



Quality Review Peer Review Report

Department of English Language and Literature

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Introduction

MIC's quality review process, as applied to both academic departments and professional services, was developed and continues to evolve in order to satisfy the College's [Quality Policy](#) and meet legislative QA requirements. MIC complies with the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act 2012](#), which places a legal responsibility on the provider and linked provider to establish procedures in writing for quality assurance for the purposes of establishing, ascertaining, maintaining and improving the quality of education, training, research and related services. (Part 3, Section 28). These QA procedures must take due account of relevant quality guidelines issued by [Quality and Qualifications Ireland \(QQI\)](#) and/or predecessor organisations. QQI is the statutory body responsible for reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of QA procedures adopted and implemented by higher (and further) educational institutions within Ireland.

The periodic quality review of functional areas (academic and professional service) within the College represents a cornerstone institutional QA/QE mechanism.

MIC's Quality Review Process

The purpose of the quality review process is:

- To provide a structured opportunity for the department to engage in periodic and strategic evidence-based self-reflection and assessment in the context of the quality of its activities and processes, and to identify opportunities for quality improvement
- To provide a framework by which external peers, in an evidence-based manner, can independently review, evaluate, report upon and suggest improvements to the quality of the department's activities and processes
- To provide a framework by which the department implements quality improvements in a verifiable manner
- To provide MIC, its students, its prospective students and other stakeholders with independent evidence of the quality of the department's activities
- To ensure that all MIC departments are evaluated in a systematic and standardised manner in accordance with good international practice and in support of the objectives of the College's Quality Policy
- To satisfy good international practice in the context of quality assurance in higher education and to meet statutory QA requirements as enshrined in national law

Overview of the Quality Review Process for Academic Departments

The MIC Quality Review process consists of three phases:

1. Self-Assessment
 - a. The department under review conducts a self-evaluation exercise and writes a self-assessment report (SAR)
2. Peer Review
 - a. A Peer Review Group (PRG) comprising external experts, both national and international, review the SAR, visit the department, meet with stakeholders and produce a report (this report), which is made publicly available on the MIC Quality Office webpage

3. Quality Improvement.
 - a. The department considers the recommendations of the PRG, devises a quality Improvement Plan (QIP) to implement them and reports implementation progress to Quality Committee and MIC Executive Team.

Department of English Language and Literature

Department Aim

The [Department of English Language and Literature](#) resides within the Faculty of Arts at MIC. The Department's aim is to raise awareness of the critical, theoretical, and responsive reading of texts across a range of genres, modes and time-periods in Literature, and across themes, technology, research methods in Applied Linguistics.

Across Literature and Applied Linguistics strands, the Department share the common goal of fostering understanding and criticality around stylistic, ideological and discoursal aspects of texts, through literary, theoretical and linguistic analysis. The Department strives to enthuse, enlighten and excite students about the power, aesthetic value and agency of language and writing.

Department Vision

The Department's vision for the study of English Language and Literature in MIC is one that is underscored by informed reading, collaboration, conversation and critical thinking. The Department aims to offer students access to a variety of modes, methods, and teaching styles.

Peer Review Group Observations

The Department of English Language and Literature engaged enthusiastically and fully with the Quality Review process, investing time, care, and thought in the SAR. Considered self-reflection was evident in the different chapters of the SAR which cumulatively built up a detailed and data-rich account of the Department's activities and involvements, flagging current concerns, and outlining strategic plans for the future. The review team appreciated the substantial information assembled in this document and the fact that the Department used the occasion of the Quality Review to engage in self-analysis, to consolidate its mission, and to pinpoint future opportunities for growth and development. During the virtual site visit from 18-22 January 2021, members of the Department and key senior administrators and office holders in MIC readily made time available and gave us invaluable insights into the key structures and systems in MIC, its unique history and place in the Irish Higher Education landscape, and provided a wealth of information in response to our unfurling inquiries.

The online conversations were remarkable for their professionalism, transparency, and candidness. The meetings we held with members of the Department were open and constructive and bore out the sense of community and joint endeavour that unites them. The discussions with the Dean, the Directors of Student Life, International Engagement, and Teaching and Learning, and the VPs for Research and Academic Affairs underscored the centrality of the Department in every facet of MIC's programmes and endeavours, the involvement of its members in policy building and academic affairs beyond the parameters of their unit, and the high esteem in which they are held. The smooth interface with all of the key areas of academic support is testament to the tact, efficiency, and communicative skills of everyone in the Department of English.

