Chapter One

The Ironic *Consolation*
and Its Reception

Boethius’s *Consolation* is typically taken as a serious philosophical work, even by those who admit to its Menippean affiliations. This is not unreasonable, as its sophisticated philosophical content reflects Boethius’s mature thought on crucial topics and proved fundamental to the medieval schools.1 The legend of his martyrdom makes it uncharitable to suggest that his last words did not literally satisfy his soul; and as most readers do not have patience for the book’s details, it seems much safer to confound philosophy and pedantry and attribute its perceived dullness to high-mindedness. Critics of modern Menippean satire do not imagine that *Consolation* is relevant to the genre and its history. Now I have long read *Consolation* as an ironic text—literally, its words meaning other than what they seem to mean—and I have found the greatest support in this approach not from classicists, who are rarely fascinated by or engaged with the text, but from Northrop Frye and from various more modern medievalists, who are willing to believe that if Chaucer liked it, there must be something more to it. Payne’s *Chaucer and Menippean Satire* is my predecessor here; though the readings of Chaucer presented in it have not found wide acceptance, and though my view of the
nature of the genre is quite different, Payne rightly emphasizes the ironies of Boethius's text as crucial ingredients in its literary influence.

But the conclusions about the nature of Consolation that I put forward in Ancient Menippean Satire I achieved primarily through a study of it in relation to antecedent classical and late classical Menippean satires, not to later works and traditions. An ironic interpretation seemed indicated, as I could read the end of Consolation only as a description of a dialogue reaching an impasse, and this reading came to make sense in the light of a classical tradition (stretching from Menippus and Varro through Seneca and Petronius on to Lucian, Julian, and Martianus Capella) in which scholars and satirists take to task the theories and constructs that in others of their works had satisfied them. A constant theme in the genre is that those who presume to observe the world from some superior vantage point, whether as moral critics (satirists) or intellectual critics (philosophers), cannot understand what they see, because human life and thought, inherently irrational, cannot be made to fit the logical categories of such observers; consequently, theorists are the butt of the humor of a Menippean satire. The observer's confident pronouncements, belied by the facts, force the reader to interpret them as commentary more on the observer than on what is observed—we hear what the embarrassed critic does not. Surprise endings tend to debunk the preceding discussions; what is advocated (typically between the lines, because the antidogmatic genre is allergic to preaching) is an antitheoretical common sense; the genre is Christianized as the common sense of Menippus's Cynicism is recast as Christian piety in late antiquity, not only in Boethius, but in Ennodius as well.

Again, this definition and history was not arrived at a priori but by the consideration of the details of interpretation of individual texts. It was the Mythologies of Fulgentius that started me on the road to Menippean satire: its tale of a narrator whose mythological studies are changed after his argument with his Muse starts along an Ovidian path; the resulting library of mythical interpretations, expounded to the narrator by Calliope, a mythical character who will allegorize herself away in the middle of these debunking rationalizations, belonged to a quite different tradition. The purpose of the Menippean compilation is to embarrass our mythographer and his theories about the end of the age of myth, demonstrate the comic and literary vitality of the myths that he seeks to reduce to mere morals, and show the limitations of the knowledge contained within his presumptuous encyclopedia.
Of course, Martianus Capella’s *Marriage* is an obvious sticking point in the history of the genre when it is viewed this way: why such a vast effort to create an encyclopedia whose point is that the truth lies beyond its compilations? But I think that this is the surface meaning of these texts; I refuse to take as protestations of modesty such passages as the end of Martianus’s *Marriage*, in which Satyra, the Muse of work, abandons it in disgust as a hodge-podge without a clear didactic point (9.997–1000). These works helped me to see some of the realities of the plot of *Consolation*: that the debate between the prisoner and Philosophy is a debate between an author and his Muse; that there is a struggle for control of the work and its interpretation; and that Philosophy is frustrated by the narrator’s questions, never gets to talk about what she wants in the later books, and is forced to abandon many of her goals. The resulting book is not what its Muse intended. It was, then, an ironic reading of *Consolation* that helped to formulate what I thought were the characteristics, the nature, and the history of the genre of Menippean satire as a whole; I was able to discern a pattern of development in which *Consolation* occupied a place intermediate between the genre’s Cynic origins and its twelfth-century transformation.

