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The English and German Translation Traditions of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*

Abstract

This article provides a full listing of all known translation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* into English and German. The two listings are part of a larger project that eventually will inventory all vernacular translations of the *Consolatio*, world-wide. The article indicates some of the comparable and contrasting aspects of the English and German translation traditions. The inventories of translations in each of these two large traditions has developed slowly, over the last century or so, as more past translations are discovered, and as new translations continue to be produced. Such comparable and contrasting aspects of the traditions reveal the interconnectedness between the translations within each tradition and the interconnectedness between the two traditions. This article suggests that studies of these two traditions will yield important scholarly information as studies of the translations and translation traditions proceed.

Keywords: Alexander Pope, Boethius, Christina Knorr von Rosenroth and Franciscus Mercurius, Edward Gibbon, English *Consolatio* translations, Geoffrey Chaucer, German *Consolatio* translations, Karl Heinz and Jutta Göller, King Alfred the Great.

For several years, the International Boethius Society has been assembling inventories of translations of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, seeking to produce full and detailed listings of all vernacular renderings of the work, world-wide. In this paper, I discuss some of the comparable and contrasting aspects of the English and German traditions that researching the translations and producing the inventories have made apparent. In the initial stage of this project, I consulted with Karl Heinz and Jutta Göller, and their help was of great value. We discovered quite early-on some difficulties that the project entails, such as identifying and locating the actual translations and separating them from some that were either spurious or mislabeled. The earliest phase of the project owes much to Karl Heinz and Jutta, and I am grateful for their help.¹

¹ At the beginning of the project, Karl Heinz and Jutta Göller made substantive suggestions on the project and they helped locate German scholars knowledgeable on the Boethian tradition in Eng-

The *Consolatio* has been translated into at least twenty vernacular languages – generally, multiple times into each – through the last thousand years.² In all, there are well over one hundred complete translations. The first rendering into English, dated about 890, is attributed to King Alfred, and it also stands as the earliest of all translations or adaptations from the Latin. The oldest translation into German, by Notker of St. Gall, is a monument in Old High German letters, and it was prepared as a bilingual text about 1000 AD.

The English and German traditions comprise many and varied translations and adaptations of the Latin text: all-prose, all-verse, verse-prose, full renderings, partial renderings, translations of the meters only, scholarly or popular renderings, and even one German translation presented as a dramatization for the stage. There are no fewer than twenty-four full translations into English³ and twenty-five

land and Germany. Later, other scholars gave valuable assistance to the project: Susanne Gärtner did preliminary research in German libraries; Hans Sauer arranged for me to access translations held at the Ludwig-Maximilian University at Munich; Anne Aschenbrenner found important translations on-line and via interlibrary loan in Munich; Florian Schlegel accessed materials at the University of Regensburg; Johannes Weber accessed materials in archives at Bamberg; Christoph Houswitschka arranged for me to access translations held at the University of Bamberg; Brian Donaghey shared his collection of *Consolatio* translations with me during a visit in Sheffield, England. Librarians at Oxford, the British Library, the Public Record Office, Harvard University, and elsewhere have provided assistance without which the production of this article would not have been possible.

² The languages into which the Latin work has been translated include: Catalan, Czech, Dutch, English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Korean, Norwegian, Occitanian, Romanian, Polish, Spanish, Russian, and others.

³ The twenty-four complete translations into English are:

King Alfred the Great	c.890
Geoffrey Chaucer	c.1380
John Walton	1410
George Colvile	1556
T.R. 1584	
Queen Elizabeth	11593
John Bracegirdle	c.1602
I.T.	1609
Harry Coningsbye	1664
Henry Somerset, Duke of Beaufort	1693
Sir Richard Graham, Viscount Preston	1695; 1712
William Causton	1730
Philip Ridpath with George Ridpath	1785
Robert Duncan	1789
H.R. [Henry Rosher] James	1897; 1926
W.V. [Wilbraham Villiers] Cooper	1902
Richard Green	1962
Victor E. Watts	1967
S.J. Tester	1973
Sanderson Beck	1996
P.G. Walsh	1999
Joel C. Relihan	2001
David R. Slavitt	2008
Scott Goins and Barbara H. Wyman	2012

into German.⁴ As is true in all the linguistic traditions, much English and German *Consolatio* translation is fairly direct, aiming to convey the philosophical content of the work, but there are occasional moments of striking literary quality, especially in renderings of the meters. Several examples of noteworthy translation can be found among the English and German versions of 3m9. The rendering by Alexander Pope, penned in 1703 and published in 1717, although only partial, is distinctive. It begins:

O Thou, whose all-creating hands sustain
 The radiant Heav'ns, and Earth, and ambient Main!
 Eternal Reason! Whose presiding soul
 Informs great nature and directs the whole!
 Who wert, e're time his rapid race begun,
 And bad'st the years in long procession run:
 Who fix't thy self amidst the rowling frame,
 Gav'st all things to be chang'd, yet ever art the
 same!⁵

What Pope's translation lacks in literal accuracy is compensated for in the strength of his heroic couplets. Compare Pope's verse rendering with Chaucer's earlier, more literal prose translation of about 1380:

⁴ The twenty-five known or attested *Consolatio* translations into German are those by:

Notker of St. Gall	c.1000
Peter von Kastl	c.1401
Münster Fragments	c.1450–1500
Lemgo Translation	c.1463/1464
Erfurt Translation	c.1465
Anonymous [Koberger printing]	1473
Niklas (Niclas) von Wyle	1477
Konrad Humery	c.1462 / 1463 or c.1500
Anonymous [Schott, editor]	c.1500
Johann Hellwig [Helwig]	1600
Christian Knorr von Rosenroth and	
Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont	1667 / 1697
Friedrich Roth-Scholz [F.R.]	1717
Johann Just. Fahsius	1734
Johann Gottfried Richter	1753
Friedrich Karl Freytag	1794
L[ambert] I[gnaz] Wortberg	1826
Johann Hilarius Weingärtner	1827
Richard Scheven	1893
Eberhard Gothein	1932
Johannes Zimmermann	1934
Karl Büchner	1939
Konrad Weiss	1956
Ernst Neitzke	1959
H[ermann] M[artin] Endres	1961
Ernst Gegenschatz and	
Olof Gigon	1981

⁵ S.A. Pope, *Minor Poems*, eds. N. Ault, J. Butt, London 1954, p. 73.

O thow Fadir, soowere and creatour of hevене and of erthes, that governest this world by perdurable resoun, that comaundest the tymes to gon from syn that age hadde bygynyng; thow that duellest thiselve ay stedefast and stable, and yevest alle othere thynges to ben meved [...].⁶

Pope omits all of the Platonic content of the Latin meter, which Chaucer includes. Pope was not translating the entire *Consolatio*; he was creating out of 3m9 a poem for the nonce. Chaucer, however, was creating a translation of the entire *Consolatio*, complete with notes inserted into the text, and his prose version of 3m9 was produced as an integral moment in the whole work.

Consider also the translation into German made by Christian Knorr von Rosenroth and Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont, first printed in Sulzbach in 1667 and then in Lüneburg in 1697:

Schöpffer Himmels und der Erden, dessen Hand die gantze Welt
In beständig-schöner Ordnung hoch-vernünftig unterhält,
Der du aller Zeiten Lauff heissest auff dein Wort entstehen,
Daß er aus der Ewigkeit stracks beginnt herfür zu gehen:
Der du ewig-unbeweget bloß in einem Stande bist,
Und doch gleichwol machst, daß alles immer in Bewegung ist.⁷

Here, in the cadence as well as in the content of the verses, the translators recall Goethe's Prolog im Himmel from *Faust, Part I*. Compare this lyrical German rendering to the very concise translation made by Ernst Gegenschatz and Olof Gigon, printed in Düsseldorf in 1981.

Der du lenkest die Welt nach dauernden, festen Gesetzen,
Schöpfer des Himmels, der Erden, der du von Ewigkeit ausgehen
Hießest die Zeit, selbst nimmer bewegt, bewegend das Weltall!⁸

In this more recent rendering, there is no backward glance to Goethe's Neo-classical or early-Romantic verse forms. It, like Chaucer's rendering, aims for accuracy and fidelity in meaning. In each of these, there are fewer formal distractions from the statement made in Boethius.

Boethius's *Consolatio* has endured as a Latin work for fifteen-hundred years. For the last millennium, it has stood as a base text for translation into vernacular languages, and each historical era from the ninth century onward has imposed its own aesthetic and cultural preferences upon renderings of Boethius's text. Each translator worked in one of those historical eras, and each translator added to the cultural expectations of the time an individual predisposition or agenda in reading and translating Boethius's work. For English and German readers, translations have appeared fairly regularly, in the Old, Middle, Early-Modern, and Modern

⁶ G. Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., L. D. Benson, Boston 1987, p. 431.

