

## H072/01 Shakespeare and poetry pre-1900

### General Comments:

This is the first session of a new specification and candidates responded well to the demands of answering two questions in 90 minutes. One examiner commented that ‘candidates have, on the whole, done remarkably well within the shorter time limit’. Another Examiner commented that ‘there was some very impressive writing and clear evidence of engagement with and enjoyment of the texts’. Across the range of scripts there was clear evidence that the questions were accessible to candidates and that they responded by taking the opportunity to show what they knew and were able to do. There was considerable evidence that texts had been well prepared and many candidates constructed responses that included substantial detail, particularly considering the length of the examination. One Examiner commented that ‘there was evidence of comprehensive and sophisticated teaching throughout.’

A significant number of scripts would be improved by candidates increasing their familiarity with the texts. Close familiarity with the text is a pre-requisite for success in English literature examinations. As a general rule candidates should be encouraged to read the set text at least four times. The first, a reading for familiarisation before close study; the second, a detailed reading in preparation for, or as a part of, class study; the third, re-visiting the text when preparing and writing practice assignments; the fourth when revising approaching the examination. Although context is ‘light touch’ in this specification candidates should be aware of basic historical time-lines and periods which are the contexts of the texts studied. More than one Examiner commented that Shakespeare was identified in a number of scripts as a Victorian writer writing for a Victorian audience. Finally, in general terms, candidates should be encouraged to handwrite practice assignments and ensure their hand is clearly legible.

Section 1 answers on Shakespeare generally responded well to the format of the questions in which candidates were invited to respond to an AO5 style prompt. One examiner commented that ‘the best answers were characterised by cogency and coherence of expression, and a real confidence in the use of the text – some candidates have shown excellent detailed knowledge of these closed texts.’ The best answers kept closely to the question set and avoided the tendency, evident in some weaker scripts, to move away from the topic set. It is not acceptable to focus the answer on an agenda different to the slant of the question by suggesting, for example, that the play is not about ‘fatherhood’ but about ‘colonialism’ and then proceed to write about that. A significant performance indicator was the ability of candidates to use succinct, accurate quotation. Indeed one Examiner commented that ‘the pertinence of the textual reference seemed to be the main discriminator.’ A particular strength of the answers on this new specification, and this should be encouraged, is the excellent use made of productions to illustrate points and suggest alternative readings. One examiner commented that ‘candidates who discussed specific scenes and staging they have seen, linked explicitly to the question and the impact it created, were brilliant to read.’ Another commented that ‘performance interpretations were by far the most popular way of addressing AO5. One Examiner commented that this strength was less evident in response to ‘Twelfth Night’. On certain texts, including the two most popular, *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, critical material was assimilated and well used. However, the best use of such material was when candidates used it to raise a new angle which was then debated rather than just included it as ‘another view’.

Some candidates, however, seemed to be more familiar with a film than the text of the play. This was particularly evident in ‘Hamlet’ questions where the Branagh film was taken, for example, as evidence that Hamlet had slept with Ophelia. Familiarity with the text as set is a prerequisite. Weaker responses sometimes contained no quotation or close echo of the text, or merely put in a quotation which had been learnt (‘foul and most unnatural murder’) regardless of its relevance. The use of contextual material in the Shakespeare answers was of uneven quality. *The Tempest*

## OCR Report to Centres – June 2016

answers on Caliban often used contextual material deriving from post-colonial approaches well, whilst others focused too much on the colonial context at the expense of close attention to the text. Contextual material is most effective when precise, for example, Protestant views of the ghost in *Hamlet* or Hamlet's identity as an Early Modern/Renaissance questioner which could be directly linked to the question set. Responses would be improved by remembering that the approach to context is 'light touch' with specific, brief links made.

