

H072/01 Shakespeare and poetry pre-1900

General Comments:

This is the second session of this specification and candidates responded well to the demands of answering two questions in 90 minutes, dividing their time sensibly and responding to some of the advice given in last year's report. This was particularly apparent, for example, in the use of productions on the Shakespeare section and the balance between analysis of the extract and connections to the rest of the text and/or other poems in the poetry section. Examiners made a number of very positive comments relating to the overall performance of the candidates. One examiner commented that 'across the range there was significant evidence that the questions were accessible to candidates and they took the opportunity to show what they were able to do', while another commented that 'generally speaking most questions were responded to in the manner requested.' In a more elevated tone, an examiner observed that 'there were times when the responses were wonderful and uplifted the heart and soul....' There was much evidence of very good teaching with candidates constructing responses that showed detailed and nuanced understanding of both text and context. More candidates seemed to be planning although one examiner commented that in Section 2 many responses fell into 'a stream of consciousness approach lacking structure and direction'. One examiner noted that there were 'fewer generalisations about context than last year, although 'women had no power' and 'men didn't care about women' still cropped up'. One examiner observed that 'this paper, for those who enjoy English literature, provides candidates with an insight into the mind and world of Shakespeare as well as pre-twentieth century poetry, preparing them well for both A level and for reading literature at university.'

It continues to be the case that, as observed in last year's report, candidates who performed well invariably had close familiarity with the texts, whereas weaker scripts were clearly impeded by cursory knowledge of the play and/or the poem or extract. A surprising number of candidates fell into narrating the plot in Section 1 without much quoting at all and in Section 2 a number of candidates did not engage sufficiently in an analysis of the set extract. There is more work still to be done on preparing students for the requirements of the paper including work on picking apart questions and identifying what is being asked and how to exploit the potential of the task. In terms of contextual knowledge, there were fewer, but still several, instances of Shakespeare being identified as a Victorian writer. Some candidates showed an impressive knowledge of the historical background to 'Richard III' (the 'Hollow Crown'?) but there was still evidence of a basic lack of relevant historical context in the weaker scripts. Candidates and centres should be urged to continue to offer opportunities to handwrite responses. More than one examiner commented that handwriting is getting worse and there did seem to be a curious outbreak of 'in which' and 'of which' being used as a substitute for the plain 'which' in sentences like 'Duke Vincentio's role is as an onlooker of the state, of which is heavily rife with corruption in which Vincentio fails to resolve.'

In Section 1 top level responses demonstrated a thorough understanding of the plays within their context. A characteristic of such responses was the use of embedded quotations to support arguments which were then analysed succinctly and their effect commented upon. One examiner commented that 'the best responses drew on quotations from across the play to provide thoughtful and incisive arguments.' As reported above, contextual understanding was invariably mentioned and often to some good effect but on occasion it became intrusive and a substitute for textually based lines of commentary. Context is 'light touch' on this specification. Many examiners commented on the excellent use of productions. One examiner commented that 'the concise reference to Shakespeare productions seen was a skilful and effective aspect of many, perhaps, most scripts'. This is an excellent practice to be encouraged although in weaker scripts there was a danger that some candidates analysed the film at the expense of analysis of the primary text of the play. It was also noticeable that there was a wide range of

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critical responses cited often to good effect to support or develop AO5 viewpoints: the historic (Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt), the classic (Bradley, Wilson Knight, Spurgeon, Leavis) and the more modern (Dollimore, Belsey, Showalter). Such citations are often more precise and useful than general references to critical schools, such as ‘post-colonial’ critics or ‘feminist’ critics, although, this does depend on how well and precisely they are used.