⁷ Ch. Knorr von Rosenroth, F. Mercurius van Helmont, *Des Fürtrefflichen Hochvweisen Severini Boetii, Weil. Bürgermeisters zu Rom, Consolatio Philosophiae, oder Christlich-vernunfft-gemesser Trost und Unterricht in Widerwertigkeit und Bestürtzung über dem vermeinten Wohl-oder Ubel-Stand der Bösen und Frommen: Verteuschet, und mit beygefüigten kurtzen Anmerckungen über etliche dunckele Ort desselben zum andernmahl auffgeleget* 1697, Lüneburg 1697, p. 127–128.

⁸ *Boethius: Trost der Philosophie*. eds. and transl. E. Gegenschatz, O. Gigon, *Introduction* by O. Gigon, Munich 1981, p. 3, 5, and 7.

periods of the development of their languages. Few translation traditions, except for the significant and extensive French tradition, can rival those of the English and German *Consolatio* renderings, in either completeness of representation or variety of approach, although the Dutch, Italian, and other European traditions also contain a number of noteworthy translations.

In the late seventeenth century, Edward Gibbon famously wrote:

While Boethius, oppressed with fetters, expected each moment the sentence or the stroke of death, he composed in the tower of Pavia the *Consolation of Philosophy*: a golden volume not unworthy of the leisure of Plato or Tully, but which claims incomparable merit from the barbarism of the times and the situation of the author.⁹

As the record of translations indicates, Boethius's *Consolatio* has proved quite worthy of the engaged leisurely perusal, and indeed of the dedicated concentrated study, of many a noble mind, throughout the centuries, and throughout the world.

An appreciation of the importance of the vernacular translations as an area of scholarship deserving of study in itself has developed only slowly. To indicate how our knowledge of and interest in the English translations has grown, it is worth considering a work by William Thomas Lowndes.¹⁰ In his bibliography of 1864 he mentions just one Latin edition (Glasguae, 1751), and he lists only eleven English translators and their translations: [1] King Alfred; [2] Geoffrey Chaucer, later printed by Caxton (making Chaucer's *Boece* the first *Consolatio* translation published in England); [3] John Walton, printed in 1525; [4] George Colvile, printed in 1556; [5] J.T.'s (or I.T.'s) translation, printed in 1609 (with Lowndes's annotation: "Not noticed [in an earlier bibliography] by Dr. Clark"); [6] Harry Coningsbye (spelled here with a final "e" on the family name), printed in 1664; [7] Richard (Graham) Lord Viscount Preston (described by Lowndes as a second edition, corrected, of 1712, but with Lowndes's further observation: "A good translation, originally published [first] in 1695"); [8] William Causton, printed in 1730 (with Lowndes's annotation: "An excellent translation with very useful notes, and a life of Boethius, drawn up with great accuracy and fidelity"); [9] Reverend Philip Ridpath, printed in 1785; [10] Robert Duncan, printed in 1789; [11] an Anonymous translation of the meters, printed in 1792 (with Lowndes's short but biting annotation: "A pitiful performance").

Then, just over eighty years later, Clarissa P. Farrar and Austin P. Evans¹¹, in their bibliography of 1946, list twelve English translators in their main bibliography, but with two other translators mentioned separately, Alfred and Chaucer, in a final note, which brings their total to fourteen: [1] I.T., published in an edition

⁹ E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 4, New York–London 1909; rpt. AMS Press, 1974, p. 215.

¹⁰ W. T. Lowndes. *The Bibliographer's Manual of English Literature: containing An account of rare, and useful books, published in or relating to Great Britain and Ireland, from the invention of printing; with bibliographical and critical notices, collations or the rarer articles, and the prices at which they have been sold*, 8 vols. London 1864, new edition, revised, corrected and enlarged; with an appendix relating to the books of literary and scientific societies, p. 229–230.

¹¹ C.P. Farrar, A.P. Evans, *Bibliography of English Translations from Medieval Sources*, Records of Civilization Sources and Studies, 39, New York 1946, p. 86–87.

of 1609, and later in the Loeb edition of 1918 and as subsequent reprintings; [2] George Coluile, published in 1556; [3] Queen Elizabeth I, translated in 1593 (first printed in an EETS edition of 1899); [4] Harry Coningsby (spelled here without the final “e” on the family name) translated in 1664; [5] an Anonymous translator (the *Summum bonum*) (with the annotation: “The first four books only, translated by Henry Hallywell), printed in 1674; [6] Richard, Lord Viscount Preston (with the annotation: “not seen”), printed in 1712; [7] William Causton, printed in 1768; [8] Philip Ridpath, printed in 1785; [9] Robert Duncan, printed in 1789; [10] an Anonymous translator (meters only, given the annotation: “with the preface of P. Berty in Latin and English”), printed in 1792; [11] H.R. James (with the annotation: “Other editions: London, Routledge (1906)” [*New Universal Library*], [as well as in] *Boethius and Dante* [...] with a commentary by Henry Howard Harper, Boston, Bibliophile Society (1930), printed in 1897; [12] W.V. Cooper (with an annotation: “Second edition, 1924; third edition, 1933”), first printed in 1902. As noted above, the translations by Alfred and Chaucer [numbers 13 and 14] are mentioned only at the end of the listing, in an addendum to the entire entry on Boethius.¹ Since 1948, about ten further translations have entered the lists.

