

DOUGLAS C. LANGSTON, ed. : *The Consolation of Philosophy: Boethius*. Norton Critical Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. 204 + xx.

Douglas Langston's volume, *The Consolation of Philosophy: Boethius*, appears in the Norton series of Critical Editions in the History of Ideas, and its contents follow the order established for that and other Norton series. There is a preface, an introduction by the editor, a translator's preface, a text, four articles under the rubric Contexts, five under the rubric Criticism, and a chronology on Boethius, a selected bibliography, and an index.

The introduction divides the content of *The Consolation of Philosophy* into three parts: Books 1-3, Book 4, and Book 5. This division sacrifices Boethius's symmetrical structure of the work, which proceeds from the emotionally-charged display of Book 1 toward the hymn to a rational governance of the universe in Book 3, Meter 9, and on to the conclusion of the logical argument in Book 5, but the Norton volume is prepared for use by undergraduate and graduate university students, and the simplified description of the content (about seven of the fourteen-pages of introduction) suffices for the very general audience that is targeted. In a section entitled The Message of the Text, Langston emphasizes the Christianity of the *Consolation*, stating, for example:

Many have puzzled over the philosophical nature of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. It does not seem particularly Christian since it never mentions Christ. But the work is profoundly Christian, although it uses philosophy and Classical literature to deliver its Christian message. (xv)

Boethius does posit a *deus* as the governor of the universe, and he posits that this *deus* represents the Highest Good, which is the teleological goal toward which movement within the universe aims, but Boethius's construction is more Platonic, or neo-Platonic, than Christian. Langston's judgment on the message of the text, that "The consolation of *The Consolation of Philosophy* is, in fact, a religious one," is a bit one sided. Lady Philosophy is not a theologian.

As an English text of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Langston has selected the all-prose translation by Richard Green. English translation, and indeed all European translation of *The Consolation*, began about A.D.899 when King Alfred the Great provided an Old English version of the work for his West Saxon people. The entire text was rendered into prose, but alliterative verse translations of most of the Meters also were produced. About 1380, Geoffrey Chaucer translated *The Consolation* into Middle English prose, but four of his shorter poems ("The Former Age," "Fortune," "Truth," and "Gentelesse") reflect Boethian themes rendered into Chaucer's English verse. In 1410, William Walton completed an all-verse translation based upon Chaucer's prose text. Nearly two hundred years later, however, when Queen Elizabeth I translated the *Consolation* in 1593, she worked independently of any prior translations, producing a text with the Latin prose rendered into English prose and the Latin verse rendered into English verse. Elizabeth was genuinely interested in capturing as many qualities of the Latin original as possible, with particular attention given to the Meters. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, all-prose translations were produced early on by W.V. Cooper in 1902, James J. Buchanan in 1957, and Richard

Green in 1962; prose-and-verse translations then followed by Victor E. Watts in 1967, S.J. Tester in 1973, Sanderson Beck in 1996, P.G. Walsh in 1999, Joel Relihan in 2000, and David R. Slavitt in 2008. The all-prose renderings generally are described as utilitarian, as Chaucer's *Boece* occasionally has been described, while the prose-and-verse renderings attempt to capture aesthetic value of the mixture of forms in the Latin work. Both Alfred the Great and Geoffrey Chaucer indicate their appreciation of the form of *The Consolation* by rendering some the Meters into verse. Given the number of quite accurate prose-and-verse translations into English, I believe that students would benefit from reading one of them instead of an all-prose rendering. The form of *The Consolation* unquestionably is a very important dimension of the work.

The articles selected for reprint under the categories of Contexts and Criticism are well selected. Boethius is rightly referred to as a Neo-Platonist, and the Platonist and Neo-Platonist influences upon *The Consolation of Philosophy* are represented for readers in selections from Plato's *Gorgias* and *Timaeus* and from St. Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*. The influence of Aristotle upon Boethius also was profound, particularly from Aristotle's writings on logic, which can be discerned throughout the *Consolation*, as well as in Boethius's earlier translations of the *Organon*. Langston has chosen a selection from *The Nicomachean Ethics* to represent the direct influence of Aristotle's work upon Boethius's last philosophical statement, and for the students who form the target audience of this volume, this is an appropriate passage to cite. Under the rubric "Criticism," historical background of the *Consolation* is provided in several articles. First, Henry Chadwick's "Introduction to *Boethius: His Life, Thought, and Influence*" is reprinted from Margaret Gibson's monumental volume of 1981. William Bark's "Theodoric vs. Boethius," Edmund Reiss's "The Fall of Boethius and the Fiction of the *Consolatio Philosophiae*," and John Marenbon's "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius" give important information on various aspects of the life and work of Boethius. Nelson Pike's "The Predicate 'Timeless'" provides insight into one of the more innovative concepts in the *Consolation*.

Langston's contribution to the series of Norton Critical Editions is a useful addition to the materials on Boethius now available for use in classrooms. One of the reasons that today's undergraduate and graduate students read *The Consolation of Philosophy* is due to the work's great influence upon so many subsequent medieval and post-medieval writers. Any student of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, for example, must be well acquainted with Boethius's final statement to the world. Students of Alexander Pope, and even of the more recent American writer John Kennedy Toole, also should have more than passive knowledge of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. As noted earlier, I would prefer to present my students with an English translation of Boethius's work that maintains the prose and metrical form of the original. Nevertheless, Langston's volume provides a worthy initiation into an influential work by one of World Literature's important voices. Text

Noel Harold Kaylor, Jr.
Professor of English and Instructor of German
Troy University, Troy, Alabama

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