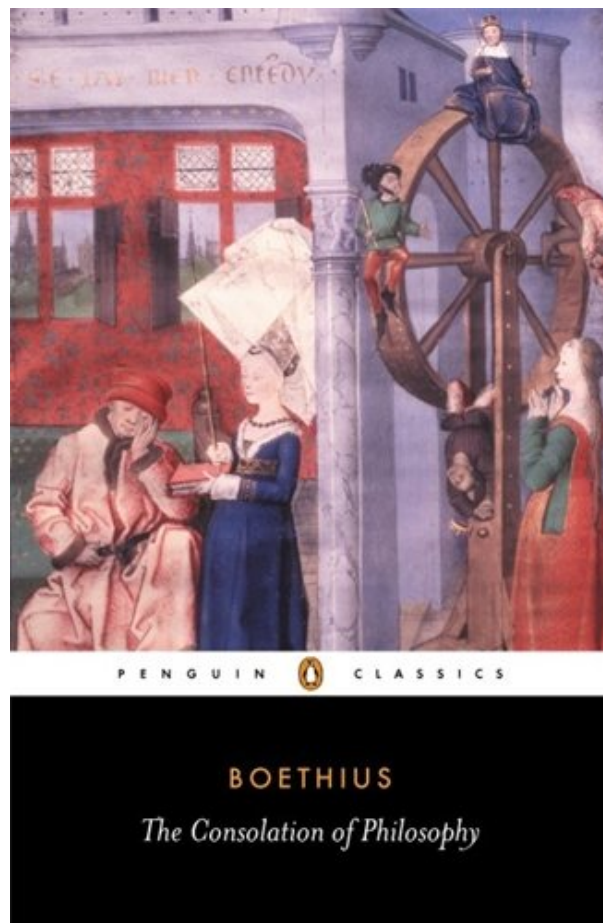



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The Consolation of Philosophy

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Language Notes

Text: English (translation)

Original Language: Latin

From the Back Cover

The Consolation of Philosophy is perhaps unique in the nature and extent of its influence on Western thinking.

An eminent public figure under the Gothic emperor Theodoric, Boethius (c. A D 475-525) was also an exceptional Greek scholar and it was to the Greek philosophers that he turned when he fell from favour and was imprisoned in Pavia. Written in the period leading up to his brutal execution, it is a dialogue of alternating prose and verse between the ailing prisoner and his 'nurse' Philosophy, whose instruction on the nature of fortune and happiness, good and evil, fate and free will, restore his health and bring him to enlightenment.

The clarity of Boethius's thought and his breadth of vision made *The Consolation of Philosophy* hugely popular throughout medieval Europe and his ideas suffused the thought of Chaucer and Dante. This translation makes it accessible to the modern reader while losing nothing of Boethius's poetic artistry and philosophical brilliance.

About the Author

Ancius Boethius (c. A.D.480-524) was a Roman philosopher and is considered one of the last authentic representatives of the classical world, in both his life and writings. It is through Boethius' translations that the knowledge of Aristotle has survived in the West.

Victor Watts read Classics and English at Merton College Oxford. He is Master of Grey College and part-time Senior Lecturer in the School of English and Linguistics at Durham University.

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Boethius was an eminent public figure under the Gothic emperor Theodoric, and an exceptional Greek scholar. When he became involved in a conspiracy and was imprisoned in Pavia, it was to the Greek philosophers that he turned. The Consolation was written in the period leading up to his brutal execution. It is a dialogue of alternating prose and verse between the ailing prisoner and his 'nurse' Philosophy. Her instruction on the nature of fortune and happiness, good and evil, fate and free will, restore his health and bring him to enlightenment. The Consolation was extremely popular throughout medieval Europe and his ideas were influential on the thought of Chaucer and Dante.

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Most helpful customer reviews

132 of 134 people found the following review helpful.

A classic of philosophical thought--Key to the middle ages.