The feedback we got from undergraduate and postgraduate students as "stakeholders" in the Department was overwhelmingly positive and a huge endorsement of the quality of the teaching and care that they receive. It was striking that undergraduate students declared that they chose to study at MIC because of its reputation, manageable size, and friendliness; they all noted that the atmosphere and events on Open Day clinched their decision to study English. The postgraduate students chose their programmes because of their flexibility, their relevance to their interests, and because of the international reputations of their lecturers. They stressed that they liked the sense that they were joining a thriving intellectual community at MIC. They also appreciated the access they had to their lecturers and supervisors and the unstinting personal attention that they received.

The Department of English Language and Literature punches way above its weight on every indicator of excellence. It enjoys an international reputation academically, and all its members are actively engaged in ground-breaking research. This is married with a commitment to student-centred teaching, innovative programme building especially in areas such as blended learning, and collegiality. The energy, talent, and dynamism of the Department are remarkable.

The Department has evolved and changed in recent years, expanding its programmes, enhancing its intake of international students, and growing its postgraduate numbers. It combines its role in a College of Education with university-level standards and objectives in the differing academic specialisms its members pursue. In some ways, the BEd and the BA pull against each other, when, ideally, they should not. The challenges that the Department faces are a by-product of the high number of students

it serves as a result of its success in attracting, mentoring, and retaining them. The constraints of the current budgetary model at MIC mean that this is not appropriately rewarded. A change in the budgetary regime to a Resource Allocation Model would make a big difference, not only to the funding of the current programmes in the Department, but also to the realization of possible future programmes such as the Single Subject Major degree. A reduction of the high staff-student ratio is desirable as the levels at the moment impact on the quality of the learning experience; this can only be achieved if further appointments are made.

This is a hard-working and productive Department with a noteworthy and laudable commitment to student welfare and the maintenance of an open-door policy. Its members carry a very high workload (in areas like assessment and supervision) which the Head of Department monitors and adjusts. Nonetheless, in the absence of a Faculty workloads allocation model, it would be advisable in the interests of transparency and oversight that an internal one be adopted that fits the situation of the Department. Also, the sustainability of all of the Department's current programmes needs to be examined and priorities set. Further expansion in numbers and the development of new programmes should happen in tandem with a slimming down of some offerings, even if more appointments prove possible.

The administrator carries a very heavy burden because of the multiple roles that she fulfils. These demands are of a tall order and are met because of her skill, efficiency, experience, good will, and sheer hard work. It seems desirable and expedient that a big Department like English should have a dedicated administrator, even if this flies in the face of current structures and practices at MIC. The administrative duties entailed in running the Department would still be demanding. But not being torn between several roles would at least would give more leeway for focused day-to-day operations and for strategic planning.

The number of staff on part-time and CID contracts in the Department is a cause for concern because of the attendant precarity. These staff work in excess of their contracted hours and are unable to engage in course planning and development because of the constraints on their time and uncertainty about their future. The centralisation of a lot of the pastoral and operational management of the Department in the Head, while a reflex of the conditions of such positions in MIC, is excessive and also risky. Ideally, the role should rotate or some of its functions be taken on by others in the Department to allow for more inclusive decision making and to permit others to gain vital training in administrative functions.

The distinctive history and mission of MIC and of the Department of English Language and Literature with their devotion to education and to student learning and welfare were made abundantly clear in the SAR and in the meetings that took place during the Quality Review virtual site visit. To this ethos the Department adds a talent for innovation and a belief in the pursuit of research and of academic excellence, despite the lack of promotional pathways. The team spirit, loyalty, openness, and professional engagement of all of the members of the Department are admirable. As reviewers, we are impressed by your achievements and offer our comments and recommendations, which in the main are in consonance with the findings in the SAR, with a view to flagging ways in which the Department of English Language and Literature can continue to develop and flourish in the future without sacrificing any of the values which currently underwrite your success. In what follows, some points are repeated

to signal their importance and the degree to which they are rooted in several aspects of your undertakings. The Peer Review Group consulted on and agreed on all aspects of the following report but the chapters reflect the individual style of the writer.