The ‘deflected response’ still occurred and candidates should be specifically warned against this. The question will always invite the candidate to consider ‘how far and in what ways do you agree’ and this is a prompt to evaluate the proposition and not to dismiss it and write about something else. For example, it is unacceptable to say ‘I don’t agree that ‘The Tempest’ is about the need for second chances, it is about colonialism’ and then go on to write about that. It is acceptable, though certainly not required, to make a glancing reference to other themes in the play, but the argument should be a discussion of the merits and demerits of the proposition. So, for example, with the ‘Tempest’ question, a candidate might observe the second chances in the play offered by Prospero to Antonio, Alonso, himself etc. but contest that a second chance is, arguably, not offered to Caliban or that Antonio seems to spurn it and has no ‘need’ for it. Candidates should also be warned against answering last year’s question. Several responses to 2a on ‘Hamlet’ attempted to turn it into a question on ‘inaction’, whilst others shoehorned in barely relevant material on Caliban and colonialism into 5a. A most common feature of weaker scripts was the tendency to re-tell sections of the play. Centres should continue to guard against narrative responses; descriptive and narrative comment is a level 2 criterion. One examiner commented that ‘for many candidates there was a complete lack of textual support for their arguments and good ideas lapsed into narrative comment.’

In Section 2, as one might expect, the level of analysis was sharper than in Section 1. One examiner commented that ‘level 6 responses showed a genuine engagement with the poem and demonstrated consistent AO2 application. The significance of contextual factors were recognised and used to enhance arguments’. Another examiner observed that ‘maturer essays were often distinguished by an excellent grasp of the possibilities of verse form.’ Many candidates have grasped the principle and appropriate balance of A04 (two thirds to three quarters of the response on the extract, the rest on connections) with evidence of extensive and insightful cross reference, especially on Rossetti but notably, too, on Milton and Chaucer. However, some candidates did not respond to all the information in the question, for example, noting that the Chaucer question invited a response to the presentation of the garden *and* the change of fortune. Whilst others, and this was particularly true of the Rossetti question (see below), did not get to grips with the steer of the question which was, for example, to discuss the presentation of Laura’s transformation (see below). Weaker responses did not strike an appropriate balance between the extract and connections. One examiner commented that ‘some candidates paid scant attention to the extract.’ Some presented a general response to the rest of poet’s work or the context (a particular problem with Rossetti – again see below) and failed to analyse adequately the extract in front of them. One examiner commented that ‘at the lowest levels, it was clear that some candidates had very little understanding of the extract or poem almost as if it was an ‘unseen’ text’. An examiner commented that ‘perhaps the greatest discriminator for this section of the paper was between those who had clearly spent time working through the extract and those who paid little attention to it.’ General overviews are no substitute for AO2 analysis.

Section 1 – Shakespeare

Comments on Individual Questions:

1. *Coriolanus*

There were even fewer responses to this text than last year, with only a handful of examiners seeing any at all. However, comments on those seen were positive. Question 1a invited candidates to discuss the presentation of Rome in the play (as city, republic, or even as a set of values) in the light of its perception as a place of the negative qualities of ‘anger and self-interest’. The few responses that were seen presented a good overview of the anger generated by a militaristic Rome and some successful responses discussed this in terms of a range of cultural and political factors. Answers to 1b invariably showed a secure knowledge of the play. Volumnia was well understood. One examiner reported on ‘some excellent commentary on how she was able to project her influence and its limitations.’ Good responses discussed Coriolanus’s autonomy but also considered its attendant failure which led to the tragic ending. There was a high level of at least competence and much excellence in responses to this text with one examiner commenting that responses were ‘confident and focused.’ One examiner commented on the appropriate use of oedipal perspectives in answering 1b whilst another observed that ‘references to the Ralph Fiennes’ production were good and frequent.’

2. *Hamlet*

2a was the most popular question on the most popular Shakespeare text. One examiner commented that it was ‘accessible to candidates across ability ranges.’ Another commented that ‘revenge was considered from historical, religious and literary perspectives’ and many strong responses integrated context with the text excellently, arguing for revenge as, at best, only partially worthwhile. Other strong responses concluded that the play presented revenge as mainly worthless, a conclusion supported by analysis of its effect upon Hamlet, Polonius, Ophelia and the tragic conclusion. There were many excellent arguments which related revenge to codes of honour, contrasting, for example, the demands of family honour as opposed to Christian codes. Bacon’s ‘revenge is a kind of wild justice’ was much quoted usually to good effect. Although it was possible to write a very strong response by just considering Hamlet, most of the strong responses discussed Laertes and Fortinbras as foils to the Prince. Good responses arguing for the value of revenge often saw it as a purging of corruption. However, one candidate challenged the view that Fortinbras restored order and cleansed in a vengeful act the corruption of Denmark by citing Bogdanov’s 1980s presentation of Fortinbras arriving on stage as a territorial opportunist with an AK47. One candidate observed how the dumb show holds up a mirror to the corruption of Denmark necessitating revenge while another observed astutely that ‘Revenge seems not to be a solution but a symptom of the corruption in Denmark.’ Weaker responses used the topic as an opportunity to discuss revenge as a concept removed from the text or to deflect the question on to another, perhaps prepared, topic, such as the position of Gertrude. One examiner commented that there were many ‘shades of last year’s question’, not always directed to the topic in hand, which may have been written as some form of a mock exam.

