

The Consolation of Philosophy

translated by H. R. James M.A.



Anicius Manlius
Severinus Boethius

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Homô̄s de kai en toutois dialampeĩ to kalon, epeidan pherê
tis eukolô̄s pollas kai megalas atychias, mê di analgêsian,
alla gennadas ôn kai megalopsychos.
Aristotle's 'Ethics,' I., xi. 12.

Quantum libet igitur sæviant mali, sapienti tamen corona
non decidet, non arescet.

Melioribus animum conformaveris, nihil opus est iudice
præmium deferente, tu te ipse excellentioribus addidisti;
studium ad pejora deflexeris, extra ne quæsieris ultorem, tu
te ipse in deteriora trusisti.

PREFACE.

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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, from King Alfred's paraphrase to the translations of Lord Preston, Causton, Ridpath, and Duncan, in the eighteenth century. The belief that what once pleased so widely must still have some charm is my excuse for attempting the present translation. The great work of Boethius, with its alternate prose and verse, skilfully fitted together like dialogue and chorus in a Greek play, is unique in literature, and has a pathetic interest from the time and circumstances of its composition. It ought not to be forgotten. Those who can go to the original will find their reward. There may be

room also for a new translation in English after an interval of close on a hundred years.

Some of the editions contain a reproduction of a bust purporting to represent Boethius. Lord Preston's translation, for example, has such a portrait, which it refers to an original in marble at Rome. This I have been unable to trace, and suspect that it is apocryphal. The Hope Collection at Oxford contains a completely different portrait in a print, which gives no authority. I have ventured to use as a frontispiece a reproduction from a plaster-cast in the Ashmolean Museum, taken from an ivory diptych preserved in the Bibliotheca Quiriniana at Brescia, which represents Narius Manlius Boethius, the father of the philosopher. Portraiture of this period is so rare that it seemed that, failing a likeness of the author himself, this authentic representation of his father might have interest, as giving the consular dress and insignia of the time, and also as illustrating the decadence of contemporary art. The consul wears a richly-embroidered cloak; his right hand holds a staff surmounted by the Roman eagle, his left the mappa circensis, or napkin used for starting the races in the circus; at his feet are palms and bags of money—prizes for the victors in the games. For permission to use this cast my thanks are due to the authorities of the Ashmolean Museum, as also to Mr. T.W. Jackson, Curator of the Hope Collection, who first called my attention to its existence.

I have to thank my brother, Mr. L. James, of Radley College, for much valuable help and for correcting the proof-sheets of the translation. The text used is that of Peiper, Leipsic, 1874.

PROEM.

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Anicus Manlius Severinus Boethius lived in the last quarter of the fifth century A.D., and the first quarter of the sixth. He was growing to manhood, when Theodoric, the famous Ostrogoth, crossed the Alps and made himself master of Italy. Boethius belonged to an ancient family, which boasted a connection with the legendary glories of the Republic, and was still among the foremost in wealth and dignity in the days of Rome's abasement. His parents dying early, he was brought up by Symmachus, whom the age agreed to regard as of almost saintly character, and afterwards became his son-in-law. His varied gifts, aided by an excellent education, won for him the reputation of the most accomplished man of his time. He was orator, poet, musician, philosopher. It is his peculiar distinction to have handed on to the Middle Ages the tradition of Greek philosophy by his Latin translations of the works of Aristotle. Called early to a public career, the highest honours of the State came to him unsought. He was sole Consul in 510 A.D., and was ultimately raised by Theodoric to the dignity of Magister Officiorum, or head of the whole civil administration. He was no less happy in his domestic life, in the virtues of his wife, Rusticana, and the fair promise of his two sons, Symmachus and Boethius; happy also in the society of a refined circle of friends. Noble, wealthy, accomplished, universally esteemed for his virtues, high in the favour of the Gothic King, he appeared to all men a signal example of the union of merit and good fortune. His felicity seemed to culminate in the year 522 A.D., when, by special and extraordinary favour, his two sons, young as they were for so exalted an honour, were created joint Consuls and rode to the senate-house attended by a throng

of senators, and the acclamations of the multitude. Boethius himself, amid the general applause, delivered the public speech in the King's honour usual on such occasions. Within a year he was a solitary prisoner at Pavia, stripped of honours, wealth, and friends, with death hanging over him, and a terror worse than death, in the fear lest those dearest to him should be involved in the worst results of his downfall. It is in this situation that the opening of the 'Consolation of Philosophy' brings Boethius before us. He represents himself as seated in his prison distraught with grief, indignant at the injustice of his misfortunes, and seeking relief for his melancholy in writing verses descriptive of his condition. Suddenly there appears to him the Divine figure of Philosophy, in the guise of a woman of superhuman dignity and beauty, who by a succession of discourses convinces him of the vanity of regret for the lost gifts of fortune, raises his mind once more to the contemplation of the true good, and makes clear to him the mystery of the world's moral government.

