

Hauptseminar: Fate and Fortune in Old English Literature

Term:	Winter 15/16	Instructor:	Dr P. S. Langeslag
Time:	Tue 8:30–10	Office:	SEP 2.306
Room:	Theologicum 0.135	Phone:	0551/3919706
Credits:	6 (incl. lecture for some modules)	Office hours:	Wed 2–3
Prerequisites:	one prior course on Old English	E-mail:	planges@gwdg.de

Course Description

Short of the Bible itself, few texts were as influential on learned medieval thought as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Small wonder: the events of the era read like living proof of the seemingly capricious upturns and downturns of fortune taken on in the work. Alfred of Wessex came within an inch of losing his kingdom before it grew to encompass all of England; Geoffrey Chaucer survived the Black Death that killed half his compatriots before he reached ten years of age. Both men were so impressed by the sixth-century treatise on fortune that they chose to make it available in English prose.

Even so, the late ninth-century Alfredian translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy* was not England's first encounter with the concepts of fate, fortune, providence, and free will. By the time of its production, Anglo-Saxons had already spent three centuries integrating Christian thought into the very heart of their culture, which involved the absorption of sophisticated views on all these concepts against the background of the transience/eternity dichotomy. Moreover, literary evidence suggests that the Anglo-Saxons had a robust tradition of fate that thrived prior to and/or alongside Christianity. In this seminar, we will study a variety of Anglo-Saxon expressions of the degree to which life on earth is predetermined, brutish, and short.

Texts we will read include a full modern translation of Boethius's Latin *Consolation of Philosophy* alongside excerpts from its Old English prose and verse translations. In addition, we will read up on Boethius's philosophical and theological forebears from the Stoics to Augustine, as well as some comparative material from Tacitus and Old Norse tradition, before we turn to the Old English elegies, homilies, and *Beowulf*. Students will improve their reading proficiency of Old English prose and verse, but above all they will gain an understanding of the philosophical and theological concepts of free will, predestination, and transience.

Please note: this course has a substantial language component! Students will train their understanding of Old English, and some engagement with the original language will be part of both the exam and the paper assessment.

Aims

Students will improve their knowledge of and skills in

- Medieval philosophy;
- Medieval theology;
- Old English literature;
- Old English reading comprehension; and
- Comparative Germanic mythology

Assessment

Students in the Basismodul have a choice of assessment: one final exam or one 5,000-word term paper. Students in the Aufbaumodul will write a 7,500-word term paper. Other forms of assessment may apply for students in other programmes; contact me if you are not sure. The exam runs 90 minutes and includes open questions based on the lecture series (33% of assessment) as well as an essayistic examination of seminar material involving philosophy, theology, and literature, with a subordinate role for language. All students are expected to complete three ungraded preliminary assignments as an entry requirement into the assessment stage (see the Debates and Outlining handouts for week one).

Lateness Policy

Essays are due by email by the end of Friday, 25 March 2016. Wait for my written confirmation of receipt, which constitutes proof of submission. Essays may be submitted up to seven days late without penalty. After the end of Friday, 1 April 2016 and on every third day thereafter, 0.3 points will automatically be subtracted for papers submitted past that point. The system is thus fully autonomous and an extension is already built in. Further extensions should not be requested except in demonstrable cases of medical impediment that render a student unable to write for at least seven days in the second half of March.

All students must sign up for their choice of examination in good time, including those who write the term paper. Regulations do not allow instructors to submit grades for students who have not signed up in time.

Diversity Statement

This course is run with the understanding that students bring a variety of backgrounds into the classroom in such domains as socioeconomics, appearance, culture, religion, disability, gender, age, family situation, and sexual identity. With different backgrounds come different needs. If you feel your needs or those of a fellow student require special attention or are being compromised, please feel free to make this known to me by whatever channel seems most appropriate. (For more serious concerns, the Department, Faculty, and University each have their own points of contact as well.) I will treat all requests seriously and with confidentiality, and will seek to make accommodations within my abilities and reason. At the same time, you too owe it to your fellow students to treat them with respect regardless of their background and identity. University should be awesome — for everyone.

