

Wesleyan University

College of Letters

Junior Comprehensive Exam 2015

Day One

QUESTION 1.

Choose ONE of the following essay questions. In your answer, discuss at least three texts in detail (perhaps mention more) and draw them from at least two of your courses unless otherwise specified. Limit yourself to 1800 words, or about six double spaced pages.

1) *Beyond 'Western Civilization'*. You are extraordinarily lucky compared with me at the same age, in that your COL courses have explicitly invited you to compare Western and non-Western texts, whereas mine was 'Western Civilization' only. What do you feel that you have accomplished as a result? Have you, for example, been able to see ways in which non-Western materials were the source for Western learning? Have you been able to make comparisons between parallel but separate treatments of certain topics and themes? Have you gained greater appreciation of the interchange between Western and non-Western thinkers in a larger intercultural conversation, whether at a given point in time or in the course of historical change? Be as specific as possible about the insights you have gained, pursuing one or more of these lines of argument. If appropriate to your argument, you may in this case confine your examples to a single term's course.

2) *Power of words/ language*. Examine how words and language are discussed or self-consciously deployed by an author. Explain the power the author imputes to words—whether explicitly or implicitly—and discuss whether and why you think there is cultural anxiety surrounding the power of words and language evident in those texts. If possible, bring the texts into a conversation with each other.

3) *Bodies and Body*. Humans are embodied beings and therefore part of the material world. You have read texts that address the distinction between the body or material bodies and the mind or soul (or one or more of its capacities such as will, intellect, etc.), and that prioritize one over the other. Discuss human embodiment and the range of attitudes toward that fact, including at least one text whose concerns are primarily moral/ethical, and another that is analytic or descriptive.

QUESTION 2.

Choose either Cluster A or Cluster B. Comment on TWO of the four clustered passages in detail, placing each in context within the work from which it comes and putting your chosen passages in conversation with one another. Limit yourself to 1800 words, or about six double spaced pages.

PASSAGES A

Odyssey: 9.92-113: “Nine whole days I was borne along by rough, deadly winds on the fish-infested sea. Then on the tenth our squadron reached the land of the Lotus-eaters people who eat the lotus, mellow fruit and flower. We disembarked on the coast, drew water there and crewmen snatched a meal by the swift ships. Once we’d had our fill of food and drink I sent a detail ahead, two picked men and a third, a runner, to scout out who might live there—men like us perhaps, who live on bread? So off they went and soon enough they mingled among the natives, Lotus-eaters, Lotus-eaters who had no notion of killing my companions, not at all, they simply gave them the lotus to taste instead... Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit, lost all desire to send a message back, much less return, their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters, grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home dissolved forever. But *I* brought them back, back to the hollow ships, and streaming tears—I forced them, hauled them under the rowing benches, lashed them fast and shouted out commands to my other, steady comrades.

Exodus 14:10-13

Thucydides: 6:16

Virgil 2.56-70: “The lead is taken by Laocoön. He hurries from the citadel’s high point excitedly; and with a mob around him, from far off he calls out: ‘Poor citizens, what wild insanity is this? Do you believe the enemy have sailed away? Or think that any Grecian gifts are free of craft? Is this the way Ulysses acts? Either Achaeans hide, shut in this wood, or else this is an engine built against our walls to spy upon our houses or to batter down our city from above; some trickery is here. Trojans, do not trust in the horse. Whatever it may be, I fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts.’”

PASSAGES B

Plato, *Apology*, 40a-b: “A surprising thing has happened to me, Judges—you I would rightly call judges. At all previous times my usual mantic sign frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong, but now that, as you can see for yourselves, I was faced with what one might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign has not opposed me, either when I left home at dawn, or when I came into court, or at any time that I was about to say something during my speech. Yet in other talks it often held me back in the middle of my speaking, but now it has opposed no word or deed of mine.”

Descartes, *Meditation II*.21: “But perhaps God has not willed that I be deceived in this way, for he is said to be supremely good. Nonetheless, if it were repugnant to his goodness to have created me such that I be deceived all the time, it would also seem foreign to that same goodness to permit me to be deceived even occasionally. But we cannot make this last assertion.”

Hume, *Enquiry...*, II: “[W]hen we analyse our thoughts or ideas, however compounded or sublime, we always find, that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment. Even those ideas, which, at first view, seem the most wide of this origin, are found, upon a nearer scrutiny, to be derived from it. The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom.”

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book 2:III: “All that is from the gods is full of providence.

