"FRŌFRE TŌ FÆDER ON HEOFONUM": A BOETHIAN READING OF FATE, PROVIDENCE, AND CONSOLATION IN *THE WANDERER*

Claire Wagner

ENGL 331: Medieval Literature

December 14, 2023

The anonymous Old English poem known as *The Wanderer* belongs to the group of Anglo-Saxon poems from the Exeter Book collectively referred to as the elegies. Although the manuscript likely dates from the late tenth century, linguistic evidence points to an earlier date of composition for the poem itself, possibly the late ninth century.[1] In 115 alliterative lines, *The Wanderer* poignantly describes the bitter lot of the exile who must wander the world, homeless and friendless, after the deaths of his lord and kin. The poem's depiction of themes such as fate, transience, and divine grace has invited many comparisons to Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Scholars such as R. M. Lumiansky and A. D. Horgan maintain that *The Wanderer* explicitly draws on Boethian philosophy in its treatment of issues such as the nature of true happiness and the wise response to misfortune. Others, including Paul S. Langeslag, suggest that similarities between the *Consolation* and *The Wanderer* reflect parallel but independent evolution of ideas rather than direct influence.[2] This analysis investigates parallels between the portrayals of fate, providence, and consolation in the *Consolation* (especially its Old English translation) and *The Wanderer* without taking a firm stance on the issue of influence. It argues that both literary works depict fate, governed by God, as the determiner of one's lot in life. Since all things under heaven are doomed to pass away, wisdom and comfort come from recognizing that God is the only source of true happiness and security.

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[1] Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 11-21.

[2] Lumiansky, "The Dramatic Structure"; Horgan, "*The Wanderer*"; Langeslag, "Boethian Similitude."

Boethius in Anglo-Saxon England

Few philosophical works have exerted as extensive an influence on medieval English literature as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Composed around 525, the *Consolation* takes the form of a dialogue between the imprisoned statesman Boethius and the personified Philosophy.[3] As Boethius awaits his likely execution, Philosophy comforts him through a series of prosimetric reflections on the nature of fortune, felicity, fate, and free will. Although the work's significance for later medieval writers is unquestionable, the degree to which it influenced the Old English corpus is more debatable. However, the writings of Bede and Alcuin provide evidence that the *Consolation* was known to English intellectuals by the eighth century. Bede specifically references the *Consolation* in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (c. 731), while Alcuin lists Boethius's works more generally as part of the York Cathedral Library around 790.[4]

Furthermore, the *Consolation* was well-regarded enough to merit a translation into Old English between roughly 880 and 950. Attributed to King Alfred the Great (849-899), the Old English *Consolation* survives in two manuscripts: Cotton Otho A.vi from the mid-tenth century, which renders the meters in alliterative verse, and Bodley 180 from the early twelfth century, which renders the meters in prose and may have served as the basis for the former version.[5] According to the chronicler Æthelweard, both scholarly and non-scholarly audiences had been

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[3] *The Old English Boethius*, viii.

[4] Lumiansky, "The Dramatic Structure," 109; Redgate, "Bede," 90.

[5] It is beyond the scope of this analysis to engage the question of whether Alfred was actually involved with the translation. Accordingly, this analysis will sidestep the issue by referring to the translation simply as the Old English *Consolation*.

exposed to the Old English translation by the end of the tenth century.[6] As Paul Szarmach notes, the Old English *Consolation* reflects the translator's willingness to interpret and alter Boethius's original text rather than merely reproducing it word-for-word.[7] The Old English *Consolation* thus represents a valuable resource for understanding Old English engagement with Boethian philosophy.

Despite this evidence of early English interest in the *Consolation*, it is probably impossible to prove that *The Wanderer* reflects the influence of Boethian thought. It is certainly within the realm of possibility that the *Wanderer* poet was exposed to ideas from the *Consolation*. However, *The Wanderer* lacks overt, unambiguous verbal allusions to the *Consolation*, forcing scholars to make the case for Boethian influence based on thematic and philosophical similarities instead.[8] As Langeslag points out, such similarities do not necessarily prove that Boethius influenced *The Wanderer*, since the resemblance could just as easily derive from the poets' shared Christian worldview.[9] Nevertheless, even though direct influence may not be demonstrable beyond a shadow of a doubt, investigating possible parallels between Boethius and *The Wanderer* is still a worthwhile endeavor. The *Wanderer* poet may never have encountered the *Consolation* at all, whether in Latin or in Old English. Nevertheless, the Old English version serves as a window onto the ways in which the *Wanderer* poet's contemporaries adapted Boethian concepts to fit not only their language but also their cultural context.

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[6] *The Old English Boethius*, ix-xi; Szarmach, "Boethius's Influence," 221-223, 226-227.

