timothy Michael

*(Four internal examiners and the first chair withdrew from Board business during MAB, whereupon Prof McCullough was appointed Chair, and, with the Board's assurance that appropriate expertise remained adequate, Education Committee approved the constitution of the smaller Board without additions pro tem.)*

**External Examiners:**

- Professor Alison Shell (University College London)
- Professor Isabel Davis (Birkbeck College, University of London)
- Professor Peter Boxall (University of Sussex)

# FHS 2023 Examiners' Reports

## Shakespeare Portfolio

258 students took this paper, of whom 224 were Single Honours candidates and 34 candidates for Joint Schools. The examiners were impressed by the range of material covered by the portfolios. No text by Shakespeare was left untouched and subjects of essays included Machiavelli; lock-down theatre productions; specific grammatical features (such as 'shall' and 'will'); fathers; blushing women; time in the Romance plays; versification; fools; nineteenth century political tracts quoting Shakespeare; animals; prologues; suicide; breastmilk; novels based on Shakespeare plays; trees and images of trees; the scimitar; the balcony; banquets; the significance of names; and much besides. It is difficult to generalise about this large body of submissions, but the essays were generally well-written, excellently presented, and solidly supported by relevant quotation and scholarship. Individual portfolios tended to cover around seven or eight works in some detail with additional references to the rest of the canon. Most involved a mix of approaches: for example, one essay on film adaptations, another on material texts, and a third on the influence of a particular source. It is evident that candidates take the portfolio seriously and that most show high competence when it comes to organising material in a fresh and convincing manner.

A substantial proportion of candidates who achieved marks in the 70s did so on the basis of elegant, scholarly prose and the intelligent gathering of relevant textual examples blended with critical reading. These candidates picked appropriately sized topics and had a good sense of the relevant scholarship. It was much more unusual for scripts to gain marks in the high seventies or even the eighties. Scripts that did achieve those very high marks tended to deal with larger, more conceptual questions (for example the emotional response of audiences to a particular kind of event) and did so with nuance and precision. These top scripts were generally less directly dependent on secondary literature and more confident in their readings of language, verse form, and scenic structure. The best candidates showed evidence of deep, wide, independent, and slow reading. They were bold in their combination of scholarly approaches (for example combining attention to a textual crux with consideration of a likely narrative source). It was a joy to read work at that level.

On the negative side, examiners felt that too little attention was paid to the formal or special qualities of literary writing. Many highly competent scripts seemed entirely uninterested in the plays as plays and mined them only in the interest of topics. Portfolios of this kind could still tip into the First Class bracket, but there was something mechanical to them: a lack of genuine curiosity; a lack of interest in ambiguity and contradiction; a pragmatic sense of a task being completed in accordance with the rubric.

Plenty of good work was done on well-established subjects, such as witchcraft, queerness, gender, maternity, and the body. Proper engagement with older critical writing (e.g. Jan Kott, A. C. Bradley, or G. Wilson-Knight) can be very helpful, but such engagement does need to show a sense of critical history. Candidates are encouraged to make use of scholarly resources, such as Shakespeare Documented or Shakespeare Census, and to conduct a thorough search of relevant scholarship. A relatively small number of scripts showed real weakness. These scripts were marred by poor presentation, obscure and inelegant prose, sparse bibliographies, and unconvincing arguments. Candidates producing this kind of material tended also to choose their topics rather naively, showing little awareness of professional methodologies and tending to make incautious, reductive, and often moralistic generalisations.

## Paper 2: Literature in English from 1350 to 1550

All questions were attempted. Questions 4, 6, 7, 11 and especially 12 were the most popular. Commentary 1b was more popular than 1a, though both attracted good numbers of responses.

The commentary exercise had some notable weaknesses this year. While many candidates demonstrated a detailed understanding of key themes of the passage and their significance within the wider context of the poem, it was apparent that frequently candidates had only a vague understanding of ME idioms and expressions (e.g. 'It is me lief') and therefore used the MED in a misguided way by drawing on all possible meanings of a word without being aware that of course some senses will be entirely inappropriate in a particular context. Some commentaries took the form of linguistic discourse-analysis, as taught in Prelims 1A. While such analysis can indeed inform and enrich a *literary* commentary, it cannot replace it. Other commentaries presented something akin to a Modern English paraphrase rather than an analysis of the passage. Many commentaries this year focused on semantics (i.e., the meanings of particular words and their relevance to particular themes in the passages) and compelling issues such as individual characters' psychological process, or relationships between characters. However, such commentaries often fell short of the aims of exercise because they effectively treated the passages as if they were in prose. Candidates are reminded that the interactions between verse-form and content are at the heart of this commentary exercise. Many of this year's candidates are to be praised for engaging with verse-form; however, the analyses attempted were often let down by a misunderstanding of rhyme (e.g. 'mette' and 'grete' do not rhyme) or metre, especially in relation to syllabic count and the 'Chaucerian final e'. Likewise, some of the technical vocabulary was wrongly used, and basic concepts such as poetic foot, metrical stress, and grammatical inflection appear to have been confused. A strong performance in the essays was thus not infrequently compromised by a weak commentary.

The essays showed a pleasing engagement with a wide range of texts across the period. Some essays also meaningfully addressed aspects of material culture and manuscript evidence. Some showed welcome enterprise in engaging with texts at a sophisticated theoretical level.

Questions 11 and 19 were often used to accommodate answers on dream vision; with the former, there was often no discussion of mixed genre at all; with the latter, the definition of 'situatedness' was sometimes stretched beyond breaking point. By 'religious change', the quotation from Erler in question 25 means the Reformation, though many candidates did not discern this and instead used the phrase to reflect on e.g. examples of individual religious conversion in literature of the period. In many cases, however, this was done effectively and persuasively.

There was a surprising number of single-text answers; these tended to lack nuance as well as range. Among both single-text and multiple-text answers, there was a noticeable number where the candidate had clearly decided which essay they were going to write before seeing the exam paper. Most of these made some attempt in the introduction to link their work to the title prompt; some didn't even do that. This is a shame, as the purpose of the exam is not to test whether a candidate has memorized a small and selective amount of information. Relevance, and the ability to adapt one's prior knowledge to a particular prompt, matter. Furthermore, quotations from ME texts were sometimes provided in Mod. Eng. translation. Candidates are reminded that the paper requires study of all ME texts in the original.



In contrast, the strongest answers showed candidates effectively selecting from a wide range of reading to make an argument that responded specifically to their chosen prompt, effectively situating detailed discussion of the texts in the context of a wider argument. The best work was genuinely original and suggested that candidates were enjoying the process. These essays were a pleasure to read.

However, the quality of the scripts overall gave examiners of this paper the impression that the OBOW format does not work to students' advantage. As in past OBOW years, presentation was often markedly shoddy and there was an abundance of typographical and grammatical errors. Given the time allowed and the published marking criteria, this was surprising. Not infrequently, scripts were overlength. In the commentaries, the frequent inclusion of a large amount of quotation from secondary material suggests that availability of resources directed students' attention away from the passage itself, and that far from improving the quality of their analysis, it had a detrimental impact.

## Paper 3: Literature in English from 1550 to 1660

224 students took this paper, of whom 10 were Joint Schools. All exam scripts were complete and every question on the exam paper was attempted at least once. Examiners were very impressed by the range of texts covered and by the proficiency of responses, many of which offered thoughtful, well-informed, and well-articulated essays. Virtually all essay submissions were alert and engaged both with argumentation and with the fractures and fissures of the texts they were reading. The level of writing was good; there were very few poor scripts and some outstanding ones. Overall, examiners felt that the candidates taking the exam this year produced some exceptional work and should be commended.

