

ADAMS STATE COLLEGE EXTENDED STUDIES  
ENG 311 – WORLD LITERATURE I  
Final Exam

I certify that the student named on this exam did not receive assistance and did not have unauthorized access to books or notes. I have returned this exam to the instructor on \_\_\_\_\_ (date).  
Proctor Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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Choose THREE of the following topics and write a coherent, grammatically correct essay on each. Use specific examples from the texts to support your answers. (50 pts. each)

1. Using your knowledge about the epic (definition, epic conventions, qualities of the hero/heroine, social and historical climate) argue that *Beowulf* can be considered an epic.
2. Using at least five (5) women, from three (3) different works, discuss their role in the society in which they lived. Choose from Wealththeow, Penelope, Dido, Beatrice, Chimene, Hildeburgh, Infanta, Phaedra, Lavinia.
3. In the beginning of the *Inferno*, Dante has lost “the path that does not stray.” At the end, he emerges “to see—once more—the stars.” In your supported opinion, does Dante regain “the direct way” or is his journey a spiritual failure?
4. Compare and contrast Euripides’s *Hippolytus* and Racine’s *Phaedra*. Note the changes Racine made and comment on why he made these changes.
5. Dante’s *Inferno* portrays one part of the Christian pilgrimage, the part where Christians blinded by their sins struggle to renew their state of Grace. Dante’s hell is a dark place and we, the readers, and Dante, the pilgrim, need to rely on spiritual guidance to emerge to see the stars once again. Discuss the efficacy of the different guides that Dante employs and comment on guides in the modern world that can either help us or hinder us on the way to spiritual happiness.

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It is fair to say that modern woman controls her fate to a degree unheard of in any past age. Still, the fairer sex did experience varying levels of freedom in different locations and eras, and it is worth exploring the trajectory of their escape from the realms of male hegemony. This progression does not occur in a straight line, unfortunately, with freedoms diminishing after the fall of Greco-Roman prominence, only beginning to rise again after the doldrums of the Dark Ages. A brief review of five famous females from classic literature will amplify this reality.

Amongst the women of our study, Wealththeow from the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf clearly must rest at the unfortunate end of the personal freedom scale. Due to the testosterone-driven brutality of the context, the role of woman in this story hews closely to the concept of "geomuru ides", or woman-as-victim. Power is won with the edge of a sword, and there are no Camillas in Beowulf. What we do find is woman as a "peace-weaver", binding together warring sects by the power of her uterus, the gateway to a dynastic line. Wealththeow's very name translates to "foreign slave," so we can deduce the reality here: Hrothgar took her as a spoil of war. What power she has is therefore informal: serving the mead, acting as a symbol of wealth, offering a bit of advice or two to the king. It is true that women often acted as kingmakers when a ruler died, but this power is mostly illusory, as wars were mostly inevitable after this occurrence. Wealththeow is ultimately a slave, and no amount of jewelry can alter that fact. The utter awfulness of her personal status is only palliated by the story of Hildeburgh, though to the liberal mind, this addition only serves to depress the reader further.

Whether we use Euripides or M. de Racine as our guide into the twisted mind of Phaedra, we might at first be tempted to think that she wielded some moderate degree of personal power. Certainly, it must be acknowledged that she possessed enough autonomy to utterly wreck the lives of Oenone, Theseus, and Hippolytus. She pushed both plays to their gruesome ends, but it is still an open question as to how much power she really had. All of her decisions are seen through the

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lens of a male-centered ~~was~~ **ENG 311 - WORLD LITERATURE I** world: she fears Theseus' discovery; she betrays her son's claim Final Exam to the throne, by bartering it for the love of Hippolytus; she thinks of nothing but the love of her hero; she fails to achieve this; she betrays him as well, ultimately causing Theseus to use Poseidon's curse upon him, slaying him. Her role in society, then, is actually little different from that of Wealththeow; it is the men who are different in these plays. A woman may well love a man, but she is not truly free unless she has the right to reject him; clearly, Phaedra possessed little ability to determine her own fate, outside of the consummation of Medea's "poison" - and I mean this in both senses of the word. In the end, Phaedra's role in society was to stand in as eye-candy for the king, albeit one with a rotten core.