By A Customer

I didn't know exactly what to expect when I first picked up a modern-English translation of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. I knew that Boethius was held to be one of the greatest thinkers of his time--a child prodigy from a distinguished Roman family, a distinguished student of Greek, who essayed to translate all of Plato and Aristotle into Latin, and reconcile their philosophies (a task which he never completed). I knew that *The Consolation* was held to be one of the most influential books of the middle-ages: translated into English by Geoffrey Chaucer and no less than two English monarchs.

I didn't expect the fusion of allegorical tale, platonic dialogue, and lyrical poetry (the genre is officially called the Menippean Satire) that I found. The issues *The Consolation of Philosophy* addresses were already the time-worn province of philosophical thought by the time that Boethius essayed to address them: the nature of predestination and free will, why evil men often prosper and good men (as Boethius thought himself) often fall into ruin, the nature of the relationship between time and eternity. And the answers are mostly not new with him either: long chains of sophistical reasonings that prove, among other things, that evil men do not wholly exist, and that by allowing them to obtain their evil desires, God is punishing them more terribly than if he had stopped them. The answers are familiar, in tone, if not in exact content: a mystic-based neoplatonic vision of God as an eternal oneness, to which the soul rises through the layers of being. A somewhat recursively defined and unworldly 'good,' to which all souls aspire. Long passages on the vanity of worldly gain, the fickleness of fortune--all of them are familiar to readers who've read much classical or medieval philosophy.

But much of what feels familiar in *Consolations of Philosophy* is not familiar from its sources, but from the many works for which it is the basis. It is in Boethius that much of the thought of the the Classical period was made available to the Western Medieval world. Thus, you find things in *The Consolation* that echo throughout the Western Canon--the female figure of wisdom that informs Dante, the ascent through the layered universe that is shared with Milton, to say nothing of the ideas of the reconciliation of opposing forces that find their way into Chaucer in *The Knight's Tale*, among others.

But beyond the influence of the ideas, what *The Consolation of Philosophy* has that is lacking in most other philosophical texts is a feeling of the importance of these ideas: Boethius wrote this book while awaiting trial and execution (he was ground to death in a mortar) on charges of treason, and though the book isn't explicitly autobiographical, the problems that it deals with were of the utmost importance to him at the the time, and he didn't have time to spare on superfluities. What results, then, is a philosophy made explicitly to deal with suffering: compact and full of emotion. Whether you read this book as a key to Medieval thinkers, an introduction to Classical thought, or simply as a way of looking at the problems that still concern us to this day, you should, by all means, read it.

92 of 93 people found the following review helpful.

Remains vital after fifteen hundred years

By Robert Moore

The particular edition I am reviewing is the Oxford World's Classics translation by P. G. Walsh.

This is one of those classics that can catch an unsuspecting reader completely by surprise, especially if one has read many other works by near contemporaries. The circumstances under which it was composed are legendary, and lend the work a legitimacy granted to few other works. Boethius was among the foremost government officials in what was essentially the successor government to the end of the Roman Empire. Rome and much of the rest of what would later become Italy was under the control of the Ostrogoth king Theodoric. A product of one of the leading Roman families, Boethius ascended to a power of great honor and authority under Theodoric, only to be accused of treason late in the latter's life, at which point Boethius was imprisoned and condemned to death. While awaiting his fate (including whether Theodoric actually intended on carrying out the sentence), Boethius wrote this remarkable dialog between a prisoner whose situation closely resembles Boethius' and Philosophy personified as a woman. Although many topics are discussed, the heart of the dialog is the nature of true happiness.

Although few of its readers are likely to face circumstances as dire as Boethius', the work remains remarkably pertinent in an age where ideals of happiness are dictated almost entirely by our modern consumer society. Philosophy carefully explains to the prisoner that that happiness can never be found in such things as fame or power or riches and other things that are confused with the true source of happiness. For Boethius' Philosophy, happiness is ultimately rooted in the Christian God, but even for non-Christians, the lightly theological tone of the work provides much reflection on the nature of happiness in almost any kind of situation.

The Walsh edition of this work is, in my opinion, the finest readily available edition in English. The notes are marvelous, both providing overviews to each upcoming section as well as providing detailed comments on specific lines in the text. The introduction gives any new reader of the work all the context and background that he or she would need to digest the work. Best of all, the translation is exceptionally readable, and the translations of the many poems far above the average for most academic translations of verse.