Examiners reported that 2b was also popular and accessible. Many successful responses placed Polonius in the context of what one candidate described as the ‘surveillance society prevalent in Denmark’. Telling comparisons were drawn with the court of Elizabeth and even specific figures such as Lord Burghley. The respect conferred on Polonius by Claudius was often seen as a signifier of his political skills. Many good responses considered his political skills in the domestic sphere debating whether his manipulation of Ophelia, advice to Laertes and his subsequent tracking of him were wise and politically clever or merely examples of his folly. One candidate referenced how in the Greg Doran production ‘Polonius is seen mouthing the words of Laertes, suggesting he believes his children are incapable of doing things for themselves’. Some

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responses noted how Polonius's political and espionage skills back-fired. Others saw his foolishness and verbosity as a tactic with one candidate observing that 'Polonius is aware of his actions but puts on a facade of being a tedious fool'. One candidate observed that 'the derogatory description of his corpse is a sign of the worthlessness of the courtier'. Competent responses were able to comment upon the way his prolixity and loquaciousness is mocked by Hamlet but yet he does display some political skills. Weaker scripts could not see beyond the 'tedious folly' nor reflect upon the role Polonius plays in 'Hamlet'. There were examples of candidates re-directing the question to one about the abuse of Ophelia and one examiner commented on how this elicited 'some angry feminist responses.'

3. *Measure for Measure*

A less popular play this year. Most examiners reported that they had seen no responses to 3a which required the candidates to focus on the play of the 'low life' or underworld in terms of its overall role in the function of the comedy, possibly as a foil to Angelo's puritanism. The question also invited the candidates to consider the significance in the play of certain characters, such as Lucio. One examiner did note that responses to this question were very competent, but more in providing an overview than in detailing individual instances with close textual knowledge. One very good response did discuss the function of the underworld in the way it provided insight into the seedy, immoral, sexually promiscuous underbelly of Vienna. Lucio was seen as a key character who subverted conventional sexual morals. 3b was an accessible question. One examiner observed that 'this was a successful question and produced many good, well-argued answers with interwoven quotation and very sound, sometimes very good, use of context'. Some responses focused on the character of the Duke but many responses were able to go beyond this to discuss his role as ruler and his function at the end of the play in providing a problematic but necessary comic ending. There was much good discussion of the Duke's leaving Angelo in charge: his 'wisdom' in realising he would not be able to re-impose morality, his 'testing' of Angelo, but also his 'feckless irresponsibility'. Relevant contextual material was in abundance with one examiner commenting on the appropriate reference to Jacobean morality, James I, Vienna's reputation and religious debate. There was good use of critics (Wilson Knight, Leavis, Northrop Frye, Jan Kott, Boas, 'feminist theorists') and good use was made of recent productions including a Globe production. Most responses achieved a balanced view though weaker responses were unable, for example, to grasp the Duke's reasons for leaving or becoming a friar.

4. *Richard III*

Not a popular text but more responses than last year. 4a was the more popular of the questions with good responses unpacking the concept of loyalty – to God, interestingly to oneself, to one's family, to England. One candidate countered the proposition in the title by arguing that Richmond's loyalty to 'the cause of saving England from Richard is eventually realised.' Candidates appear to have studied the characters well and were able to integrate well selected quotations with a contextual understanding of the Tudor ascendancy and the Tudor myth. The tragic consequences of loyalty were well explored with responses identifying those whose loyalty was naive and those in whom it was more commendable. Weaker responses allowed context to get in the way of considering the text, did not pay attention to the 'does nobody any good' dimension and struggled to find counter arguments. In the use of productions, Cumberbatch has risen to rival Olivier. There were few responses to 4b. Candidates were better at discussing Clarence and Hastings's similar fates than their differences. One examiner noted that two candidates recognised that 'fate' was an Elizabethan and a tragic concept. One candidate noted detailed similarities in the role of foreshadowing, dreams and inevitability while observing that 'Clarence evokes pity, Hastings does not' and quoted Peter Smith on Hastings's 'colossal complacency.'