Chimene from Pierre Corneille's Le Cid is also controlled by the chains of convention, but they take on a very different appearance based on the context of the day. In terms of personal freedoms, she appears to have the ability to go and say and do things which were unavailable to Wealththeow or Phaedra. Her person was also treated with more respect than the other two, although much of this deference was due to her position as the highborn daughter of Don Gomez. What controls this heroine are the virtues embodied in "gloire" which are aspired to by the royalty, and so she must demand her lover's death in order to avenge her father's. It is a wretched prison that fate has put her in, but she chooses to stand for her beliefs in the face of her love. This implies a degree of control virtually unheard of in earlier works. Her obedience to honor allows the potential for happiness with Don Rodrigue, if the king's proclamation of "time healing all wounds" is true. Chimene's lot is still dependent upon men, but she appears to be self-determinant to a degree enviable

to many women, and not altogether dolorous.

Penelope from Homer's Odyssey is difficult to peg on the spectrum. She clearly

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enjoys little social freedom, even as a queen. The hypothesized death of her noble husband has caused all of the vultures of Ithaca to descend, and the pressures to remarry were intense. And yet, Penelope is a most exemplary character, withstanding their assaults. She uses her wit to thwart the suitors for years, a delay which ultimately allows Pallas Athena to convey Odysseus homeward to mastermind her enemies' slaughter. In this character we find a key to power: whatever our situation, it is our state of mind and will to power that gives us true freedom. As a result of her bravery and intelligence, the renown of Penelope echoes even to the Underworld carried by the shades of the slain suitors. As a partner, she proves herself worthy of the great Odysseus, and while we may still bemoan her lack of complete autonomy, we can find some consolation in the fact that she got what she most desired. Had the genetic lottery gone a different way, she would have been a mighty Greek hero.

Last we come to Dido, a key player from Virgil's Aeneid. She is, at first glance, a rather sympathetic character. Depending on the source (and there are several), Dido - which translates to "virgin" - escaped from Tyre after her husband was murdered by her brother. Since she had the presence of mind to abscond with the royal treasury, she was at least well situated financially, and free to form the city of Carthage. As Queen sans a king, she had nearly unlimited power by which to indulge her whims. That said, she goes and falls in love with Aeneas, and thus chains her destiny to his whims. In this act, we find the least noble of all of the women presented here (with the possible exception of Racine's Phaedra): she had all of the power that the rest lacked, but threw it away voluntarily on a doomed romance. She kills herself out of desperation, but not before keeping misery on the Trojans, who had, clearly, already experienced more than their fair share. Her character is shown when Aeneas ventures into the depths of Tartarus and sees her bitter resolve undiminished.

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These five women give us a spectrum of power in the ancient world, and we are at once made appreciative for the tides of progress. Penelope and Chimère are the only two who come out as winners, a pretty sorry looking average, all things considered. None of us are as free as we would like to pretend, and analyzing <sup>the</sup> manacles of others is a good way to visualize our own, so perhaps the suffering of these women can be sufficiently didactic to help us achieve the freedom they were denied.

4) Roughly twenty-one centuries divide the penning of Euripides' Hippolytus and Jean Racine's Phaedra; thus, even though they purport to spin the same rough tale, differences were probably inevitable. When viewed from a critical perspective, it becomes clear that these alterations go deeper than the stylistic or factual, however. M. de Racine changed the name of the play in order to place the queen in the spotlight, and with this focus we are given a view to massive ideological dissimilarities between the two "Phaedras", and this then creates thematic deviations, as well. A short summary of these factual distinctions will provide a convenient gateway into the deeper structural issues at work in these two plays.

For starters, Euripides' play opens with a soliloquy by Aphrodite, who is in a bit of a tiff because Hippolytus is the lone human male who fails to pay her homage. Thus, the entire production can be viewed as a catfight between the "goddess marvelous after dark" and Artemis, the chaste huntress and protector of Hippolytus. Indeed, Euripides closes his play with the appearance of Artemis ex machina, promising vengeance upon one of Cyprus' boy toys. Racine eliminates this squabble completely, pointing the accusatory finger at "original sin" as the culprit; aside from the presence of the sea

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monster, the constant meddling of the Greek pantheon is absent in the later work.

Sans the whims of Aphrodite, Phaedra's passion for her stepson also must change in form. Far from absolving responsibility to the whims of fate, Racine's Phaedra becomes centrally responsible for her decisions. We can see some evidence for this in the scene where the so-called secret of her ardor escapes her lips into the world of action. In the earlier play, it takes the repeated henpecking of both the nurse and the chorus to produce this ~~scene~~ admission; in M de Racine's play, Phaedra comes out with it rather quickly, with only trivial resistance and without the prodding of any chorus.

