
Among the European languages English has the longest running history with Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy: Alfred the Great made a translation in the late ninth century, after which came Notker’s Old High German and then a host of various medieval and modern vernaculars. The last century has brought at least six English renderings to light,1 among which, in this reviewer’s opinion, Walsh’s claims pride of place. The volume divides into five parts: introduction (pp. xi–l); summary and bibliography (pp. li–livii); translation (pp. 3–114); explanatory notes (pp. 115–65); index and glossary (pp. 166–71). Walsh did not have access to Moreschini’s new Teubner edition2 and so based his translation on the Latin text of Bieler, which is still of considerable value.3 The traditional internal divisions of the text are conveniently keyed to Bieler’s edition, although page-by-page indicators (for the notes as well) of book and chapter numbers would have made the book more convenient still. The great value of this volume lies in the overall balance of its interpretation: the translation catches appropriate literary nuances without sacrificing philosophical precision, and the notes make judicious use of the most important bibliography on Boethius’ difficult work.4

The introduction is in ten parts, covering general historical background, Boethius’ career, his literary achievements, his Neoplatonism, his theological works, the structure and content of the Consolatio, its sources, prosimetric form, meters, and Fortleben. Walsh has deftly managed the competing demands of completeness and conciseness, and as a result readers will have good access to the essential facts without having to wade through trivial or eccentric matters of interpretation. Thus Boethius’ political career and its implications for the extant corpus, the extent of (limitations on) his use of ancient sources both literary and philosophical, his

theological views — all this and more is treated with care and insight. Walsh is perhaps too quick to assume that Boethius was “familiar” with Plotinus’ writings and “certainly” influenced by those of Proclus, and he shows only a little more caution in respect of Ammonius (p. xxxvif.). That the latter converted to Christianity (pp. xxv; cf. xxxvi) is not an established fact. And it is not quite correct to hold (p. xxvii, with n. 31) that 4 carm. 6 presupposes an “Aristotelian notion of the eternity of the world.” An Aristotelian account of elemental transformation is indeed understood, although _aeternos_ (v. 16) is intended only to emphasize the cyclical nature of celestial and phenomenal change, which in Aristotle’s view is the closest approximation of eternal being. Moreover, insofar as Philosophy remains “true to her ancient spokesmen” as against the “Christian doctrine of creation _ex nihilo,_” she evidently prefers Plato’s _Timaeus_ to Aristotle’s _De caelo_ on the question of the world’s perpetuity.

The translation is of course the centrepiece of the book, and Walsh rises splendidly to the challenges presented by the mixed form. The prose chapters are rendered with accuracy and clarity, without unnecessary straining after technical jargon. We may note, for example, the plural forms _Canios ... Senecas ... Soranos_ at 1,3,9, which Walsh translates, “such figures as Canius” (etc.); this brings out very nicely the hint that the list of persecuted Roman philosophers is in fact longer than is actually indicated, reaching up into Flavian (or indeed later) times. Again, Walsh sees that at 5,5,4 _sola_ is transferred from _divini_ to _intelligentia_. He rightly translates: “(belongs) solely (to the divine).” Here are some passages which merit reconsideration:

1 carm. 5,27: _merito_ cannot mean “justly”, since the complaint (cf. _questibus_ 1, 5,1) is precisely that God fails to impose due measure (_modo_) on human actions as on the rest of the world.

3 carm. 12,1: “Would” is evidently a typographical error for “who” (_quí_), under the influence of “could” (_potuit_).

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7 3 carm. 9; 5,6,6–14; cf. Gruber, Kommentar 409–411. Just as _aeternos_ (4 carm. 6,16) should not be pressed too hard for the strictest possible sense, so also with _perpetua_, 3 carm. 9,1 (Gruber, Kommentar 278 ad loc. 1).
4,6,15: “(the closer to the axis of the world) which (a thing approaches).” The restriction is
unwarranted by *quanto illum rerum cardinem vicinium petit*.

5,1,1: “diverting.” Diversion is unacknowledged before 5 (*aversa ... deviis*). Philosophia is about
to turn (*vertebat conative, or inchoative*) to the next stage of discussion, when “Boethius”
interrupts her train of thought with the question about chance.

5,4,29: “appearance.” As a rendering of *speciem(que ipsam) (*eïdôç*) this is weak, although it is
indeed difficult, given *formam* (*iðêáν*) and *formaliter* at 30 and 32f., to suggest a suitable
English alternative; 32 (*universales species*) and 35 (*universe*) would suggest simply
*species*, taking into account an Aristotelian notion of abstraction, as at In Isagogen II 164,5–
167,7. There may be an echo of the double-form distinction as at *De trinitate* 2 (113f. M.).

The notes will prove useful to a wide audience. Walsh has made good use of Gruber’s
distinguished commentary, to which he has occasionally added findings. He remarks, for
example, at 3,12,29 (p. 143; cf. 4,2,39) the Neoplatonic theme of the non-being of evil. A
possible nuance has perhaps been overlooked in connection with 4 carm. 2. Walsh observes (p.
147) that the earlier Stoics divided the passions into appetite, fear, grief, and pleasure, and
Boethius must indeed have known the ancient classification. But it seems probable, especially in
light of the reference to Plato at 4,2,45, that *libido ... ira* (4 carm. 2,6f.) suggest instead the
Platonic tripartite division of soul (minus *ratio*). Calcidius deploys *ratio, iracundia, and libido* in
that way.

But these are relatively minor observations. Price may remove Walsh’s translation from
competition for a place in undergraduate classrooms (where Relihan’s recent version probably
has the edge); but that it is overall the most satisfying modern English rendition seems certain.

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8 Cf. 5,4,33; 5,5,11f.
9 Cf. 1 carm 7,25–28, with Walsh p. 122; Gruber, Kommentar 161 ad loc. 25ff.; Scheible, Die Gedichte 44f. ad loc.
10 comm. 140; cf. 139; 182f.; 187; 223;Macrobius, somn. 1,6,42 (with Boethius, in Porph. comm. pr. 31,22f.); Plato,
Rep. 441E f.; Tim. 70A–D; Phaedr. 246B; Alcinous, Epit. 23f.