



The Prisoner's Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius's CONSOLATION

By Joel C. Relihan

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The Roman philosopher Boethius (c. 480-524) is best known for the *Consolation of Philosophy*, one of the most frequently cited texts in medieval literature. In the *Consolation*, an unnamed Boethius sits in prison awaiting execution when his muse Philosophy appears to him. Her offer to teach him who he truly is and to lead him to his heavenly home becomes a debate about how to come to terms with evil, freedom, and providence. The conventional reading of the *Consolation* is that it is a defense of pagan philosophy; nevertheless, many readers who accept this basic argument find that the ending is ambiguous and that Philosophy has not, finally, given the prisoner the comfort she had promised.

In *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, Joel C. Relihan delivers a genuinely new reading of the *Consolation*. He argues that it is a Christian work dramatizing not the truths of philosophy as a whole, but the limits of pagan philosophy in particular. He views it as one of a number of literary experiments of late antiquity, taking its place alongside Augustine's *Confessions* and *Soliloquies* as a spiritual meditation, as an attempt by Boethius to speak objectively about the life of the mind and its relation to God.

Relihan discerns three fundamental stories intertwined in the *Consolation*: an ironic retelling of Plato's *Crito*, an adaptation of Lucian's *Jupiter Confutatus*, and a sober reduction of *Job* to a quiet dialogue in which the wounded innocent ultimately learns wisdom in silence. Relihan's claim that Boethius's text was written as a Menippean satire does not rest merely on identifying a mixture of disparate literary influences on the text, or on the combination of verse and prose or of fantasy and morality. More important, Relihan argues, Boethius deliberately dramatizes the act of writing about systematic knowledge in a way that calls into question the value of that knowledge. Philosophy's attempt to lead an exile to God's heaven is rejected; the exile comes to accept the value of the phenomenal world, and theology replaces philosophy to explain the place of human beings in the order of the world. Boethius Christianizes the genre of Menippean satire, and his *Consolation* is a work about humility and prayer.

“Acknowledging that the *Consolation of Philosophy* is ‘over-familiar and under-read,’ Joel Relihan puts to the side old bromides about the work and instead pays careful attention to the narrative(s) Boethius constructs, grounding his readings in the contexts the work cultivates, especially its Menippean elements. The result is perhaps the first satisfying reading of the *Consolation* to be produced, a satisfaction felt also in the ways Relihan mirrors Boethius himself in the thoroughness of his scholarship and the elegance of his exposition. No one who studies Boethius will be able to ignore this book.” —**Joseph Pucci, Brown University**

“Anyone who has been fascinated, intrigued, or perhaps puzzled by the meaning, structure, or argument of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* will find Joel Relihan’s new book a welcome addition to the study of this core text of the early medieval world whose influence extends to the present time. Relihan’s study is a tour de force that belongs in the library of all those who appreciate Boethius’s depth and subtlety. Fortune’s wheel has indeed turned in the favor of those who wish to explore with Relihan the intricacies and brilliance of the *Consolation*.”

—**Fr. John Fortin, O.S.B., Saint Anselm College**



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Editorial Review

Review

“Going beyond the stance that the *Consolation* has merely some latent religious convictions, Relihan argues that Boethius is using the resources of Menippean satire to show the limits of pagan philosophy and the need to turn to prayer instead... The present volume is a masterful re-thinking of a classic text that rightfully has an honored place in the philosophical canon. Its thesis is carefully argued and richly deserves a scholarly hearing.” —*Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 46, 3, July 2008

“Relihan’s book argues that the *Consolation* is Menippean satire, a parody of both philosophy and the form of consolation. There is much to admire in this complex and literarily sophisticated reading. The connections it makes—not just to Job but to Matthew’s gospel, to Plato’s *Crito*, to the book of Esther, and to the *Odyssey*—appreciably deepen our understanding of the *Consolation*.” —*Religious Studies Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, September 2010

“This text will become one of the most important critical sources for study on the Menippean problem. . . . Relihan makes an important and compelling argument for paying attention to the narrative of the *Consolation*. . . . Relihan does a valuable service to the reading and teaching of the *Consolation*. He brings a sense of excitement and even suspense to the text.” —*Speculum*, 2009

“Relihan develops the innovative interpretation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* that he previously advanced in his *Ancient Menippean Satire* and elsewhere. . . . Although Relihan’s conclusions will be considered radical by many, he offers thoughtful approaches for examining some of the difficulties of the *Consolation*.” —*Choice*, June 2007

About the Author

Joel C. Relihan is professor of classics at Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts. His translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* was published in 2001.

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