That *Consolation*, so understood, can be seen as occupying a specific place in a lengthy literary history is one sort of argument for the interpretation that I offered in my previous study. But what I seek to do now is to make my assertion of a Menippean reading of *Consolation* more plausible, and to bolster an argument made in conjunction with antecedent Menippean traditions, by an intensive appeal to the details of the plot and structure of *Consolation*, to the other traditions and texts that I see at work in it, and by considering later authors who saw in *Consolation* either failure in its serious and surface goals or success in its ironic and subtextual ones. Payne offers a suggestive reading of *Consolation* that may help in the interpretation of Chaucer, but I will be pursuing those later texts that would support the argument that *Consolation* presents a Philosophy whose teachings do not satisfy or are not the ones that she wanted to teach. Both of these attempts, to relate the details of *Consolation* to parallels in texts outside of its genre and to recover a specifically ironic reception of *Consolation*, will be offered as further arguments for the interpretation that I propose.

For I do not think that *Consolation* is merely truth-testing (as Dronke labels it), or even that it celebrates the inalienable right of human beings to be free from the straitjacket of rational thought (pace Payne). Marenbon is
content to say that Consolation explores the limitations of Philosophy as a conscious goal. I would go further; I find myself more in the company of critics of Menippean satire in the Enlightenment and in the modern world, who argue that the genre insists on the essential disconnectedness of facts and rejects the mythical modes of reasoning that look for theories to explain events (Kaplan 2000, inspired by Wittgenstein), or that it uses at least two voices to oppose a threatening or false orthodoxy (Weinbrot 2005). But in considering Consolation, I am much more specific: the Philosophy that would give the prisoner wings and a chance to fly out of prison (4.1.9) is never allowed to do so, because the prisoner grounds her by his demand for an accounting of his own life and of earthly life in general. In books 4 and 5 the narrator closes Philosophy's open door out of the prison. When the prisoner compels Philosophy to admit that divine foreknowledge of human events does impose a sort of necessity on human action and free will, we see that the prisoner's own philosophical nature and interests, at odds with the journey to his true home that the personified Love of Wisdom freely offers, does not allow him the particular freedom that is Philosophy's gift. Acting as a philosopher, the prisoner deprives himself of Philosophy's undeniably great gift of a heavenly vision; he is forced to be satisfied with God's contemplation of the earth, rather than the earth's contemplation of God. In this collision of desires a via media is glimpsed, the common sense that is the path not taken in Menippean satires, and here this is Christian faith. Philosophy, who had chided the prisoner for looking down to the ground at the beginning of Consolation, abandons her effort to make him look up to heaven and so looks down with him as the Menippean observer, a catasco-pus; the world that she and the narrator see does not make sense to them through their own eyes, but would through the eyes of God. The prisoner prays, using Philosophy's expertise only to establish a groundwork for prayer, and it is quite doubtful that this is the flight home that Philosophy had in mind.