5. *The Tempest*

This was a popular text. 5a was marginally the more popular question and several examiners reported that there were many excellent responses to it. Stronger responses considered the ‘human need’ dimension to the question, suggesting, for example, that this need did not appear to be present in Antonio and debating whether the ‘human need’ for second chances applies to Caliban and the spirit Ariel. Good answers discussed Gonzalo’s rescue of Prospero and Miranda, Caliban’s destiny at the end, Prospero’s second chance to be Duke of Milan and the second chances offered to the ‘men of sin’ as Prospero moves from vengeance to mercy. One candidate, perhaps mischievously, suggested that Miranda has a second chance ‘to exchange one dominant male for another’. There was much interesting discussion of Antonio’s silence in the final scene as he appears to be unrepentant in receipt of Prospero’s forgiveness. One candidate suggested that the ‘play is not about the human need for second chances so much as the necessity for forgiveness’. Although Caliban was discussed well in terms of the question, some responses re-directed their response too closely to last year’s question and engaged in a lengthy debate about colonialism. As commented upon by one examiner, 5b prompted ‘some fantastic responses’. Another commented upon ‘delightful responses.’ Many candidates seized upon the scope for psychoanalytical, postcolonial and Marxist readings, which were very productive when understood and handled with care. Many responses offered a nuanced reading of the relationship between Prospero and Ariel contrasting, for example, Prospero’s terms of endearment with his pejorative terms of address. One candidate observed that ‘Ariel is an important figure, not just an agent of Prospero’s will.’ Many aspects of his dramatic function were successfully analysed: his music, the way he symbolises air, fire, the imagination, his role as an extension of Prospero’s psyche and as an instrument of redemptive instruction. Many responses observed his crucial function in prompting Prospero’s conscience and commitment to mercy in Act 5. There were many excellent citations of productions, none more so than the many references to the recent RSC/Intel production which had clearly inspired and moved many candidates with its dramatic spectacle. The image of Ariel tangled in the roots of the tree, and the evocation of his alluring music accompanied by what one candidate described as ‘mystical and beautiful creatures’ to draw Ferdinand ashore clearly made a great impact. However, one examiner noted the wide variation in command of textual detail with some responses being ‘too narrative based.’

6. *Twelfth Night*

A popular text this year, with 6a being the more popular of the two questions. 6a prompted a wide range of responses in terms of quality. Good responses focused not only on Malvolio (with one examiner commenting on ‘fine critiques of Malvolio’s performance’) but also considered the ‘narcissism’ of Orsino, the self-love of Sir Toby, and Olivia made an appearance in many answers as an example of self-indulgent mourning and vanity. One candidate observed that despite the punishment of Malvolio the play was more concerned with ‘mocking self-love than warning of its dangers.’ Indeed, one examiner commented that many otherwise good responses did not give adequate attention to the ‘dangers’ dimension of the question. However, one candidate did discuss thoroughly the extent to which Malvolio, Orsino and Olivia were punished. Surprisingly, little was made of how Viola might act as a counterpoint to the presentation of self-love; one candidate briefly referred to the dangers of selfless love, identifying Antonio as a character who puts his life in danger for Sebastian’s sake. Last year it was observed that few productions were referenced in the ‘Twelfth Night’ responses but this year good use was made of the Trevor Nunn production, the Globe 2012 production and the 2017 NT production. However, some candidates did not move beyond Malvolio in their answer; this may be a shadow of the sample question of Malvolio which many candidates may have answered as a practice. 6b was well answered. Viola’s disguise was seen to give her the freedom of a man, but restricted her in terms of expressing her love for Orsino. However, some answers could not get beyond the idea of the disguise as a prison rather than a potential liberation. One examiner commented that ‘language was well explored, including the double meanings and word play in her conversations with Orsino and Olivia which provided rich material for analysis’. In terms of context, the concept

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of the patriarchal society was frequently cited though some rather sweeping comments were made about the ‘powerlessness’ of women in Elizabethan society and what might shock a contemporary audience. One excellent response suggested that, in disguise, ‘Viola became a dynamic force to disrupt and reconfigure the stasis of Illyria.’