[7] Szarmach, 234-235, 255.

[8] Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 34.

[9] Langeslag, "Boethian Similitude," 214-216, 219.

Fate, Providence, and Consolation in the *Consolation of Philosophy*

In the *Consolation*, Philosophy offers Boethius comfort in the midst of his afflictions by putting the temporal powers of fortune (Latin *fortuna*) and fate (Latin *fatum*) into an eternal perspective. Tormented by his unjust imprisonment and impending execution, Boethius longs to understand why the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper. He has sunk so deeply into bitter despondency that he even wonders whether blind chance, rather than the judgment of a just God, has caused his present misfortune.[10] Philosophy responds with the famous image of the personified Fortune at her wheel. All lesser goods that come from the hand of Fortune, including wealth, power, and fame, fail to bring happiness to their possessors because they are limited in scope and doomed to pass away. True happiness resides only in God, who is self-sufficient, unchanging, and immovable.[11] At this point, Boethius pivots from his discussion of fortune to consider fate. Although humans may perceive fate as random and unjust, it is actually the temporal outworking of God's eternal providence, which governs all things benevolently and justly. Consolation in the face of misfortune thus comes from turning away from the transience of lesser goods towards the stability and felicity of God, who is the highest good of all.[12]

The Old English *Consolation* largely reproduces this argument, but it also makes some notable modifications to further Christianize the work and adapt it to an Anglo-Saxon context. The Old English version replaces Philosophy with Wisdom, the personification of a concept that Nicole Discenza argues would have been more familiar to Anglo-Saxon audiences. A figure

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[10] Boethius, *The Consolation*, Book 1 Prose 4 and 6.

[11] Boethius, Books 2 and 3.

[12] Boethius, Books 3 and 4.

strongly associated with Christian Scripture in general and Christ in particular, Wisdom makes more overt appeals to Christian tradition than Philosophy does.[13] These changes reinforce the theme that the Christian God alone has ultimate control over the world. Furthermore, the Old English *Consolation* omits the personification of Fortune and collapses Boethius's two concepts of *fortuna* and *fatum* into the single governing force of *wyrd*.[14] This has the effect of unifying the two strands of the original's argument into a single claim about the relationship between fate and providence.

Given the prominence of *wyrd* in the Old English *Consolation*, it is worthwhile to examine the semantic range of the word. According to B. J. Timmer's study of occurrences of *wyrd* in Anglo-Saxon prose and poetry, the term originally referred to "a superhuman, blind and hostile power" understood to govern human lives in pre-Christian times, sometimes personified as the three Norns or Fates. But with the Christianization of England, the word lost its pagan associations and weakened into a neutral term for one's lot in life.[15] In its more specialized senses, the word could denote random chance, noteworthy events, the death of an individual, or even the end of the world. Overall, however, *wyrd* simply meant the inevitable course of events. Often used as part of or in parallel with expressions referring to God, the word came to be associated with divine providence in Christian literary works, including the Old English *Consolation*. As a result, Timmer concludes, *wyrd* refers in Anglo-Saxon literature to a force not opposed to or independent from God but rather subject to his control.[16]

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[13] Discenza, "The Translator's *Cræft*," 87-90; *The Old English Boethius*, xii, 426-427; Amodio, "Alfred's Translation," 44-45.

[14] *The Old English Boethius*, xiii, Prose 5, 427-428; Timmer, "*Wyrd*," 27-29.

[15] Timmer, 25, 30, 226-227.

In the Old English *Consolation*, therefore, *wyrd* — like Boethius's *fortuna* and *fatum* — may govern human lives, but it is governed in turn by God. Although humans may perceive *wyrd* as either favorable or unfavorable, God ultimately directs it to the good of the world. As Wisdom puts it, "[t]his mutable fate which we call *wyrd* acts according to his providence and his design, as he plans that it should be. Though it seems to us manifold, some good some evil, it is however single good to him, since he brings it all to a good end and does for good all that he does." Wisdom teaches Boethius that he must understand and accept the goodness and justice of this relationship between humans, *wyrd*, and God. Only by doing so can he find "a very great medicine for [his] sorrow" that can console him even in the face of misfortune.[17]

Fate, Providence, and Consolation in *The Wanderer*

The concept of *wyrd* also plays a central role in *The Wanderer*, where it occurs four times.[18] Before investigating these uses of *wyrd*, however, the two problems of speech attribution and structural integrity must be briefly considered. Firstly, scholars disagree on whether they should read *The Wanderer* as a monologue or a dialogue and, if the latter, which lines they should assign to which speakers. Following Gerald Richman and Anne L. Klinck, I interpret the poem as a unified monologue in which all lines are spoken by the eponymous Wanderer, aside

[16] Timmer, 27-33, 213-227.