A wide range of authors from across the period were discussed, including many responses on Baldwin, Donne, Herbert, Lanyer, Jonson, Marlowe, Nashe, Pulten, Sidney, Spenser, and Wroth. In addition to Lanyer and Wroth, women writers were well represented, with numerous responses on Margaret Cavendish, Katherine Philips, and Isabella Whitney, as well as others on Elizabeth Cary, Ann Lock, and Mary Sidney Herbert. Sermons by Donne and Andrewes were considered by some candidates; while some were excellent, others lacked theological awareness – a limitation that also holds true across other exam scripts. Drama was well represented, although examiners felt that the range of playwrights and plays was sometimes quite narrow: *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Edward II*, *Dr Faustus*, and *The Duchess of Malfi* make very frequent appearances. There was very little material, for example, on Philip Massinger and Thomas Heywood. While responses covered the full range of the period, there was limited work on, for example, early Milton, Crashaw, and Caroline drama. Travel writing, including work by Hakluyt, Harriot, Coryate, and Raleigh, was well represented, and the best responses demonstrated wide reading and independence in the selection of examples from these texts, rather than a reliance on material that might have been provided in lectures, classes, or tutorials. Much of the best work was attentive to issues of race, colonialism, and ethnicity across a range of texts.

Outstanding essays – and there was a good number of them this year – offered a clear and developing argument that was well supported by contextual and critical materials, but not overly dominated by the arguments of others. They displayed independent thinking, sometimes through genuinely fresh ways of approaching or analysing a topic, through unusual or striking combinations of texts within a response, or through the selection of examples that are less familiar. As in previous years, some exam scripts offered similar combinations of texts, arguments, and examples, which suggests that candidates may have drawn directly on material they have discussed in classes or heard in lectures. The best responses took advantage of the flexibility offered by an Oxford degree and demonstrated evidence of a range of independent reading and thoughtful, productive combinations of texts.

One of the main problems with some exam scripts was irrelevance to the question prompt or partial engagement with it. Such responses could be excellent in their own terms, but were only partially or tangentially relevant to the question. In some cases, candidates ignored the quotation prompt and opted to write on the general theme of the quotation or associated prompt topics. Others engaged in quite a limited way with a quotation or question by selecting just one or two words from it in isolation, while a few left examiners guessing about how they were using and responding to the question. In a few cases, it seemed as if candidates wanted to draw significantly on previous essays they had written or arguments they had carefully prepared. Because of the OBOW format, it is important to

demonstrate precise engagement with the chosen question, and fresh thinking and argumentation in the moment of the exam. In some cases, examiners were not able to reward work that was good in itself because of irrelevance. Examiners also felt that, for many candidates who struggled with relevance for certain questions, there were ample opportunities in other questions for the kinds of discussion they sought. Candidates should take time to select the best question for their material, and be alert to how they could discuss them from different possible angles and approaches.

Other features of weaker exam scripts included limitations in depth of engagement, range of primary materials, and contextual knowledge. Some treated their topic and texts descriptively or rehearsed familiar critical arguments about them. Others used contextual details about the period – ranging from conditions of performance, textual production, historical events, religious identities, etc. – rather imprecisely or superficially, suggesting that more research and a deeper understanding of these frames of reference would have been helpful. And overall, examiners felt that the range of primary texts considered within candidates' full exam scripts occasionally seemed quite limited. While most candidates aimed to include at least two comparative essays involving different writers, others did not, and some essays focused on a limited amount of primary material (e.g., one or two short poems or a single play), which made it difficult to demonstrate wide knowledge of the period and its literature. Candidates should be aware that, without sacrificing the detailed analysis of two or three main texts within a response, it is possible to weave in references to other primary materials that would assist and deepen engagement with the chosen topic and the proposed argument.

The limit of 1500 words per essay seemed to work very well for most candidates. Most exam essays were close to this upper word limit, and there were very few short responses. Examiners were very impressed by the level of close reading, and by the fluency, clarity, and liveliness of written expression. Overall, examiners felt that the OBOW format resulted in higher quality work from candidates than the three-hour exams.

## Paper 4: Literature in English from 1660 to 1760

Many of the answers addressed a surprisingly narrow range of authors and texts. A high proportion of the candidates (perhaps the majority) discussed only two texts in each answer, sometimes just one. A common pattern emerged, in which candidates answered questions through a sustained comparison of two texts by different authors. But the rationale for the selection and comparison often remained unclear.

Given the eight-hour timespan of this year's OBOW examination, the level of error was surprisingly high. There were many slips in e.g. authors' names, titles, spelling, which could easily have been checked and corrected over that eight-hour period. Despite being asked to specify which section of a question they were responding to, few candidates did so, and it was often unclear from the opening paragraph which specific prompt was being attempted. More generally, relevance was a big problem in this exam format, with evidence of cutting and pasting parts of a tutorial essay without considering whether or how it might relate to the question.

The best answers involved attention to unfamiliar writings including manuscripts and pamphlets while also showing range and awareness of a bigger picture. Labouring class poetry and georgic poetry attracted a large number of responses, including answers addressing Thomson and Pope, and particularly women poets such as Mary Leapor and Mary Collier. Many students wrote about the theatre across the whole span of the paper, though this work was variable in quality. The prompt on theatrical conventions attracted a few strong responses, but most were hampered by lack of detailed knowledge. Essays on women and the stage were somewhat limited in scope, for example addressing the agency (or lack thereof) of female actors. There were some interesting responses to the question on colonialism, though the answers which focused only on the theme of 'China' had the feel of pre-written tutorial essays. There was surprisingly little on the novel, with the exception of a small number of answers on Haywood and on early Richardson. Defoe's writing more often appeared in the context of discussions of urban criminality. Questions on satire were often scholarly but narrow in scope, focusing on a very specific political or literary dispute and not addressing generic issues. Rochester's work made a frequent appearance, but most discussions focused on the theme of impotence (with comparisons with Behn and/or Wycherley). Disappointingly, very few responses addressed his philosophical and conversational poems. There was a substantial number of answers on Milton and the best of these were excellent, with wide range and context (political and theological) embedded in a knowledge of Milton's other works, especially his prose. There were also some attentive and interesting answers on genre and form.

## Paper 5: Literature in English from 1760 to 1830

All questions on this paper were attempted this year by at least one candidate. There was a good range of authors covered, with many answers on Wordsworth, Keats, Clare, and Charlotte Smith (among the poets), Wollstonecraft, Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey (among the prose writers), and Austen and Mary Shelley (among the novelists). The range of texts considered was pleasingly wide: discussion of highly canonical writers was not limited to the best-known works, various paratexts were brought to bear on analyses, and many essays addressed women writers (it was refreshing to see that answers on Charlotte Smith were not confined to *Elegiac Sonnets*, but extended to *The Emigrants*, *Beachy Head*, and her novels). Answers ranged generically from Romantic sonnets, drama, novels, essays, parodies, odes, lyrics, ballads, to life-writing, and thematically from gender, power, religion, national identity, the self, sociability, ekphrasis, rural life, to science and beyond. Certain topics emerged as firm favourites: abolitionist writings, especially work by black writers, sensibility, Romantic essayists, Gothic fiction, Georgian theatre. Many scripts, though, stuck to certain pairings: *The Man of Feeling* generally appeared with *A Sentimental Journey*, *The Deserted Village* with *The Village*, *She Stoops to Conquer* with *The Rivals*, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' with 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci'. There was also a noticeable avoidance of longer texts, with few scripts on *Don Juan*, *Prometheus Unbound*, *Tristram Shandy*, the novels of Burney, or Scott.

Candidates are again reminded of the examination rubric: 'You should pay careful attention in your answers to the precise terms of the quotations and questions.' In particular, the importance of that 'and' should be noted. Several candidates this year struggled to interpret (or even to mention) the quotations in their answers and seemed intent on downloading a prepared essay irrespective of what was being asked about the quotation. Many scripts offered only an opening paragraph which attempted to engage with the terms of the question before the essay went on to do what it appears the candidate was determined to do anyway. In addition, several answers showed very little range; some of the essays on lyric poetry confined themselves to only one or two short poems, suggesting limited preparation, and some of the essays on drama incorporated information about performance history that, while informative in itself, was not necessarily relevant to the essay's theme. Candidates are reminded that contextual material of any kind is worth mentioning only insofar as it is directly relevant to the essay's theme and argument.

