

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
FIELD EXAMINATION
RENAISSANCE LITERATURE
MAY 2009

INSTRUCTIONS

Three questions are to be answered on the examination, **one** from each Category prepared (including your special field). The questions are of equal value.

Category 1: Renaissance Poetry

- 1) How does Spenser locate himself within the traditions of English poetry, and more generally within the project of vernacular poetics in his period?
- 2) The recovery of classical works influenced the forms and subject matter of Renaissance poetry. Discuss the importance of classical literary theory to English Renaissance poetry, using examples from works by at least three poets.
- 3) With reference to works by three poets, discuss the importance of the persistence of manuscript circulation of poetry in England.
- 4) The period between 1500 and 1700 is now normally referred to as the “early modern period” in English literary studies. This label has supplanted “the English Renaissance,” which was usually held to span the period between the publication of More’s *Utopia* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Defend the use of one of these terms to describe the period, with reference to the work of three poets.

Category 2: Shakespeare

- 1) While disciplinary practices tend to keep them apart, it is widely presumed that aspects of Shakespeare’s plays (such as characterization, dialogue, plot, and conceptions of identity, love, and community) relate to aspects of non-dramatic literature of the period. With reference to three of Shakespeare’s plays and selected examples of non-dramatic literature, discuss this assertion.
- 2) To what extent are Shakespeare’s sonnets indebted to the conventions established in earlier works? In what ways can they be described as innovative?
- 3) Shakespeare’s culture was structurally homosocial and his theatre was richly homoerotic. With reference to three plays, discuss the impact of these qualities of Shakespeare’s world on the depiction of love, gender, and sexuality in his work.
- 4) How does rhetoric figure in Shakespeare’s plays? Discuss this question, using examples from three of Shakespeare’s plays.

Category 3: English Petrarchan Poetry

1. How do critical fashions shape what we value in poetry? Using the example of English Petrarchan poetry, discuss this question.
2. Gordon Braden writes, “The Petrarchan lover’s problem is not just his rejection by an uncooperative woman; it is also the intrinsic problem of a narcissistic individualism, amplifying to Renaissance scale. The most important heritage of Petrarchism is a troubled concern with the

place of such individualism in the larger scheme of things" (12). Discuss the problem identified by Braden with regard to English Petrarchan poetry.

3. The status of the female love-object has been a concern for critics with interests in feminism, lyric subjectivity, and social identification. With reference to at least three critics who have dealt with the question of the status of the female love-object, discuss the status of women in English Petrarchan poetry.

4. One of the material distinctions between Petrarch's situation and that of English Petrarchan poets is the advent of print. With reference to the work of at least three critics, discuss how the possibility of print and the existence of print culture affected English Petrarchan poetry.

Renaissance Literature--Sample Questions

1. Sample questions are provided below for all four standard Parts of the reading list.
2. Three questions are to be answered on the examination, one from each Part prepared (including the student's special field).

Part A: Renaissance Poetry

1. In undergraduate courses surveying Renaissance literature, Book I (complete) of *The Faerie Queene* often appears on reading lists, together with short selections from other books. Make an argument for teaching a different book of *The Faerie Queene*; or, if you think Book I to be the best choice, then argue the case for Book I against a plausible alternative.
2. Both Spenser and Milton show signs in their poetry of preoccupation with becoming or with being great poets. Identify and discuss some of the specific forms this preoccupation takes, and reflect on their significance. You may limit your answer to Spenser or to Milton, or you may answer on both poets.
3. With specific reference to three or more poets, identify and discuss at least three significant innovations or experiments in the sonnet.
4. Compare and contrast the use and usefulness of place as the subject matter of three of the following poems: Lanyer, "The Description of Cooke-ham"; Jonson, "To Penshurst"; Marvell, "Bermudas"; Herbert, "The Altar"; Vaughan, "A Rhapsody."

Part B: Renaissance Prose

1. The works of More, Elyot, Bacon, Hobbes, and Brown prove that human nature was not discovered but devised, and devised so as to rationalize and legitimize the social order. Agree or disagree on the basis of examination of three of the writers listed.
2. Explain why one of More's *Utopia* or Lyly's *Euphues* was an Elizabethan best-seller.
3. "It preferred the forms that express the energy and labor of minds seeking the truth, not without dust and heat, to the forms that express a contented sense of the enjoyment and possession of it. In a single word, the motions of souls, not their states of rest . . ." How adequate is this, Morris Croll's classic description of the Baroque style in seventeenth-century prose, to three prose writers? Discuss.

4. Identify some of the main texts and issues usually associated with the "Controversy over Women." Make the case that a selection of these texts could be profitably incorporated into a one-term undergraduate course on English Renaissance prose in such a way as to interrogate conventional uses made of some other Renaissance prose texts.

Part C: Shakespeare

1. "Shakespeare tailored his plays for the theatres in which they were to be performed and for the patrons of those theatres." Discuss the validity of this statement with specific reference to particular plays and playing places.
2. Shakespeare's medium is frequently part of his message. With specific reference to three plays, discuss his treatment of either language or acting as his subject matter.
3. "My tongue will tell the anger of my heart," says Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*; although the anger of Kate's heart remains unspoken to the end of the play, she is by no means silent in the last scene. Nonetheless, silence does often mark the woman's part at the conclusion of a Shakespearean play. With specific reference to at least three plays, consider the uses of women's silences and of their speech-making in the endings of Shakespeare's plays.
4. Many of Shakespeare's plays are concerned with the problem of the "Governor." Consider with relation to three plays.

Part D: Renaissance Drama (excluding Shakespeare)

1. Discuss the attempts of three or four Tudor playwrights to design a satisfying comic form. With what problems did they grapple? How successful were they in their results?
2. "In Webster's world, death does not merely end the burden of living as it does in Beaumont and Fletcher's; it is, paradoxically, that which makes life meaningful." Discuss the validity of this claim by reference to two works by Webster and two by Beaumont and Fletcher.
3. Explain, with specific reference to plays by three or four Jacobean or Caroline writers, the dramatic effectiveness and thematic significance of public performances (plays, masques, tournaments, rituals, ceremonies, royal entries, processions, baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.) embedded within the plays.
4. Discuss the effectiveness of the dramatic language of two of the following playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Chapman, Middleton, Massinger.