The Old English Boethius. An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae

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The Old English Boethius. An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius’s De Consolatione Philosophiae
MALCOLM GODDEN AND SUSAN IRVINE (Eds.)
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009
1240 pp., ISBN: 978-019-925966-3, £205.00/$365.00

Hwæt þu wast þæt nan mon ne mæg næmne cræft cyþan ne næmne anweald reccan ne stioran butan tollum and andweorce (Truly you know that no-one can show any skill, or exercise or control any power, without tools and material). This line from the Old English version of Boethius’s De Consolatio Philolosphiae (OEBo) will sound familiar to anyone who has ever picked up an anthology of Old English literature. The line belongs to a famous passage in which the author of the OEBo rewrites his original and describes how a good king should provide his tools (prayer-men, army-men and work-men) with ample material (land, gifts and other necessities). This passage and other deviations from the Latin original have attracted major scholarly attention as the author of the OEBo is traditionally identified with King Alfred the Great. By analysing the way Alfred adapted Boethius’s work we were assumed to be able to reconstruct the preoccupations and ideas of one of England’s greatest royals. This assumption is now downplayed by Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine’s new edition of the OEBo: the editors suggest that most deviations from the original are based on a tradition of early medieval commentary and that King Alfred himself, very likely, was not involved in the creation of the OEBo. As such, the new edition closes the door on Alfredian interpretations of the OEBo, but, at the same time, it opens up new research possibilities by its thorough and detailed presentation of the first vernacular translation of one of the most influential texts of the Middle Ages.

This two-volume edition marks the completion of The Alfredian Boethius Project, based at the University of Oxford, 2002–7, the primary aim of which was to enhance understanding of the Anglo-Saxon adaptation and appropriation of late Roman culture. Five years of intensive research into the history and background of the Anglo-Saxon interest in Boethius, and particularly the Anglo-Saxon versions of his De Consolatione Philosophiae, have led to many publications and, ultimately, this new edition, which replaces Sedgefield’s (1899–1900). Like Sedgefield, Godden and Irvine provide the text and translation of both the prose and the prosimetrical version (known as the meters of Boethius) of the OEBo. Their main advantage over Sedgefield is their rich introductory and commentary material, which reflects the intensity and multidimensional nature of the research project this edition stems from.
Volume One contains a highly detailed introduction and a critical edition of the different versions of the OEBo. The introduction contains a long and detailed description of the manuscripts of the OEBo and the relationships between them: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 180 and Junius 12, London, British Library, Cotton Otho A.vi, and the Napier Fragment. This is followed by a discussion of the composition of the prose and prosimetrical version of the text, which focuses specifically on how the prose author made use of earlier commentaries in Latin manuscripts and how, later, someone else reworked this prose translation into a prosimetrical version by translating the metrical sections of the Latin into Old English alliterative verse. Next is a discussion of the OEBo within an Alfredian context. The editors conclude that the profile of the author of the OEBo, as a learned and confident Latinist, does not match with that of King Alfred (who, according to Asser, only learned Latin in his late thirties). The introductory material is completed by analyses of the language, later uses (by Ælfric, Nicholas Trivet and others) and previous editions of the OEBo. Volume One concludes with the editions of the prose version (Bodley 180), the prosimetrical version (Cotton Otho A.vi, cross-referenced to Junius 12), the Napier Fragment and some passages by Ælfric which draw on the OEBo.

Volume Two provides Modern English translations of both the prose and prosimetrical version, followed by textual notes on the Old English texts. The next feature in this second volume is what really sets this edition apart from all its predecessors: ca. 280 pages of rich and highly detailed commentary. The commentary is arranged per chapter and begins with a short summary of its contents, along with a general impression of how the Anglo-Saxon author adapted his original. This short summary is followed by commentary on specific phrases and sections, often providing the corresponding lines of the Latin original or the corresponding passages of manuscript glosses that the author may have used. This material allows us to reconstruct how the early medieval tradition of Boethian commentary affected the Anglo-Saxon translator’s understanding of his Latin original and will provide future scholars with a wealth of formerly unavailable information. Finally, there is a complete glossary and a list of proper names.

The edition by Godden and Irvine has a few minor shortcomings. First, the focus of the editors lies heavily on matters of composition and language, rather than on context and interpretation. For example, the Alfredian context, the question of authorship and the dating issue are all dealt with in only fifteen pages, which is limited and inexhaustive in comparison to the fifty-five pages spent on minute details of the OEBo’s language. Second, the editors seem reluctant to draw hard conclusions and prefer to keep their options open. Some problems, e.g. dating or manuscript relations, are dealt with by summing up hypotheses by former scholars and the reader is left with unsatisfying remarks, such as that a certain question “has been much debated and is in part a matter of personal opinion or speculation” (Vol. I, p. 50). On one occasion this academic reserve is remarkably absent. On Volume I, pages 56–7, the editors mention a group of English manuscripts from the late tenth and early
eleventh century which contain glosses to the original Latin text of Boethius. These glosses show close parallels with the OEBo and the editors assume that the author of the OEBo must have had a manuscript containing an early version of this commentary tradition (seeing as the manuscripts all post-date the composition of the OEBo). In line with the restraint of the editors throughout the introduction, they should have kept open the possibility that the OEBo may have influenced the glosses in these manuscripts, rather than vice versa; especially since the editors remark on Volume I, page 71 that, in English monasteries, the Old English version was probably read as a complement to the Latin original. The final shortcoming of this edition has to do with the user friendliness of the translation and the commentary in Volume Two. The translations lack line numbers which correspond to the Old English texts, making them less useful for finding the translation of single passages or lines one is interested in. The commentary, finally, could have been improved by adding the translation of the cited Latin lines from the original and the early medieval commentary.

Overall, Godden and Irvine, as experienced editors, have definitely succeeded in showing their skill with this edition of the OEBo. It sets the standard for future editions of medieval texts, not in the least by illustrating how detailed and thorough an edition of a text can (and should) be. With the much-cited words of the author of the OEBo in mind, then, we can only conclude that Godden and Irvine were the right tools, provided with the proper material.

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Texts and Traditions of Medieval Pastoral Care. Essays in Honour of Bella Millett
C. GUNN AND C. INNES-PARKER (Eds.)
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xx + 217 pp., ISBN: 978-1-903153-29-1, £50.00/$95.00

This volume in honour of Bella Millett gathers thirteen contributions on different aspects of devotional and pastoral literature in late medieval England. As the editors point out in their introduction, the themes and issues addressed in the essays reflect the broad interests of Millett’s production, though she is best known for her work on Ancrene Wisse, the early thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses.

The first essay, by E. A. Jones, discusses the complex late medieval relation between solitary life and pastoral care, which—the author claims—should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive. This is followed by Elaine Treharne’s contribution, which is the only one to go as far back as the late Anglo-Saxon period; it focuses on the problems related to the identification of vernacular manuscripts’ origin and/or provenance. Another manuscript—Lambeth Palace Library, MS 487—is the main subject of