Required Texts and Resources

Selections from the bibliography below will be made available on StudIP; course reserves have been set up in the Central Library, Reading Room 1 (directly above the staircase). Handouts, lecture slides, and lists of key concepts will be made available at studium.langeslag.org/fate15, so bookmark this site. Students are asked to obtain a copy of Walsh, *Boethius: "The Consolation of Philosophy"* (see bibliography below) at their earliest convenience.

Schedule

sess.	date	topic	reading	in the original
1	27 Oct	Determinism and Volition in Antiquity	Greene, "Fate and Providence," 331–54; Frede, "Stoic Determinism"	
2	3 Nov	Grace and Free Will	Romans chs. 4–9 (any trans.); Augustine, <i>To Simplician</i> (at least) question 2, §§1–18 (Burleigh 385–401); Rist, "Augustine on Free Will"	
3	10 Nov	Fate in Germanic Cultures	<i>Germania</i> chs. 9–10 (Birley); <i>Völuspá</i> (Orchard); <i>Gylfaginning</i> ch. 15 (Faulkes); <i>Njáls saga</i> chs. 156–157 (Bayerschmidt and Hollander); <i>Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhalls</i> [DE] (Bödl, Vollmer, and Zernack); Gilbert, "The Ambiguity of Fate"	
4	17 Nov	The Storms of Life	<i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> book 1; OE <i>Boethius</i> : Prefaces and book 1 (i.e. Irvine and Godden up to p. 33)	Prose 4 §§ 6–7
5	24 Nov	False Joys and the Wheel of Fortune	<i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> book 2; OE <i>Boethius</i> : metre 9, prose 9, metre 10	Metre 9 ll. 1–45
6	1 Dec	True Happiness	<i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> book 3; OE <i>Boethius</i> : metre 20; Helmig & Vargas, "Ascent of the Soul"	Metre 20 ll. 46b–85
7	8 Dec	The Problem of Evil PAPER TOPICS DUE	<i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> book 4; OE <i>Boethius</i> : prose 29; Chadwick, "Evil, Freedom, and Providence"	Prose 29 §§ 4–7
8	14 Dec 18:15 KWZ o.601	Providence & Free Will	<i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> book 5; <i>Deor</i> (Bjork, <i>Shorter Poems</i>); Rowe, "Augustine on Foreknowledge"	<i>Deor</i>
9	15 Dec	Transience	<i>The Ruin</i> (Bjork, <i>Shorter Poems</i>); Fell, "Perceptions of Transience"	<i>The Ruin</i>
10	12 Jan	Grace and Free Will Redux PAPER OUTLINES DUE	Ælfric, <i>Catholic Homilies</i> II, 40, ll. 63–108 (Godden); Kleist, <i>Striving with Grace</i> , ch. 7	<i>ÆCH II</i> , 40, ll. 63–108
11	19 Jan	The Voyage of Life	<i>Christ B</i> ll. 850–863 (Bjork, <i>Cynewulf</i>); <i>The Seafarer</i> (Bjork, <i>Shorter Poems</i>); Holton, "Old English Sea Imagery"	<i>Christ B</i> ll. 850–863; <i>The Seafarer</i> : at least ll. 39–90
12	26 Jan	<i>Wyrd</i> and <i>Metod</i>	<i>The Wanderer</i> (Bjork, <i>Shorter Poems</i>); O'Keeffe, "Heroic Values"	<i>The Wanderer</i> : at least ll. 1–5, 78–115
13	2 Feb	A Hero's Fate	<i>Beowulf</i> ll. 2510–3057 (Liuzza); Tietjen, "God, Fate, and the Hero"	(Try reading <i>some</i> of Tietjen's quotations)
14	9 Feb	EXAM		
	25 March	PAPERS DUE		

References and Further Reading

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