The best answers in Section 2 kept a central focus on the extract while, as one Examiner commented, making 'pithy references, effectively in parentheses, to other poems or other sections of the longer poem'. Candidates who were able to write accurately and confidently about the impact of poetic structure and phonology, whether it be the use of rhyme scheme, couplets, variation of the caesura, variations in the use of iambic pentameter, the effects of plosive letters or sibilance, stood out. The best answers contained consistently detailed close analysis. Many candidates showed considerable skill in the analysis of poetic practices while weaker scripts relied on paraphrase of content. Clearly some of the set texts for Section 1 are very long and contain significantly more material than the 15 poems set for each poet on the legacy F661. However, candidates should be made aware that the principal focus of the response should be a close analysis of the set text. The balance between the focus on the extract and connections to other poems/parts of the poem is broadly similar to that on F661 i.e. two thirds to three quarters on the extract, the remainder on connections. Connections should be relevant to the angle set on the extract, whether in comparison or in contrast. Very effective links were made, particularly in the responses to Chaucer and Milton, to the rest of the poem/Tale, but with some candidates this turned their responses into a more general response to the whole work rather than sustained attention to the extract. As with Section 1, context is a light touch; there were many excellent responses to Rossetti, but some included far too much material on her biography/social context/the position of women in Victorian society at the expense of the key demands of the task.

### Comments on Individual Questions:

#### Section 1

#### Question No.

#### 1. *Coriolanus*

There were very few responses to this text; several Examiners reported seeing none at all. Only a couple of responses to a) were reported. Examiners commented responses to b) were often strong. Some candidates saw Coriolanus as a military figure unskilled in politics and ill-equipped for life beyond the battlefield, but others recognised a more human side in his dealings with his wife and mother. One Examiner reported on an interesting response which took the view 'that, although Coriolanus lives by the sword, our experience of him as a character is essentially through his words' and went on to offer a good analysis of how his language can be violent but is often rhetorical in structure. There was perceptive comment on Volumnia's formative influence.' In one particularly impressive response the candidate observed that 'Coriolanus is, in many ways, an embodiment of 'Romanitas', the Roman ideal. Much of this comes through war and the potency of his sword... Coriolanus is also an epitome of the Aristotelian virtue of megalopsychia, the virtue of 'independence'. He refuses on matters of principle to 'sway' with the ambitions of politicians.' Good use was made of the Ralph Fiennes' production/film.

## 2. *Hamlet*

This was the most popular text in Section 1; both questions produced some excellent responses. Good responses often focused on Hamlet's procrastination, frequently discussing his responses to the Ghost, drawing attention to Protestant scepticism, and the 'now I might do it pat scene'. Good answers explored Hamlet's 'Renaissance' questioning and philosophical doubt and what he was thinking *about*: his obsessions with death, corruption and his mother's 'incest' and sexuality, with Ernest Jones 'Oedipus Theory' being frequently cited and sometimes well handled. Good answers provided effective contrast by discussing Laertes, Claudius, Fortinbras and even Ophelia. One Examiner commented that in 'a few stimulating responses candidates considered Ophelia either as a character whose suicide shows she acts impetuously or as a character prohibited from acting and/or living entirely in her own thoughts'. One excellent response examined Hamlet's status as a Renaissance man in a feudal world stating 'thought is not getting in the way of action, but rather action is impossible with Hamlet's knowledge of both Christian and classical virtues'. Weaker responses tended to assert rather than cite textual support; this was a particular problem with unsupported assertions such as 'Hamlet is not willing to commit murder because his conscience is warning him that he will be sent to Hell if he commits murder.' Surprisingly, few responses took the question as an invitation to analyse closely one of the introspective soliloquies. Strong answers to question b) discussed Gertrude's words and actions rooting arguments firmly in the text. One candidate observed 'It is unclear in the play if Gertrude was involved, or even knew of, the murder of her first husband' and the point was made that 'she is alone and as a character marginalised and overlooked, so arouses sympathy'. Detailed analyses of the Ghost's view of Gertrude, Hamlet's response to her, especially in the closet scene, and her death, were all productive areas of the text explored. Weaker responses simply speculated on what Gertrude might have thought, why she married, what she knew, without textual support. The responses made excellent use of productions, with Branagh and Tennant both being popular.

