

Boethius: Gateway to Medieval Thought
Dr. Anthony G. Cirilla, Instructor

Course Description

C.S. Lewis wrote of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, "To get a taste for it is almost to become naturalized in the Middle Ages," placing it on the top ten list of books which most influenced him. Theologians such as Anselm, Aquinas, and Peter Abelard were deeply influenced by Boethius's work, as was the medieval conception of the seven liberal arts and medieval literature in general. Translated by King Alfred's circle, by Chaucer into Middle English as well as by two other Middle English writers, and by Queen Elizabeth I, *The Consolation of Philosophy* also profoundly inspired writers such as Dante, Thomas More, Jean de Meun, and many others.

This course will examine Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* from its theological and liberal arts context and with an eye to the history of its massive theological, philosophical, and literary influence. We will start by reading the *Opuscula Sacra*, Boethius's five theological tracts (two on the Trinity, one on Christology, one on the nature of created vs uncreated goodness, and one a general statement of the Christian faith). A brief tour of Boethius's extensive liberal arts writing will form a bridge between his theological tracts and his magnum opus. We will then spend most of the course reading *The Consolation of Philosophy* closely, seeing how Boethius's theological and academic work coalesced into his final production. The last meeting of the course will end with a case study of his vast literary influence, namely with a reading of two Middle English works: *Sir Orfeo* and *Pearl*.

Course Objectives

Objectives for this course include: (1) understand Boethius's theological works, in terms of content, value and influence (especially on writers like Anselm and Aquinas), (2) apply this knowledge to a reading of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, (3) articulate the philosophical and theological significance of *The Consolation*, and (4) consider and develop answers to major questions surrounding the text, especially, Why is Christianity not explicit in the *Consolation* though the text is clearly theistic in its philosophy? (5) Appreciate the profound influence of the *Consolation*, with two Middle English works serving as a literary example.

Course Format

The format of the course will be predominantly one of mini-lectures followed by guided discussion. The instructor will often be doing most of the talking, but generally to illuminate and draw out themes from the text for discussion, rather

than in pure lectures. Thus, students will be expected to come having read and engaged with the text selection for the week, and with thoughts prepared to contribute.

Classes will meet via Zoom for two hours each week and will be recorded for later viewing by students who cannot participate. Weekly responses to the readings on the discussion board are required for students taking the class for credit and strongly encouraged for those auditing the class as well.

Course Requirements

1. Weekly readings (due before our meeting each week).
2. Weekly interaction with fellow participants and the instructor in live class sessions.
3. Weekly participation in the online discussion forum.
4. For those taking the course for-credit: Composition of a 3k-5k argumentative essay that presents a thesis statement-driven position about Boethius's work or its influence. The paper should be 12-point Times New Romans font, with regular margins and standard citations (I will accept either MLA or Chicago Style).

Assessment and Weighting

Class Participation 25%

Discussion Forum Participation 25%

Essay 50%

Course Texts

Boethius. *Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*. Loeb.

Sir Orfeo & Pearl.

Other handouts as optional reading for context.

Course Schedule

Week	Dates	Discussion Topics/Themes	Reading
1	April 11-17	Life, work, & influence	Introductions & <i>On the Christian Faith</i>
2	April 18-24	Trinitarian thought	<i>Whether the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are Predicated</i> & <i>On the Trinity</i>
3	April 25-May 1	Created vs uncreated goodness Christology	<i>How Substances are Good</i> & <i>Against Eutyches and Nestorius</i>

4	May 2-8	Liberal Arts	Short selections from <i>On arithmetic, On topical differences & On Cicero's Topics, On Music, On Interpretation</i>
5	May 9-15	Philosophical healing	<i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> Book 1 Optional background reading: Selection from Augustine's <i>On Order</i>
6	May 16-22	Fortune's Goods	<i>Consolation</i> Book 2 Optional background reading: Selections from Seneca the Younger
7	May 23-29	Temporal vs Eternal Good	<i>Consolation</i> Book 3, Optional influence reading: Selections from Anselm's <i>Proslogion</i>
8	May 30-June 5	Privation, Fate & Providence	<i>Consolation</i> Book 4, Optional influence reading: selection from Aquinas's <i>On Evil</i>
9	June 6-12	Chance, Free Will, Epistemology	<i>Consolation</i> Book 5 Optional influence reading: Selections from Anselm's <i>On Concord</i>
10	June 13-19	A Case Study of Influence: Middle English	<i>Sir Orfeo & Pearl</i>