BOOK I. THE SORROWS OF BOETHIUS.

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SUMMARY.

Boethius' complaint (Song I.).—CH. I. Philosophy appears to Boethius, drives away the Muses of Poetry, and herself laments (Song II.) the disordered condition of his mind.—CH. II. Boethius is speechless with amazement. Philosophy wipes away the tears that have clouded his eyesight.—CH. III. Boethius recognises his mistress Philosophy. To his wondering inquiries she explains her presence, and recalls to his mind the persecutions to which Philosophy has oftentimes from of old been subjected by an ignorant world. CH. IV. Philosophy bids Boethius declare his griefs. He relates the story of his unjust accusation and ruin. He concludes with a prayer (Song V.) that the moral disorder in human affairs may be set right.—CH. V. Philosophy admits the justice of Boethius' self-vindication, but grieves rather for the unhappy change in his mind. She will first tranquillize his spirit by soothing remedies.—CH. VI. Philosophy tests Boethius' mental state by certain questions, and discovers three chief causes of his soul's sickness: (1) He has forgotten his own true nature; (2) he knows not the end towards which the whole universe tends; (3) he knows not the means by which the world is governed.

BOOK I.

Song I. Boethius' Complaint.

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
complaining 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.
I.

While I was thus mutely pondering within myself, and
recording my sorrowful complainings with my pen, it
seemed to me that there appeared above my head a
woman of a countenance exceeding venerable. Her eyes
were bright as fire, and of a more than human keenness; her
complexion was lively, her vigour showed no trace of
enfeeblement; and yet her years were right full, and she
plainly seemed not of our age and time. Her stature was

difficult to judge. At one moment it exceeded not the common height, at another her forehead seemed to strike the sky; and whenever she raised her head higher, she began to pierce within the very heavens, and to baffle the eyes of them that looked upon her. Her garments were of an imperishable fabric, wrought with the finest threads and of the most delicate workmanship; and these, as her own lips afterwards assured me, she had herself woven with her own hands. The beauty of this vesture had been somewhat tarnished by age and neglect, and wore that dingy look which marble contracts from exposure. On the lower-most edge was inwoven the Greek letter Pi, on the topmost the letter Theta, [1] and between the two were to be seen steps, like a staircase, from the lower to the upper letter. This robe, moreover, had been torn by the hands of violent persons, who had each snatched away what he could clutch. [2] Her right hand held a note-book; in her left she bore a staff. And when she saw the Muses of Poesie standing by my bedside, dictating the words of my lamentations, she was moved awhile to wrath, and her eyes flashed sternly. 'Who,' said she, 'has allowed yon play-acting wantons to approach this sick man—these who, so far from giving medicine to heal his malady, even feed it with sweet poison? These it is who kill the rich crop of reason with the barren thorns of passion, who accustom men's minds to disease, instead of setting them free. Now, were it some common man whom your allurements were seducing, as is usually your way, I should be less indignant. On such a one I should not have spent my pains for naught. But this is one nurtured in the Eleatic and Academic philosophies. Nay, get ye gone, ye sirens, whose sweetness lasteth not; leave him for my muses to tend and heal!' At these words of upbraiding, the whole band, in deepened sadness, with downcast eyes, and blushes that confessed their shame, dolefully left the chamber.

But I, because my sight was dimmed with much weeping,
and I could not tell who was this woman of authority so
commanding—I was dumfounded, and, with my gaze
fastened on the earth, continued silently to await what she
might do next. Then she drew near me and sat on the edge
of my couch, and, looking into my face all heavy with grief
and fixed in sadness on the ground, she bewailed in these
words the disorder of my mind: Song II. His Despondency.
Alas! in what abyss his mind Is plunged, how wildly tossed!
Still, still towards the outer night She sinks, her true light
lost, As oft as, lashed tumultuously By earth-born blasts,
care's waves rise high.