## 3. *Measure for Measure*

Although less popular than *Hamlet*, candidates choosing this text clearly enjoyed the challenges it presented, recognising it as a 'problem play' and commenting, in both questions, on the ambiguity of the ending. There was a good range of engaged responses to 3a, often weighing the outcomes for the different characters carefully, with many candidates discussing Angelo, Lucio and Isabella. One candidate felt that the Duke's 'irresponsibility and lack of guilt' is at the heart of the injustice. One examiner commented that Lucio was much discussed 'and his punishment felt to be unjust – it seems not least because of the audience's affection for him'. Another examiner reported that context was used well here, both in terms of Vienna and England under James I. Typical responses to this question marshalled thoughtful arguments based on good understanding and support from the text. Examiners commented that good answers were comfortable relating the question to concepts of the 'problem play' and 'comedy' linking the oddity of the ending to Shakespeare's search for comic resolution in a play which had teetered on the edge of tragedy. Weaker responses typically focused on a narrow range of material, for example, just discussing the outcome for Angelo without adequate textual support. The b) question also produced good responses which took a range of views on Isabella. One examiner commented that this question produced 'some of the most interesting analysis in the whole paper. One response argued that when Isabella asserts the importance of her chastity, 'Isabella is at the zenith of orthodox Christian religiosity, and these principles can be seen throughout the remainder of the play and she discovers little.' Many answers saw Isabella as a victim of Angelo while good answers often considered her situation at the end of play in detail and with an open-minded evaluation: 'her final silence could be indicative of a silent rebellion, or alternatively it could show an unhappy compliance'. Another candidate saw Isabella on 'a journey towards empowerment.' Good answers to b) often explored virginity and its associated notion of purity through 17<sup>th</sup> century eyes. Examiners reported on weaker responses to this question slipping into a scant narrative of what Isabella does in the play.

#### 4. *Richard III*

This was a text chosen by few. However, examiners report that the responses they saw were generally well done. In a) students tended to assume what a 'good' person was rather than unpack the concept, but power and powerlessness were well explored. Anne, the Princes and Richmond appeared frequently and one response offered some good analysis of Act 1 Scene 2 and how well Anne does defend herself verbally. There were rather more responses to b) and some of the stronger candidates grappled well with the nuances of the term 'intelligence' and that it means more than 'clever', embracing concepts such as sensitivity and emotional intelligence. Stronger responses also showed a good understanding of the interplay between Richard and the audience. Successful approaches looked at Richard's ability with language, his manipulative and deceptive powers, and most interestingly his political shrewdness in swaying the opinions of others. Weaker responses tended to assume that the statement was just true and there was a tendency to slip into narration rather than select key moments for analysis.

#### 5 *The Tempest*

This was the second most popular text. Question a) was the less popular of the choices. One examiner reported that the 'responsibility and difficulty of fatherhood was often explored well, as well as the idea that Prospero is an imperfect father to all three of his wards'. Interesting ideas were expressed such as the response which linked fatherhood to the responsibility of the ruler, the father of the nation, while another response succinctly observed 'Fatherhood is a battle against change, in order to maintain absolute control'. Many successful answers offered good close reading of the dialogues between Miranda and Prospero and ranged further into the paternalistic relationships between Prospero, Ariel and Caliban, seen sometimes in a colonialist perspective.' One excellent response commented in detail on the role of the marriage masque in enchanting and educating Miranda and Ferdinand as Prospero's daughter and future son-in-law. Weaker responses to this question did not unpack the concept of 'fatherhood', often sticking close to a description of the relationship between Prospero and Miranda. Some weaker responses simply offered the assumption that Miranda is totally under male control, 'like all women of her time'. The b) question was very popular. Clearly candidates had been well prepared on Caliban and approached this question with relish. Strong responses analysed Caliban's shifts in language closely, and, whilst post-colonial perspectives were prevalent, many candidates felt there was genuinely much to be said on either side of the question. Good responses often argued that his savage side was a product of his treatment by Prospero, while acknowledging his natural tendencies to reproduce, understandably alarmed Prospero and the audience in his attempt to violate Miranda. Caliban's sense of beauty was frequently acknowledged and there was interesting debate about the sincerity of his seeking for grace at the end of play. One examiner reported that 'there was an impressive consideration of Montaigne and, occasionally, of psychoanalytic readings of Ariel and Caliban as aspects of Prospero'. Another examiner commented how candidates had made good use of the recent Globe (Allam) production. One Examiner observed that 'this was a text and question which enabled candidates to show excellence of argument and approach. In weaker scripts contextual knowledge on the state of colonialism/Empire was insecure.