Section 2 – Poetry pre-1900

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

This was the second most popular poetry text and many examiners commented on a number of excellent and some outstanding responses. Excellent responses were characterised by the quality of detailed comments on the language of the extract: the rhyme and onomatopoeia of ‘wicket’ and ‘clicket’ linking with Chaucer’s bawdy symbolism, the pervasive use of irony, with the ironic use ‘of noble’ and ‘fresshe’ being frequently picked out, and the literal and metaphorical blindness of January. Some responses equated May’s body with the garden as both are centres for January’s pleasure and only he (apparently) has access. One response observed that ‘the Merchant portrays Januarie’s garden as an environment which invites deception’. The wider context was noted in the allusions to the Garden of Eden, the Romance of the Rose (though one candidate described this as a ‘pornographic novel’), mythological characters, the ‘senex amans’ and fabliau tradition. The position of women in medieval society was frequently referenced but the best responses avoided targeting the text with over-simplified accusations of misogyny, with one candidate arguing strongly that Chaucer could be seen as a proto-feminist. Many candidates were alert to the comedy. The two parts of the question tested some candidates with a number ignoring the second part of the question completely. However, many responses not only considered the apostrophe to Fortune and the comparison to a scorpion but also linked this to the whole extract and its foreshadowing of future activities in the garden. Some excellent connections were made to the rest of the text with many candidates, for example, linking the description of the garden ‘walled with stoon’ with the description of May on her wedding night ‘as stille as stoon’. Many candidates coped very well with the linguistic challenges of the Middle English, although a few analysed the irony of January being described as ‘wise’, misreading the medieval spelling of ‘ways’. Weaker candidates and those who were reading less attentively assumed the apostrophe and the reference to the scorpion was an invocation of Damyan or even May.

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

This was the third most popular text with examiners commenting on a series of strong responses. One examiner commented that most responses were in the top two levels and another that responses were ‘often approached in a sophisticated manner.’ Most impressive was the level of AO2 detail and the way most candidates achieved a balance in discussing the portrayal of each character. Many candidates explored Satan’s complicated response to Eve successfully, the extract being mainly from his perspective. The phrase ‘stupidly good’ was often picked out and analysed as a good example of Satan’s mixed feelings and some responses paid close attention to language and verse form with discussion of the device of the epic simile in the context of some excellent understanding of Milton’s literary style. Some responses presented an excellent discussion of Milton’s theology relating to the text. Eve’s portrayal was discussed in terms of her beauty and vulnerability and how, ironically, Satan is tempted by her. References were made to the possible misogyny present in the theological and social background of the poem but this was often handled in nuanced way. One candidate referenced Milton’s ‘Doctrina de Christiana’ in a discussion of Eve: ‘man is not of the woman, but woman of the man.’ Excellent connections were made to, for example, Adam’s interactions with Eve and the temptation of Eve in the garden. One examiner noted responses ‘sometimes intercalating quotations with real flair.’ Some responses did present some basic misunderstandings. The misreading of ‘Emborder’d on each bank, the hand of Eve’ (misunderstanding that ‘hand’ here means ‘handiwork’) led many candidates to discuss the importance of the Eve’s ‘hand’

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elsewhere in the poem and several candidates observed that Eve, rather than the ‘spot’, was ‘delicious’.

