

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2006

Each day's questions are placed under a general rubric that is meant to help you to understand the specific questions and respond in an organized way. Answer any two of the five questions offered on each day.

Day 1: Authorship and Artfulness

1. Ruth Padel has argued that what she terms the "spatial syntax" of 5th-century Athenian theatre reveals much about that society's understanding of consciousness. "A Greek tragic plot is articulated," writes Padel, "through its exits and entrances, through its *eisodoi*." The single, focal door in the ancient Greek stage represents not simply a passageway and visual dialectic between the seen and the unapparent, the known and the unknown, and the real and the imagined; it defines and demarcates the political from the domestic, safety from danger. Does the simplicity of the ancient stage with its focal door lend an intensity to the action that is missing in, say, the modern theatre with its elaborate three-dimensional sets? Consider the entrances and exits of Cassandra, Clytemnestra, and Agamemnon in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, for example, and discuss the dramatic function of the door in that play.
2. "Tragedy," says Aristotle in the *Poetics*, "is complete and whole and has some magnitude 'Whole' is that which has beginning, middle, and end." Aristotle was speaking specifically about Greek tragedy and had Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* most in mind, but his definitions have been applied to literary works of all kinds, and they are broad enough to warrant such application. How satisfying an aesthetic standard is wholeness? How has it fared down through the ages? To which works can you usefully apply it? To which can you not?□
3. There is some irony in the fact that Ovid ends his *Metamorphoses*, a work devoted to displaying change and changefulness, by asserting the durability of his own labors and his own spirit. In Golding's translation (1567), Ovid says:
Let come that fatal hour
Which (saving of this brittle flesh) hath over me no power,
And at his pleasure make an end of mine uncertain time.
Yet shall the better part of me assurèd be to climb
Aloft above the starry sky. And all the world shall never
Be able for to quench my name.
Looking back to the *Iliad* and forward to *Beowulf* or Beckett, comment on the power ascribed to fame in combating the forces of mortality.
4. Recent studies demonstrating the surge in literary and artistic productivity of 15th and 16th-century European women have undercut historian Joan Kelly's

influential pronouncement in 1975 that women did not “have a Renaissance.” In light of your own studies, do you think that Kelly’s view of the Middle Ages as *the* golden age for early women poets might also warrant reassessment? “The sexual nature of courtly love [in Marie de France’s and other 11th and 12th-century women’s writings],” represents a society, she writes, that “could posit as a social ideal a love relation outside of marriage, one that women freely entered and that, despite its reciprocity, made women the gift givers while men did the service.” In answering this question, discuss and weigh representations of the competing conventions of female chastity and courtly love in the poems of Marie de France and her contemporaries commenting briefly on the social and economic circumstances of their lives. You may wish to cite other primary sources from the period as evidence for your conclusions.

5. Mrs. Dalloway is in many ways an old-fashioned woman. She married a man who could give her life stability, rather than one with whom she shared great intimacy; she lives in a house in Westminster surrounded by servants; the prime minister comes to dinner; a Reynolds portrait hangs in the house; she says and does the right things in front of company. How is it, then, that she can be the focal point of a modernist work of art? Could she have been the heroine of a classical or medieval work of art? What makes her modern?

Day 2: Darkness, Death, and the Uncanny

1. In their book on Freudian approaches to literature, Regina Schwartz and Valeria Finucci write: "Surely, the dynamics of...the uncanny, even the unconscious, were concerns that arose not in the context of nineteenth-century Vienna, but were already evident in the social, political, and religious upheavals of the early modern period as they were in the classical world." Considering Freud's lecture on "Dream-Work" in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* and, in particular, some of the essential terms in his dream theory ("condensation," "displacement," and "transformation"), do you agree or disagree with Schwartz and Finucci on the relevance of Freudian dream theory to illuminate the workings of unconscious in pre-modern literature? Does Freud's "Dream-Work" shed light, for example, on Agamemnon's dream in book 2 of the *Iliad*, Clytemnestra's nightmare in the *Oresteia*'s second play, the *Libation Bearers*, or in the dream-like emotions Turnus experiences in book 12 of Virgil's *Aeneid*? You may also wish to consider Freudian dream symbolism in relation to the dream-vision sequences featured in classical and medieval works.
2. In his poem *Winter* (1726), James Thomson refers to Socrates as "Truth's early Champion, Martyr for his God." Thomson did not invent this characterization of Socrates; he was, in fact, following in a long tradition of assimilating Platonic thinking to Christian ideas. Using what you know about Christian thinking in the New Testament and at least one other Christian text comment on the firmness of the foundation for Thomson's claim. Is the "martyrdom" of Socrates—both his death and the witness he bears of the divine—describable in terms of Pauline or other New Testament teachings?
3. "Ibant Obscuri" (they went in darkness). So begins Virgil's description of Aeneas' descent into the underworld in book 6 of the *Aeneid*. A passage through darkness, whether it is in Hell or in the fog of war (as in Thucydides 7.44) is a feature of many great works. But is darkness and obscurity always the same? Touching on treatments of darkness in at least three works, outline some of the main features of darkness as various authors describe it.
4. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues not only that language is incapable of representing physical pain but that the reality of physical pain itself destroys language. Perilous consequences for society stem, she observes, from the impossibility of communicating the physical agony of victims under torture and in war. Assembling and analyzing examples from Genesis, Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*, Sophocles' tragedy *Philoctetes*, and the detailed accounts of war crimes published by Amnesty International, among numerous other examples, Scarry sustains her thesis that physical pain "has no voice." How

