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

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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