[17] *The Old English Boethius*, Prose 29.3-6.

[18] All references to the text and translation of *The Wanderer* are cited by line number and taken from "The Wanderer," edited and translated by Richard Hamer. Additionally, the glossary in Dunning and Bliss, *The Wanderer*, 128-140 was consulted for assistance with the Old English verse.

from the narratorial exposition of lines 6-7 and 111.[19] Secondly, some scholars view the beginning and ending of *The Wanderer* (lines 1-5 and 112-115, respectively) as later interpolations, deeming their overtly Christian message to be incongruous with the purportedly more pagan tone of the rest of the poem.[20] As the following analysis will show, however, I diverge from this interpretation, regarding the first and last lines of the poem as a fitting introduction and conclusion to the themes of the elegy.

An analysis of the uses of *wyrd* in *The Wanderer* clearly shows that the poem shares the theme of fate governing human lives with the Old English *Consolation*. Introduced in line 5 as the force responsible for the exile's bitter lot, *wyrd* is presented as an inexorable power beyond the ability of the weary to resist (lines 5b, 15).[21] *Wyrd* is alliteratively linked to both the suffering of the exile (*wadan wræclāstas*, line 5a) and death in battle (*wæpen wælgīfru*, line 100a). Furthermore, as the poem continues to discuss the pain and ephemerality of mortal life, it points to *wyrd* as the cause: "all the kingdom / Of earth is fraught with hardship, the decree / Of fate alters the world under the heavens" (lines 106-107). As a result, the term carries primarily negative connotations in *The Wanderer* compared to its generally more neutral usage in the Old English *Consolation*. Despite this difference, however, both works agree that fate determines one's lot in life.

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[19] Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 31-32.

[20] Klinck, 106, 126; Timmer, "*Wyrd*," 220-221.

[21] According to Klinck, 107, the Old English word used to describe *wyrd* in line 5b, written as *ared* in the manuscript and typically corrected to *aræd*, has been variously interpreted as meaning "resolute" or "appointed." Either sense supports the reading of fate as inexorable in this analysis.

The Wanderer also echoes the Boethian view of *wyrd* as subject to divine providence, at least insofar as the first and last lines of the elegy are concerned. Although the Wanderer must endure the hardships ordained for him by fate, the opening of the poem asserts that he can rely on the mercy of God to withstand them (lines 1-5). The ending of the poem reiterates this theme by asserting that consolation and security can be found with the Father in heaven (lines 114b-115). The only refuge for those buffeted by the storms of fate is with God, since he alone is the ultimate ruler of the world. *Wyrd* may govern the lots of humans, but, as Boethius argues, it is governed in turn by the God whose grace sustains the ill-fated.

At first glance, the body of *The Wanderer*, which lacks the overt references to divine providence that characterize the first and last lines, does not support this Boethian reading of *wyrd* as subject to divine providence. However, a closer reading reveals both implicit and explicit comparisons between the temporal and the eternal that highlight the consolation found in God's sovereignty over fate. Near the mid-point of the poem, the Wanderer confides that he sees no reason why "in *this* world / [His] heart should not grow dark" as he contemplates the transience of all things (lines 58-63, emphasis added). As R. F. Leslie points out, the alliteration on the letter *thorn* in line 58 places unusual emphasis on the demonstrative *þās*, suggesting that the poet may intend to contrast the speaker's state of mind regarding the present world with the hope offered by the next.[22] Similarly, both Horgan and Lumiansky view this line as a turning point of the poem that signals the Wanderer's growth in Boethian wisdom.[23] Although the

[22] Klinck, 118-119.

[23] Horgan, "*The Wanderer*," 45; Lumiansky, "Dramatic Structure," 108.

vicissitudes of life in this world may invite the Wanderer to despair, he can find the strength to endure his lot by relying on grace from heaven.

As the poem goes on to describe the depredations of fate, another note of consolation emerges with the mention of "mankind's creator" (line 85b), as scholars like Horgan and Klinck have observed.[24] The poem explicitly compares the devastation wrought by fate to the Creator's destruction of ancient civilizations, an analogy that might initially seem to be the opposite of comforting. The analogy takes on more reassuring implications, however, when considered in the context of other passages in the Old English corpus that similarly parallel *wyrd* with divine providence, depicting fate as governed by God.[25] By comparing *wyrd* with the Creator, *The Wanderer* implies that God is the one responsible for — and thus in control of — even the destructive effects of fate, a portrayal reminiscent of Boethius's assertion that both good and bad fortune ultimately come from God.