#### 6. *Twelfth Night*

There were some strong responses to this text. Some excellent answers to a) unpacked the key concepts of the question explicitly, by considering that the play presents many aspects of love including romantic love, familial love, heterosexual and homosexual erotic love and narcissism. Indeed, several Examiners commented upon the maturity with which homosexual dimensions in the play were discussed. Just as significantly, successful answers focused closely on the phrase 'changes everything' noting that the set task is not a general question about love. One response foregrounded this concept of change in the following way: 'Frank Kermode describes the world

## OCR Report to Centres – June 2016

in *Twelfth Night* as ‘topsy turvy’ which could be said to stem from the complications and changes caused by unconventional and unrequited love in the play.’ Most answers concentrated on how far Orsino and Olivia can be said to have changed as a result of love, one response observing that ‘both Orsino and Olivia were changed by Viola into more authentic and less performed selves’ and this was linked nicely to Shakespeare’s subversion of ‘Petrarchan’ modes. Some argued that Malvolio and Antonio remain unchanged by love – they remain isolated at the end as stressed in some productions. One strong response observed that ‘Sir Toby remains distinctly himself despite falling in love’. One analysis saw love to ‘shatter the frozen and static world of Illyria’. However, there were a significant number of weaker scripts which wrote generally about love and ignored the steer towards ‘change’ and a few were determined to turn this into an essay about disguise and deception, which could be linked but only if handled well. One Examiner commented that, unlike the other plays tackled, ‘examples from the text in performance were far rarer to hear.’ However, many were influenced by Branagh’s film interpretation. There were fewer responses to b) but Examiners observed that there was some good understanding of the ambiguities of Feste’s role in the play, which was explored well in the light of the three terms of the question. Strong responses presented some very good linguistic and structural analysis of Feste’s speech and many responses noted his role as an onlooker and his appearance in the background throughout the play. Stronger responses picked up on his melancholy, sensitivity, wisdom and possible kindness to extend and present alternative responses to those prompted by the title quotation. Weaker responses slipped into character study rather than evaluating the slant of the question and one examiner commented upon the lack of attention paid to Feste’s songs.

## Section 2

Question no:

### 7. Chaucer: *The Merchant’s Prologue and Tale*

This was the second most popular text in this section. One Examiner commented that ‘this text produced some very good responses, with candidates showing knowledge of the wider text and understanding of the Tale’s context and how Chaucer both reproduced and subverted courtly love conventions’. Another Examiner commented that ‘candidates clearly relished and wrote well about the use of irony in the passage.’ Stronger candidates were able to comment precisely on the ironic effects within the passage in the portrayal of all the characters and were also able to comment on the proleptic irony as future events such as the cuckolding of January unfold. Many candidates commented well on the use of rhyming couplets, one observing that ‘important words are put together in order to emphasise them to the listener and even create an ironic effect, such as ‘might’ and night’. Candidates analysed cratylic names, also described as charactonyms, very effectively. Connections to the rest of the text were often well integrated into the response and there was a wide range of contextual knowledge shown: courtly love, fabliau, the senex amans, Medieval aphrodisiacs, classical myths and also to the patriarchal context. One response observed that ‘misogyny can be observed throughout the Tale but Chaucer’s proto-feminism can be seen in the way May’s sexuality is an act of defiance against patriarchy.’ Weaker responses gave too little attention to a detailed analysis of the extract and too much attention to writing generally about the Tale as a whole. In general the Middle English was well handled but there were a number of examples of misreading and misinterpretation. For instance,, Damyan’s taking to his bed was interpreted as a reference to January wanting to go to bed with May and the line, ‘That for the verray peyne he was ny wood’ was understood by several candidates to imply that Damyan had become like a tree.