Candidates often failed to explain or justify why the authors or works discussed had been chosen for comparison. A significant number of essays used their first paragraphs for purposes other than actually introducing the essays, making it difficult to determine what argument the essay would be pursuing or sometimes even which authors and texts it would be discussing. On occasion, the use of criticism tended to be heavy-handed, and too often candidates' own analyses served largely to affirm an established critic's argument. Weaker essays tended to be primarily descriptive or highly generalising, relying on very broad and unscrutinised historical generalisations about, for example, gender or empire, or responses to the French Revolution or nationhood. Given that this was an open-book exam, there were also dismaying levels of carelessness and misquotation: poems given the wrong titles, characters in novels misspelt, critical terms fuddled ("juvenalia" for "juvenilia", etc.).

A number of scripts made the same arguments about the same texts (for instance, some made the same point about the punctuation in a single line of verse), suggesting a shared source but without proper acknowledgement. Candidates are reminded that 'independence

of argument' is an important marking criterion, and they should build on what they have encountered in lectures and in criticism by developing original lines of enquiry.

The best scripts paid sustained attention to literary language, showed relevant knowledge of intellectual history (e.g., philosophical or political backgrounds) that didn't depend on broad generalisation, and made precise, concise use of a range of sources from within the period (snippets from contemporary reviews, for example). Answers which offered a mixture of close readings and contextual and historical information were generally stronger than those that only did only one or the other. Good scripts also showed an ability to construct plausible comparisons between authors and texts, giving an explicit rationale for their choices. The best scripts engaged throughout with both the concepts and the terms introduced by the exam quotation, producing stylish, detailed, and wide-ranging answers of real originality and critical acumen. These scripts really stood out and were a pleasure to read.

## Paper 6: Special Options

### *The American Novel after 1945*

Fifteen students took this paper. Most essays were comparative and focused on two texts by different authors; some chose to discuss three texts or one text, and others compared works by one author. Students' textual choices tended to include a text from the set reading and frequently introduced a new text or new author. Essays were submitted on a wide range of authors, including Kurt Vonnegut, Fran Ross, James Baldwin, Don DeLillo, Carson McCullers, Richard Wright and Cormac McCarthy. The most popular authorial choices were Toni Morrison, Percival Everett, Audre Lorde, Leslie Marmon Silko and Flannery O'Connor. Several students engaged with theories of literary postmodernism and the representation of racialised and gendered identities. Many essays successfully considered form in relation to the historical, as encouraged by the option's title. Weaker essays were generally more descriptive than analytical and less able to position their wider reading in support of a well-developed argument (often because of too little or too much research). The best essays offered cogent textual analysis and made apt use of a wide range of critical sources in the service of thoughtful and sophisticated arguments. These essays also tended to be better presented and suggestive of careful drafting, editing and organisation.

### *American Renaissances*

Eleven students enrolled for American Renaissances. The submitted essays covered a range of philosophical, historical, and aesthetic topics. The best essays combined an interest in all three, as do the primary texts we considered. The strongest work reflected serious and sustained engagement with the primary texts, a careful working through of the secondary materials, and a background support of additional reading in the period and its major criticism. These essays were the product of multiple revisions, at the level of the overall structure of the essay, the paragraphs, and the sentences. Weaker essays tended to be overly self-referential; they did not engage sufficiently with secondary materials, or, when they did, approached them in a superficial way.

### *Creating Race*

Seven students took this option. The essays produced covered an impressive range of texts and topics, from canonical authors such as Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton to lesser-known works, brought into dialogue with modern writers including Saidiya Hartman and Rowan Ricardo Phillips. The strongest work was attentive to the form as well as the content of the writings under discussion, attending to the ways in which literary forms become freighted with ideological and subversive possibilities as part of their work across time, including in processes of race-making. The very best essays not only made bold and challenging leaps across literary history but also reflected upon the stakes of doing so, integrating a degree of methodological self-reflection into the interpretations being offered.

### *Early Modern Criminality*

There were 9 candidates for this option. The submitted essays showed engagement with the option's themes and approaches, in particular the investigation of intersections between representations of early modern criminality and other significant contexts such as gender, spirituality, 'domestic' politics, changing perceptions of criminal 'reputations', and developments in print culture. The strongest work demonstrated independent critical thinking, attentiveness to genre, fluent writing, and well-structured, persuasive arguments. The clarity of arguments was enhanced by wide critical reading. In weaker work, limited critical reading always hindered candidates' ability to develop ideas and arguments fully. The examiners were pleased to see the detailed analytical attentiveness often given to primary texts (usually prose pamphlets). In weaker work, the examiners noted a misunderstanding of what can be achieved in 6000 words; for example, detailed engagement with two or three pamphlets (supported by wide critical reading) can produce a more convincing analytical argument than a descriptive account of a greater number. The Examiners encourage candidates to proof-read their essays carefully, paying particular attention to scholarly presentation and correct referencing.

### *Elements of Criticism: Earth, Air, Fire and Water*

14 candidates took this paper. There was an impressive range of different approaches taken and materials addressed. The best answers showed a strong grasp of some of the most challenging criticism and debate in contemporary ecocriticism; they also found their way to independent, insightful conclusions grounded in close and intelligent reading of literary works. Students wrote on poetry and fiction of all periods: the majority with confidence and curiosity. Weaker essays were either over-ambitious in scope (trying to cover all the elements, or works from very different literary periods and traditions which were not obviously connected in theme or focus) or demonstrated a shaky hold on critical argument including that of other scholars. Work on 'cli-fi' and 'climate disaster' fiction sometimes struggled to move beyond describing content. Essays on 'nature' poetry sometimes relied on familiar arguments about constructions of (human) identity often at odds with the posthuman critiques of the Anthropocene they were using to frame the essays. Several of the essays were deft in bringing together analysis of visual and verbal materials.

### *Fairytales, Folklore and Fantasy*

There were 15 essays. All of them demonstrated enormous intellectual ambition, and most showed real delight in the material and the scholarship it has stimulated. The strongest essays maintained a clear and resolute focus on a particular aspect of the multiplicity of texts, using theory and understandings of literary style to explore it in significant detail. Less successful essays tried to do far too much, sometimes setting themselves a scope that would have been more appropriate for a doctoral thesis. However, this is a fault in the right direction in the sense that it illustrates the appetite for the literature.

### *Film Criticism*

The work for this option was of a very good standard. The essays fulfilled the assessment objectives: critically distinguishing and illuminating the particularities, qualities, and merits of individual films and recognising their distinction as films; concentrating on their form and style, executing close analysis, and providing detailed discussions of the workings and



significance of specific sequences; providing sensitive and persuasive interpretations of the film or films; and discussing, where appropriate, the relevant academic literature by testing its claims against the detail of the films. Many candidates showed resourcefulness in choosing films and topics which were not included on the taught component of the course. Essays focused on features of film form such as composition, point of view, motifs, costume, and space. There were some accomplished extended analyses of individual sequences, but at the same time the essays provided a sense of the whole with some persuasive interpretations being gleaned from patterns across the films. There was some agile work on gender. There were no indications of a prevailing problem. The essays showed a clarity of thought, claims were well substantiated, and there was almost no extraneous material or padding detected. The overall sense was of refreshing, lively, and imaginative engagement with the films.

### *Freedom, Anarchy, Strangeness and Decay*

12 students took this option. The standard of the examined work was high, with marks ranging from 2:1 to high first class. Scripts ranged across a wide range of approaches and diverse materials, from short stories by women, to Victorian erotica and pornography, actresses' autobiographies, print and performance cultures, and the rise of the department store. The strongest essays brought together theoretical sophistication, deep knowledge of material conditions (variously of theatrical production, publication and print, commercial and artistic contexts) and deft and insightful close readings. There was evidence of extensive independent research and original thinking producing innovative and ambitious readings of familiar texts and performances. Stronger scripts demonstrated an admirable readiness to engage actively with critics' interpretations and to challenge their assumptions and conclusions, entering the critical debate with confidence and acuity.

