

# **HUMANITIES SEMINARS PROGRAM**

## Happiness, Love, and Hope in Medieval Literature

Fall 2016

Mondays 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

September 26 – December 12, 2016

Dorothy Rubel Room

### **Instructor:**

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### **Seminar Content:**

Some of the most fundamental questions regarding human life never seem to change, either because the answers continue to be elusive, or because we tend to forget them. The discussion concerning personal happiness is a very difficult one, addressing philosophical, ethical, religious, political, aesthetic, and moral issues. No one has ever given us a complete picture of what happiness means. After all, it is a discourse, so an ongoing process, and we all contribute to that quest; each trying his/her own approach.

We cannot, of course, hope to solve the issue in our seminar, but we can endeavor quite successfully to look into answers provided in the past. In this seminar we will consider how happiness was defined by some of the most influential thinkers in the Middle Ages, beginning with the late antique philosopher Boethius (d. 525). But then we will also turn to religious authors such as St. Francis of Assisi, and worldly poets such as Marie de France. Although it is very unlikely that we will then conclude the course with a sense of being happy as an automatic result of our readings, of knowing what that really means, the purpose is, rather, to confront ourselves with some of the most far-reaching comments from the past regarding happiness and to consider how they might apply to us today.

After all, we are looking at roughly 1000 years of human experience, from ca. 500 to ca. 1500, which form the foundation of our own culture today. There is no doubt that many of the pre-modern intellectuals had powerful insights to share, which will help us today to proceed in our eternal quest for happiness. Past suffering and happiness are simply the rungs of the same ladder we are

climbing upwards every day. Understanding where our discourse has come from, will make it possible for us to keep climbing. However, that climbing we have to do ourselves.

### **Readings:**

The readings will be posted by Kerstin Miller by the end of August on a special Box@UA site for this course. After they are posted, Kerstin will share the link to this site with any student registered for this class.

### **Class schedule:**

**Sept. 26:** Introduction to the Middle Ages, focus on the early Middle Ages, introduction to Boethius, and an examination of the discourse on happiness.

**Oct. 10:** Boethius, books 1-2

**Oct. 17:** Boethius: books 2-3

**Oct. 24:** Conclusion of our discussion of Boethius. Then: The High Middle Ages; Marie de France: The Lay of the Two Lovers, Lanval

**Oct 31:** Marie de France: Bisclavret, Eliduc

**Nov. 7:** Walther von der Vogelweide: all the selected poems

**Nov. 14:** St. Francis of Assisi: considerably long selection; we will read particular sections, tba

**Nov. 28:** Gautier de Coinci: The Tumbler

**Dec. 5:** Hartmann von Aue, Lord Henry

**Dec. 12:** Lord Henry; and conclusion of course. Final reflections. How does Boethius fit into our lives? Should we all be tumblers? How do Francis's teachings apply to our existence? Was there a discourse on happiness in the late Middle Ages as well? Outlook on to Johann of Tepl, The Plowman (not included in our reading, but I want to wet your appetite).

This will be a fun seminar, applying a medieval lens to our postmodern quest. I am convinced that you will be surprised, delighted, shocked, and then also gain deep and new insights.