## 8. Milton: *Paradise Lost Books 9 and 10*

There were some very sophisticated and scholarly responses to this text. Particularly strong was the analysis of the contrast between Satan's original transformation into a serpent when tempting Eve and the version of it in this extract. One response observed that 'Their transformation is from the spiritual forms of the fallen angels to the physical state of the serpents.' Many responses analysed in detail the sibilance of the hissing, and the syntax and use of enjambment in 'supplanted down he fell/A monstrous serpent on his belly prone' which 'reflects his fall leaving him on his 'belly''. One candidate observed that 'Milton places 'fell' twice emphatically at the end of the line, mirroring the depiction of the Fall of Adam and Eve. The potential spondee 'Heav'n-fall'n', the unstressed syllables elided, is highly illustrative of the fallen state.' Comments upon rhetorical effects of repetition and variation of the caesura were also strengths in some excellent responses, as was knowledge of the epic genre, shown, for example, through analysis of Milton's use of allusion. One candidate observed that 'Epic formulae are used in the very different types of disgusting snake that they turn into, namely the 'Scorpion and asp, and amphisbaena dire' which shows the immensity of their transformation and their fall from grace (peripeteia)'. Links to other parts of the poem were generally proficient, including going beyond Books 9 and 10 to an awareness of the aim of the text to justify the ways of God to men, the notion that Milton was seen by Blake to be 'of the devil's party' etc and this knowledge enabled candidates to orient themselves around the key details in a dense passage. Weaker scripts struggled with the form of the poem and frequently wrote more generally about Satan in the poem as a whole rather than analysing the extract closely.

## 9. Coleridge: *Selected Poems*

This was not a popular text but there were a few excellent responses. One strong answer noted that the 'natural elements *become* supernatural, creating a more eerie effect because of the established power of nature'. Another response observed that 'Coleridge's combining natural and supernatural elements can be seen in the tricolon of rhetorical questions: 'Is this the hill? Is this the kirk? Is this mine own countree?' suggesting his longing at seeing something of spiritual familiarity'. Good links were made to *Kubla Khan*, *Christabel* and conversation poems such as *Frost at Midnight* and one Examiner commented that some candidates seemed more comfortable with locating supernatural elements in other parts of the poem rather than in this extract. Many candidates did not get to grips with the way natural and supernatural elements were presented in the poem and did not pay sufficient attention to the language, imagery, ballad form in this extract. A potentially productive area which was rarely explored was a consideration of the Gothic elements in this extract and in the poem as a whole. One Examiner commented that 'it was interesting that although the passage was part of a longer narrative, candidates who actually mentioned the albatross etc were in the minority, but if they did this, their task was much easier, in tracking the consequences of harming nature and the sense here of how these consequences ultimately unfold'.

## 10. Tennyson: *Maud*

Although there were few responses to this text, some were excellent. Strong answers tracked the shifts of mood through the poem through choice of language, imagery and most impressively through shifts of meter and verse form. One candidate observed that Tennyson 'emphasises pathetic fallacy with the phrase 'the sunset burn'd' suggesting a growing passion in Maud and the speaker's relationship' while another commented that 'the rhyming of 'spark' and 'dark' is a subtle allusion to the intertwined nature of hope and darkness in the speaker's life'. Some good answers showed their understanding of how the speaker's changing moods relate to Tennyson's engagement with industrialisation, religious despair and war. Weaker responses identified the changes in mood but did not adequately support this with textual evidence and analysis and often failed to pick up on the political and social strand in the extract.

## 11. Rossetti: *Selected Poems*

This was by some distance the most popular text. One Examiner observed that ‘there was some very good close reading of the poem, with attention focusing especially on the door itself, the iron bars, the spirit and the wall. The garden and the sense of loss were profitably explored in terms of the Garden of Eden.’ Many Examiners commented upon the impressive range of interpretations including religious, feminist, and biographical and combinations of all three: Rossetti’s compassion for and engagement with fallen women, as a personal confession of her religious crises and as an angry riposte from a woman desperate for a voice in a man’s world. Good answers were not reductive but opened up the possibilities of the poem, sometimes unpacking the concept of loss and making comparisons to other poems exploring Rossetti’s different ideas about holding on, letting go and remembrance in general. Stronger responses analysed the rhyming pattern effectively, observing, for example, the relationship between ‘enclosed’ rhyme and the speaker’s situation. Stronger answers effectively combined sophisticated analysis with appropriate but *succinctly* referenced biographical and social context, such as the social position of women, Rossetti’s relationships, and isolation from nature as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Effective connections were made to poems such as ‘Up Hill’, ‘The Echo’, ‘Goblin Market’ and ‘Remember’. However, there were also a number of weaker scripts who indulged in personal responses not rooted in textual analysis and became side-tracked into context based responses rather than ones that had a dominant focus on the set text.