Chapter 1: Vision, Mission, Strategy and Governance

Commendations

1	The Department of English Language and Literature has a clear and distinctive mission, admirably embracing both the long tradition of college education at MIC and its modern engagement with international networks of learning and new technology.
2	There is a strong and genuine sense of commitment to teaching and learning at both local and global levels.
3	The Department has done superbly well to foster research among postgraduate students, and also to give undergraduates an enthusiastic interest in research.
4	There is an excellent and finely articulated understanding in the Department, relating to both literary study and linguistics, of the cultural value of reading and writing, and of the deeply enabling effects of an education that emphasises critical analysis and communication.
5	The Department has a lively and energetic sense of its own professional values and commitments, including the need for occasional curriculum review and innovation.
6	The planned improvements in the SAR documentation have been given careful thought and scrutiny, and they point to clear benefits for both the Department and the College.

Recommendations (Please include a brief justification for the Recommendation)

1	<p>Further emphasis on the role and value of research:</p> <p>The Department's research profile is highly impressive and its research achievements might be acknowledged and articulated more fully in terms of 'vision' and 'mission', including the importance of research to the Department's international reputation. It would be good to reiterate the importance of research as an integral part of the Department's work, perhaps through emphasising that research-led teaching is a dynamic process, not just delivering the personal insights of research but allowing student ideas to challenge, inform, and shape research in the course of teaching. The concept of 'undergraduate research' to which the Department is also clearly committed is worth emphasising, too, in any future documentation.</p>
2	<p>Reaffirming commitment to lifelong learning:</p> <p>Despite the recent decline in recruitment of adult learners, the Department and the College have a strong reputation for supporting 'mature students' and those wishing to 'return to learn' after absence from formal education and / or a career break. Hopefully, this will continue to be a significant part of the Department / College mission.</p>
3	<p>Register of graduate destinations:</p> <p>The Department is clearly committed to supporting all students in their career pathways. The Department might consider giving greater emphasis to graduate destinations as part of its mission statement, and perhaps to publicise the various kinds of employment that graduates have gone into (in addition to teaching), such as local government, journalism, arts management, business communication, and other occupations.</p>

4	<p>The need for careful discussions to do with sustainability:</p> <p>The sheer amount of work undertaken at every level by a very small team – teaching, administration, and research – raises serious concerns about sustainability. Questions of strategy need to be tempered by these questions of sustainability. Can current levels of supervision and mentoring be maintained at postgraduate level, for instance, if there is significant postgraduate expansion?</p>
5	<p>Support for planned improvements:</p> <p>The proposal of a new Single Honours degree programme in English has great merit and promise, especially if it brings new resources to the Department. It will strengthen the Department’s reputation for excellence nationally and internationally. Even allowing for the special and distinctive status of the College, the pathways for progression and promotion look antiquated, and this applies all the way from clerical officers to senior lecturers. New programmes of study clearly need to be supported with additional and improved resources. It is surprising that the Head of Department is not also a Professor. The research profiles of other colleagues in the Department are equivalent to those of Reader / Professor in other institutions. Having a Chair in the Department carries great significance in terms of leadership and morale, and also provides a clear indication at home and abroad about the major teaching and research achievements of the Head of Department and his colleagues.</p>