A wide and diverse range of texts and topics were addressed, though Wilde's *Salome* remains a particularly popular focus, with scripts encompassing alternative queer readings, the consideration of adaptations and performance choices, and original readings of the play in relation to contemporary artistic representations and modern adaptations. Weaker essays offered individual insights and ideas without a clear line of argument, tending towards a 'theme and variation' approach, organizing perceptions into topic-based sections without a fully developed thesis. Across the board there was clear evidence of thoughtful and energetic engagement with the artistic, political, and intellectual movements of the period.

### *The Good Life*

Fifteen candidates took this option. The essays, on the whole, were wide-ranging and impressively interdisciplinary, taking care to honour the specific demands of the various disciplines invoked. Many candidates chose to show how art and philosophy can fruitfully interact, while retaining a wise sense of their differences. A large number of essays this year focussed on film (Sirk, Fassbinder, Wilder, Bergman, Baumbach, Haneke, Almodóvar, Kaurismäki), though there was also very enterprising work on life-writing, comic books, and contemporary fiction. The best essays attended to the formal elements of their object of study while constructing a subtle case about its ethical dynamics. Weaker work, on the other hand, tended to miss out on these details and opted to argue in an over-general and under-reflective vein. That said, the quality of the work this year was very high.

### *Good Poets, Bad Politics?*

Students in this course wrote about a wide range of topics, with good work on politics and affect (indifference, self-humouring, idleness) and on identity and individualism. Most essays preferred to focus primarily on one of the two poets and Eliot was more popular than Wordsworth. But the strongest work was able to locate productive points of similarity in both.

Most essays used a quite impressive range of secondary criticism. The strongest essays were also sceptical and probing about the various -isms (romanticism, classicism, modernism, conservatism, liberalism) inevitably invoked in weekly discussion. Weaker essays tended to use these terms without adequate definition or discussion.

Some strong essays were slightly let down by lack of attention to presentation (this was more a question of writing style than footnoting), and by incorrect dating and other factual inaccuracies and typos.

### *Language, Persuasion, People, Things*

Thirteen students took this paper. The standard of submissions was very strong. Candidates often made extremely good use of materials and approaches explored during the course, especially in relation to advertising, persuasion, and ideology in various forms. There was some astute critical engagement with persuasive duplicity in the form of greenwashing and the purveyed illusions of commodity activism. The best essays combined depth and breadth, exploring a clearly articulated nexus of ideas while not losing sight of the opportunities for close textual analysis, including the interaction between word and image, as well as appropriate historical/contextual engagement.

### *Literature, Culture, and Politics in the 1930s*

There were 15 students in this option. As in previous years, most candidates identified a historical phenomenon or theme that was noticeably prevalent or distinctively handled in the literature of the period—for example, a particular form of consumption, or means of entertainment, or aspect of work or leisure, or response to contemporary political events—and built an argument around its specific social and cultural significance. The single feature distinguishing the most successful essays that adopted this kind of thematic focus was that they were also, crucially, able to describe convincingly the specifically *literary* and/or *literary historical* significance of what they had identified. Many candidates read enterprisingly beyond the course's assigned authors and texts, and almost always wrote knowledgeably and well about these additional finds. Some candidates addressed literature in relation to other contemporary arts and media with confidence and flair. Although essays that ranged across multiple authors often showed a very persuasive command of the interwar period, there were also numerous equally strong essays, well-informed and insightful, on individual writers.

### *Literature's Silences*

Fifteen students took this paper. Their essays were, in the main, of a very high standard. Topics were impressively varied, ranging from Thomas Traherne to Sarah Kane, from the silences of conversation poems to the silencing of women. Approaches included close

readings, highly theorized analyses, archival research, and trans-historicist comparisons. The best work drew unqualified admiration from the examiners, who recognised its professional, publishable quality.

### *Old Norse*

There were six candidates for this paper, and scripts were of a high standard. The best translations combined sensitivity to the peculiarities of Old Norse syntax with a good sense of how to turn it into idiomatic English, and most candidates provided informative textual and literary notes on each passage. Candidates wrote on the full range of set-texts, and the best scripts combined excellent close textual analysis with a wider understanding of (among other things) genre, gender, and emotion in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. All candidates were able to quote confidently in Old Norse, and, overall, they showed a good understanding of what is distinctive about Old Norse-Icelandic poetry and prose.

### *Others and J. M. Coetzee*

Eight candidates took this paper. The submitted work was strong, with candidates pursuing—as they are encouraged to do—various different ways of bringing Coetzee’s writings into dialogue with others. A wide range of topics were considered, including photography, realism, life-writing, the lives of animals, literary character, and multilingualism. The best work demonstrated real independence of mind. Several candidates were able to develop incisive and well-motivated arguments about their chosen subjects.

### *Possibilities of Criticism*

Students wrote their pieces on a wide range of themes and authors, with an equally wide range of formal and theoretical approaches. The best essays were probing, adventurous, informed, and often beautifully written, really thinking about the terms and discourses in and of which they were writing, and showing evidence of wide and deep reading. Some outstanding work was done that accessed difficult texts through personal experience, while avoiding the perils of narcissism, and always recognising that the vital thing in this course is to find ways of discovering the texts (or the experience of texts) anew. There were also some highly ambitious pieces that used unpredictable texts as models in themselves of immanent critical or theoretical thinking, sometimes pitting very different approaches against one another. The less successful essays tended to be too loose or approximate in their critical language, writing as though unaware of the history of their key terms. The need for precision of expression – which of course needn’t preclude figurative or allusive or experimental language - is perhaps even more important when seeking to write outside established critical templates. Writers/works engaged with included Anne Carson, WG Sebald, Walter Benjamin, Wittgenstein, Gertrude Stein, Iris Murdoch, Theodore Roethke, Maggie Nelson, Sarah Kane, Deleuze and Guattari, medieval Arabic odes, Nabokov, German expressionist and Singapore migrant film, Susan Wicks, Moniza Alvi, Eve Sedgwick, George Eliot, Shakespeare, William Kentridge.

### *Postcolonial Literature*

Eleven students took the option, and wrote on topics ranging from southern African material, through Caribbean writing, to the Sri Lankan novel. There were several single-

author-focussed essays, including on Kureishi, Bessie Head, and Jamaica Kincaid. Canonical postcolonial writers like Naipaul or Coetzee put in appearances. It was interesting to see that Njabulo Nbebele elicited some attention, though he was not a writer fully featured in class discussions. In a contrast with previous years, students tended to stick to texts and topics covered in classes, though this may have been because tutors encouraged them to do so. This greater familiarity with the discussed materials led to the stronger essays being clearer, with better defined arguments and contextualisation. The best essays demonstrated excellent awareness of the core issues, as well as grounding in context, and in the wider critical debates. Weaker essays tended to be quite narrow in focus, and, surprisingly, had little critical theoretical framing.

### *Seeing Through Texts*

There were eight candidates for this option. The work was very good, with all the essays engaging with visual or material culture alongside texts, often finding illuminating ways to understand them in the light of one another, or in their interaction. The best essays found ways to explore how medieval and/or postmedieval concepts and theories of materiality or visibility helped to explain the texts and objects they discussed, or how those texts and objects complicated or resisted such theories. Less successful essays tended to place, say, a text alongside an image without enough explanation of how and why this made a difference to our understanding. There was a wide range of topics analysed, across religious and secular material.