effectively are the horrors of torture and mass murder revealed and depicted in Dante's *Inferno*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*? Consider Scarry's thesis in relation to these three works or others you have studied in the Colloquia.

5. Consider the following scene in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). In the midst of a casual conversation at a party, the novel's protagonist Clarissa learns that a young man has jumped from a window to his death. She reflects that his act was "a thing...that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death." (184) What is the importance of this scene in the overall plan of the novel? In what ways do other such post-World War I writers as Owen, Sassoon, and Auden echo the reflections of Woolf's protagonist on death?

Day 3: Performance and Society

1. The classicist David Halperin has noted, "Friendship is the anomalous relation: it exists outside the more thoroughly codified social networks formed by kinship and sexual ties...It is therefore more free-floating...more in need of social and ideological definition. Homer's *Iliad* represents an instance of precisely this sort of ideological or definitional activity; it enables us to glimpse a certain species of social relation in the very act of being labeled, of undergoing literary construction." Halperin argues that the friendships between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Assyrian epic *Gilgamesh* and Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad* should be seen "not as some fixed, unchanging, and immovable feature of the epic but as...the product of a particular turn of thought at a particular juncture in the artistic elaboration of traditional material." Compare these two epic friendships in terms of their structural similarities; and contrast both with the long-term relationship of two early Christian males, Augustine and his friend Alypius, as represented in Augustine's *Confessions*. Do you think there's a danger that we as critics may be too quick to categorize relationships - particularly that most elusive and various of relationships we call friendship?
2. Pericles' funeral oration in book 2 of Thucydides urges the citizens of Athens to think of themselves in relation to the state. He praises Athenian liberty and courage, and he contrasts the pleasure and privilege of Athenians with the dour lives of the Spartans. He tells the assembled listeners not to weep for the dead but to praise them and to rejoice in the nobility of their sacrifice. Looking back toward Homer and forward to Virgil, or perhaps as far as Wilfred Owen, reflect on the words that are spoken by leaders to commemorate those who die in defense of the state.
3. The heroes Roland and Beowulf accomplish deeds of daring that are literally incredible. Is this a fatal flaw? How can we appreciate these works when we find it hard to credit the deeds they rehearse? How much does the worth of these works depend upon the oral economy of art in which they were created? Told by jongleurs and scops, were these works more credible and therefore better? Is credibility itself an anachronistic standard that we can dismiss when we read *Beowulf* or *Roland*? Does the standard also apply to, say, the gospel according Mark or the Qur'an? Does it ever apply?
4. T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, as his notes to the poem suggest, draws on ancient myths and fables; it also makes allusions to a great many works of English, French, classical, and medieval literature. And yet, it is a poem very much of its time - 1922, the year of Joyce's *Ulysses*, D.H Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* and Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room*. What else should one know about 1922 in order to place Eliot's poem in that year? In what ways is Eliot's poem a work that could

only have been created in 1922 (or thereabouts)? In what ways is it a poem for all times?

5. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* opened in Paris in 1953. Simone de Beauvoir's novel *The Mandarins* went to press the same year in France. Both were smash hits and clearly struck a common chord of sorts with French intellectuals. H. Stuart Hughes has observed of *Godot* that the work "showed two tramps on a bare stage, awaiting the arrival of a mysterious M. Godot, who had still not appeared by the play's end. Alternately given to hope and despair, the pair were reduced to pursuing their fruitless vigil for its own sake, just as...men and women of his time wasted their lives while expecting better days." Compare Beauvoir's novel to Beckett's play. In intent, outlook, and method, these two works appear to be polar opposites. Yet on a deeper level they express the same Zeitgeist and share themes common among intellectuals in post-World War II Europe. Discuss the ways in which the mentalités articulated in these two works diverge. Contrast in particular their use of language, attention to place, and conception of character.