Hippolytus is informed of the truth in quite distinct manners, as well. In Euripides, the nurse betrays Phaedra and spills the beans. In the latter play, it is Phaedra herself who confesses the truth to her innamorato. In both cases, Hippolytus rejects the queen's advances, though his reasons are distinct. In the earlier work, he rejects her because he is a pious robot in thrall to Artemis and wants nothing to do with women. In the latter work, Hippolytus is already in love - but with Aricia, the political prisoner of Theseus, and heir to Athens. She is an invention of Racine, and does not appear in the earlier play at all.

The timing of Phaedra's suicide presents us with the last major factual deviation between the plays: in Euripides, Phaedra hangs herself after the rejection, leaving a letter claiming that her stepson had made an attempt upon her virtue. In Racine's play, it is Oenone the nurse who tells the king of his son's supposed betrayal, and the queen only commits suicide by poison after hearing of her lover's death.

This is the factual architecture of the play, but it is the vastly different thematic/ideological foundations laid by the authors which ultimately build such disparate narrative structures. M de Racine was writing for a very Catholic audience in the time of Louis XIV; notions of noblesse oblige and Cartesian-inspired control of the "lesser" emotions were rampant.

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Racine attempted to save his Phaedra in a certain sense, by converting the responsibility for her lies to Theseus from acts of commission to an act of omission. Perhaps, but sophistry is sophistry is sophistry, and the dear queen is clearly full of bull, perhaps a genetic curse handed down from her mother, Pasiphaë. (Fun intended and instantly regretted.)

Despite Racine's insistence that while she may have committed the mental sin of unfaithfulness, her behavior was still blameless, we find that his version of Phaedra pushed the engine of tragedy forward in a way unavailable to her previous incarnation. One must be consistently reminded as one moves through the complication that the catalyst for the denouement - Medea's poison - was available to the queen from page one. She obviously didn't want to use it, and this refusal had dire consequences. We only become socially responsible for our internal insanities when they breach the prisons of the mouth and enter the realms of behavior, and this clearly includes words. Phaedra was perfectly free to keep her trap shut in spite of Oenone's hovering maternalism; she was doubly free to refrain from discussing the matter with the apparently misogynistic and priggish Hippolytus. When the news arrives of Theseus' supposed demise, she sells her husband's throne and her own son's claim to it for the bed of Hippolytus. This was done on her orders, and it matters not that it was actually Oenone who spoke the words. When Theseus arrives - very much alive - she consents to a lie intended to teach Hippolytus a lesson on the subject of hubris (hypocrisy, my name be Phaedra).

Ultimately, Racine's attempt to ennoble his protagonist backfires, and the audience

is probably more shaken by her evasions than by her "incest" (and, my, how the definition of that word has changed since 1676). When the chance to

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save Hippolytus arrives, Phaedra resists, having discovered the truth about his love for Aricia. In Euripides, father and son are given a chance to reconcile before Hippolytus' death; in Racine, Phaedra prevents this redemption from taking place. This fact dooms Phaedra's attempt at absolution (which is absolutely non-existent in Euripides): by admitting to her love, but in no way taking responsibility for the death of Hippolytus or suicide of Oenone, Phaedra is cast in a terribly negative light. The author was attempting to show the power of mental corruption (i.e., "original sin") to thwart reason, but this theory fails the test of viability. What competed here was not sin vs reason, but passion versus self-control, and a very weak example of the latter, at that. Even if love cannot be controlled (a doubtful premise), one's mouth can be, especially when the cost for speaking is known in advance to be the peace of a kingdom.

#1) Though the term is often applied by modern users to describe any literary work of significant length, a true epic story must meet certain criteria in order to be worthy of the title. Epics are long narrative poems usually written in an elevated style, which expound upon the great deeds of a central hero. Standing behind the protagonist is a nation or a people whom depend on him for salvation from some great trial; his decisions are therefore of immense importance and can be seen to represent the author's attempt to revive the spirit of a nation. Beowulf is an epic of a very different sort than the Odyssey, Aeneid, or Inferno, as it fails to meet many of the conventions necessary for inclusion into this vaunted class. The literary path connecting Homer to Virgil to Alighieri is well-documented and obvious, and seems to completely bypass the author of Beowulf; one gets the idea that neither the Anglo-Saxon originators of the myth nor the later Christians who co-opted it had ever heard of Virgil. Still, it seems apparent that for all the missing elements, Beowulf is still clearly an epic, and upon inspection we find that it meets enough of the criteria to pass



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muster. A balanced view of these epic conventions and their application to Beowulf will evince this fact completely.