### *Tragedy*

Fifteen candidates took this paper. The course encourages comparative work across a great variety of periods and forms, from ancient to contemporary, and across multiple literatures (in translation and otherwise, according to student choice). Real originality, literary sensitivity, and sophistication of thought were on show in several essays that explored their chosen works with analytical and theoretical precision, making careful and historically informed comparisons. There was also excellent work on single novels, or single authors, showing that precise focus and close reading can produce work of equal ambition and power. Candidates who did less well often relied on more superficial or circular analysis, taking the meaning of 'tragedy' for granted, or failed to construct an argument that could illuminate the texts comparatively, rather than merely juxtaposing disparate works. Several candidates fruitfully considered transformations and appropriations of 'tragedy' under the pressures of shifting cultures, analysing postcolonial and feminist literatures; a number considered texts and theories of tragedy in relation to film, television series, and graphic novels. Many candidates made effective and imaginative use of their freedom to discuss texts of their own choosing beyond the seminar reading list.

### *Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Theatre*

This option elicited a generally strong set of essays covering an exceptionally wide range of topics, often highly original and exciting. Some focused on thematic topics such as postcolonial identity in contemporary Irish performance; a media theory of spectatorship in 20th century feminist theatre; antitheatricity and the creation of a pseudo-documentary theatre; staging cognitive bias in contemporary British theatre; the representation of mental disorder; the relationship between racism and temporality on stage; representations of disability; the mythic; and the use of deliberate anachronism in contemporary plays. Other essays explored ideas relating specifically to performance, staging, and scenography, such as: unstageability; spectatorship and remediation; the use of light in contemporary theatre;

and the use of voice technologies on stage. Still others focused on a single playwright such as Glaspell, Beckett, McDonagh, Kirkwood. Common to the most successful essays was an ability to mount a compelling argument drawing on a range of both texts and performance-related material (never losing sight of the dual nature of theatre as both text and performance).

### *Writing Feminisms/Feminist Writing*

There were fifteen candidates who took this option. Essays addressed texts spanning thousands of years – from Homer to the recently published. They explored a wide range of authors and genres, in English and in translation, high and low: the epic, poetry, novels, plays, short stories, life-writing, experimental literature, children's fantasy literature, autotheory, metafiction, critical fabulation, trans writing. Essays explored a broad range of topics, including: gender, race, postcolonialism and reading texts by women of colour; literary experimentalism, narrative authority, textual instability and 'sliding'; identification, disidentification and feminist revision of the classics; female aggression and violence; appetite and consumption; anorexia; disability and illness; the social construction of women's mental illness; subverting boundaries, borders and binaries; queer feminist aesthetics and queer temporality; the veil and modesty as power; trans autobiography, pastiche and parody; intertextuality, mimicry, performativity and resignification; polyvocal selves, 'living autobiographies' and 'real estate'; success and failure; 'glimpses' of Utopia and the (im)possibilities of queer kinship; boundaries and ungendered spaces between male and female; the border between intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels of reality; identity politics of 'recognition' versus indecipherability and ethical blindness; stream of consciousness and Sapphic desire; the sinthomosexual. Essays engaged critically with a wide spectrum of feminist theory and criticism, with a strong interest in intersectional, African American, postcolonial, Islamic and trans feminisms as well as *écriture féminine*, difference, deconstructive and psychoanalytic feminisms. Feminist approaches were fruitfully combined with poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, phenomenological, deconstructive, African American, critical race, postcolonial, queer, trans, disability, "fat", and trauma theory and criticism. The strongest essays demonstrated wide critical reading and combined close readings with attentive exploration of relevant feminist theory. A few of the essays made up for a lack of style or clumsy presentation with innovative research into their topics; the best essays exhibited beautifully crafted and lucid prose with original claims backed up by examples from the text and engagement with relevant criticism. Weaker essays tended to let their arguments run away with them or did not demonstrate enough knowledge of their subject matter. Overall, the essays contributed in fascinating ways to current debates.

### *Writing Lives*

Fourteen candidates took this option. The standard of essays produced was high, displaying an impressive variety of critical approaches. Some of the best work combined imaginative close reading with original historical research and/or nuanced theoretical approaches, but there were successful essays that approached their chosen topics in many different ways. Essays that offered a clear line of argument tended to perform better than those that bundled together ideas and examples in a looser structure. A few essays relied too much on synthesising a range of secondary criticism on their chosen author, rather than using the views of others to power their own line of argument. Candidates ranged widely across different genres and topics, although contemporary life writing was considerably more popular than earlier examples of the genre. Authors studied included Barnes, Barthes, Berger, Cottom, Dickens, Didion, Nelson, and Ali Smith.

## **Paper 7: Dissertation**

Examiners were generally impressed by the quality of dissertations, with many candidates offering original, well-researched, and well-presented pieces of work. The best all offered some combination of fine close reading, well-defined and original arguments, and demonstration of a range and depth of knowledge that were appropriate for the required length. Many were also praised for pursuing cross-period and/or multi-author comparisons to produce original and insightful analyses from unexpected combinations of primary texts. Others were rewarded for penetrating theses on single authors or even single works, though the best of these always showed a range of reference or awareness based on much wider reading (whether in other primary works, historical-cultural contexts, or theoretical approaches). Examiners also observed the tendency for weaker dissertations to struggle to declare and develop a clearly defined, sustained argument (rather than description or observation, often preceded by lengthy, meandering introductory gambits); a failure in cross-period or multi-author pieces to explain and justify the comparisons being made; a failure to assemble the specialist expertise necessary for a given field; insufficient scope and content; and mistaking ethical or moral investment in a topic as sufficient in itself for appropriate critical discussion of it. Candidates and their supervisors should keep in mind the investment of time and thought required for the wide reading, original research, and careful structuring and drafting necessary for a successful dissertation.

## **Course II Paper 1: Literature in English 650-1100**

28 candidates sat this paper. There was a good spread of answers across the whole range of the question paper. Popular questions included 2 (performance of gender), 4 (past/myth), 9 (non-human voices), 11 (welcoming and/or expelling cultures), 14 (literary collections) and 19 (vigilance). The examiners were impressed with the range and quality of the work overall. The best work showed an excellent combination of careful, accurate, and imaginative engagement with primary texts across a range of genres, and a critical engagement with debates in scholarship, which could feed into coherent arguments in response to the quotations. There was good work across many Old English texts, including biblical narratives and saints' lives, heroic and mythological narratives, shorter poems and riddles, various kinds of prose, and documentary and practical texts. Some scripts also dealt well with comparative analysis of texts from, for example, Latin or Old Norse (it is fine to use translations to do this). Some of the weaker scripts showed a less secure understanding of Old English grammar, syntax, and style: these are fundamental to creating a strong argument about the texts, and it is worth noting that regular work on Old English language throughout the course will pay off for candidates. There were some candidates who showed good knowledge of primary and secondary materials, but did not address the questions clearly enough, or show why the material they were offering was relevant. On the whole, though, there was some very good work for this paper.

## **Course II Paper 2: Medieval English and Related Literatures 1066-1550**

28 candidates sat this paper. All the questions were answered, with a good spread across the range of the paper. Some of the most popular were 1 (lyric as unfixed, split between voices etc), 3 (paradox), 4 (extreme mental states, or 'natural' world), 6 (women's desire and/or lament), 7 (song and suffering). There was a great deal of impressive work this year. Many candidates showed a deep engagement with the lyric traditions that they had studied, and were able both to discuss texts in detail, and to think more broadly about lyric traditions and the critical debates to which they give rise. Some of the best scripts were able to include close attention to the language and form of the texts they studied, along with a sensitivity to different linguistic and cultural milieux (for example, there was some excellent discussion of texts from Arabic, Old Norse, Welsh, and French traditions). It is worth noting that the marking criteria include an assessment of candidates' sophistication, both of comprehension of issues and of conceptualization, and candidates who were able to discuss primary texts in detail, and engage in the ongoing critical debates about lyric, were more likely to be able to show evidence of that sophistication. This paper allows for a range of work on texts studied in translation, and much of this was very good. It is worth noting, however, that a script that discusses a relatively small number of texts, mostly ones translated into English, is less likely to achieve the higher levels of engagement and use of primary texts that are set out in the marking criteria. Candidates should be encouraged to think across traditions within the longer essays on this paper, and to be reassured that detailed discussion of the language and form of English lyrics is welcome. Most scripts addressed the implications of the questions well, but candidates are reminded of the importance of directly engaging with the terms of the questions they are answering.