I recommend this work strongly to either of two kinds of readers. First, for anyone who is a student of intellectual history the work remains for an understanding of a host of writers in the middle ages, as well as for many 19th century poets. Second, anyone interested in devotional or reflectional works, whether religious or philosophical, this remains one of the most essential works in the history of thought. By almost any standard, this is a work that demands careful reading and study.

47 of 48 people found the following review helpful.

Philosophy as Religion

By C. King Khidr

That Boethius was the "last of the Romans and the first of the scholastics", as has often been said of him, makes him a most unusual character in the history of thought. Serving as a bridge between two worlds, his writings, infused with the ideas of both Aristotle and Plato -- the two giants of ancient Greek philosophy -- allowed for the transmission of Neoplatonism into the emerging Christian intellectual tradition. Through the figure of Boethius the Latin West came to inherit many of the achievements of Greek learning.

The Consolation of Philosophy, Boethius's magnum opus, was one of the most widely read works in medieval Europe, especially in the twelfth century. No doubt, the dramatic context in which the work was written must have greatly accentuated its popularity. But there is more to the Consolation than simply a

dramatic background, and this feature in itself would hardly explain the influence of the work on figures ranging from King Alfred to St. Thomas Aquinas. Boethius, being at once a Christian and a philosopher, was confident that reason and faith were reconcilable, and his entire literary enterprise can be summarised in his own words: *fidem rationemque coniunge* (show the harmony of reason and faith). An inheritor of the Greek tradition, he held that the world was a *KOSMOS* -- rationally structured, therefore rationally knowable. What makes the *Consolation* unique is that although it is a religious text, it doesn't make recourse to revealed religion; in Boethius's case, Christianity. That Boethius sought to answer religious questions without reference to Christianity, relying solely on natural philosophy, caused some later figures to question his religious allegiance prior to his death. But Boethius, as has been pointed out, believed in the harmony of faith and reason; being a Christian-Neoplatonic philosopher, for him to have found solace in philosophy does not imply that he left Christianity. For the truths found in Christianity would be no different than the truths found in philosophy, and whether consolation was found in the religion of Christ or Socrates would make no great difference. In the words of Henry Chadwick, "If the *Consolation* contains nothing distinctively Christian, it is also relevant that it contains nothing specifically pagan either...[it] is a work written by a Platonist who is also a Christian, but is not a Christian work."

The *Consolation* begins with Boethius lamenting his plight. Dame Philosophy descends to provide consolation to his bereaved soul, cure him of the extreme melancholy, and rid him of his misfortune, not that of his imprisonment and loss of worldly goods and status, but the spiritual ailment clouding his intellectual vision.

Boethius's troubles, Lady Philosophy tells him, lie within himself. He has been driven into exile by himself. "For if you can remember your true country...it has one ruler and one king" and the "oldest law of your true city, [is] that the citizen who has chosen to establish his home there has a sacred right not to be driven away". Dame Philosophy is here referring to his self, the mind. For Boethius, being distracted by external matters, (both the fortunes of his luxurious life and the misfortunes of his political imprisonment), has forgotten his real source of happiness, whose fountain lies within.

In short, the *Consolation* examines the *raison d'être* of philosophy, and its capacity to bring about true and complete happiness -- a happiness which can be acquired by unearthing the hidden treasures which dwell within. Hence philosophy is not an end in itself -- a fruitless game of mental acrobatics -- anymore than a shovel is for one in search of Sophia's treasures.

Boethius expresses the Socratic idea that all men seek the Good, and the Aristotelian idea that this Good is *eudaimonia*. The attainment of happiness is found through a return of the soul to its primordial state, since "You, too, who are creatures dream of your origin". By the end of the *Consolation*, Boethius, remembering who he truly is -- a rational being endowed with a purpose, to actualise the good and fulfil his true nature -- recovers from his spiritual amnesia through a discovery of the remedy for his extreme sickness: philosophy.

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