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The Medieval Review

20.09.05 McMullen/Weaver (eds.), *The Legacy of Boethius in Medieval England*

McMullen, A. Joseph, and Erica Weaver, eds. *The Legacy of Boethius in Medieval England: The Consolation and its Afterlives, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS), 2018. pp. xxxii, 224. \$68.00. ISBN: 978-0-86698-581-9.

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Boethius's works and their reception and influence have been the subject of some half-dozen collections of essays since 2000, often focusing on the medieval afterlives of the treatise *De consolatione philosophiae* (c. 525). The present collection is distinguished by a cluster of essays on the Old English *Boethius* (c. 880-950) and a pair of essays on Latin literary culture in the tenth and twelfth centuries. There are also five essays on the Boethian writings of Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400) and Middle English writers influenced by him.

The two essays on Latin materials are among the most significant. Erica Weaver's topic is the circulation of books between monastic institutions in England and the Continent, especially to and from the illustrious monastery at Fleury. Fleury might well have been the center from which the *Consolatio* re-surfaced into European literary culture around the turn of the ninth century, but the library subsequently needed replenishment from houses it had previously supplied with exemplars. At the center of Weaver's study is a letter written 974 x 984 and addressed to Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, by a monk recently returned to Fleury after a spell in the monastery at Winchester. The letter-writer, probably one Lantfred, reports a fire at Fleury and loss of books, and asks Dunstan to arrange for return of the books that he, Lantfred, had in his possession at Winchester and left at that abbey. Weaver speculates that MS lat. 6401 in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, containing a late tenth-century copy of the *Consolatio* with mixed indications of provenance, might be one of the books requested by Lantfred, or else a copy of such a book. A coda speculates about the Boethian books of Abbo of Fleury (resident at Ramsey Abbey 985-987) and his student Byrhtferth of Ramsey (c. 970-1020). Avowedly speculative, Weaver's narrative requires a tight compression of events. Yet the speculations are thought-provoking and the essay is erudite and well-documented, building on important work by Michael Lapidge, Rosalind C. Love, and Adrian Papahagi. Weaver concludes that "Boethius's *Consolation* may have arrived in England from the Continent ca. 900, but it did not stop moving

--its travels demonstrating not only the interconnectivity of late tenth-century monastic centers in England and on the Continent but also the enduring importance of Boethius's Latin text in the century after it was first translated into English" (102).

Ann W. Astell picks up the story in the twelfth century, and turns attention from the circulation of books to the composition of new works of literature. Her topic is the motif of friendship in the writings of three twelfth-century English monks, Lawrence of Durham, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Walter Daniel. Cicero's *De amicitia* and Augustine's *Confessiones* are the primary reference-points, but Boethian strains are present too, especially in Lawrence's *Consolatio de morte amici sui*. This essay is more expository than analytic; paragraphs frequently end in an unanalyzed quotation. Yet the materials are given a clear presentation and the pairing of Augustine and Boethius is instructive. Astell describes Lawrence's *Consolatio* as "[a]scetical and philosophical," "harken[ing] back to a Late Antique world, halfway between the passion of Augustine and that of Aelred and distant from their biblical modalities" (124).

The essays by Weaver and Astell are outliers, facing one another across a division between "Earlier Medieval England" and "Later Medieval England." The remaining essays in the section "Earlier Medieval England" form the most coherent group in the volume. A comprehensive, magisterial, and not-uncontroversial new edition of the Old English *Boethius* has sharpened and focused scholarly attention. I have profited especially from the contributions by Susan Irvine, Nicole Guenther Discenza, and Haruko Momma.