## **Course II Paper 3: Literature in English from 1350 to 1550**

See FHS Paper 2: Literature in English from 1350 to 1550.

## **Course II Paper 4: The History of the English Language to c. 1800**

Twenty-nine students took this paper. The best submissions were cogent and analytical, robustly alert to the implications of the questions chosen, and able to draw on a range of apposite materials (primary as well as secondary). Weaker candidates, however, displayed a range of problems, from fundamental violations of rubric (and the necessary focus on language coverage within the period 800-1800), to palpable struggles with relevance (and accuracy) in relation to the questions chosen. The commentary passages presented particular problems for some candidates, and there were some significant difficulties in identifying fundamental linguistic features. There were nevertheless some very promising answers on gender, private writing, register, and syntax, as well as some illuminating discussions of language change and variation from a range of perspectives.

## **Course II Paper 5: The Material Text**

Twenty-two students submitted work for this paper. All students attempted both questions, as the rubric requires. More students wrote on the Nowell Codex than on the Vernon Manuscript in answering the first question, but this may simply be natural variation from year to year. A pleasingly wide range of topics appeared in answers to the second question, answers which also displayed many methodologies: palaeography, collation, art-historical research, quantitative study, et cetera.

Some strong answers for the first, commentary, question were detailed and rounded, addressing several aspects of the manuscript page and edition; other strong answers took just two or three features (e.g. script) and developed a very precise reading of those. All strong answers were detailed and showed not only knowledge of the manuscript at hand, but also an ability to select from that knowledge and apply it in original analysis. The best candidates thought carefully through the range of factors that shape scribal and editorial decisions, alert to the ways in which early scribes and modern editors are not always so very different in their labours.

Some weaker submissions for the commentary question slipped too much into castigating the editions set. The commentary question invites candidates to explore what the edition is doing and why. There is certainly room to critique an edition's ideological foundations, but such critique should frame the exercise, in the introduction and conclusion, around a core of close analysis of concrete evidence to back the critique up: students must show that they understand how the guts of an edition work. In a subvariant of the same problem, some weaker scripts displayed a tendency to criticise the editions set for failing to be the original manuscripts, through an un-interpretative listing of differences between scribe and editor -



even though not being the original manuscript is part of the point of any edition. Some weaker answers showed knowledge of the manuscript discussed but did not apply that knowledge, leaving it inert in their account and unable to earn high credit. Noticeably fewer scripts than in some previous years ignored the edition entirely.

Strong submissions for the essay question tended to explore one tightly defined topic, either through a detailed case study of a single work, manuscript, inscription &c, or through a small, delineated sample of manuscripts. As on the commentary, the range of approaches could vary, but the detailed analysis of concrete evidence united all the best answers. Candidates who did well on the essay question knew the research on their area of interest well but also selected precisely what was relevant from that research to help build their own arguments. Weaker submissions for the essay question tended to write in more general terms, not affording themselves chances to dig into concrete material evidence. Some weaker submissions displayed a working knowledge of relevant secondary literature but struggled to distinguish an independent voice and analytical thrust beyond reporting and summarising pre-existing work, risking writing only a survey.

Across both questions, every excellent script had clear prose, and few errors in spelling, punctuation, and scholarly apparatus, showing evidence of completion in draft before the deadline and careful checking of the argument and presentation. Weaker submissions typically lapsed in one or more of these aspects. For this paper, markers grant some leeway for unorthodox but consistent referencing of manuscript material, in light of the fact that manuscript studies is a technical topic to which students are new. Other aspects of apparatus and presentation are held to a high standard, though, since this is a coursework paper. The Material Text occupies a position in the assessment ecosystem analogous to the Shakespeare paper taken as an alternative by other Course II students, and time management allowing for revision and checking is part of the exercise.

Most of the submissions that were weaker compared to the best work were still solid writing, standing as a credit to the hard work of the candidates. Almost all submissions displayed heartening enthusiasm for the topic, much appreciated by the examiners.

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2023**

|  |                    |  |
|--|--------------------|--|
| <b>External examiner name:</b>               | Peter Boxall       |  |
| <b>External examiner home institution:</b>   | Sussex University  |  |
| <b>Course(s) examined:</b>                   | English Literature |  |
| <b>Level:</b> (please delete as appropriate) | Undergraduate      |  |

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

| <b>Part A</b>   |  |                                  |            |           |                    |
|---|--|----------------------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------|
|   |  | <i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i> | <b>Yes</b> | <b>No</b> | <b>N/A / Other</b> |
| A1.   | Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>                                      |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A2.   | Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:<br><br>(i) the frameworks for higher education qualifications, and<br><br>(ii) any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 7 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i> |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A3.   | Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?   |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A4.   | Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?  |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A5.   | Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?  |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A6.   | Did you receive a written response to your previous report?  |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A7.   | Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?   |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| <p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B.</b></p> |  |                                  |            |           |                    |

## Part B

### B1. Academic standards

- a. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

It is your greatest asset as an examination board, and one of your most intractable problems, that the academic standards which your students achieve, and to which they are held, are exceptionally high. While I am happy to tick 'yes' to question A1 above, to confirm that the standards at Oxford are comparable with elsewhere, it is nevertheless the case that the class boundaries are consistently set higher at Oxford than at other higher education institutions. I will return to this in B3 below.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes and with reference to academic standards and student performance of other higher education institutions of which you have experience (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

I sat on the boards which carefully scrutinised students' work, and attended the mitigating circumstances meetings. I also read the entire run of a number of students – mostly in the first class, and at the borderline between first and second class (my fellow externals looked at some of the work in the lower range). This allows me to comment with some confidence on the student performance and achievement across the degree.

The student performance at Oxford is distinctive in at least three ways. The first and most striking distinctiveness is the quality of the writing. Oxford students at all levels acquire a precision, fluency and polish in their writing that is quite exceptional, and that is very clearly a product of the intensive teaching that Oxford students receive. The second is the historical reach, breadth and depth of the students' work, and the third its theoretical and critical originality and ambition.

These three characteristics make the work produced by Oxford English students exceptionally strong. The best work I read (and I reviewed the top first this year) is unquestionably publishable, and promises to lead to probing postgraduate research. All of the work I read was of very high quality, and I noted in the second marks meeting that many of the lowest ranked students had first class marks in their arrays, indicating the strength of your cohort across the range.

### B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.*

The rigour of the assessment process, and the conduct of the exam board, is exceptional, and as robust as any higher education institution of which I have had experience.

Oxford is extremely unusual in maintaining a double blind assessment procedure (the vast majority of UK institutions having abandoned this principle either completely, or for most of their assessments) and this ensures a consistency and a rigour in the marking more effectively than any other single measure. There is full and proper use of third markers, where first and second markers can't agree. This is a crucial element of the blind double marking process – to prevent the tendency for disagreements to be resolved by meeting in the middle – and I saw much evidence of third markers taking strong and well justified decisions, when disagreements do occur.

The exam board is also exemplary in its rigour and care. The mitigating evidence process is scrupulously fair, and both marks meetings were conducted in a spirit of collegial rigour, and with the interests of the student, and the fairness of the decision making, the paramount concern. Individual markers are also extremely accurate in their grading. Even when there were disagreements, I could see why each examiner had reached the mark they did, and I did not feel on any occasion that the wrong mark had been arrived at.

### **B3. Issues**

*Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?*

1] This year was an unusual year, as a result of disruption arising from the marking and assessment boycott.

Some rules had to be adapted, in order to ensure that students graduated on time. These adaptations were made with great care, ensuring that the rigour of the assessment procedure was not compromised. This was also done with full respect to those colleagues who observed the boycott.