Yet once he ranged the open heavens, The sun's bright
pathway tracked; Watched how the cold moon waxed and
waned; Nor rested, till there lacked To his wide ken no star
that steers Amid the maze of circling spheres.

The causes why the blustering winds Vex ocean's tranquil
face, Whose hand doth turn the stable globe, Or why his
even race

From out the ruddy east the sun Unto the western waves
doth run: What is it tempers cunningly The placid hours of
spring, So that it blossoms with the rose For earth's
engarlanding:

Who loads the year's maturer prime With clustered grapes
in autumn time: All this he knew—thus ever strove Deep
Nature's lore to guess.

Now, reft of reason's light, he lies, And bonds his neck
oppress; While by the heavy load constrained, His eyes to
this dull earth are chained.

II.

'But the time,' said she, 'calls rather for healing than for
lamentation.' Then, with her eyes bent full upon me, 'Art
thou that man,' she cries, 'who, erstwhile fed with the milk
and reared upon the nourishment which is mine to give, had
grown up to the full vigour of a manly spirit? And yet I had
bestowed such armour on thee as would have proved an

invincible defence, hadst thou not first cast it away. Dost thou know me? Why art thou silent? Is it shame or amazement that hath struck thee dumb? Would it were shame; but, as I see, a stupor hath seized upon thee.' Then, when she saw me not only answering nothing, but mute and utterly incapable of speech, she gently touched my breast with her hand, and said: 'There is no danger; these are the symptoms of lethargy, the usual sickness of deluded minds. For awhile he has forgotten himself; he will easily recover his memory, if only he first recognises me. And that he may do so, let me now wipe his eyes that are clouded with a mist of mortal things.' Thereat, with a fold of her robe, she dried my eyes all swimming with tears.

Song III. The Mists dispelled.

Then the gloom of night was scattered, Sight returned unto mine eyes.

So, when haply rainy Caurus Rolls the storm-clouds through the skies, Hidden is the sun; all heaven is obscured in starless night.

But if, in wild onset sweeping, Boreas frees day's prisoned light, All suddenly the radiant god outstreams, And strikes our dazzled eyesight with his beams.

III.

Even so the clouds of my melancholy were broken up. I saw the clear sky, and regained the power to recognise the face of my physician. Accordingly, when I had lifted my eyes and fixed my gaze upon her, I beheld my nurse, Philosophy, whose halls I had frequented from my youth up.

'Ah! why,' I cried, 'mistress of all excellence, hast thou come down from on high, and entered the solitude of this my exile? Is it that thou, too, even as I, mayst be persecuted with false accusations?'

'Could I desert thee, child,' said she, 'and not lighten the burden which thou hast taken upon thee through the hatred of my name, by sharing this trouble? Even forgetting that it were not lawful for Philosophy to leave companionless the

way of the innocent, should I, thinkest thou, fear to incur reproach, or shrink from it, as though some strange new thing had befallen? Thinkest thou that now, for the first time in an evil age, Wisdom hath been assailed by peril? Did I not often in days of old, before my servant Plato lived, wage stern warfare with the rashness of folly? In his lifetime, too, Socrates, his master, won with my aid the victory of an unjust death. And when, one after the other, the Epicurean herd, the Stoic, and the rest, each of them as far as in them lay, went about to seize the heritage he left, and were dragging me off protesting and resisting, as their booty, they tore in pieces the garment which I had woven with my own hands, and, clutching the torn pieces, went off, believing that the whole of me had passed into their possession. And some of them, because some traces of my vesture were seen upon them, were destroyed through the mistake of the lewd multitude, who falsely deemed them to be my disciples. It may be thou knowest not of the banishment of Anaxagoras, of the poison draught of Socrates, nor of Zeno's torturing, because these things happened in a distant country; yet mightest thou have learnt the fate of Arrius, of Seneca, of Soranus, whose stories are neither old nor unknown to fame. These men were brought to destruction for no other reason than that, settled as they were in my principles, their lives were a manifest contrast to the ways of the wicked. So there is nothing thou shouldst wonder at, if on the seas of this life we are tossed by storm-blasts, seeing that we have made it our chiefest aim to refuse compliance with evil-doers. And though, maybe, the host of the wicked is many in number, yet is it contemptible, since it is under no leadership, but is hurried hither and thither at the blind driving of mad error. And if at times and seasons they set in array against us, and fall on in overwhelming strength, our leader draws off her forces into the citadel while they are busy plundering the useless baggage. But we from our vantage ground, safe