Chapter 2: Organisation, Management and Staffing

Commendations

1	Staff engagement and satisfaction are extremely high and there is a clear sense of pride in working for MIC that was consistent across all colleagues. Staff at all levels told us that they absolutely love their job and love working for MIC, and this gave an overall positive sense of workplace identity. There is a solid, unstinting, and unifying commitment amongst all staff to the classroom success of their students.
2	The teaching and research profile of individual colleagues is outstanding, and this enables ELL to provide research-informed and research-engaged teaching of the highest quality. As a unit, they are easily on a par with top- ranking university English Departments. The eco-system between teaching and research works particularly well in this regard, and any future integration of language and literature specialisms offers further opportunities for internationally leading provision of teaching in this area. The overall skills within the staffing profile of the unit also enables the unit to be at the forefront of a number of entrepreneurial endeavours, including online provision for new and existing programmes, and engagement with international opportunities (including student recruitment and new English Language teaching provision). The integration of the skill sets, interests, and enthusiasm for innovation outlined above lead to a high performing Department where the whole is larger than the sum of its parts.
3	This is a Department that benefits from outstanding leadership, and thrives on the informal and supportive approach taken to personal development and review. Decision making is largely by consent and staff are able to raise any concerns they may have informally, knowing that these will be taken seriously and addressed without delay. The Head of Department is a true enabler of a positive working environment and culture. As someone who knows the strengths of all of the colleagues in the Department, he is able to address any pressures quickly, and assemble high performing teams to respond to any emerging tasks in an agile and efficient way.
4	The Department benefits from outstanding administrative support through the Faculty Office. The appreciation for the Departmental administrator was evident in all of the meetings we had during the review. This support enables the smooth running of the Department and gives confidence to both staff and students that they have a first port of call for many of their day-to-day questions and activities.
5	The Department has an outstanding working relationship with the various professional services across the College, and this is evident both in the leverage they get for every aspect of their activities from working in partnership and the development of new opportunities and innovations that emerge from this kind of working. Again, the interaction with those services is mainly informal and supportive, and this seems to be one of the key reasons for success in this space.

Recommendations (Please include a brief justification for the Recommendation)

1	<p>Review workload allocations and address unsustainable workloads amongst staff.</p> <p>The overall success of the Department relies on the good will and engagement of its staff and the high student numbers pose a serious risk to staff engagement, as well as to the feasibility of any planned future innovation.</p>
2	<p>Review allocation of administrative support with a view to increasing allocation.</p> <p>Related to 1, the high number of students and breadth of activity require additional administrative support to make the unit sustainable and enable innovation. Additional dedicated support by the current departmental administrator would allow this imbalance to be addressed.</p>
3	<p>Review fixed-term contracts with a view to making these permanent (year-long).</p> <p>A combination of different types of contracts can pose a risk to staff morale and retention. There is a clear need to review fixed-term contracts and ensure that all activity in the Department is valued and remunerated in a fair and consistent way.</p>
4	<p>Review provision of staff training with a view to identifying any current gaps.</p> <p>Staff training in all areas is a combination of informal instruction and mentoring arrangements. While this is clearly working well on the whole, a review of the training needs of different staff groups would allow the Department to identify requirements for provision as they occur. Review incentivisation and career progression with a view to enhance opportunities for professional development. There is currently little scope for career progression across both the academic and administrative job families and the reasons for this lie mainly with the overall national approach to this issue. A review of alternative ways to enable professional development alongside lobbying for a career progression framework would be desirable.</p>
5	<p>Review approach to staff engagement with overall decision making with a view to understanding whether these are fit for purpose in the long run.</p> <p>The informal arrangement in place for staff to feed in to decision making at every level of the organization seems to serve the Department well, and lead to strong staff engagement and a positive culture in the workplace. However, reliance on an outstanding leader and informal decision-making arrangements may pose a risk to longer term planning and sustainability of that positive culture if there is a change in the Headship.</p>

Chapter 3: Design, Content and Review of Curriculum

Commendations

1	The emphasis on research-centred courses is be applauded and is mirrored in students' appreciation of the quality of the teaching they receive. The coherence of the research clusters in the Department further reinforces the cross-connections between the courses on the curriculum.
2	The development of online and blended learning graduate programmes especially in the areas of applied linguistics has proven highly successful and clearly caters for the needs of national and international students.
3	The reliance on team teaching introduces dynamism and variety into the programmes and also allows academic conversations between colleagues to develop.
4	The current undertaking to revisit and rethink the curriculum in English Literature has led to fresh and challenging courses.
5	The graduate programmes in the Department are notably successful. They recruit strongly and have produced high calibre students.