Irvine's topic is the generic affiliations of mixed-form compositions in the early Middle Ages. The essay is occasioned by recent proposals that the two versions of the Old English *Boethius*--one all-prose, the other alternating prose and verse--are cast in the mould of the *opus geminatum*, a Latinate genre that paired prose and verse treatments of a single topic, exemplified by Aldhelm's *De virginitate*. Irvine responds to this generic identification in two steps. First, she argues that the Old English authors responsible for the prose text of the *Boethius* and subsequent versification of its poems did not approach these tasks as one would expect, had they intended to produce an *opus geminatum*. Second, she turns to reception of the texts, as expressed in the verse and prose prefaces attached to them. "The verse preface," she writes, can "be situated within a well-established Latin tradition, associated with the *prosimetrum*, which sees the pleasures of poetry as an antidote to the tedium of prose. In exploiting this tradition, the versifier implicitly aligns Alfred with Boethius himself" (9). Yet "the *topos* of the pleasures of poetry" was also part of the self-understanding of the *opus geminatum* tradition (11), and that tradition may be relevant to the prose preface, which, oddly, describes "the production of two different versions of the work, one in prose and one in verse" (15). Irvine's well-organized argument provides solid support for her thesis: a "connection between the *Boethius* and the *opus geminatum* may have developed in the context of early reception of the work rather than in the context of its composition" (7). There are larger implications for the authorship of the prose preface and the system of literary genres in ninth- and tenth-century England.

Discenza's essay begins and ends by observing that the author of the prose *Boethius* sharply compresses the arguments in *Consolatio* 5 about the nature of divine knowledge and its compatibility with human freedom. This feature of the text is interpreted variously. Discenza places it in the context of the author's earlier remarks on human disobedience and aspirations to knowledge of divinity. Discussion proceeds by fine-grained comparison with Boethius's Latin and centers on two narrative additions in the Old English text: the gigantomachy (expanding an allusion at 3p12.24) and the story of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel. Discenza concludes that, "While Godden and Irvine have rightly called our attention to how daring the Old English *Boethius* is in its explorations of philosophy and the universe, the text reveals some discomfort with its own probings into the workings of God" (34).

In an essay that I found especially thought-provoking, Momma performs a synthetic reading of chapters of the Old English *Boethius* corresponding to *Consolatio* 4. This segment of the Old English text contains a number of peculiar departures from its Latin source. Momma shows that these changes consistently expand a binary moral framework into a ternary one (the good, the wicked, and the *middlestan*, "middle-most"). Though Momma does not quite say so, the shift from two to three involves a reorganization of ethical system, not just the introduction of a medial position between good and evil. True, much of *Consolatio* 4 is organized by a contrast between good and evil, yet this is Philosophia's condescension to the Boethius-persona, who sets the agenda of this book by his opening complaint that evil goes unpunished in the realm of a good and omnipotent God. The goodness or wickedness of other people is not the primary concern of Boethius's Philosophia. For her, the real contrast is between (1) the implacable composure of the sage whose whole being is fixedly merged with the highest good and (2) any other relation whatsoever to the highest good. That rigorously binary distinction is the point of Philosophia's image of the circles of fate (4p6), as Momma observes (63). The same point may be glimpsed, in Stoic dress, at the earliest moments of the *Consolatio* (e.g., 1m1.21-22, 1p2.3), in passages that could profitably be compared with those discussed by Momma. Momma concludes by considering 4m7, a poem suppressed in the Old English text. The labors of Hercules figure prominently in the omitted material. Perhaps, Momma writes, the Old English author "has found the very nature of Hercules, the patron saint of the Stoics, to be incompatible" with his new focus on the spiritual affairs of the imperfect (67). The *Consolatio* was reworked in ways that assimilated it into the ternary structure of Christian penitential thought.

Essays by Paul E. Szarmach and Hilary Fox complete this cluster. Szarmach's topic is the Old English author's treatment of *Consolatio* 3m9 and discussions of fate, divine prescience, and human freedom in books 4 and 5. Fox, like Momma, inquires into the ethical system of the Old English *Boethius*. Her central exhibit is the Old English author's rendition of the example of Zeno

[Skip to content](#)

of Elea (*Consolatio* 2p6.8). This material is promising and the essay raises worthy questions, but Fox's argument about ethics needs a wider horizon and deeper roots in the Latin *Consolatio*, especially Boethius's allusive style, his debts to various strands of Hellenistic and late antique philosophy (see the Introduction to Joachim Gruber's commentary), and the whole question of the status and quality of Boethius's Christianity (see Astell's essay in this volume, pp. 104-6).