9. Coleridge: *Selected Poems*

Although quite a rare choice this question did attract some good responses and one examiner commented that ‘some were very impressive indeed’. A focus on the individual words and phrases Coleridge used and attention to the tone of the extract invariably lifted the quality of responses. An examiner commented that one particularly strong response ‘commented on the effect on the difference between what is ‘seen’ and what is ‘felt’ in the poem, with feeling taking precedence’. This was linked to an effective analysis of Coleridge’s Romantic view of feeling. Another candidate wrote well about the structure of Coleridge’s conversation poems as a form of meditation. There were some very rich links made to other poems with the ‘Aeolian Harp’ and ‘This Lime Tree Bower’ being particularly productive. However, there were many weak responses to this text. Some candidates had difficulty framing ‘dejected’, although it is in the title of the poem. Others fell back on repeating that Coleridge was ‘dejected’ without analysis of the reason why. Faced with an extract which some candidates clearly found challenging, some responses wrote about other poems with one examiner commenting that one response ‘discussed Lime Tree Bower/Kubla Khan/Ancient Mariner/Aeolian Harp but quoted only once from the set extract on Dejection’. Context was an issue in some scripts. An examiner commented that less secure scripts ‘were too liberal in applying biographical context to the interpretation of the passage’ and several wrote extensively on the poem being addressed to Sara Fricker whereas it is addressed to Sara Hutchinson and expresses a frustrated love – in another version the poem is entitled ‘Letter to Sara Hutchinson’.

10. Tennyson: *Maud*

Although not a popular choice, examiners commented upon some very good responses. One examiner observed that ‘the passage gave much scope for the analysis of language effects.’ Strong responses linked the extract to other parts of ‘Maud’ and commented on the power of individual phrasing, the rhetorical flourishes, hyperbole and emphatic participles to good effect. Metre, rhythm and rhyme were dealt with well in this extract. One candidate wrote ‘there is an unsettled mood when observing the people around him which comes across in the discordant rhythm and rhyme of the extract’ while another observed ‘he is unable to separate his obsession with morbidity with his other obsession with Maud.’ Candidates found plenty to say about madness making some good contextual links to Tennyson’s family, fear of insanity and changing attitudes to mental illness. Stronger responses moved beyond the immediacy of the presentation of the mental state to discuss parts of the extract which expressed impassioned comments on, for example, the ‘church’ and linked the mood of the poem to reflections on industrialisation, religious despair and war. Weaker responses had more difficulty in placing the extract in the context of the whole poem. Whilst stronger responses weighed up the merits of the monodrama form for exploring mental states, weaker responses did not differentiate between Tennyson and the persona and presented too much contextual information rather than focusing on the extract.

11. Rossetti: *Selected Poems*

This was far and away the most popular choice of text and produced responses of varying quality, right across the range. Much depended on whether or not the candidates focused on the question of ‘transformation’ and understood the transformation presented in this extract. At the top end there were some brilliantly succinct insights. One response debated the meaning of the transformation in terms of ‘empowerment, release from addiction, redemption and a discovery of a new innocence’, while another wrote ‘Laura’s transformation is presented in many ways: as a salvation, as a bonding between sisters and as destruction.’ However, as one examiner commented, ‘all candidates engaged with the extract but many didn’t understand where the extract fitted into the wider poem and focused on Laura’s transformation to a fallen woman’.

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rather than the description of her redemption and rebirth away from this position.’ This failure to reflect upon the extract’s position at the climax of the poem and as Laura’s crisis did lead to what one examiner described as ‘a surfeit of goblins’ and a focus on their initial effect upon Laura. As one examiner commented ‘few candidates seemed to be aware that Laura has two transformations in the poem – the first following her yielding to the temptation of the Goblin fruits and the second redemptive one in the extract.’ Stronger responses picked up on the sound and rhythmic qualities of the extract and how these reflected an ‘unravelling’ in Laura with links to the onomatopoeia, sibilance and alliteration associated with goblin men earlier in the poem. There were excellent responses that analysed the nuances and ambiguities of language, and some linked the extract to the Gothic genre. Stronger responses made useful and relevant links to context: Rossetti’s precise religious beliefs, her work with ‘fallen women’, her relationship to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and some excellent links were made, not only to the rest of ‘Goblin market’ (which, if done well would satisfy AO4 requirements) but also to ‘Birthday’, ‘Shut Out’, ‘Maude Clare’, ‘Soeur Louise’, ‘Twice’ and ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi’. However, weaker responses moved far away from the extract to write mainly about the rest of Goblin Market or other poems. One examiner commented that ‘it was the text which seemed to suffer most from candidates avoiding the extract’. Another commented of a tendency in some scripts for candidates to write a ‘psycho-sexual critique of the poem instead of actually responding to the focus of the extract’. In strong responses feminist analyses were used with discretion and to illuminate the text, but one examiner commented that sometimes such perspectives were ‘crowbarred’ into the essay distracting from rather than adding to the argument.