

## ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

## SECTION II

Total time—2 hours

## Question 1

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

The story of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens and their enchanting but deadly song appears in Greek epic poetry in Homer's *Odyssey*. An English translation of the episode is reprinted in the left column below. Margaret Atwood's poem in the right column is a modern commentary on the classical story. Read both texts carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare the portrayals of the Sirens. Your analysis should include discussion of tone, point of view, and whatever poetic devices (diction, imagery, etc.) seem most important.

... our trim ship was speeding toward  
the Sirens' island, driven by the brisk wind.

...  
Line Now with a sharp sword I sliced an ample wheel of beeswax  
5 down into pieces, kneaded them in my two strong hands  
and the wax soon grew soft, worked by my strength  
and Helios' burning rays, the sun at high noon,  
and I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one.  
They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship—  
erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast—  
10 and rowed and churned the whitecaps stroke on stroke.  
We were just offshore as far as a man's shout can carry,  
scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship  
was racing past and burst into their high, thrilling song:  
'Come closer, famous Odysseus—Achaea's pride and glory—  
15 moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!  
Never has any sailor passed our shores in his black craft  
until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips,  
and once he hears to his heart's content sails on, a wiser man.'

...  
20 So they sent their ravishing voices out across the air  
and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.  
I signaled the crew with frowns to set me free—  
they flung themselves at the oars and rowed on harder,  
Perimedes and Eurylochus springing up at once  
to bind me faster with rope on chafing rope.  
25 But once we'd left the Sirens fading in our wake,  
once we could hear their song no more, their urgent call—  
my steadfast crew was quick to remove the wax I'd used  
to seal their ears and loosed the bonds that lashed me.

## SIREN SONG

This is the one song everyone  
would like to learn: the song  
that is irresistible:

Line the song that forces men  
5 to leap overboard in squadrons  
even though they see the beached skull

the song nobody knows  
because anyone who has heard it  
is dead, and the others can't remember

10 Shall I tell you the secret  
and if I do, will you get me  
out of this bird suit?\*

I don't enjoy it here  
squatting on this island  
15 looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs  
I don't enjoy singing  
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,  
20 to you, only to you.  
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!  
Only you, only you can,  
you are unique

25 at last. Alas  
it is a boring song  
but it works every time.

"Siren Song" by Margaret Atwood.  
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\*In Greek mythology, Sirens are often represented as birds  
with the heads of women.

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