

College of Letters  
Wesleyan University  
Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2016

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Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and early modern culture. We encourage you to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. Each of your answers should make general claims supported by specific evidence and have an overall, coherent argument. In some cases, where the texts obviously require or allow it, your essays may be organized around exegesis and interpretation; in other cases we expect analysis and criticism. Your essays ought to consider, where appropriate, whether an idea or view contained in the text is plausible. Feel free to consult the primary texts as you write up your responses.

Please refer to the guidelines for deadline and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day, and to number your pages. Do your best to observe specified page limitations.

Please note: For each question, you are asked to discuss **at least three texts** drawn from the three colloquia (not necessarily one from each); where a question is accompanied by a list of texts you might consider, you are required to discuss a minimum of two of these (but you may of course discuss three or more, if you wish).

Examination Day One:

I. Select one among the following topics and write an essay of approximately 1,800 words.

a) In the Gospel of Luke (23:34), Jesus is quoted as saying from the cross upon which he was crucified, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." The question of whether wrongdoing is a consequence of ignorance, and what this might mean for concepts of punishment and moral responsibility, has been problematic since classical antiquity. Discuss the problem of knowledge, guilt, and forgiveness, making reference to (among other works of your choice) at least two of the following: Homer, Socrates and/or Plato, Genesis, Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Abelard, Dante, Luther.

b) Aristotle affirmed in the *Poetics* that tragedy should elicit the emotions of pity and fear in the audience (he was referring not so much to specific scenes as to the effect of the overall plot of the drama). He also thought that the best kind of tragedy showed a basically good person succumbing to misfortune, though not because of a deep moral flaw. How well does this description fit the tragedies you have read by Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca, Heaney; can we say that other works, not necessarily plays, are tragic in Aristotle's sense? Possible texts to discuss include Homer, Thucydides, Virgil, Plutarch, the Gospels, Milton, and Lessing.

c) Heroes come in many forms, in accord with the values and expectations fostered in different cultures. Figures such as Superman or Batman no doubt have some traits in common with ancient and mediaeval heroes, but there are also important differences. Consider the hero at the center of some of the following works (select at least two from the list for discussion): Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, the *Alexander Romance*, the *Lives of Charlemagne*, *Digenis Akritas*, Machiavelli's *Prince*, *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as other texts of your choice. What characteristics seem to abide across the ages, and which seem to vary?

II. Select one among the following passages and write a critical interpretation of it, with reference to at least two other texts, of approximately 1,800 words.

(a) Sophocles *Philoctetes*:

*Odysseus*: Son of Achilles, to bring this task to its successful completion you must show yourself brave not only in deed but also in mind. Now remember, even if what I tell you is at odds with your thinking you'll still have to be willing to obey me because that's what you're here for. To help me.

*Neoptolemos*: What are your orders, commander?

*Odysseus*: You've got to trick Philoctetes, my friend. Trick his thinking with your words.

If, for example, he asks you who you are, or whose family you're from, say that you are the son of Achilles. No need to lie there but then, tell him that you've got angry with the Greeks and that you've left them back at Troy.... Tell Philoctetes that when you've rightly and justly asked for your father's arms, the Greeks said they had already given them to Odysseus. Insult me as much you like. Utter the worst insults you can imagine against me, they won't hurt me in the slightest but it will hurt all the Greeks if you fail to do as I tell you, my friend, because without this man's bow you won't be able to conquer Troy, the land of Dardanus.... I know, my boy, I know that this sort of thing is not in your character. You don't like uttering such lying language nor do you like plotting against people but you must also know what a delight it is to gain a victory after a struggle. Just try it! Try it and before long we'll be seen as having done the proper thing.

Now, for the next few hours put your virtue to one side for me and after that, you can for ever be called the most virtuous of all mortals.

*Neoptolemos*: Distressing words make for distressing deeds, Odysseus, son of Laertius and it is not in my nature, nor was it in my father's nature to do treacherous things. Ask me to take the man by using my strength, if you want but don't ask me to take him by trickery. With the use of only one foot we can beat him. We are many. I was sent with you, my lord to help you, not to perform treacherous deeds. I'd rather be beaten honestly, Odysseus than win by treachery.

*Odysseus*: When I was young, son of a noble man, I too had a slow tongue but a speedy arm but now, when I test the two I find that, with us mortals, it is the tongue and not the arm that rules the deed.

