

PREFACE

It has long been recognized that Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae* was a key text in the shaping of medieval thought and culture. The work was translated many times in different vernacular languages, and was studied throughout medieval society, at the courts, in schools and universities, in religious houses, and in lay circles. Its popularity did not stop with the advent of the humanistic movement, but continued far into the modern period. Dante, in characteristically lapidary and brilliant lines, summed up what most medieval readers would have seen as Boethius' greatest achievement: by fixing his eye firmly upon the true Good, the sainted soul (*anima santa*) shows the fickleness of this world (*'l mondo fallace*) to all careful listeners (*Paradiso* X.124-126).

Of course, the perception of the *Consolatio* changed and shifted, depending on the cultural and intellectual preoccupations of the time and, as a consequence, interpretations showed many different faces: Neoplatonic, Aristotelian, devotional, religious, humanist, or often mixtures of these. With the changing perceptions, the work was destined to find ever new translators and commentators who rendered and discussed it in the current idiom and vocabulary, borrowing not only from earlier translations but also from already existing glosses, commentaries, and other materials.

Two areas in the wide field of Boethian studies, in particular, have been well researched: the Latin commentary tradition of the early medieval period, and some major renditions in the vernacular, most notably those by King Alfred, Notker Labeo, Jean de Meun, and Chaucer. This has resulted in a comparative neglect, on the one hand, of Dutch, German, and Italian vernacular traditions, and, on the other hand, of the different ways in which the *Consolatio* was interpreted and employed in the Latin context of the later medieval period. The aim of the present collection is to try to redress the balance. The first section consists of three articles on the Latin commentaries by, respectively, William of Conches (about 1120), Nicholas Trevet (about 1300), and Pierre d'Ailly (about 1372). Each work, while clearly being part of the same commentary tradition,

was composed in its own milieu and responded to different intellectual needs. Because the commentators recast the writings of their predecessors in the mould of their own age, their works belong to the Boethian tradition and at the same time they reveal the current intellectual and institutional developments. This holds true as well for the vernacular translations which are the subject of the sections two and three. Section two is devoted to the vernacular tradition of Boethius in Middle Dutch, which has unjustly remained largely unknown to scholars outside the Low Countries. Much attention is given the so-called Ghent Boethius, a voluminous incunabulum (1485) consisting of a Latin text, a translation and an extensive commentary in Dutch; it is presumably the largest commentary ever written on the *Consolatio*. The essays in the final section offer critical surveys of the French, English, Italian, and German traditions of Boethius, and they illustrate the great variety of contexts in which the *Consolatio* was studied, translated, and used.

The idea for this volume originated at seminars on Boethius' *Consolatio* in the Middle Ages, organized in 1995 at the University of Groningen under the auspices of the Netherlands Research School of Medieval Studies. The participants of these seminars, especially Alastair Minnis and Rita Copeland, are thanked for stimulating discussions. We also gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the Netherlands Research School of Medieval Studies as well as that from the Centre for Classical, Oriental, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies at the University of Groningen.

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