I submit the following as the crucial "hard data" that any interpretation of Consolation must deal with, the four unfulfilled promises of the text. First, as it is styled a consolation, we expect a treatment of death and of the soul, but, despite a few promising passages in which Philosophy seems to be on the verge of satisfying our desires, she never does. The title is therefore playful and paradoxical, raising, but ultimately frustrating, certain serious expectations. Second, Philosophy tells the narrator that she will help
him remember who he really is (1.6.14 ff.; cf. also 1.2.6), for this forgetfulness, intimately bound up with his forgetfulness of her, is the true cause of his illness. The call to Socratic self-realization does not lead to any explicit definition of the nature of a human being in general, or of the narrator in particular; at least, not within the bounds of the text. Third, Philosophy promises to lead the narrator to his true homeland (4.1.9 and the subsequent 4.m.1; 5.1.4): she never does. There is nothing like a Platonic myth in Consolation, no vision of heavenly harmonies or guided tour of the universe, no peek into the abyss, no apocalypse, no release from the prison. Fourth, and finally, Philosophy never administers the harsher remedies that she promises. The prisoner says that he is ready for them at 3.1.2, but the last use of the image of the medicinal draft is at 4.6.57, when she offers a poem whose sweetness will ready him for further discussion. But the harsh remedy alluded to is surely Socrates’ cup of hemlock, and the prisoner does not die, possibly because he does not want to go where Philosophy would take him. He will not die, but live. One expedient is to claim that at the dialogue’s end the prisoner is ready for what has not yet been accomplished, and that he has been properly prepared to die, to learn who he is, and to enter Philosophy’s homeland. This may well be true. But then preparation consists of a pattern of absences, omissions, and frustrations of expectation that must be viewed as central to the interpretation of a dialogue which, on its face, ends up far from where it began and concludes with arguments that it misunderstands. The prisoner, rejecting the journey to heaven, remains on the earth.

Reception: Historical and Idiosyncratic Considerations

That Philosophy does not succeed in her desire to lead the exile to his death and thus to his true home, that there is a struggle for control of the argument, that Philosophy’s concluding arguments represent the tempering of her system by the prisoner’s (I will argue, Christian) desires—this interpretation seems not to have been advanced before. Modern readings, typically favorably impressed by the Christian philosopher’s unexpected rejection of Christianity and revelation in an hour of need, are more concerned to define those competing claims of reason and experience within the text whose reconciliation is symbolized by its integration of prose and verse, of poetry and philosophy. I claim that the Christian sentiment, expressed in biblical
allusions at crucial junctures, liturgical language, and emotional and devotional stance, emerges as a sign of the system to be preferred when neither Philosophy nor experience can make sense of the prisoner’s place in the world. It is fair, then, to raise the question of where my reading comes from, which sees this work as an autobiographical account of a philosopher’s growing dissatisfaction with some of his own prior beliefs, and which ends in the acceptance of a different set of values, in effect, a deconversion.

In Ancient Menippean Satire I proposed a definition of the genre that spoke more of self-parody and the parody of encyclopedic knowledge than of Bakhtinian polyphony; within the history of the genre I saw a change from the parody of the social critic (in Rome, the satirist) to the parody of the intellectual critic; Varro, with his feet in both worlds, inspires the encyclopedic fantasies of late antiquity; Boethius, along with Fulgentius and Ennodius, effectively Christianizes this genre. But to claim that Martianus Capella’s Marriage of Philology and Mercury aims to make fun of its encyclopedic content and favor the mystical ascent to the truth that is not found in books—this may seem too counterintuitive, or simply too modern. Are these views the product of my own historical location, a reflex perhaps of modern deconstructionist theory, or a retrojection of twentieth-century aesthetics? Is this reading of Boethius a naïve and quixotic attempt to recover an original meaning, the author’s intent? Or, worse, as my views on Consolation have changed over the years, is it merely a desperate compulsion of evidence to fit a theory?

Just as I would not reproduce my earlier work on Menippean satire as probative of my reading of Consolation, so too I would not claim that I have merely synthesized the work of others. Yet among modern critics I would identify three as inspirational, even if I do not accept their ultimate conclusions. Payne finds in the dialogue the prisoner’s constant struggle to escape from the intellectual straitjackets that Philosophy would impose on him, but finds no such specifically Christian escape. Lerer hears in the silence with which the work ends the language of prayer, but also the acceptance of Philosophy’s ability to direct his thoughts and his prayers. Dronke helps to define one of Consolation’s major lines of influence in the development of medieval autobiography; but, although he speaks of the undermining, relativizing, and truth-testing of the Menippean genre, the multiple “I”s of a Menippean text, and the truth that arises in the interplay of minds, he does
not claim for the end of *Consolation* a new truth but the prisoner's gaining of a "radiant strength."\(^{19}\)