(b) Thucydides 3.69-85 (The Civil War at Corcyra)

The Corcyraeans were engaged in butchering those of their fellow citizens whom they regarded as their enemies: and although the crime imputed was that of attempting to put down the

democracy, some were slain also for private hatred, others by their debtors because of the moneys owed to them. Death thus raged in every shape; and, as usually happens at such times, there was no length to which violence did not go; sons were killed by their fathers, and suppliants dragged from the altar or slain upon it; while some were even walled up in the temple of Dionysus and died there. So bloody was the march of the revolution, and the impression which it made was the greater as it was one of the first to occur.... In peace there would have been neither the pretext nor the wish to make such an invitation; but in war, with an alliance always at the command of either faction for the hurt of their adversaries and their own corresponding advantage, opportunities for bringing in the foreigner were never wanting to the revolutionary parties. The sufferings which revolution entailed upon the cities were many and terrible, such as have occurred and always will occur, as long as the nature of mankind remains the same; though in a severer or milder form, and varying in their symptoms, according to the variety of the particular cases. In peace and prosperity, states and individuals have better sentiments, because they do not find themselves suddenly confronted with imperious necessities; but war takes away the easy supply of daily wants, and so proves a rough master, that brings most men's characters to a level with their fortunes. Revolution thus ran its course from city to city, and the places which it arrived at last, from having heard what had been done before, carried to a still greater excess the refinement of their inventions, as manifested in the cunning of their enterprises and the atrocity of their reprisals. Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question, inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting, a justifiable means of self-defence. The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected. To succeed in a plot was to have a shrewd head, to divine a plot a still shrewder; but to try to provide against having to do either was to break up your party and to be afraid of your adversaries. In fine, to forestall an intending criminal, or to suggest the idea of a crime where it was wanting, was equally commended until even blood became a weaker tie than party, from the superior readiness of those united by the latter to dare everything without reserve; for such associations had not in view the blessings derivable from established institutions but were formed by ambition for their overthrow; and the confidence of their members in each other rested less on any religious sanction than upon complicity in crime. The fair proposals of an adversary were met with jealous precautions by the stronger of the two, and not with a generous confidence. Revenge also was held of more account than self-preservation. Oaths of reconciliation, being only proffered on either side to meet an immediate difficulty, only held good so long as no other weapon was at hand; but when opportunity offered, he who first ventured to seize it and to take his enemy off his guard, thought this perfidious vengeance sweeter than an open one, since, considerations of safety apart, success by treachery won him the palm of superior intelligence. Indeed it is generally the case that men are readier to call rogues clever than simpletons honest, and are as ashamed of being the second as they are proud of being the first. The cause of all these evils was the lust for power arising from greed and ambition; and from these passions proceeded the violence of parties once engaged in contention.

(c) Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1

Phoebus's first love was Daphne, daughter of Peneus, and not through chance but because of Cupid's fierce anger. Recently the Delian god, exulting at his victory over the serpent, had seen him bending his tightly strung bow and said 'Impudent boy, what are you doing with a man's weapons? That one is suited to my shoulders, since I can hit wild beasts of a certainty, and wound my enemies, and not long ago destroyed with countless arrows the swollen Python that covered many acres with its plague-ridden belly. You should be intent on stirring the concealed fires of love with your burning brand, not laying claim to my glories!' Venus's son replied 'You may hit every other thing Phoebus, but my bow will strike you: to the degree that all living creatures are less than gods, by that degree is your glory less than mine.' He spoke, and striking the air fiercely with beating wings, he landed on the shady peak of Parnassus, and took two arrows with opposite effects from his full quiver: one kindles love, the other dispels it. The one that kindles is golden with a sharp glistening point, the one that dispels is blunt with lead beneath its shaft. With the second he transfixed Peneus's daughter, but with the first he wounded Apollo piercing him to the marrow of his bones.