2] I remarked last year on the high standards of your degree (mentioned too in B1 above). As welcome as this is, it also poses a problem, to which I do not see a ready solution. Your internal structures are designed to maintain consistency, and to avoid grade inflation – and your own grading is entirely accurate within the Oxford context. The difficulty is that other institutions are awarding higher marks to work of a similar standard, and this can disadvantage Oxford students when applying for funding in open competition. I don't recommend inflating grades, but I do think that it would be advisable to give some collective thought to how you use the upper end of the marks range.

3] Following on from 2] above. It was suggested at the board that there may be a generational difference in the willingness to award marks in the higher range – so again there is possibly some scope for refreshing of practice here, to ensure consistency.

4] It was apparent that there is a significant number of cases in which students are receiving diagnoses of learning difficulties late, which puts pressure both on student support services to respond effectively to students' circumstances, and on examiners. It would be worth looking at measures that might be taken to ensure a more timely diagnosis.

5] It seemed possible at the board that there is some variation in practice around the use of Turnitin for formative work. This led to some uncertainty around the status of self-plagiarism, and it might be worth refreshing practice in this area.

### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

There was evidence of good practice and very high standard teaching across the range of work that I saw.

Peter McCullough chaired the board with great skill, and managed the adjustments around the MAB with care both for the maintenance of standards, and for the best interests of the students. In this he was ably supported by Bart van Es, who brought his experience as a prior chair to the board.

I was frankly amazed, this year and in previous years, by the standard of the administrative support given to the board by Tara Hathaway and Andy Davice. This is unparalleled in any other institution of which I have experience, and is an invaluable asset to the board.

**B5. Any other comments**

*Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.*

This is my last year as external. Over the three years, I have learned a great deal from the material I have read, and from the colleagues with whom I have worked. It has been a great pleasure to serve as an external for Oxford English, and to see the extraordinary quality of the teaching and learning in the faculty. The faculty's reputation as world leading is more than deserved. This is a thriving faculty, working at the very edges of the discipline, and helping to create a new generation of critics, writers and thinkers who will take the study of English Literature into the future.

|                |                            |
|----------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Signed:</b> | Peter Boxall               |
| <b>Date:</b>   | 31 <sup>st</sup> July 2023 |

**PLEASE ENSURE YOU HAVE COMPLETED PARTS A & B, AND EMAIL YOUR COMPLETED FORM TO: [EXTERNAL-EXAMINERS@ADMIN.OX.AC.UK](mailto:EXTERNAL-EXAMINERS@ADMIN.OX.AC.UK) AND COPY IT TO THE APPLICABLE DIVISIONAL CONTACT SET OUT IN THE GUIDELINES.**

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2023**

|  |  |              |
|--|--|--------------|
| <b>External examiner name:</b>                       | Isabel Davis   |              |
| <b>External examiner home institution:</b>           | Natural history museum (when appointed I was at Birkbeck, University of London; I use my HEI experience as my point of comparison here). |              |
| <b>Course(s) examined:</b>                           | BA English   |              |
| <b>Level:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> ) | Undergraduate  | Postgraduate |

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

| <b>Part A</b>   |   |                                  |            |           |                    |
|---|---|----------------------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------|
|   |   | <i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i> | <b>Yes</b> | <b>No</b> | <b>N/A / Other</b> |
| A1.   | Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>             |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A2.   | Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 7 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i> |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A3.   | Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?  |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A4.   | Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?   |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A5.   | Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?   |                                  | X          |           |                    |
| A6.   | Did you receive a written response to your previous report?   |                                  |            |           | N/A                |
| A7.   | Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?  |                                  |            |           | N/A                |
| <p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B.</b></p> |   |                                  |            |           |                    |

## Part B

In your responses to these questions, please could you include comments on the effectiveness of any changes made to the course or processes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic where appropriate.

### B1. Academic standards

- c. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

This is my first year examining in Oxford. I enjoyed reading the material I was sent which comprised the complete profiles of six students - three reading for Course I and three for Course II – and two interdisciplinary dissertations for the History-English joint board.

The scripts I read spread across the marking range from the top-ranked first in Course II to work which was achieving II:ii. The sample very much reflects the standards which students achieve elsewhere in the institutions with which I have experience. I worked for many years at an unusual institution (Birkbeck, University of London) which specialised in adult learning in the evening. The best students there came with years of experience of professional writing. The clear first-class profile I read for Oxford this year was as good as any I've seen there or elsewhere: work of publishable standard of the kind that might be expected from high achieving postgraduate students.

The second-class work was interesting in that often good or excellent essay writing skills were on display, but the quality of the research or argumentation was less secure. At Birkbeck student work achieving second-class marks also usually exhibits weaker essay writing skills.

There are fewer students in the II:ii or below range, in comparison to other institutions where I have worked or examined. All the student work I read demonstrated an awareness of good research skills and good discernment in relation to secondary critical engagement. The assessments I reviewed covered a formal and chronological diversity of materials in rich and varied curriculums.

- d. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes and with reference to academic standards and student performance of other higher education institutions of which you have experience (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

The first-class work was original and sophisticated, demonstrating the highest quality of argumentation and engagement with primary, secondary and theoretical materials.

Those profiles that fell in the II:i range were made up of solid answers that didn't always use the prompts and questions to their full potential. There was a tendency to select questions which enabled pre-rehearsed answers. Sometimes the connections between the essay and the prompt that might have been developed were left to the reader/examiner to infer.

In the II:ii range, although there was a seeming confidence of argumentation, there was also some wrong-headedness which led to ill-informed answers, rubric violations and an inability to understand the periods or topics covered by a particular paper.

Notably, the students who chose a dissertation topic on a very contemporary form – popular music, young adult fiction – did not always have the critical skills successfully to analyse it. It was a shame, having been introduced to such a rich range of historical materials, that some students resorted to these evidently low-brow contemporary cultural forms which required sociological or cultural theoretical approaches that hadn't been taught on the course.

Paper six and the dissertation gave the best students the chance to spread their research wings. The best work amongst these longer pieces was a real joy to read: examples of original, independent, significant, rigorous and readable studies.

The interdisciplinary historical-literary dissertations were very fine and on brilliant topics, demonstrating a clear grasp of the value of exploring these two disciplines together.

## **B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process**

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.*

The administration of the English board was efficient and scrupulous in a difficult year because of the marking and assessment boycott. The mitigating circumstances process was firm but fair, setting the same rules for all and holding clear lines. The regulations and handbooks were shared with me and the processes that were laid out there were followed.

The joint board was more difficult to administer and seemed to be more affected by the Marking and Assessment boycott. Because of a late cancellation and re-arrangement of the meeting I couldn't attend. I conducted my duties via email before the board. From what I saw it was conducted fairly but couldn't witness it in person.

I saw mark sheets for the English materials that I scrutinized, but not the work for the English-History joint board. Of the mark sheets that I did see, the marking and examining process was of the highest standard. Double blind marking was supplemented with a process for those scripts where agreement was not reached. This worked well in every case. Where I didn't see mark sheets – for the History-English dissertations - it was unclear how examiners had arrived at their marks, but my own sense of the pieces found alignment with the internal markers' grading nonetheless, suggesting that, whatever the process was, it had arrived at the correct grades.

Across the scripts that I saw, my sense was that the best work was sometimes significantly undermarked and that grades did not always reflect the descriptors in the English handbook (pp. 38-41). The first-class mark band is broken into four. Markers could use those four descriptors more actively to arrive at their gradings. Other institutions are using the 75+ band to differentiate the best in the first-class category. Some but not all markers are using those higher bands in the work I saw.

In the case of the candidates in the English board with first-class profiles, both had some papers or parts of papers that could have been graded higher. And a conservative grade was also given to the interdisciplinary dissertations I saw from the joint board. I saw some tough marking of first-class scripts in English Course II, Papers I and II, and on the Shakespeare paper; and the dissertations I read could also have gone higher. Under-marking the top candidates risks their losing out in the competition for postgraduate funding but also fails to articulate the significant value that Oxford undeniably adds even to these superlative students' education.

