Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, c. 480-524

Representative of the transition from the end of the “classical world” to the beginnings of the “medieval world”

Representative of the culture of Late Antiquity

Descendant of important Roman families; related to important early Christian leaders in the church; Greek educated; aspirant to civic and political office

The *Consolation of Philosophy* is his final work, written while under house arrest for treason.

Why should we read it? Why does the life and work of Boethius matter?
The Consolation: on its own terms, a synthesis of Classical learning and Christian faith – yet Boethius never mentions anything explicitly Christian; rather, like Augustine in the Confessions, Boethius finds the Platonic inheritance embedded in Christianity. Boethius writes as a “classicist” compatible with Christianity; Augustine writes as “Christian” compatible with the classics.

The Consolation: in its own time this is an important statement about philosophical debates central to Late Antique Christianity:

what is the relationship of God’s foreknowledge to human free will?
what is the place of Fortune in human existence?
what can we learn from Classical mythology?
what can we learn from Classical philosophy?
how is education a process of dialogue, discussion, question and answer?
what is the nature of female authority?

The Consolation: in later times this was one of the single most popular and influential works of literature and philosophy ever written; hundreds of manuscripts survive from later centuries; it influenced many writers; it generated an ICONOGRAPHY of Fortune, Philosophy, dream and desire, the cosmos, and heroic struggle
Cultural and political background

Roman Empire had split
- Eastern capital was Constantinople (modern Istanbul)
- Western capital was Rome; Rome was now run by the Ostrogoths, a Germanic speaking people who had taken power after decades of non-Italian invasions from 410-450 (e.g., Vandals, Huns, Goths)
- The emperor in Boethius’ time was THEODORIC, a non-Latin speaking, Germanic king
- The Empire was run by the impeccably educated bureaucrats and aristocracy, trying to preserve the old system under his foreign empire

Boethius himself:
- traces his lineage back to the old emperors and senators
- his in-laws were the family that produced some of the earliest Popes
- received a major education in Greek philosophy and Christian theology
- he represents political ambition during a time of turmoil
- he represents old, high culture at the end of high culture
- rises to the top of the bureaucracy, but is eventually accused of treason, imprisoned, and tortured; writes the CP; then dies

Asking: what is the role of book-learning in political culture? What does it mean to be a teacher at a time when your knowledge is increasingly irrelevant?
Review: Late Antiquity – the term used to describe Western culture and society from the conversion of Constantine in 312 to the advent of Islam in the 7th century.

Peter Brown on Late Antiquity:

Christianity had brought into the Roman world the notion of an unresolved conflict with the past. For Christians form the time of Saint Paul onward the issue had always been how much of the past should be allowed to linger in the present and how much could be declared to have been irrevocably transcended by the coming of Christ.

SO: this question of the past’s relationship to the present informed both the intellectual and the political worlds in which Boethius lived and worked.
Boethius and Late Antiquity:

we see through a glass darkly: enigma, allegory, mirror, glass

What is the role of pagan literature in a Christian world? It teaches through allegory.

Thus: Aeneas’ journey becomes an elaborate story about error, education, truth, and piety

Orpheus’s story becomes an allegory of reason and sensuality (Orpheus and Eurydice)

Hercules’ story becomes an allegory of spiritual labor

Odysseus’ story becomes a tale of spiritual imprisonment in a beastly body

Boethius and literature:

CP alternates prose and verse: called PROSIMETRUM

The purpose of this structure is to create two, parallel kinds of narratives: one is straightforward, logical, argumentative, and expository (prose) the other is allegorical, figurative, allusive, and oblique (verse)

LADY PHILOSOPHY: She is a woman because, in Latin, Philosophia is a female noun. But she is also a woman because Boethius is working in a tradition of female authority/teacher figures: e.g., Saints, Augustine’s Monica.
The relics of St. Augustine, and in the basement below, the relics of Boethius
Ciel D’oro, Pavia, Italy
THE OPENING OF THE CP

First poem: Boethius (the prisoner) laments his condition
He is depressed; his aspirations have come to nothing; he is imprisoned
He used to write “cheerful poems”
He decides to confess about his past, but he is not learning from his own past;

Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi
poetry, knowledge and study, tears and eyes, Muses, youth and memory,
Fortune, Friends, the foothold
These are all the major idioms of Augustine and the sense of the gradus of study

The first prose:
Lady Philosophy is introduced: beautiful, eyes blazing
Recall that Monica also had eyes blazing with the vision of truth
Her robe: PI stands for Practica, practice
THETA stands for Theoria, theory
She is dressed in a way that lets us know she is a teacher; ICONOGRAPHY
Lady P calls the muses by B’s bed “chorus girls.”

Latin original:
Quae ubi poeticas Musas vidit nostro adsistentes toro (when she saw the Muses of Poetry standing by my bed) . . .
commota paulisper ac torvis inflammata luminibus (she cried out with inflamed, blazing eyes)
Quis has scenicas meretriculas . . . permisit (who let these whores of the theater in?)
**Meretrix**: Latin for prostitute

**Scena**: theater

Recall Augustine: the theater as the site of sexual and sensory temptation.

