

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Consolation of Philosophy (524-525 A. D.)

Boethius, (480-524 A.D.).

The historical setting

Many cliches clog the inherited picture of mediaeval culture, literature, and art. Doubtless one reason for the simplified picture we have, of the Middle Ages, is that the period is dauntingly long, incorporates many cultures and languages, and makes best sense when viewed as a bridge period, defined by the Classical and by the Modern, at its two ends. The more gangly the period, the more tempting it is to surround it with cliches.

The downfall of Rome

At its nominal entry point, the Middle Ages—which at that point, quite naturally, had no conception of itself as a middle period, nor as a period at all—was simply what was growing out from disintegrating fragments of the Roman Empire, which for a century had been dissolving into loosely formed municipal communities and tracts of what were not long before coherent agricultural stretches, with their links to settled society still intact. The barbarians, who surrounded and now began to infiltrate the Roman world, were increasingly morphing into Romance citizens, and while they would need another millennium to establish significant new cultures of their own, these proto Romance states, of the earliest modern period, were indeed finding their direction, as they left behind all but the historical traces of the ancient Roman world.

Man's earliest cultures

(Traces which were themselves, of course, tradition bearers from a far more distant past. which stretched from the Greek world back into the cultural genetics of the Mediterranean basin, and from there, deepening into our profoundest cultural bloodstream, backward into the heritages of Indian, Egyptian, and East Asian cultures .Loose and in some senses useless as the thought processes are, which batten on this kind of human archeological thinking, our dignity of inquiry requires adventuring even farther than the Neolithic in our effort to simulate a one-presence with our earliest human kin. (Back we go into a zone where fictions like Golding's *The Inheritors* or scholarly studies like James Scott's *Against the Grain*, point their ways back into the imaginative one point of origins. Vardis Fisher's *The Golden Rooms* places us squarely inside the Stone Age Cave World, lighting the first real fires of survival.

Boethius and the post-Roman world

Be that as it may, that there is an interiorly backward motion, within the mind existence of Boethius, which thrives concurrently with his highly influential move into the Middle Ages for which we are taking him, here, as prime initiator. Born as he was in Rome, a few years after the breakdown of the Roman Empire, and its gradual replacement by elements of various non-Romanic tribes, 'barbarians,' who were 'at the gates' of the city, Boethius was soon swept up into the governing apparatus of Theodoric, the King of the Ostrogoths, who with his tribe had entered Rome from the East.

Boethius' rapid rise

(Boethius' rapid ascension into high governing positions—he was a senator, consul and *magister officiorum* by the age of thirty three—derived from Theodoric's admiration for the young man, whose valuable knowledge of Greek and Latin, no longer taken for granted even among the intelligentsia, owed much to the young Boethius' intelligence and hard work. Under the umbrella protection of Theodoric, Boethius began translating extensively from Greek, writing with equal force about the works of Aristotle, and entering the Neoplatonic zones in which he was able to synthesize the contributions to world culture

of ancient Greek thought and Christian theology. He was responsible for introducing the language and philosophy of the Greeks to a mediaeval Europe, which until the beginning of the Renaissance remained only haltingly familiar with even the language of Greek.

Boethius and the Christian world

While pursuing a vast number of projects in Greek translation and philosophical culture, Boethius was—as *magister officiorum*, master administrator of palace affairs—given particular responsibility for adjusting the interrelations between the Latin and the Eastern branches of the Christian Church, which was by this time seated in Constantinople, the present day capital of Turkey, Istanbul. It was in the course of these long-to-be-unresolved negotiations that Boethius lost the favor of Theodoric, who had him imprisoned and then put to death—most cruelly—in 524. What Boethius had already achieved, not only in his masterwork *The Consolation of Philosophy*, but in his profuse treatises on music, mathematics, logic, Aristotelian ‘topics,’ was enough to render him of unparalleled influence over the entire Mediaeval period.

The Consolation of Philosophy

The Consolation of Philosophy (524-25) grew out of the suffering of Boethius, after he had become the object of Theodoric’s hatred. Boethius had been accused of treachery, in the negotiations circling around the struggle between the Roman and the Eastern factions of Christianity. Theodoric imprisoned the suspect, and directed the (probably falsely) accused man to be jailed and ultimately executed. (The barbarous accounts of the murder, which were to involve strangling and then splitting the skull of the imprisoned genius, spoke for their time, in which the stakes of life and death were sharply jammed, and accusations from on high required little evidence.) The text before us was Boethius’ effort to deal with the harshness of his imprisonment, and the dread of a nightmarish death ahead. That this saint put his faith in writing, rather than in the recourse of his Christian belief, has led to speculations about the depth of his religious vision; and yet we have to concede that whatever works, when the going is vicious, is welcome and justified.