In this way, the cataloging of the English translations, with brief descriptions and notes on various printings and editions, has proceeded, as more translations periodically have been discovered. The cataloging of the German translations has followed a similar history of discoveries and additions. For example, Hugh Fraser Stewart, in his essay of 1891, mentions only Notker and Peter of Kastl as translators into German. Concerning this meager listing, Stewart repines: “I have little doubt that other Germans besides Notker and Peter of Kastl tried their hand on Boethius, but I have not been able so far to find a trace of them”.¹² Since 1891, over twenty other German translations have entered the lists. Thus, various translations began to be noted, and a chronology began to be established, and studies on those translations now may proceed.

Within the field of Boethian Studies today, the tradition of vernacular *Consolatio* translations constitutes an impressive sub-genre – in which the distinct personalities of the translators express themselves fairly recognizably through the translations. Collectively, the many translation traditions throughout the world comprise an area in Boethian Studies in which translators of different eras and different cultures give varying emphases or readings to Boethius’s final work, to which different translators also bring very different biographical experiences to their work: Geoffrey Chaucer, for example, working in London in the fourteenth century brings to his translation a devoted interest in philosophy, science, and cosmology, but H.R. James working on his translation, at least in part, while making his career as an educator in India, brings classical and pedagogical interest to the translation. Each translation expresses a translator’s subtle agenda for rendering the work into a vernacular, but each attempts to do justice in its own way to the Latin concepts that Boethius uses and develops. The sequence of English and German translations offers, therefore, an opportunity to follow the capacity of the

¹² H.F. Stewart, *Boethius: An Essay*, London 1891; rpt. New York 1974, p. 238.

English and German languages to convey Boethius's Latin concepts at practically every period of the languages' history. In a related way, the translation traditions also offer an opportunity for scholars to consider changes in English and German standards of prosody through the centuries by comparing renderings of Boethius's Latin meters into vernacular verse throughout a millennium of the development of the literatures.

Considering the translations from a historical perspective, an extended era of concentrated interest in Boethius and his *Consolatio* – indeed, a veritable renaissance in interest in Boethius and his final work among scholars and English-speaking translators – occurred during the Tudor period, and extended into the Jacobean period. The complex relationships among the translators working during this period, and the complex relationships between the translations they produced, is very significant, and these relationships also extend into painting and other arts. This latter point can be confirmed enjoyably by a stroll through the Tudor Gallery of the National Portrait Gallery in London. Paintings there show Thomas Chaloner, Thomas Sackville, and Queen Elizabeth I in several poses, all of whom are translators of the *Consolatio*.

For various reasons, including the continued growth at English-speaking universities in the study of works by Geoffrey Chaucer – himself, of course, a translator of the *Consolatio*, whose creative work was greatly influenced by Boethius – the twentieth century gave rise to yet another renaissance in Boethian interest.

Not only the temporal or historical distribution but also the geographical distribution of *Consolatio* translations is important enough to warrant greater scholarly investigation. For example, there are five complete American translations (Richard Green, 1962; Sanderson Beck, 1996; Joel Relihan, 2001; David Slavitt, 2009; and Scott Goins and Barbara H. Wyman, 2012); there are seventeen complete English translations (King Alfred the Great, c.890; Geoffrey Chaucer, c.1380; John Walton, 1410; George Colvile, 1556; T.R., 1584; Queen Elizabeth I, 1593; John Bracegirdle, c.1602; I.T., 1609; Harry Conningsby, 1664; Hxxxxx Duke of Xxxxxxxx, identified as Henry Somerset, 1693; Sir Richard Graham, 1695; William Causton, 1730; H.R. James, 1897; W.V. Cooper, 1902; Victor Watts, 1967; S.J. Tester, 1973; and P.G. Walsh, 1999); and there are two complete Scottish translations (Robert Duncan, 1789; and Philip and George Ridpath, 1785).

Incomplete translations, translations of selective passages, or translations of the meters only are equally wide-spread, both temporally and geographically, and they are perhaps even more varied in their approach to rendering the *Consolatio* into English and German than are the whole translations.

