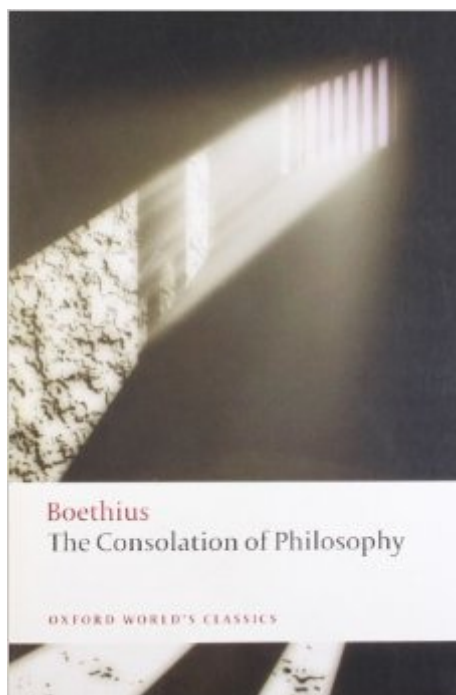


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The Consolation Of Philosophy (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

Boethius composed *De Consolatione Philosophiae* in the sixth century A.D. while awaiting death by torture, condemned on a charge of plotting against Gothic rule, which he protested as manifestly unjust. Though a Christian, Boethius details the true end of life as the soul's knowledge of God, and consoles himself with the tenets of Greek philosophy, not with Christian precepts. Written in a form called Meippean Satire that alternates between prose and verse, Boethius' work often consists of a story told by Ovid or Horace to illustrate the philosophy being expounded. The *Consolation of Philosophy* dominated the intellectual world of the Middle Ages; it inspired writers as diverse as Thomas Aquinas, Jean de Meun, and Dante. In England it was rendered into Old English by Alfred the Great, into Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer, and later Queen Elizabeth I made her own translation. The circumstances of composition, the heroic demeanor of the author, and the Meippean texture of part prose, part verse have been a fascination for students of philosophy, literature, and religion ever since.

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Customer Reviews

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 sophisticated 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.

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.

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.

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