The noble Lady

Boethius’ search for consolation leads him to construct a dramatic dialogue between himself and Philosophy, a Lady of Minervan dignity, who represents a universal wisdom. She is guised as a pagan goddess, she speaks with the abstract knowledgeability of the Wisdom of Solomon or the Word of God in St. John’s Gospel. ‘There appeared standing over my head a woman’s form whose eyes shone as with fire, and in power of insight surpassed the eyes of men, whose color was full of light, whose strength was yet intact, though she was so full of years that none would ever think that she was subject to such age as ours. Her countenance was full of majesty.’ In his hour of need Boethius receives such a divine visit and is able thus to portray himself as the victimized, the complainer, the one who suffers from a divine injustice. It is in fact this last issue that opens and supports the entire frame of the text.

Philosophy and the Muses

As in the Book of Job, Boethius faces his suffering and dread by asking himself why a person of good intentions and honorable life should call down upon himself such a dreadful fate as his own. Philosophy appears to supply the answer. She flashes into anger as she sees that the Muses of poetry are gathering around her suppliant. We realize that she is herself proud of having survived the rough patches in life—the lower hem of her gown has been dirtied and smudged, she is a deeply experienced lady—and she will not coddle her suppliant with the fineries of poetic sophistication. She will force him—he recounts—to take his fate where he finds it, and not to pretty it up.

Boethius buckles up

With the following words she addresses Boethius, referring to the Muses: ‘Who has suffered these seducing mummings to approach this sick man?’ Philosophy concedes that, if Boethius were just some nobody—‘some uninitiated man as happens in the vulgar herd’—she herself would endure the panderings

of the muses. But since her client—as Boethius puts it in reference to himself—‘has been nourished in the lore of Eleatics and Academics’—it is. Best to leave him to the professionals, which Philosophy unquestioningly accepts as her own description. In the subsequent dialogue description, Boethius ascribes to Philosophy the understanding that he, Boethius, is in fact a free student of nature as well as a learned man. (She calls forth, from her mentee, the sense of what he is and has always been, since his birth, a man ‘free to the open heavens, to watch the light of the bright sun, to penetrate the deepest secrets of the natural world.’)

Philosophy reproaches Boethius

It is at this point, after having praised the inner Boethius, that Philosophy calls out her ‘pupil’ for being a drivelling baby, complacent and tearful. And tearful indeed Boethius becomes, as he sees the accuracy of the prophetess’s analysis. At this point, seeing Boethius’ tears, Philosophy grows gentle, wipes his face, and dispels the darkness by reducing him to a healthy shame, that he, privileged and highly educated, should be reduced to self-pity. He recognizes Philosophy—which is taking on the meaning of *inborn wisdom*—as his first nurse, the companion of his childhood.

Philosophy introduces Plato

Philosophy, having brought her pupil to a rest point, where he can absorb her wisdom, goes on to remind Boethius of the glory that Philosophy itself has brought upon the Greeks, and especially through the wonder of Plato’s thinking.

Boethius takes stock of himself

Regaining his own courage and sense of identity, Boethius goes on to reflect on the good he has done for others, serving often as a friend to the marginalized. While he still asks questions, like ‘if God is, whence come evil things?’ but he is now fully prepared to reply that ‘if God is not, whence come good things,’ and to turn this simple formula into the proof he needs, to justify his own life.

The Platonic horizon

To this self discovery, Philosophy responds with a fitting opportunity to remind her eternal pupil that there is a Platonic oneness higher than all mortal behaviors, and to elicit from Boethius a prayer to the unity of the universe under God. (We take heed of the ‘Platonic’ visions that hovers over these consoling words to the suffering man, and see that the healing he needs will be part of that universal Platonic (or neoplatonic) wisdom awaiting us, at the end of the present study guide, when we come upon the works of Ficino and Pico de la Mirandola, a millenium farther into the Christian experience.

Study guide

Does Boethius feel remorse for his relations with the Emperor Theodoric? Does he feel that he has in any way been justly punished, and thrown in prison with a death sentence? Is there anything distinctly ‘Christian’ about the way he meets his harsh punishment in prison?

What is the special significance of music for the early Christian Church? What kind of notational system did the Church use? It was, of course, inherited from Greek notation, but what did Boethius contribute to accommodating that Greek system to the uses of the early Church?

The *Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the most widely read, copied, and consulted texts of the Middle Ages. What was the chief argument of this text, and what drew so many learned readers to it? What did they understand by ‘philosophy’? Would you find understanding and solace in this text, if you were condemned to death? Would there be a religious sense to the term ‘philosophy’ as you would understand it?