Recommendations (Please include a brief justification for the Recommendation)

1	Review under-resourcing of TEFL and TEAL: The staff teaching in this area are on very circumscribed CID contracts and work in excess of contracted hours. The administration of the students taking TEFL courses places a heavy overhead on the department administrator.
2	Consider integrating offerings in literature and linguistics: A programme integrating offerings in literature and linguistics is highly desirable and would put the strengths of the Department to good use. It would also be attractive to students. However, such a development is predicated on the appointment of additional staff.
3	Review oversight and management of the BA Programme: The lack of a Director for the Bachelor of Arts at Faculty level means that there is no proper oversight and management of this programme and that it lacks institutional validation and standing.
4	Review programme offerings: The size of the classes and the number of programmes being taught has led to high contact hours and loads of assessment, and increases the administrative and pastoral burden for the individual lecturer. The latter burden also takes its toll on the Departmental administrator.
5	The reshaping of the curriculum in English literature should be carefully weighed up: The reshaping of the curriculum in English literature should be carefully weighed up: as offering courses in canonical texts and historical periods adds to the breadth of the programme and is vital for producing students who are conversant with the wider contexts and evolution of literary texts.

Chapter 4: Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Feedback

Commendations

1	There is a deep commitment to high quality teaching which is appreciated by both undergraduate and postgraduate students across the Department. It is good that funding is available for specific TLA projects.
2	There is a dynamic and flexible approach to teaching such that curricula are regularly reviewed and revised.
3	The Department has been prepared to experiment with online, blended, and face-to-face modes both in response to the pandemic and in general.
4	Teaching is research-led and research-informed which enhances the reputation of the courses and helps students to aspire to be researchers in their own right.
5	The development of a 'learning lab.' sounds like a very promising project.
6	Students feel they have a voice through the Head of Department and, if necessary, through the President of the Student Union.
7	Both undergraduate and postgraduate students regard academic and administrative staff as approachable and accessible.

Recommendations (Please include a brief justification for the Recommendation)

1	Module evaluation should be standard and standardised practice.
2	Online access to library resources needs to be more user-friendly.
3	Online lectures should be provided in the same IT format where possible.
4	There should be more careers advice and support for job applications on the undergraduate courses.

Chapter 5: The Student Experience

Commendations

1	The Department ought to be commended for its high rates of student enrolment, retention, and progression.
2	Students benefit greatly from a department in which there is a strong emphasis on individual care and intellectual development. The student experience overall is exceptionally good, and both undergraduate and postgraduate students are enthusiastic about the stimulating and inspiring learning environment at MIC.
3	Induction and orientation sessions are clearly welcomed and appreciated by students. Students also appreciate Open Days and speak positively of how the experience of a college visit proved decisive in shaping their future education and career choices.
4	Teaching staff work closely with professional service providers in such areas as library access and ICT help. There is close involvement, too, with the work of the International Office.
5	There is an impressive range of core support structures, facilities and resources in place for student guidance, including Student Academic Administration, the Research and Graduate School, and the Placement Office / Careers Service. Students receive excellent support from the Faculty Office and from the ELL Administrator.
6	There is a lively and enterprising postgraduate student community, with opportunities for both formal and informal discussion, exchange of ideas, and presentation of seminar papers.
7	The Department is sensitive in its response to diverse student population needs. It has responded especially well to the pressures that have come from widening access both locally and globally.

Recommendations (Please include a brief justification for the Recommendation)

1	Improvement of student feedback channels: The use of module evaluation questionnaires might be formalised, with an opportunity for students to offer feedback on teaching and learning, and with reassurance (perhaps at an appropriate staff-student committee meeting) that feedback has been considered and (where appropriate) acted upon.
2	Strengthening of student representation: The meetings between class representatives and the Head of Department are clearly valuable and are welcomed by the students. However, it would be good to have a formal structure that enabled occasional meetings between student representatives and staff in something like a staff-student committee, and also to demonstrate, as with student feedback (above), that action has been taken when necessary.
3	Improving student work spaces and facilities: Students greatly appreciate the learning environment at MIC, including the social spaces where they can meet, but they are also aware of the current constraints, including demand

	<p>on the Library and relatively few opportunities for socialising out of class. The Peer Review Group notes that there are plans for improved library provision.</p>
4	<p>Promoting undergraduate research: The Department prides itself on research-led teaching and also on its success in student progression. The Department should take every opportunity to encourage undergraduate research and to show how it operates in undergraduate dissertations / final year projects. Students should be encouraged to emphasise their research skills in their CVs and job applications.</p>
5	<p>Improvement of staff-student ratios: Many of the Department’s desirable aspirations, with regard to improving student experience and offering enhanced support through academic advisors and programme directors, are very much dependent on more equable and manageable staff-student ratios.</p>