First, let us concentrate on the characteristics of the epic that Beowulf fails to meet. Unlike in the works of Homer or Ovid, the author of Beowulf fails to invoke the muse for inspiration at the start of the story. At times, the Christian god is referenced, though this is only in passing and clearly a later addition to the tale, designed to obfuscate the presence in the original myth of the Norse pantheon. Indeed, the absence of a coterie of meddling deities or otherwise supernatural forces is a significant departure when compared to the classical epics from the Greco-Roman world.

Second, unlike in Book XI of the Odyssey (the Nekyia) or Book VI of the Aeneid (which for all intents and purposes also includes the Inferno, which is totally derivative), Beowulf never descends into the Underworld. This is an important - even vital - rite of passage for epic heroes, dating back to Gilgamesh. One gets the idea that the Christian translator of the myth lacked the imagination to put Beowulf through such an ordeal. One could view Beowulf's descent into the lake and assault on the fortress of Grendel's mother in a similar light, considering he was going to fight to the death, but this is a charitable granting of metaphor, and hardly comparable to literally crossing the Acheron into Tartarus. Included in this difference is the lack of a heavenly guide who descends to the hero to inform him of the rightness or wrongness of his actions. Odysseus had Pallas Athena, and Aeneas had Aphrodite and the Sibyl. Beowulf simply has nothing of the sort, but one does not seem to intuit that the price of the weather-gods is

overtly concerned with haughty concepts of virtue or "pietas"; crushing foes with his greatsword is more his style.

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Epics typically begin in *media res*, such as Homer's choice to begin the Odyssey with the Telemachy. Beowulf begins as a tale of origin, instead describing the raising of the Heorot as a preface to the arrival of Grendel. The concept of *in media res* was a sophisticated literary device, which apparently did not survive the cultural diffusion into the northern European *Zeitgeist*.

Finally, epics usually contain a large variety of epic similes, literary devices where the secondary subject (vehicle) is elaborated on far beyond its points of close parallel to the primary object (tenor). Dante borrowed this from Virgil, who borrowed it from Homer. Not only does Beowulf not have a single example of this type of extended metaphor, I cannot recall a single instance of a regular simile in the entire work. What one does find in great abundance are kennings, metaphorical compounds used as simple nouns. For instance, in Beowulf we find the "whale-road" as a term for the sea, the "twilight-spoiler" for the dragon, and the "leavings-of-the-file" or "battle-ivicle" for the sword. Kennings pack an amazing amount of alliterative power into a remarkably short space, but are in no way comparable to an epic simile.

Beowulf fails to meet these epic conventions, but strives to meet others with great vigor. Beowulf is a mortal, and has not a single deity in his lineage, a fact that makes his overwhelming strength even more astonishing. Fighting as he does for the kingdom of Hrothgar, his actions can be seen to be vital in importance to all of the Danes, and therefore he meets the criteria of an epic hero. The setting of the tale is also vast, when one includes the tale of the dragon and his hoard. Beowulf is a man of great valor, and therefore the tale is a didactic one. This is how one ought to act, young Dane, and may the monster take you if your courage fails.

Anger is a central theme of the entire tale: anger of Grendel, the reciprocating wrath of the Danes; the anger of Beowulf at the loss of one of

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his companions, and the following anger Grendel's mother feels at the loss of her only son; anger by the dragon for the theft of a piece of his hoard, followed by the anger of Wiglaf at the cowardice of the other retainers who fled the combat. Wrath is basically the engine that drives the tale, and this is common to all epics.

There are many catalogues in Beowulf, a feature common to all epics. These list the lineage of the hero (and includes stock epithets), as well as histories of places and events. Beowulf has many of these devices, which serve to imbue details to an otherwise anemic narrative framework, and also serve to show the unfortunate stories of men who - unlike the hero - failed the test of valor.

Lastly, the poet in an epic maintains some measure of objectivity, a sign of some sophistication in Homer, but one of very pedestrian style in Beowulf. One is never able to detect exactly what the narrator thinks about these heathen northmen, as emotion itself seems to be mostly outside of his literary abilities.