Further hints of hope emerge from a series of implicit and explicit comparisons between earthly and heavenly realities throughout the poem. Klinck argues that "[r]eferences to an earthly lord . . . suggest by contrast his heavenly counterpart."[26] The Wanderer's human lord succumbs to death, as all such nobles must, and fails to save his retainers from their doom (lines 19-23a, 35-57, 78-80a, 92-110). But the divine Lord of all, who stands in control of fate, can offer unshakeable comfort and protection to the unfortunate. An even stronger contrast is conveyed by the use of the word *fæstnung* in line 115b to describe the stability found in God. The term

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[24] Horgan, 45; Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 32.

[25] See Timmer, "*Wyrd*," for examples of such parallel constructions.

[26] Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 32.

fæstnung can denote not only the abstract concept of security but also a physical stronghold, bringing to mind the ruins of earthly fortifications mentioned earlier in the poem (lines 75-778a, 85-87, 97-98).[27] Whereas human fastnesses crumble to dust before the ravages of time, the refuge of God's grace stands immovable amidst the storms of fate. Finally, *The Wanderer* describes *wyrd* as the ruler of the world under the heavens (*onwendeð wyrda gesceaft weoruld under heofonum*, line 107), a phrase that suggests the mutability and impermanence of the sublunary sphere.[28] The concluding line of the poem, on the other hand, identifies God as the Father in the heavens (*Fæder on heofonum*, line 115a), situating God as the one in ultimate control. Fate may govern the world under the heavens, dooming humans and the works of their hands to pass away. But God, who resides in the heavens themselves, governs even fate and is thus the true source of grace and comfort (*frōfre tō Fæder on heofonum*, line 115a).

The consolation that the *Wanderer* poet derives from the contrast between the temporal and eternal explains why the elegy repeatedly links the contemplation of transience to wisdom. "The wise must know how awesome it will be / When all the wealth of earth stands desolate," the poet says in lines 73-74. Similarly, the poem presents its famous *ubi sunt* passage as a wise person's response to the fragility of human existence (lines 88-91). As Lumiansky argues, the Wanderer himself becomes wise (*snottor on mōde*) in line 111 by ruminating on the losses that he has endured. Humans gain wisdom from reflecting on earthly ephemerality because they

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[27] Klinck, 32, 126; Dunning and Bliss, *The Wanderer*, 50.

[28] Line 107 specifically refers to fate in the plural (*wyrda gesceaft*). According to Timmer, "*Wyrd*," 26, 222, some commentators have interpreted this plural as a reference to the three Norns and thus as evidence that *wyrd* is used in a pagan sense in *The Wanderer*. However, the occurrence of the same phrase in the more uncontestably Christian poem *Daniel* suggests that the expression does not necessarily carry pagan connotations.

learn, as Boethius did, that they cannot find true happiness in lesser goods.[29] "Alas for the bright cup, the armoured warrior, / The glory of the prince" (lines 94-95a), for, as Philosophy teaches, wealth, power, and fame must all succumb to the decree of *wyrd*. The weary exile cannot resist inexorable fate, and responding to one's lot with grief or anger can provide no comfort (lines 5, 15-16).[30] Rather, consolation comes only from God, who, as the immovable ruler of fate, is the only source of true happiness and security in both the *Consolation* and *The Wanderer*.

Conclusion

In summary, Boethius's *Consolation*, its Old English translation, and *The Wanderer* demonstrate significant similarities in their perspectives on the relationship between divine providence and the events that befall humans. The original Latin version of the *Consolation* attributes these events to the distinct forces of *fortuna* and *fatum*, while both Old English texts combine these two powers into the single unifying concept of *wyrd*. Regardless of the terms used, however, all three literary works agree that fate dooms everything under the heavens to pass away. As a result, wisdom comes from recognizing the transience of earthly existence and seeking consolation in God, who, as the one ultimately in control of fate, is the only source of true comfort and security.

Remarkable as the resemblance between the *Consolation* and *The Wanderer* may be, it is important to heed Langeslag's warning and hold these similarities loosely. After all, the mere presence of parallels does not necessarily mean that one work directly influenced the other. Even

[29] Lumiansky, "The Dramatic Structure," 106-110.

[30] According to Dunning and Bliss, *The Wanderer*, 107, the phrase *hrēo hyge* in line 16a may denote either of these emotions.

if the *Wanderer* poet did not explicitly intend to echo Boethian philosophy, however, the similarities between the two works still constitute a meaningful site of investigation. Examining the thematic parallels between the *Consolation* and *The Wanderer*, as this analysis has done, yields valuable insights into the often strikingly similar conclusions of two Christian poets from widely different times, places, and cultures. Grappling with universally relevant questions about fate, providence, and consolation, these two poems have much to offer to those seeking meaning and comfort in the midst of misfortune, whether in the past or in the present day.

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