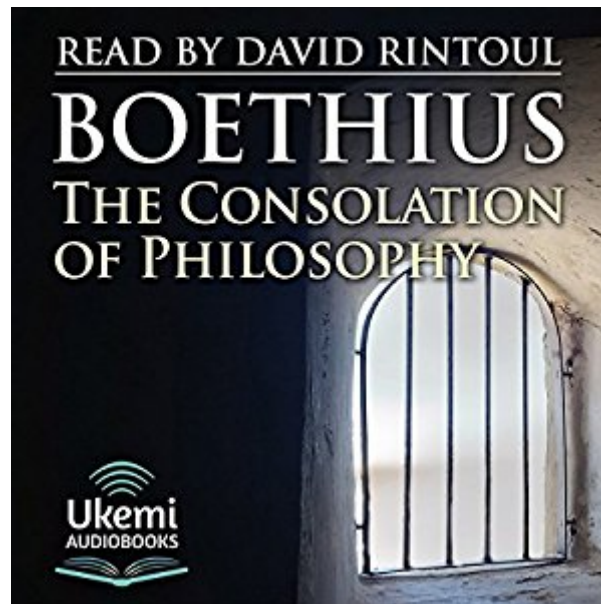




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The Consolation Of Philosophy



Synopsis

The Consolation of Philosophy is one of the key works in the rich tradition of Western philosophy, partly because of the circumstances in which it was written. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c480-c524) was of aristocratic Roman birth and became consul and then master of offices at Ravenna, one of the highest posts under the Ostrogothic Roman ruler Theodoric. But Boethius was unjustly charged with treason in 524, and this led to house arrest, then torture and execution. It was while he was imprisoned and anticipating his fate that he wrote The Consolation of Philosophy, a remarkably personal document in which, through alternating passages of poetry and prose, he considers the lot of humankind. He draws on classical Greek and Roman philosophy, emphasising the fragility of worldly position and that true happiness can only come from within. As a practising Christian, he placed this within a Christian perspective. The work is all the more effective because it is presented as a dialogue between the despairing Boethius and a figure known as Lady Philosophy, who constantly questions, guides and supports the former statesman, leading him to a place of understanding and equilibrium. The work has proved a continuing influence through the ages, having been translated by figures as disparate as Alfred the Great, Chaucer, Elizabeth I and many others. The translation by H. R. James has been revised and modernised for this recording.

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Customer Reviews

Boethius wrote this while in jail waiting for his execution around 524 - 525 AD. I had never read anything by the man, but this text, short as it is, became one of the cornerstones of medieval thought and influenced countless other authors and thinkers. Boethius wrote it to console himself. In his darkest hour he turned to two things, God and his training in philosophy to give himself hope, to sort through his doubts and concerns. His imaginary conversation with Lady Philosophy shows his

education from Athens, his reaching out to God for his final and ultimate source of strength is driven from his belief in the miracle in Jerusalem. This isn't argument for the existence of God, Boethius assumes outright that God exists, this is a book from a man on the ropes, his life in tatters, with no help coming and his death assured. This is the cry of a man seeking hope from the sources that had supported him his adult life. This is from a man that was staring fate square in the eye and refused to do anything except meet it on his own terms. Boethius ends the Roman era with aplomb while planting the seeds of Medieval Scholasticism. The book is easy to read, his arguments clear and straight to the point. He treats the existence of God like the existence of philosophy, both are beyond dispute. But what struck me the most was how timeless his worries and concerns were and how Lady Philosophy's answers are just applicable now; Boethius is relevant today as much as he was when King Alfred the Great set about laying the foundation to recover his civilization. I have no way of proving this idea, but there was a passage that struck me as being the inspiration for one of the well know quotes from Shakespeare's Hamlet. Read this from Boethius: "This very place which thou callest exile is to them that dwell therein their native land. So true is it that nothing is wretched, but thinking makes it so, and conversely every lot is happy if borne with equanimity." And here's Hamlet Act II, Scene ii: "Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me it is a prison." Too much of a match to be mere coincidence. The book's impact cannot be measured. Boethius himself cast a long shadow against the centuries, his translations and commentaries of classic Greek philosophical texts were used by the educated Christian world during the Medieval Scholastic period and beyond. The Consolation is a fusion of Christian and Classical Greek and Roman thought that quite literally changed the world.

... Then said I: 'Verily, thy pleas are plausible—yea, steeped in the honeyed sweetness of music and rhetoric. But their charm lasts only while they are sounding in the ear; the sense of his misfortunes lies deeper in the heart of the wretched. So, when the sound ceases to vibrate upon the air, the heart's indwelling sorrow is felt with renewed bitterness....' This is H. R. James translation first published in 1897. As a younger man, I disdained any version which turned Boethius's unrhymed Latin meters into rhymed English—how could such versions be literal? Mellowed out in middle age, and still unable to read the original, I appreciate James's renditions and imagine them as faithful in their way as any before or since:

SONG I. The Thorns of Error. Who fain would sow the fallow field,
And see the growing corn, Must first remove the useless weeds,
The bramble and the thorn. After ill savour, honey's taste
To the mouth more sweet; After the storm, the twinkling stars
The eyes more cheerly greet. When night hath past, the bright dawn comes
In car of rosy

hue; So drive the false bliss from thy mind, And thou shall see the true. It is a very edifying work- very worthwhile reading when one is in a serious mood. It is more of a distillation or recapitulation of ancient philosophy (from Plato to Seneca) than bold new thought- Augustine is better in that respect.... And yet wealth cannot extinguish insatiable greed, nor has power ever made him master of himself whom vicious lusts kept bound in indissoluble fetters; dignity conferred on the wicked not only fails to make them worthy, but contrarily reveals and displays their unworthiness. Why does it so happen? Because ye take pleasure in calling by false names things whose nature is quite incongruous thereto—by names which are easily proved false by the very effects of the things themselves; even so it is; these riches, that power, this dignity, are none of them rightly so called. Finally, something which struck me forcibly when I read it a year ago:... But let us consider a few instances whereby appears what is the competency of human reason to fathom the Divine unsearchableness. Here is one whom thou deemest the perfection of justice and scrupulous integrity; to all-knowing Providence it seems far otherwise. We all know our Lucan's admonition that it was the winning cause that found favour with the gods, the beaten cause with Cato. So, shouldst thou see anything in this world happening differently from thy expectation, doubt not but events are rightly ordered; it is in thy judgment that there is perverse confusion.

I admit I'd first heard of this book when reading *Confederacy of Dunces* decades ago. I thought I should read it and it was worthwhile, if not consistently fascinating. I suspect this is a somewhat weird translation, very faux Shakespearean or Elizabethan. Although at times it's deliberately antiquarian tone works. The first half to three quarters of the book are the best. There if your patient you'll find a lot of nuggets of solid moral philosophy and considerable literary charm and imagination. The later part of the book seems overly preoccupied with the problem of free will and how can there be free will in a world where God foreknows all. The fact that I thought I had an easier and clearer answer to this problem than the embodiment of Philosophy did not lead me to think I'm a philosophical genius. Rather I suspect I was dealing with something that deeply troubled the author for reasons I don't understand. You will know you are not in the modern world when you read this but do not for a moment conclude that this book's concerns have been rendered irrelevant by modern "enlightenment".

Great book that's been read by many great minds since it was written, but this version is old and difficult to read. When I got to my book club, the other quotes sounded so graceful and insightful whereas my version was more like a Shakespearean play, and also made it difficult to find

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