

Facing execution because of the whim of a dictator, Boethius was alone in the world. It was the 6th century, and he was trying to make sense of his situation.

To help himself, in that process, Boethius began to write. What he wrote, thousands of years ago, still matters because the questions he posed remain significant to people century after century.

Writing without the aid of any other sources, Boethius contemplates a person's place in the world. In the Introduction to this edition of The Consolation of Philosophy, we read these words about him:

This "dazzling masterpiece" was the inspired outpouring of a brilliant mind and a gentle soul who, when gazing out of his prison window, found solace by watching the stars, which kept their "ancient peace" pointing to the ... Love that ruled not only the heavens but also the lives of men.

His writing takes on even more significance when we realize that the Dark Ages were about to descend upon Europe. Because Boethius' work survived, we are able to understand - at least to some extent - how people thought about things during his time in history.

So important was this book that a new translation into English by H.R. James, an Oxford University scholar, included these words:

The book called The Consolation of Philosophy was throughout the Middle Ages, and down to the beginnings of the modern epoch in the sixteenth century, the scholar's familiar companion. Few books have exercised a wider influence in their time. It has been translated into every European tongue, and into English nearly a dozen times...

Boethius begins his writing with a complaint, expressed in the words of a poetic song. He sounds melancholy and surprised that life passes so quickly. Let's examine his words:

Who wrought my studious numbers
Smoothly once in happier days,
Now perforce in tears and sadness
Learn a mournful strain to raise.
Lo, the Muses, grief-dishevelled,
Guide my pen and voice my woe;
Down their cheeks unfeigned the tear drops
To my sad complainings flow!
These alone in danger's hour
Faithful found, have dared attend
On the footsteps of the exile
To his lonely journey's end.
These that were the pride and pleasure
Of my youth and high estate
Still remain the only solace
Of the old man's mournful fate.
Old? Ah yes; swift, ere I knew it,
By these sorrows on me pressed
Age hath come; lo, Grief hath bid me
Wear the garb that fits her best.
O'er my head untimely sprinkled
These white hairs my woes proclaim,
And the skin hangs loose and shrivelled
On this sorrow-shrunken frame.
Blest is death that intervenes not
In the sweet, sweet years of peace,
But unto the broken-hearted,
When they call him, brings release!
Yet Death passes by the wretched,
Shuts his ear and slumbers deep;
Will not heed the cry of anguish,
Will not close the eyes that weep.
For, while yet inconstant Fortune
Poured her gifts and all was bright,
Death's dark hour had all but whelmed me
In the gloom of endless night.
Now, because misfortune's shadow
Hath o'erclouded that false face,
Cruel Life still halts and lingers,
Though I loathe his weary race.
Friends, why did ye once so lightly
Vaunt me happy among men?
Surely he who so hath fallen
Was not firmly founded then.

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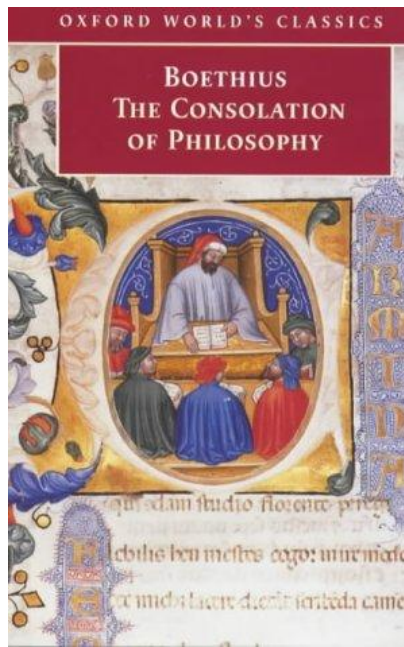
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