Now the one loved, and the other fled from love's name, taking delight in the depths of the woods, and the skins of the wild beasts she caught, emulating virgin Phoebe, a careless ribbon holding back her hair. Many courted her, but she, averse to being wooed, free from men and unable to endure them, roamed the pathless woods, careless of Hymen or Amor, or whatever marriage might be.... Phoebus loves her at first sight, and desires to wed her, and hopes for what he desires, but his own oracular powers fail him.... He sees her disordered hair hanging about her neck and sighs 'What if it were properly dressed?' He gazes at her eyes sparkling with the brightness of starlight. He gazes on her lips, where mere gazing does not satisfy. He praises her wrists and hands and fingers, and her arms bare to the shoulder: whatever is hidden, he imagines more beautiful. But she flees swifter than the lightest breath of air, and resists his words calling her back again.... He ran faster, Amor giving him wings, and allowed her no rest, hung on her fleeing shoulders, breathed on the hair flying round her neck. Her strength was gone, she grew pale, overcome by the effort of her rapid flight, and seeing Peneus's waters near cried out 'Help me father! If your streams have divine powers change me, destroy this beauty that pleases too well!' Her prayer was scarcely done when a heavy numbness seized her limbs, thin bark closed over her breast, her hair turned into leaves, her arms into branches, her feet so swift a moment ago stuck fast in slow-growing roots, her face was lost in the canopy. Only her shining beauty was left.

## Examination Day Two

I. Select one among the following topics and write an essay of approximately 1,800 words

a) The idea that wisdom comes at the end of an arduous journey of the mind has persisted over the centuries, and given rise to philosophical works that seem to blend metaphysical reasoning with personal history and travel narratives. Consider what wisdom consists in, how it is achieved, and whether it is available to all or only to a select few, in at least two of the following: Plato, Augustine, Dante, Ibn Tufayl, Al-Ghazzali, Teresa of Ávila, and Luther.

b) History is often the record of human folly and iniquity. Consider the views of human nature, and how human nature contributes to the course of history, in connection with at least two of the following: Herodotus, Thucydides, Machiavelli, Bartolomé de las Casas, Hobbes, and Milton; in the light of these authors, you may also select some literary works for comparison (remember: a minimum of three texts in all).

c) Aristotle held that in comedy, as opposed to tragedy, no one really suffers or is harmed. Comedy also ends up happily, with the most bitter of enemies miraculously reconciled. Is there a continuous structure to comedy over the ages, or does it vary from one epoch and culture to another? Consider the plot forms and delineation of character in Aristophanes, Lope de Vega, and Swift, along with other comedies of your choice.

(d) Consider the following: “In the Middle Ages, people were conscious of themselves only as members of a race, party, family, or corporation — only through some general category. In Renaissance Italy, men and women first became individuals and recognized themselves as such” (Jacob Burckhardt, 1860). With specific reference to at least three authors we have read, assess the extent to which you find Burckhardt’s influential view persuasive.

II. Select one among the following passages and write a critical interpretation of it, with reference to at least two other texts, of approximately 1,800 words.

(a) *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*

But respecting Felicitas (for to her also the Lord's favour approached in the same way), when she had already gone eight months with child (for she had been pregnant when she was apprehended), as the day of the exhibition was drawing near, she was in great grief lest on account of her pregnancy she should be delayed—because pregnant women are not allowed to be publicly punished—and lest she should shed her sacred and guiltless blood among some who had been wicked subsequently. Moreover, also, her fellow martyrs were painfully saddened lest they should leave so excellent a friend, and as it were companion, alone in the path of the same hope. Therefore, joining together their united cry, they poured forth their prayer to the Lord three days before the exhibition. Immediately after their prayer her pains came upon her, and when, with the difficulty natural to an eight months' delivery, in the labour of bringing forth she was sorrowing, some one of the servants of the Cataractarii said to her, “You who are in such suffering now, what will you do when you are thrown to the beasts, which you despised when you refused to sacrifice?” And she replied, “Now it is I that suffer what I suffer; but then there will be another in me, who will suffer for me, because I also am about to suffer for Him.” Thus she brought forth a little girl, which a certain sister brought up as her daughter.

(b) Al-Ghazzali, *Path to Sufism*

Then I said: “My reliance on sense-data has also become untenable. Perhaps, therefore, I can rely only on those rational data which belong to the category of primary truths, such as our asserting that ‘Ten is more than three,’ and ‘One and the same thing cannot be simultaneously affirmed

and denied,' and 'One and the same thing cannot be incipient and eternal, existent and nonexistent, necessary and impossible.'" Then sense-data spoke up: "What assurance have you that your reliance on rational data is not like your reliance on sense-data? Indeed, you used to have confidence in me. Then the reason-judge came along and gave me the lie. But were it not for the reason-judge, you would still accept me as true. So there may be, beyond the perception of reason, another judge. And if the latter revealed itself, it would give the lie to the judgments of reason, just as the reason-judge revealed itself and gave the lie to the judgments of sense. The mere fact of the nonappearance of that further perception does not prove the impossibility of its existence."

