BOETHIUS IN MEDIEVAL FRANCE: TRANSLATIONS OF THE
DE CONSOLATIONE PHILOSOPHIAE AND LITERARY INFLUENCE

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The De consolatione philosophiae [Consolatio] and the example of Boethius imprisoned in Pavia, a victim of tyranny and injustice, listening to the soothing, but searching, discourse of Philosophia, have appealed for many centuries to people in adversity. French writers of the 14th and 15th centuries frequently evoked Boethius. In the Roman de la Rose (c.1269–78), Jean de Meun called for a translation of the Consolatio so that the laity might read the work, a wish he himself fulfilled, perhaps without knowing of the prior existence of at least two translations in French by c.1300. Others followed, so that today 12 French translations can be identified and distinguished.

Individual writers of the 14th and 15th centuries evoked Boethius’s life; they used him as a tragic figure, suffering unduly but rising above adversity by means of the human mind; they quoted him as an authority, especially with reference to the Consolatio. They also readily adopted its dialogue form, and alternation of verse and prose. Various prologues to translations and commentaries emphasized the moral purpose and utility of the Consolatio and thus reinforced the writers’ testimony.

The medieval French translations of the Consolatio belong to the European tradition initiated by the Old English translation traditionally attributed to King Alfred (849–99). Successive translators wished the work to
be universally known, by both clergy and laity, to whom it would provide thoughtful consolation and hope. In no other country than France, in no other language than French, however, did so many vernacular translations of the *Consolatio* exist in the Middle Ages. France also contributed significantly to the Latin commentary tradition by the commentary (c.1120) of William of Conches (c.1080–1154/60), which, together with the commentaries of Nicholas Trevet (c.1258–after 1334), an English Dominican, and of his near contemporary William of Aragon, provided the main sources of explanation and interpretation of Boethius’s text for the translators.

Before the translations into French, two other vernacular works, inspired by the *Consolatio*, appeared in the 11th and 12th centuries: the Occitan *Boecis* and the Anglo-Norman *Roman de Philosophie*. Found in a manuscript dating from the early 11th century, Orléans, Bibliothèque municipale 444, fols 269–75, the *Boecis* is an anonymous, untitled fragment of 257 decasyllabic assonanced lines in *laisses* of varying length. It is the oldest Occitan text, as well as the oldest example of the vernacular tradition of the *Consolatio* in the Gallo-Roman area. It has three parts: first, a prologue, in which the author addresses young men in particular, and then sketches the biography of Boecis (*laisses* 1–10), second, Boecis’s lament on his predicament and imprisonment, expressing his trust in God and the Holy Trinity, and blaming his friends (*laisses* 11–22), and third, description of a noble lady who visits Boecis in prison (*laisses* 23–35). While Boecis advocates living a Christian life and avoiding evil, the unnamed lady has a role corresponding to that of Philosophia, with the significant difference that she represents not the medieval categories of learning but certain moral virtues and Christian doctrine. The benefit achieved by ascending the ladder of virtues on the lady’s gown is salvation in heaven. Reflecting Boethius’s thought in the *Opuscula sacra*, the incomplete work thus offers