For the *fides quærens intellectum* in these matters, we may invoke reception for considerations of method that will allow us to sail between the Scylla and the Charybdis of assertion and complaisance. But reception is itself a curious thing. We are denied access to a text's original meaning, if there ever was such a thing, and are constrained to view it through the filters of subsequent use and interpretation as text becomes icon. Yet we still exercise our right to reject (perhaps only to try to reject) certain influential views, as texts may inspire utterly contradictory lines of influence, as in fact *Consolation* has. After all, the positivist interpretations of the last hundred years are the first to be swept away in order to let reception have its say about classical literature. And there are further complications, as the rightly rejected theoretical approaches of ages past (the medieval allegorization of Vergil, for example, or the moralizing of Ovid) may be approached for insight, and at the fuzzy edges of hermeneutic principle is heuristic reality: texts are inexhaustible, and readers are well advised to listen to what other readers have to say about them.\(^{20}\)

Reception theory is certainly right to encourage a sort of humility in the face of history, but humility is not method: there is no particular logic by which individual readers unconsciously assemble the inevitable filters or consult the particular elements of the great chain of reception. By our own patterns of reading we create our own models against which we evaluate what we read next.\(^{21}\) Ancients and moderns would probably agree that reading and interpretation are matters of the reader's self-discovery.\(^{22}\) We are not perfect microcosms of literary history; reception theory may encourage us to pat ourselves on the back for our mastery of Great Books in Sequence, whether we have read them or not; but we must remember our normal desire to read our books from back to front, and our traditions from front to back, and to skip about as the spirit moves us.

Further, once we are consciously aware as critics of reception's role in the reading and interpretation of texts, the rules are changed, and unconscious influences may be less powerful than conscious desires. We may have very different explicit motivations when we try to constitute the particular chain of reception at whose end we would stand. This strikes me as resembling the essential Catholic-Protestant debate: whether authoritative texts are to
be understood in the light of an ongoing revelation, or whether they are to be stripped of the accretions of a fallible tradition. In practice, there are no pure forms of either, and both, in their theoretical, pure forms, are very much alike because they equally refuse to stand still: both continuing revelation and continuing rejection of yesterday’s readings threaten to produce that on-going revolution that cynics would say is the true religion that organized religion tries to suppress. I draw the analogy because literary criticism, like literary creation, is an arena in which inspiration has an undeniable role. The processes of both are numinous.  

I was once very carefully told that I should never say that I had “figured out” the meaning of a work; rather, I should examine my conscience to discover what personal and historical forces made my particular interpretation inevitable. The first half of this statement is fair, but surely the second is ridiculous; if nothing else, natural contrariness should make me dissatisfied with such an analysis of my own motives. We may, and should, labor mightily to discover the historical prejudices of others, but I would maintain that our own can never be completely known to us. Inspiration leads us as readers and critics to conclusions that we must think essential to the work in question and lends us a rhetoric that is the tool that lets us try to persuade others of them. For persuasion is at the heart of the enterprise: my opinions per se should be of interest to no one, but, if I may continue my analogy, my desire to win converts to my opinion is. Certainly the least persuasive forms of argument are “I read the work this way because my teacher told me to,” or “Current history requires this interpretation.” If we think that our readings are purely idiosyncratic, meditations upon our own prejudices and not upon the text, or if we think that they are mere historical artifacts, fashioned by accident and circumstance, we ought to keep quiet. There is no compelling reason for burdening others with our private thoughts; as critics we must all believe at some level that what we think makes at least some pretense to wider application.