(c) Dante *Purgatorio* Canto 11

I said to him: 'O, are you not Oderisi, the glory of Gubbio, and the glory of that art which in Paris they call 'Illumination'?' He said: 'Brother, the leaves that Franco of Bologna paints are more pleasing: the glory is all his now, and mine in part. In truth, I would not have been so humble while I lived, because of the great desire to excel, that my heart was fixed on. Here the debt is paid for such pride: and I would still not be here, if it were not that, having power to sin, I turned to God.'

O empty glory of human power: how short the green leaves at its summit last, even if it is not buried by dark ages! Cimabue thought to lead the field, in painting, and now Giotto is the cry, so that the other's fame is eclipsed. Even so, one Guido, Cavalcanti, has taken from Guinicelli, the other, the glory of our language: and perhaps one is born who will chase both from the nest.

Worldly Fame is nothing but a breath of wind, that now blows here, and now there, and changes name as it changes direction. What more fame will you have, before a thousand years are gone, if you disburden yourself of your flesh when old, than if you had died before you were done with childish prattle? It is a shorter moment, in eternity, than the twinkling of an eye is to the orbit that circles slowest in Heaven.

All Tuscany rang with the noise of him who moves so slowly in front of me, along the road, and now there is hardly a whisper of him in Siena, where he was lord, when Florence's fury was destroyed, when she was prouder then, than she is now degraded. Your Reputation is like the colour of the grass, that comes and goes, and he through whom it springs green from the earth, discolours it.'

### Examination Day Three

I. Select one among the following topics and write an essay of approximately 1,800 words.

a) It is conventional to see a tension between science and religion, which is sometimes thought to have come to a crisis point in and after the European Renaissance. Discuss how religion and scientific thought conflict or coexist in at least one of the texts in each of the following sets

(remember, you must discuss a total of at least three works, and in this essay, preferably four):  
(1) Genesis, Augustine Qur'an, Al-Ghazzali; (2) Bacon, Galileo, Hume, Kant.

(b) Satire is a powerful form of social criticism, in part because it hides behind a veneer of humor or ambiguity. Discuss the nature of satire, and how it "gets away with it," in at least two of the following works (and remember, you must discuss at least three works in your essay): Aristophanes, Ovid, *The Alexander Romance*, More, Erasmus, Montaigne, Voltaire, and Swift.

(c) The idea of human rights is sometimes regarded as a modern invention, according to which people are entitled to a certain basic consideration simply by virtue of their humanity, as opposed to participation in a particular community or political entity. Discuss the idea of human rights, and also its limits, in connection with at least two of the following (for a total of at least three works): Genesis, Herodotus, Thucydides, Augustine, Ibn Tufayl, Thomas More, Hobbes, Locke, Wollstonecraft, Kant, *The Declaration of Human Rights*.

(d) Women's voices have only rarely survived from antiquity, less rarely from the Middle Ages, more frequently but still very unevenly from the modern period. Yet women are often said to have a distinctive voice, due to their role in the family and to the very fact that they speak from a position of social dependency and oppression. Is there "a woman's voice" at all? Discuss the problematics of women as writers in at least two of the following (for a total of at least three works in all), taking care to recognize aspects of culture and genre: Sappho, *Martyrdom of Perpetua*, Hildegard of Bingen, Marie de France, Teresa of Ávila, Mary Wollstonecraft.

(e) Seeking enlightenment from profound scholarly exchange, you stumble into *The Stoned Stoat Biker Bar* in Moosup at 3:00am on a Sunday morning. There, you overhear (or at least imagine) a learned conversation taking place at the table next to you: **Plato, Augustine, Machiavelli, and Bacon** are discussing what kind of education of the youth will do the most good for society. Record their conversation, taking care to portray each in character.

II. Select one among the following passages and write a critical interpretation of it, with reference to at least two other texts, of approximately 1,800 words.