As noted above, there are four translations from Tudor England (by George Colvile, T.R., Queen Elizabeth I, and John Bracegirdle – and a fifth related work, the noteworthy translation by I.T., that follows soon in Jacobean England), and the relationships between the renderings, and the relationships between their translators, reveal much about the society and its social and educational values. During the later Civil War, Protectorate, Restoration, and Revolution of 1688 periods, there are two translations (by Harry Coningsbye and Henry Somerset). Other periods manifest similar concentrations or distributions of translations.

In the course of collecting and working through the corpus of English and German *Consolatio* translations, and through the information generated about them, the interconnectedness of the translations became apparent: through the translators' use of particular editions of the Latin *Consolatio*, their reliance upon various commentaries for interpretation of words and passages, and their consultation of prior translations (into either English or German and into other linguistic traditions). It is only in the vernacular tradition viewed in historical or geographical groupings, and then as an interconnected whole, that researchers can describe and analyze the continuous network in the transmission of the *Consolatio* through the centuries.

The inventories being produced by the International Boethius Society give general information on each of the translators, to be sure, but they also provide full transcriptions of two of the most prominent prose and verse passages: Book I, Prose 1, and Book III, Meter 9. Each of these sections has commanded special scholarly attention within the work as a whole—that scene in which Lady Philosophy makes her first appearance in the Prisoner's cell, and the central Platonic hymn to the governor of the universe. Some general information relevant to these passages is mentioned in introductions to the translations and their editions, but references to the points of interconnection between the translations appear often in notes appended to the texts. The notes tell much about the translators' or editors' scholarly attitude toward the *Consolatio*. Some translators, for example, consulted commentaries, and some consulted earlier translations (either into the same language or into other languages).

For example, it is in a footnote that the German translator Friedrich Karl Freytag, in the translation he published in 1794, informs his readers that he had perused the English translation published somewhat earlier, in 1695, by Philip Ridpath (with some assistance by his brother Gerorge Ridpath). Freytag makes this reference in a complaint that Ridpath had left untranslated the central verses, containing the Platonic content of 3m9, in his rendering (which Alexander Pope also would omit in his later translation of 1703).¹³ In another footnote, Freytag acknowledges having read the French translation prepared by P.R. de Ceriziers and published in the 1630s, and he quotes from this translation in this lengthy footnote; in this same note, he also acknowledges having read the French translation by Nicolas Régnier, published in 1676. Freytag seems to have done considerable research as he translated the *Consolatio*, and we learn specific details of

¹³ F.K. Freytag, *Trost der Philosophie aus dem Lateinischen des Boethius mit Anmerkungen und Nachrichten die Geschichte des Originals und das Leben des Verfassers betreffend* von Friedrich Karl Freytag, Riga 1794, p. 2–7. The footnote reads:

Durch diese beiden Buchstaben wird die Eintheilung der ganzen Philosophie angezeigt; durch das π der praktische, und durch das θ der theoretische Theil derselben. Plato, dem Boethius beinahe in allen Stücken folgt, ward auf diese Eintheilung durch die Vergleichung der ersten Gründe des Denkens und Handelns gebracht. Ihre Unentbehrlichkeit und Richtigkeit hat sie allen Wahrheitsforschern bis auf den heutigen Tag wichtig gemacht. Um so mehr ist es zu verwundern, daß der neuste englische Übersetzer Ridpath von dieser Erklärung abgegangen ist, und dem θ die Bedeutung Gott, und dem π die der Philosophie beigelegt hat, besonders da das griechische π zur Bezeichnung der Philosophie meines Wissens nie gebraucht worden ist.

this research in his footnotes. Thus, the footnotes stand as important aspects, or integral parts, of the texts or editions themselves.

The inventories of translations of Boethius's final statement to the world should prove useful for any preliminary research on the translations. Many new directions should open to scholars in Boethian studies that heretofore have not been explored sufficiently. It is with pioneer-scholars in mind, who might become interested in these new directions in research, that the inventories are being created as reference texts. The inventories are organized chronologically, with a separate entry for each translation. The sections are defined by the type of translations they comprise, whether complete, partial, meters only, etc. The plan of the work is encyclopedic in format: some biographical material is provided for each translator; the translations are described briefly, as are their linguistic peculiarities, their implied audiences, their links with other translations, and the general reception of each work is noted.

The bibliographical entries that conclude the textual entries in the inventories include articles, book chapters, and whole works devoted to the translations, but they omit literary histories in which the translations are simply mentioned.

The task of creating the inventories is formidable, but the work is needed now, as Boethian Studies continues to move into the relatively new areas of research on the translation and reception of the *Consolatio*.

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