Chapter 6: Research Activity

Commendations

1	The research profiles of the staff, and their obvious enthusiasm for research, are hugely impressive.
2	There are coherent strands of research around research centres such as Irish Studies, Women's Writing and IVACS.
3	Research has an international dimension through partnerships and collaborations with other networks of researchers, associations, and institutions. Research funding is readily available for conference funding and other research-related activities.
4	Staff research feeds directly into the curriculum, which is appreciated by the students.
5	Staff research is disseminated internally through, for example, the lunchtime lecture series. PhD research is disseminated through a seminar series.
6	PhD completions relative to the number of staff are extraordinarily good.

Recommendations (Please include a brief justification for the Recommendation)

1	Research plans need to be more than a paper exercise: They should be developmental rather than evaluative, discussed semi-formally with the Head of Department and reviewed annually. The Head of Department should have time profiled for this.
2	The College should (continue to) lobby for the national regulatory framework to allow the appointment of new professors and greater allocation of sabbaticals.
3	There should be a set expectation for the number of supervision meetings per semester (to be invoked if staff are over-worked or a student has gone missing in action).

Peer Review Group

Svenja Adolphs is Professor of English Language and Linguistics and Head of the School of English at the University of Nottingham, UK. Her teaching and research interests are in the areas of corpus linguistics (in particular, multimodal spoken corpus linguistics), pragmatics and discourse analysis. She has published widely in these areas, including *Introducing Electronic Text Analysis* (2006, Routledge), *Corpus and Context: Investigating Pragmatics Functions in Spoken Discourse* (2008), *Introducing Pragmatics in Use* (1st ed. 2011, 2nd ed. 2020, Routledge, with Anne O’Keeffe and Brian Clancy), *Spoken Corpus Linguistics: From Monomodal to Multimodal* (2013, Routledge, with Ronald Carter) and *The Routledge Handbook of English Language and Digital Humanities* (2020, Routledge, edited with Dawn Knight).

Anne Fogarty is Professor of James Joyce Studies at UCD, co-founder with Luca Crispi of the *Dublin James Joyce Journal*, and Academic Director of the Dublin James Joyce Summer School. She is co-editor of *Joyce on the Threshold* (2005), *Bloom’sday 100: Essays on “Ulysses”* (2009), *Imagination in the Classroom: Teaching and Learning Creative Writing in Ireland* (2013) and *Voices on Joyce* (2015). She has edited special issues of the *Irish University Review* on Spenser and Ireland, Lady Gregory, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Benedict Kiely and has published widely on aspects of twentieth and twenty-first century Irish literature, especially fiction. A collection of essays on Deirdre Madden, coedited with Marisol Morales Ladrón, is forthcoming from Manchester University Press and she is currently completing an edition of Joyce’s *Dubliners* for Penguin for publication in 2022.

Stephen Regan is Professor of English at Durham University, where he is also Director of the Centre for Poetry and Poetics. He is a member of the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham and helps to organize a biennial conference on Catholicism, Literature and the Arts. He served as Head of Department at Durham from 2008 to 2011, and he was a Visiting Research Fellow at Harvard University from 2011 to 2012. His main teaching and research interests are in modern British, Irish, and American literature. His publications include *Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Literature in English 1789-1939* (Oxford University Press, 2004) and an edition of *Esther Waters* by the Irish novelist, George Moore (Oxford University Press, 2012). His essays on modern poetry have appeared in *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* (2010), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (2008), and *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (2012). He is the author of *The Sonnet* (Oxford University Press, 2019), and co-editor (with Andrew Motion) of the forthcoming *Penguin Book of Elegy*.

Ivor Timmis is Emeritus Professor of English Language Teaching at Leeds Beckett University. He has worked in ELT for over 30 years. His research interests are in corpus linguistics, historical spoken language research and materials development for language teaching, and he has published in all these areas. Recently, he completed an advanced diploma in forensic linguistics, and he has just begun an OU course in Welsh language and culture. He has visited Limerick over 20 times for conferences and external examining. His latest book with Routledge (2020) is: *The Discourse of Desperation: Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-century Letters by Paupers, Prisoners, and Rogues*.