That which is from fortune is not separated from nature or without an interweaving and involution with the things which are ordered by Providence. From thence all things flow; and there is besides necessity, and that which is for the advantage of the whole universe, of which thou art a part. But that is good for every part of nature which the nature of the whole brings, and what serves to maintain this nature. Now the universe is preserved, as by the changes of the elements so by the changes of things compounded of the elements. Let these principles be enough for thee, let them always be fixed opinions. But cast away the thirst after books, that thou mayest not die murmuring, but cheerfully, truly, and from thy heart thankful to the gods.”

Day Two:

QUESTION 1.

Choose ONE of the following essay questions. In your answer, discuss at least three texts in detail (perhaps mention more) and draw them from at least two of your courses unless otherwise specified. Limit yourself to 1800 words, or about six double spaced pages. Avoid writing on the same texts you used on Day One.

1) *War and historical change.* In telling the story of a ruler or a people, or in reflecting on history or its particular events, texts you have read have often considered the social and personal costs of war, and weighed what may be gained or lost through violence. War may, for example, create epistemological confusion (the ‘fog of war’), place previously stable loyalties in conflict, or seemingly suspend ordinary moral rules and legal rights. War may, on the other hand, provide a showcase for the display of outstanding human qualities on the part of the victors or, on the other hand, the conquered. Discuss contrasting depictions of war in your readings: make an effort to draw on at least two genres (e.g., epic, history, biography, lyric poem, treatise).

2) *Family structure/generational relations.* Discuss the importance of family structure within and across generations. Bring the texts into a conversation with each other in a way that shows something about larger cultural concerns that the texts are addressing. You might give thought to filial obligations, generational conflict, childhood, or gender relations, but you need not feel bound by these topics.

3) *Individual and community*. The social pressure to behave as others expect often concerns individual writers, who not uncommonly see themselves as exceptional in some way. Discuss how at least three of the writers you have studied use their writings to question, or circumvent, or complicate their readers' understanding of the relationship between individual and community.

QUESTION 2.

Choose either Cluster A or Cluster B. Comment on TWO of the four clustered passages in detail, placing each in context within the work from which it comes and putting your chosen passages in conversation with one another. Limit yourself to 1800 words, or about six double spaced pages.

PASSAGES A

Dhuoda, p. 8. "That Lord can fulfill even the will of me his servant, if he so wishes. At least under his table--that is, within his holy church--I can see from afar the puppies who are the ministers of his holy altars, and can gather words for both you and me, my son William--clear, worthy, beautiful words from among their intellectual and spiritual crumbs. For I know *his commiserations have not failed.*"

Anselm, On Free Will, p. 181 "T. No one is deprived of this rectitude except by his own will. One who acts unwillingly is said to act against what he wills; and no one is deprived of this rectitude against his will. But a man can be bound unwillingly, because he does not wish to be bound, and is tied up unwillingly; he can be killed unwillingly, because he can will not to be killed; but he cannot will unwillingly, because one cannot will to will against his will. Every willing person wills his own willing."

Abelard, Historia Calamitatum, p. 49 "Encouraged, then, by these lessons and examples, let us bear out troubles with less concern, the more unjustly we have suffered them. If they do not add to our merit, at least let us not doubt that they are useful for our purification. Since everything is ruled by divine providence, it should at least comfort each faithful soul, in every affliction, to know that the sublime goodness of God never permits anything to happen that he has not ordained and that he himself brings to its best conclusion whatever has been done perversely. So we are right in saying to him in every situation (Matt 6:10), "Thy will be done."

Dante, Inferno, canto III lines 112-117 [lines 93-98 in Pinsky's translation]

As leaves in quick succession sail down in autumn

Until the bough beholds its entire store
Fallen to the earth, so Adam's evil seed
Swoop from the bank when each is called, as sure

As a trained falcon, to cross to the other side
Of the dark water[.]

PASSAGES B

Apophthegmata, p. 142: “12. A brother questioned Abba Poemen saying, ‘I have committed a great sin and I want to do penance for three years.’ The old man said to him, ‘That is a lot.’ The brother said, ‘For one year?’ The old man said again, ‘That is a lot.’ Those who were present said, ‘For forty days?’ He said again, ‘That is a lot.’ He added, ‘I myself say that if a man repents with his whole heart and does not intend to commit the sin any more, God will accept him after only three days.’

Gawain and the Green Knight, fitt 4 lines 2366-68:

But a little thing more—it was loyalty you lacked:
not because you’re wicked, or a womanizer, or worse,
but you loved your own life; so I blame you less.

Marie de France, Bisclavret, lines 97-102:

The lady heard this wonder
and turned scarlet from fear;
she was terrified of the whole adventure.
Over and over she considered
how she might get rid of him;
she never wanted to sleep with him again.

Dante Purgatorio Canto II lines 124-9:

As doves when they are picking up wheat or weed seeds
all together, quietly feeding
without their usual puffed-up displaying,

if something should appear that frightens them
suddenly abandon what had tempted them,
seized as they are by what matters more to them...