## **B3. Issues**

*Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?*

The differences between Oxford and other institutions are considerable. Elsewhere there is a culture of retaking and reassessment. That difference means that in some cases Oxford students are excused from submitting work where they have compelling personal circumstances. A point for reflection: what should the limits of that practice be?

The other clear issue is the slowness of processing of students with different disability needs. The mitigating circumstances board took the right approach to students with on-going health



challenges: those conditions should be tackled in advance with the right disabilities support, rather than through the mitigating circumstances process, which ought properly to be reserved for those with unforeseen circumstances. But the system needs to be working effectively and efficiently for students to get a fair deal.

#### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*


Oxford is maintaining a very high standard of assessment practice, using two and in some cases three internal examiners. Many institutions are moving to moderation or are under considerable pressure to do so. Systems in place to consider mitigating circumstances and poor academic practice or plagiarism are especially rigorous and effective.

The courses that I saw were such rich and impressive programmes of study. As a medievalist who has recently had to leave the Higher Education sector, I looked at Course II, in particular, with wonder and envy. Students have so much opportunity to explore in detail and depth. I saw students tackling medieval music, history, art as well as literature and managing literary and linguistic study in Old, Middle and Early Modern English, Old Norse, Old French, and Medieval Welsh. Undergraduates are regularly using archival material, manuscripts and early printed books and, in most cases, doing so with confidence and verve. It was a joy to read the work and I learned a great deal from it.

#### **B5. Any other comments**

*Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.*

I'd like to thank Andy Davice, Tara Hathaway, Peter McCullough, Andrea Hopkins and Jon Parkin for all their work in preparation and during the board. There have been so many challenges this year and I commend the smoothness with which the process has run.

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| <b>Signed:</b> |  |
| <b>Date:</b>   | 11 <sup>th</sup> July 2023  |

**Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk) AND copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.**

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2023**

|  |                                      |  |  |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>External examiner name:</b>               | Alison Shell                         |  |  |
| <b>External examiner home institution:</b>   | UCL                                  |  |  |
| <b>Course(s) examined:</b>                   | English BA / English and Classics BA |  |  |
| <b>Level:</b> (please delete as appropriate) | Undergraduate                        |  |  |

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

| <b>Part A</b>  |  |                                  |            |           |                    |
|--|--|----------------------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------|
|  |  | <i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i> | <b>Yes</b> | <b>No</b> | <b>N/A / Other</b> |
| A1.  | Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>                                      |                                  | x          |           |                    |
| A2.  | Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:<br><br>(i) the frameworks for higher education qualifications, and<br><br>(ii) any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 7 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i> |                                  | x          |           |                    |
| A3.  | Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?   |                                  | x          |           |                    |
| A4.  | Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?  |                                  | x          |           |                    |
| A5.  | Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?  |                                  | x          |           |                    |
| A6.  | Did you receive a written response to your previous report?  |                                  | x          |           |                    |
| A7.  | Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?   |                                  | x          |           |                    |
| * <b>If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B.</b> |  |                                  |            |           |                    |

**Part B**

## **B1. Academic standards**

- e. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

Most of the material I saw was really impressive: written by the very best students in the cohort, or by those at the 1/2:1 borderline. The two English departments with which I'm most familiar, Durham and UCL, have (or had in my time) a similar spread of achievement among Single Honours students at the top end -- though at my current institution, UCL, marks are capped at 80.

- f. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes and with reference to academic standards and student performance of other higher education institutions of which you have experience (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

Within Oxford English -- as with my departmental points of comparison mentioned above -- there are many ways for student work to be excellent: through theoretical virtuosity, or inspired close reading, or ambitious use of primary sources (sometimes, indeed, all three at once). I saw no work from medium-ranking students, but was asked to confirm a fail: a performance which wouldn't have passed muster anywhere. I was especially struck by Oxford students' relative confidence in handling comparative literature: a skill intrinsic to English and Classics, though the best Single Honours students showed this too.

## **B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process**

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.*

Members of both the examiners' committee and the MCE committee were alert and scrupulous, never more so than when ensuring equity between candidates -- but, remarkably, the meetings kept to time nevertheless! Peter McCullough, generously standing in as chair of examiners, and Andy Davice and Tara Hathaway, the administrative team, all deserve particular praise. Everything was conducted in accordance with the University's regulations and guidance.

The double marking process remains gold-standard, even -- or especially -- where raw marks are some way apart; I continue impressed by the thoughtful resolutions attained by markers initially at odds.

One of my main duties as external has been to patrol the boundary between low Firsts and top 2:1s, and -- this year as last -- the border seemed correct to me. Plainly, a top 2:1 is still a considerable achievement, but such candidates did typically display marked unevenness, local error, and relative thinness of material or thought, not matching the solidity of a low first-class performance. Hence, I fully endorse the markers' group mind -- in this context, and in the run of papers I saw from the bottom end of the spectrum, where the markers proved themselves expert in discriminating between different forms of weakness.

Some cases which came before the MCE committee threw up alarming difficulties about taking examinations in un-invigilated environments; some problems were also reported with students' awareness of the Inpera system, especially concerning the 'shop window' allowance for writing time. I'm told that the OBOW process is being retired next year, which is a relief.

During the Classics & English board meeting, there were some points in the meeting where the veil of anonymity wore thin. I didn't feel this resulted in any injustice, and it may be

inevitable in a joint honours school where the number of candidates is relatively small -- but I think it's worth reflecting upon nevertheless.

### **B3. Issues**

*Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?*

One issue concerned me greatly: the all-too-common complaint on mitigating circumstances forms that the university's mental health services were difficult to access and slow to evaluate students' problems thereafter, often in a way that directly impacted upon assessment. I'm aware that the Disability Advisory Service is typically dependent on self-registration, and that students often take this step later than they should; however, given that student procrastination is so predictable, systems do need to allow for it, and expedite response-times accordingly. This is my second year of externalling, and I don't think it's a coincidence that the issue should have loomed so much larger this year than last; after all, this is the first generation affected by Covid to graduate. Anyhow, for whatever reason, there's clearly a mismatch between need and provision at the moment, and the mitigating circumstances forms told of more than one near-tragedy; I hope it won't take an actual one for things to improve. I understand that the DAS is actively rethinking its service with a view to providing earlier adjustments, which is a welcome development.

### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

As noted at B2, I'm glad that the university is returning to invigilated exams. However, there are likely to be losses as well as gains, given that the OBOW format minimises the need to question-spot, and makes it possible to draw on a greater range of material than one can in a traditional exam. Is there any way that an invigilated environment can maintain these scholarly desiderata, e.g. by giving students access to particular databases during the exam?

### **B5. Any other comments**


*Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.*

A case of plagiarism, perhaps involving material sourced from an essay-bank, was exposed with exemplary diligence. But it was a relief that Oxford seems, *prima facie*, to have escaped the scourge of ChatGPT, which has occasioned more than one charge of academic misconduct this year in my own department. While of course a sophisticated use of AI for essay-writing would be impossible to detect, I have the impression that it's usually weaker students who reach for it in the first place -- the very ones who are least likely to discern and correct its problems. If Oxford's culture discourages such students from this form of cheating, long may this continue!

I was so impressed by the department's and the university's response to this year's marking and assessment boycott: both by what I was told, and in what I saw. Within this bitter dispute, where conscientious people find themselves on opposing sides, I believe the university are quite right to eschew the punitive measures towards boycotters which have been widely applied elsewhere in the sector. But I don't underestimate the toll the boycotters' action has exacted from non-union members; the examination process isn't concluded yet, but it wouldn't have got as far as it did without a lot of quiet heroism on the part of the latter body. I believe the examiners' committee

was right to keep mitigation minimal, avoiding the dubious practices that have so often prevailed in other universities this year, and to pause final classifications till the autumn where necessary.

Lastly, this is the first Covid cohort to graduate -- these candidates have shown remarkable courage in difficult circumstances, and should be congratulated.

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| <b>Signed:</b> |  |
| <b>Date:</b>   | 8 August 2023   |
|                |   |

Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk) AND copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.