I cannot say therefore by what specific theory I insist that the details of the plot of Consolation need careful attention, and that prevailing interpretations seem to ignore crucial details which, when taken into account, would change those interpretations. I suppose that there is something of New Criticism in this (if the term has any relevance left); I admit that “common sense” is a tyrannical label for an attempt to deal with all of the phenomena
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of a text. But it is not necessary to engage in hand-wringing over the necessity of interpretation, nor is it proper to label assertion as arrogance, a pejorative term for an inevitability. What I would offer is a protestation of honesty, showing to the best of my ability the steps and stages by which I reached my conclusions, and how my reading of Consolation affected my explicitly stated theories about the nature and history of the genre of Menippean satire. I am willing to call this an argument, in all of the senses of the term.

The Scholar at Play

In other words, I claim that in reading Consolation, as in reading the other late classical Menippean satires, most modern readers have simply missed the joke. The text is both over-familiar and under-read; it is the modern reception of the text, and the expectations raised in readers because of this reception, that must be countered. One has to agree with reception theory here and admit that it is practically impossible to come to Consolation for the first time, though I hope to demonstrate in what follows just what such an encounter might be like. And so I do think that I have “figured it out,” though I am uncertain of the relative proportions of revelation and analytical discovery. But I am not the first; I am not proposing a complete “paradigm shift”; not all people at all times have missed this joke; we may speak of a “Menippean reception” of Consolation. I have argued that Menippean satire takes its inspiration from Plato and that in the course of its history it returns to its origins in the twelfth century, in increasingly philosophical discussions of whether humans and human reason can find a logical place in the fabric of the physical universe. The fact that rational theories cannot explain irrational human beings is originally the entrée for attacking the silliness of philosophy; in time it becomes the argument for the existence of a transcendent reality. Boethius is not at the end of any tradition; the often-repeated phrase “last of the Romans, first of the Schoolmen” asserts this reality in one way, but the history of Menippean satire shows it in quite another. In the history of the genre that I detailed in Ancient Menippean Satire, the genre that has its origins in Plato finds its comic fulfillment in Alan of Lille and its sublime transformation in Bernardus Silvestris. It is
The twelfth century that proceeds from Boethius's text into prosimetric accounts of the inadequacy of Philosophy, and thus of the necessity of Theology, to explain the place of human beings in creation. Boethius is intermediate in his use of prose and verse—he does not write a medieval prosimetrum, though he does influence its development. So too in techniques of dialogue: Boethius' *Consolation* exists along a trajectory that leads from the Socratic dialogue to the medieval consolatory dialogue and the instructional dialogue, but is not equivalent with any of them. Many of the extraordinary characteristics of *Consolation* can be made to appear more reasonable when they are located within the history of a developing, unfolding genre.

It is easier to claim that we should read in the light of reception than to prove that we inevitably do; but it is certainly true that *Consolation*, which has exerted its influence in many different genres and in many different ways, suffers in modern times from being largely removed from the arena of creative imitation. In the Middle Ages, when it was endlessly imitated, authors saw within it many more things than we see now, including its comic and ironic potential (see chapter 9). For example, we know of an eleventh century musical production of *Consolation*, in which a similarity between the poems and the Psalms must surely have been exploited; we also know of a Burgundian commentary on *Consolation*, into which obscene stories were interpolated as glosses. The twelfth century uses *Consolation* to construct myths that describe the end of Christian Platonism and the inability of the mind to comprehend the universe, but the relations between Philosophy and the prisoner are also the inspiration for Abelard's depiction of Heloise, for the debate between Reason and the Lover in *Romance of the Rose*, for the sublimation of Dante's grief for the dead Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova*.