Day Three

QUESTION 1.

Choose ONE of the following essay questions. In your answer, discuss at least three texts in detail (perhaps mention more) and draw them from at least two of your courses unless otherwise specified. Limit yourself to 1800 words, or about six double spaced pages. You may by this point need to draw on a text you have already used, but be sure to find examples that allow you to address your new topic here.

1) *Deception, Truth, Knowledge.* Discuss the character traits of deceiver and deceived, with attention to how and whether their moral characters are bound up in what they know, do not know, cannot know, or should know. At least one of your texts should be a philosophical text.

2) *Texts Change Lives.* Many of your readings present scenes of reading, within a narrative or discussion, in which texts play a pivotal role in bringing about dramatic social or individual change. The material form of the text may be important (e.g., letter, wax tablet to be scored and erased, scroll to be unrolled, book to be leafed through) or its oral performance, or its transmission from place to place. Assess the means by which contrasting readings from your courses present texts as the catalyst for change, attending to both how the change is presented as coming about, and how the force of speech or writing may be presented differently in each case.

3) *Moral Responsibility.* Explain what makes one morally responsible or not responsible for actions. How, if at all, is one's moral responsibility linked to knowledge or ignorance? How ought society or particular social institutions deal with moral mistakes, and how does one's response to this final question hinge on one's answers to the previous considerations? At least one text you choose should be a work of literature and one should be a philosophical text.

QUESTION 2.

Please notice the change in format from the two previous days. Choose TWO of the following short answer questions. Limit yourself to 900 words, or about three double spaced pages on each. Use the questions that accompany the quotation to prompt your response; you need not address them all.

Short answer passages (choose TWO, 900 words on each)

1. *The following quotation from John Donne's "The Canonization," (pp. 5-6 in your edition, see p. 6, third full stanza) presents a speaker apparently unconcerned by the social institutions and written forms for which the lovers' story is "unfit:"*

We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tombs and hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
As well a well wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for love.

Here Donne wittily upends the conventions of memorialization and religious history. What does it mean to propose the canonization of those who cannot live by love? Is Donne's experiment here a novel one? Or does it have precedents or echoes in your readings from earlier terms? Did you see similar experimentation in other readings in your Early Modern colloquium?

2. *In 'Of Sadness,' (Essay 2), Montaigne professes himself at the beginning and end one of those least subject to this passion – or indeed any violent passion. What difference does it make, in his intervening tour of the strongest feelings we can attempt to imagine or understand, illustrated by some of the most familiar literary commonplaces, when he scratches out "an*

accident that is not unknown to me” *after* “And from that is sometimes engendered the accidental failing that surprises lovers so unseasonably, and that frigidity that seizes them by the force of extreme ardor in the very lap of enjoyment” (see p. 7 and footnote)? *Does it matter whether Montaigne speaks explicitly of himself only at the beginning and end of this essay, or also here? Where else in your readings, this term or elsewhere, have you seen writers mingle the personal with what are presented as general claims, and with what result?*

3. Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus: “Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply the capacity for sensation, and death is the privation of all sentience; therefore a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life a limitless time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality. For life has no terrors for him who has thoroughly understood that there are no terrors for him in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.”

How is the Stoics’ attitude toward death important to their approach to the good human life? Specifically consider emotions and pleasure and pain. How is the link between attitudes toward death and the good human life apparent in other texts you have read?

4. Hippolytus, 1-23. “I am powerful and not without a name among mortals and within the heavens. I am called the goddess Cypris. Of those who dwell within Pontus and the boundaries of Atlas and see the light of the sun, I treat well those who revere my power, but I trip up those who are proud towards me. For this principle holds among the race of the gods also: they enjoy being honored by mortals. I shall now show you the truth of these words: Theseus’ son, Hippolytus, the Amazon’s offspring, reared by pure Pittheus—he alone of the citizens of this land of Trozen says that I am by nature the most vile of divinities. He spurns the bed and doesn’t touch marriage, but honors Apollo’s sister, Artemis, the daughter of Zeus, considering her the greatest of divinities. Always consorting with the virgin through the green wood, he rids the land of beasts with swift dogs, having come upon a more than mortal companionship. I don’t begrudge them these things; why should I? But I will punish Hippolytus this day for the wrongs he has done me. I won’t need much toil, since long before this I prepared most of what was to be done.”

How and why is it relevant to Euripides’ play that (a) Aphrodite speaks first and (b) she specifically describes her attitude toward and relationship to particular characters. How do the god’s actions and attitudes frame the actions of the play and our responses to it? In what way(s) is this literary device important to the play’s overall effect?