Book I of the CP establishes the condition of the prisoner and Lady P.

It uses poetry to describe how he is imprisoned, how his mind is dulled, and how he has lost his way. The poetry is full of natural imagery, especially of the sea journey, the weather, and the heavens.

The prose is largely lectures by Lady P.

She says of the prisoner (I.prose 2): “he has forgotten who he really is”

In the course of the prose, Lady P establishes herself as
- A TEACHER
- A PHYSICIAN

LEARNING IS A FORM OF HEALING
THE PRISONER TRIES TO JUSTIFY HIMSELF

I. Pr. IV: Here, he presents his case; he tries to apply his learning to public life. Big mistake; he is accused of treason; he is charged with wanting to preserve the old Senate; he goes on and on; “instead of being rewarded for my actual virtue, I am punished for imaginary crimes”; he is “five hundred miles from home” (that is, he is imprisoned in Pavia, far away from his home in Ravenna – more on this soon!)

The poetry in Book I is full of storm and sea imagery: I. poem v:
“bring order to the surging waves of mankind’s follies”

Lady P’s diagnosis: “you seem to have forgotten what your native country is” (p.20). KEY POINT: THE PATRIA IS NOT THE POLITICAL OR DOMESTIC HOME BUT THE TRUE HOME OF THE SOUL IN THE HEAVENS
PLATONIC NOTION OF THE SOUL’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE BODY
TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMAN PATRIA INTO PHILOSOPHICAL HOMELAND

SO: the process of healing is a process of question and answer:
I prose vi: “Let us begin with a few simple questions that will help in the diagnosis”
She says: “you have forgotten what you are”
   Learning is a form of remembering (Platonic idea)
   The condition of life is a form of imprisonment: the soul is imprisoned in the body
   The condition of life is a form of exile: the soul is exiled from the heavens

Boethius’ literal condition (imprisonment, exile) becomes a METAPHOR for the human condition itself.

BOOK 2: The diagnosis begins
   II.prose 1, p.30: “If you spread your sails before the wind, then you must go where the wind takes you and not where you might wish to go.”
   Echoes of the Aeneid here
   The central image of the sea-journey of life

   Fortune and her wheel: rota: wheel
   vertere: turn
   ebb and flow of tide
   Throughout Book 2, images of harmony contrast with images of change storm and sea imagery
The world is in a constant state of change; that change in itself represents cyclical harmony

KEY ARGUMENT:
“What governs earth and sea and sky is nothing less than love”

LOVE: here, a cosmic ordering force; not just the love of people for each other, or even, really, the love of a Christian God for his children, but a sense of complete balance in the heavens.

How happy is mankind
If the love that orders the stars above
Rules, too, in your hearts.

O felix hominum genus,
Si vestros animos amor
Quo caelum regitur regat.

A key word in the CP is happiness as a function of cosmic love.
How did later readers understand the Consolation?

As a document of philosophy
as a collection of poetry
as an argument
But also, as a framework for a visual imagination of its major characters.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE CP GENERATED A LARGE AND COMPLEX ICONOGRAPHY: THAT IS, LATER READERS FREQUENTLY HAD MANUSCRIPTS THAT WERE ILLUMINATED OR ILLUSTRATED.

WHAT IS THE PICTORIAL, VISIONARY, QUALITY OF THE CP AND HOW DOES IT PROVOKE A PICTORIAL RESPONSE?

KEY IMAGES:

BOETHIUS HIMSELF: SCHOLAR, MUSICIAN, COURTIER, PRISONER
LADY PHILOSOPHY: HER ROBE WITH ITS PI AND THETA
THE SCENECAS MERETRICULAS: THE FALSE MUSES BY B’S BEDSIDE
LADY FORTUNE AND HER WHEEL: ONE OF THE CENTRAL IMAGES OF MEDIEVAL THOUGHT.
Quomodo quisque studuit
in partem repente nasci
flammas sustineret
ignis suis mystique
stebat, et caelestis
subito sibi subiecisset
potuit pristina terere
deficiturque certe
Elia reliquit
alium viresque, quoniam Sol auro
tua sibi intem pene sine pene
qui gravata multis spinae sererat
Et dolor ostre usus ut homo sciret
For Thursday:
   Poetry and philosophy

Is poetry something to be used or used up?
What is the place of verse in the making of an argument
Is poetry a vehicle for philosophy

Key arguments:
   Free will vs. determinism
   The status of the human in the cosmos and the nature of cosmic love
   The theory of ideas and the question of perception
   Fortune and desire

KEY POEMS
   Book III, poem 9 – the cosmic order refracted through poetic form
   Book III, poem 12: Orpheus: moral virtue
   Book IV, poem 3: Ulysses: beastliness and humanity
   Book IV, poem 7: Hercules: education as a form of labor; the beast and the human
   Book V, poem 4: Stoic perception; the difference between Stoic and Platonic thought

Final question: Why is there no final poem to the CP?