Modern readers and critics circumscribe and limit the possibilities of *Consolation* because it is a work that seems to have ceased to engage the imagination of modern authors. This trend begins in the Renaissance, as Humanist literature seems to bypass *Consolation* altogether, though its influence may be detected in a few of that era's Menippean satires. In fact, contemporary interpretations seem more pious than the most adulatory ones of the Middle Ages. The *Consolation*'s prisoner who, at the point of death, is forced to wrestle with eternal questions and to locate his soul in eternity, continues to work his influence, perhaps even in *Darkness at Noon*. The Boethius who wrestles with philosophy and politics lies behind one of the
characters in Iain Pears’ brilliant work *The Dream of Scipio*. And *Consolation* can certainly take its place in the general history of prison literature as well. 34

But to cite the exception to this rule is to understand it: John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Its hero, Ignatius J. Reilly, is a scholar gone mad, compiling endless notebooks of rant against the world, quoting from *Consolation*, appealing to Fortuna and her wheel, clinging to Boethius, and so becoming utterly estranged from the corrupt world of New Orleans. His own text of *Consolation* becomes, through a series of misadventures, a prop in a widely distributed pornographic picture with a schoolhouse theme: a book, a globe, and a female teacher in a provocative pose. *Consolation* has here become a symbol of wisdom out of place.

In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Philosophy appears in the person of one Myra Minkoff, a friend from college with whom Ignatius used to assail the modern academic and intellectual orthodoxies; she now wants to liberate him from his mother and New Orleans with promises of sex and New York and wants him to abandon his notebooks and run away. He resists her strenuously and will not take her path until the very end when he is still trying to grab armfuls of his notebooks to stuff into her car, trying for salvation on his own terms. One description of Myra is certainly drawn from the beginning of *Consolation*, in the Philosophy who has been attacked (cf. 1.1.5; 1.3.7):

I have seen that liberated doxy a few times since then, for, from time to time she embarks on an “inspection tour” of the South, stopping eventually in New Orleans to harangue me and to attempt to seduce me with the grim prison and chain-gang songs she strums on her guitar. Myrna is very sincere; unfortunately, she is also offensive. When I saw her after her last “inspection tour” she was rather bedraggled. She had stopped throughout the rural South to teach Negroes folk songs she had learned at the Library of Congress. . . . Although the Negroes had tried to ignore her, the whites had shown great interest in her. Bands of crackers and rednecks had chased her from the villages, slashed her tires, whipped her a bit about the arms. She had been hunted by bloodhounds, shocked by cattle prods, chewed by police dogs, peppered lightly with shotgun pellets. She had loved every minute of it, showing me quite proudly (and, I might add,
suggestively) a fang mark on her upper thigh. My stunned and disbelieving eyes had noticed that on that occasion she was wearing dark stockings and not leotards. My blood, however, failed to rise.35

We see the new Muses and the promise of true music, prison music; the descent from the true homeland, the delight in persecution, the promise of union and return. And what of the revealing of her thigh? After all, Philosophy's robes are torn; and it is Alan of Lille who depicts a similar apparition (Natura, like Lydia the Tattooed Lady, with an encyclopedia of the natural world on her cloak) to a narrator who finds himself wondering just what is to be found above the tops of her boots.36

Every student of Consolation should read A Confederacy of Dunces, but clearly it proves nothing about the essential nature of Consolation. A Confederacy of Dunces could be just a parody of a serious Consolation. The counter-argument that the novel, by a comic use of Consolation, points to a comic potential in Consolation is not necessarily convincing. And I should not like to undertake a proof that Toole had a knowledge of Alan of Lille. But the novel is part of Consolation's modern reception, and this creative use of the text is at the very least a useful antidote to interpretations that presume the text to be a serious, inspirational, but ultimately unusable, demonstration of a particular set of philosophical worldviews that can no longer find a truly sympathetic audience in the twentieth century.37

My interest in the reception of Consolation is not to attempt to speak of its forward and outspreading influence. This is a vast topic.38 Rather, I am interested in working backward, to see what elements in the reception of Consolation may bear some probative weight as concerns the reading that I have presented. There is no difficulty in documenting that the first Latin texts to use Consolation suggest a battle between a Muse and an author in which the author is overpowered; or that the lack of self-definition was a defect that needed to be made up; or that the presence of Job was felt. And the twelfth century and what used to be called the School of Chartres saw in Consolation a work that emphasized the difficulty of transcendence through Philosophy and accordingly offered a view of the world in which Theology explains what Philosophy cannot and thus can make a universe that human beings fit in.39