The essays on Middle English form a more heterogeneous group. Eleanor Johnson reprises the themes of her 2013 monograph, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve*, focusing here on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. A. Joseph McMullen asks how Chaucer renders the matter of natural philosophy, astronomy, and cosmology in his prose translation of the *Consolatio*. Jonathan Stavsky revisits Henry Ansgar Kelly's studies of Chaucer's concept of tragedy. Anthony G. Cirilla advocates a surface-literalist reading of the fictive interlocutor in Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love* (1384-5). Taylor Cowdery asks what the word *sentence* means in John Walton's versified *Boethius* (c. 1410) and teases out a theory of translation from that. If there is a common thread among these essays, it may be termed "indigenous literary theory," an approach pioneered (not under that name) in the 1980s and '90s by Judson Allen, Alastair Minnis, Rita Copeland, and contributors to *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520*. The essays in this cluster collectively raise the question, "Which way forward?"

The biggest ideas come from Johnson and Cirilla. Johnson writes with energy and conviction, generating some fine formulations, though I am not persuaded that the Tale of Thopas is in meaningful dialogue with Boethian poetics. A larger problem is that "ethical work" is a topic about which it is hard to write clearly. The most promising thesis comes from Stavsky, who argues that scholars have granted too much authority to the definition of tragedy transmitted in Nicholas Trevet's commentary on the *Consolatio* (c. 1300) and subsequently in Chaucer's *Boece* and Monk's Tale. If our aim is to understand what Chaucer and writers influenced by him understood by *tragedie*, explicit denotation supplies only a point of departure. Stavsky proposes that Chaucer's and Hoccleve's conception of tragedy had a lexical component, focalized around the words *unwar* (adj.) and *unwarly* (adv.). He describes these words as constituents of "tragic diction" in English c. 1385-1425. It will be interesting to see how this line of inquiry develops.

Some translations need more thought and discussion. *Totus ignium globus...caelum versus cacumen extendit* surely means "The whole ball of flames extended (its) peak towards heaven" (perhaps with an echo of Gen. 28:12), not that fire extended "from the grass" to heaven, as rendered on p. 89. *Consulit alte visa* (*Consolatio* 5m3.29) means "(the mind) reflects upon things seen on high," not "watches over us from the heights," as translated on p. 206. Lines 8-9a of *Solomon and Saturn*, "Swylce ic næfre on eallum þam fyrn-gewrytum | findan ne mihte / soðe samnode," are translated by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Robert E. Bjork as "Such things I could never find truly gathered in all the ancient writings" (see volume 11 in the *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library*), taking *swylce* as a pronoun and *soðe* as an adverb, as in *Beowulf* 871a. This is probably better than the translation on p. 78, where *soðe* is treated as a noun or substantive adjective and *swylce* as an omissible adverb or conjunction.

The Legacy of Boethius in Medieval England: The Consolation and its Afterlives contains some fine scholarship, but on the whole I wanted a different and more substantial collection of essays, especially in the second half. Latin materials of all kinds deserve more attention. Simund de Freine's Anglo-French *Roman de philosophie* awaits basic study. Someone might ask where Chaucer acquired a copy of Jean de Meun's *Livres de confort*. Students of John Walton's *Boethius* could profitably explore the manuscripts of this work, rather than working from Mark Science's sloppy and outdated edition. (Newberry Library MS f36, which presents an unfaithful text of Walton's *Boethius* and the Latin *Consolatio* within a general collection of literature in translation, would be a good subject for an essay or dissertation chapter.) Moving beyond the Middle Ages, one might examine the English translations of the *Consolatio* made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Queen Elizabeth I's hasty exercise has received ample attention, but other contemporary translations express more thoughtful and significant engagements with Boethius's text. Further afield, translations of the *Consolatio* into medieval Hebrew have begun to receive basic study. There are attractive opportunities for work in each of these areas.