(a) Milton *Paradise Lost* Book 2

He ceas'd, and next him MOLOC, Scepter'd King  
Stood up, the strongest and the fiercest Spirit  
That fought in Heav'n; now fiercer by despair:  
His trust was with th' Eternal to be deem'd  
Equal in strength, and rather then be less  
Car'd not to be at all; with that care lost  
Went all his fear: of God, or Hell, or worse  
He reck'd not, and these words thereafter spake.  
My sentence is for open Warr: Of Wiles,  
More unexpert, I boast not: them let those

Contrive who need, or when they need, not now.  
For while they sit contriving, shall the rest,  
Millions that stand in Arms, and longing wait  
The Signal to ascend, sit lingring here  
Heav'ns fugitives, and for thir dwelling place  
Accept this dark opprobrious Den of shame,  
The Prison of his Tyranny who Reigns  
By our delay? no, let us rather choose  
Arm'd with Hell flames and fury all at once  
O're Heav'ns high Towrs to force resistless way,  
Turning our Tortures into horrid Arms  
Against the Torturer; when to meet the noise  
Of his Almighty Engin he shall hear  
Infernal Thunder, and for Lightning see  
Black fire and horror shot with equal rage  
Among his Angels; and his Throne it self  
Mixt with TARTAREAN Sulphur, and strange fire,  
His own invented Torments.

(b) Erasmus *Colloquies*

*Chrysoglottus*. “If I weren't afraid my chatter would interfere with your eating, and if I thought it lawful to mix anything from profane writers with such religious conversation, I'd present something that didn't puzzle but delighted me extremely as I was reading it today.”

*Eusebius*. “On the contrary, whatever is devout and contributes to good morals should not be called profane. Of course Sacred Scripture is the basic authority in everything: yet I sometimes run across ancient sayings or pagan writings — even the poets' — so purely and reverently expressed, and so inspired, that I can't help believing their authors' hearts were moved by some divine power. And perhaps the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand, and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar. Speaking frankly among friends, I can't read Cicero's *De senectute*, *De amicitia*, *De officiis*, *De Tusculanis quaestionibus* without sometimes kissing the book and blessing that pure heart, divinely inspired as it was. But when, on the other hand, I read these modern writers on government, economics, or ethics — good Lord, how tame they are by comparison! And what lack of feeling they seem to have for what they write! So that I would much rather let all of Scotus and others of his sort perish, than the books of a single Cicero or Plutarch. Not that I condemn the former entirely, but I perceive I am helped by reading the others, whereas I rise from the reading of these somehow less enthusiastic about true virtue, but more disputatious.”

(c) Machiavelli *Prince*

It is not necessary for a prince actually to have all the above written qualities, but it is very necessary to seem to have them. Indeed, I shall dare to say the following: that when these qualities are possessed and always observed they are harmful. And when they seem to be possessed, they are useful. So that it is useful to seem compassionate, faithful, humane, honest,



religious – and to be so, but to stay so constructed in your spirit that if it is necessary not to be these things, you are able and know how to become the contrary. And one must understand the following: that a prince, and especially a new prince cannot observe all of those things for which men are believed good, since to maintain his state he is often required to act against faith, against charity, against humaneness, and against religion. And for this reason he needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and the variation of things command him, and, as I said above, not to depart from the good if he is able, but to know how to enter into evil when he needs to.

Thus a prince must take great care that ... he appear, to hear him and to look at him, all compassion, all faith, all integrity, all humaneness, all religion – and there is nothing more necessary to appear to have than this last quality. And men as a whole judge more with their eyes than their hands, because everyone is permitted to see, but few are permitted to touch. Everyone sees what you seem to be, but few feel what you are – and those few do not dare to oppose the opinion of the many, who have the majesty of the state that defends them. And in the actions of all men, and especially of princes (where there is no judge to whom to protest), one looks to the end [i.e., the outcome].

(d) Thomas More, *Utopia*

Pleasure they define as any state or activity, physical or mental, which is naturally enjoyable. The operative word is *naturally*.... But human beings have entered into an idiotic conspiracy to call some things enjoyable which are naturally nothing of the kind - as though facts were as easily changed as definitions. Now the Utopians believe that, so far from contributing to happiness, this type of thing makes happiness impossible - because, once you get used to it, you lose all capacity for real pleasure, and are merely obsessed by illusory forms of it. Very often these have nothing pleasant about them at all - in fact, most of them are thoroughly disagreeable, But they appeal so strongly to perverted tastes that they come to be reckoned not only among the major pleasures of life, but even among the chief reasons for living.