In what follows I attempt a close reading of the text, pointing to details of dramatization and argument, and to parallel texts in antecedent philo-
sophic, comic, and consolatory traditions, that will make, I hope, the point that \textit{Consolation} is to be seen as a work that does not accomplish what it sets out to do, that it does so intentionally, and that its larger goal is to demonstrate the limits of philosophy as understood, or misunderstood, by an author who refuses to accept its transcendent nature. In other words, I will present as fully as possible that interpretation of \textit{Consolation} which enabled me in the first place to see what the nature of classical Menippean satire is, and then suggest classical models, contemporary analogs, and later adaptations that show similar themes and structures at work. Because I see the text’s goals and methods very differently, the parallels that I will bring to bear are frequently not those of more standard analyses. I try to keep these discussions brief, being content more to suggest and point the way to future study than to pretend to exhaustive proofs of dependence or influence. I will consider the consolatory tradition; some classical texts whose plots parallel that of \textit{Consolation} (Plato’s \textit{Crito}, in which the philosopher cannot escape his prison because he is a philosopher; various dialogues of Lucian, especially \textit{Jupiter Confutatus}, in which the impudent questioner exposes the absurdity of the lofty figure of authority); sixth- and seventh-century analogues and reactions (a poem of Agathias Scholasticus on the irreconcilability of Plato and Aristotle; the reading of \textit{Consolation} implied by Maximian’s \textit{Third Elegy}; Isidore of Seville’s \textit{Synonyma}, which tries to make up some of the perceived deficiencies of \textit{Consolation}); and late medieval vernacular literature (see William Heise’s chapter on personification allegories in Dante, Alan, \textit{The Romance of the Rose}, and Langland). I will also address in passing parallels within Christian literature (\textit{Consolation} as a Christianization of Job; as apocalypse; and as autobiography after the manner of Augustine).

\textit{Consolation} is a book of stunning depth and complexity. To speak of it as play does not label it as trivial: it is an experiment on an ambitious scale, an intellectual autobiography, an attempt to identify the author’s self in the context of his thoughts and of his political world. This self is quite particular, that of a Roman proud to be Rome’s last patriot, last poet, last scholar, and last philosopher; and a Roman who makes humble discoveries about himself and learns to make modest claims. \textit{Consolation}, accordingly, can be seen not just as Menippean satire, but as satire in its more original sense, an exploratory attempt at self-definition through confrontation with otherness. To those who have taken the patience to dwell on its details and its poetic resonances, there is revealed a world of bitter emotion, vast longing,
and unexpected beauty. My contentions do not demean, nor can they exhaust, the dazzling potentialities of this text; I do hope to offer a new and cogent way of looking at it. In speaking of irony and parody I do not intend to claim that there is no serious philosophical content in *Consolation*, or that the author is not interested in advancing serious arguments. Nor will I just claim that it is context that makes us realize the relative worth of, and thus devalue, philosophical abstractions. We ought not argue from the fact that there is no escape from the prison that the abstractions of Philosophy are valueless, as if she should have brought the prisoner a cake with a file in it instead. Plato shows us the value of irony as a tool for stating philosophical truths; are we really to be satisfied with understanding *Consolation* as having a happy ending? I think that *Consolation* dramatizes what happens to a man who limits himself to words when questions of the soul and its true home are paramount. The philosopher who returns to the world of Aristotelian commentary to score a point against Philosophy herself, and then finds that it is prayer and not logic that is the way home, makes a painful but hopeful and helpful discovery. The prisoner’s silence is the end of the book, the silence of prayer and the silence of Job, beyond the realm of discursive thought. And the marvel is that the author has constructed, quite strictly within the limits of his professional competence, a tale about those limits.