

**Boethius Background**  
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**ENGL 3302**  
**British Literature Before 1066**

**Early Life**

- Full name - Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius
- Born around 480, half a century after Augustine died
- Orphaned at an early age and brought up by Symmachus, a Roman patrician
- Was never formally adopted by Symmachus, so was able to marry his daughter

**Career**

- Many offices were largely ceremonial, and he had a lot of time to write
- Made a court minister by Theodoric c. 500 due to his education - explained technological achievements to the Goths
- Held office of consul at age 30 (510) - an honor usually given to men much older
  - Had two sons serve as consul as well in 522
- *Magister Officiorum* for the emperor Theodoric in early 520's (chief of all civil servants)

**Philosophical Works**

- *Institutes of Arithmetic*
- *Institutes of Music*
- *On Euclid's Geometry*
- several works on logical syllogisms
- Translations and commentaries:
  - Aristotle's treatises on logic
  - Porphyry's *Isagogue*
  - Cicero's *Topics*

**Theological Works**

- *On the Trinity*
- *Against Eutychius and Nestorius*
  - *Eutychianism* - Christ has only one nature, the divine; not fully human
  - *Nestorianism* - Christ has two natures, but not a hypostatic union; in effect, he's both a human Son and a divine Son
- *On the Catholic Faith*

**The Beginning of the End**

- Rome had been conquered by Visigoths in 476 and came under the rule of the Ostrogoths around 493 or so; **Theodoric was on the throne at the time of Boethius**
- Eastern and Western Catholics were divided by the Monophysite heresies; the Roman church wanted a harder line against them but the Greeks made some concessions (Acacian Schism)
  - theological rift healed by about 530 or so
- Caused a rift between Eastern and Western empires as well as churches

## Boethius's Death

- Boethius had been in contact with the Greeks over the theological crisis and defended the consul Albinus against charges of treason
- Was accused to Theodoric of plotting against him and attempting to restore Roman supremacy over the Ostrogothic kingdom
  - also accused of astrology
- Theodoric was Arian and may have perceived a threat from Boethius
  - *Arianism* - Christ was the Son of God, but he was not consubstantial (one in being) with the Father
- Placed under house arrest and executed in 524 or 525

## Sainthood

- Regarded as a martyr in the Diocese of Pavia after his death
- 1883 - Congregation of Sacred Rites confirmed the local practice and acknowledged him as a saint for the whole Church
- St. Severinus Boethius - Feast day is 23 October

## *The Consolation of Philosophy*

- Written in Pavia shortly before Boethius's death
- Alternating prose and metric sections - *Menippean satire*
  - Basic issue - why do bad things happen to good people if God is good? What have I done to deserve this?
- Attempts to look at his situation from a Platonic/Stoic viewpoint
- some have wondered how Christian he is because it's more philosophical than theological, but still had a profound effect on medieval literature and philosophy

## Stoicism

- Zeno of Citium held to be the founder (c. 333-262 BCE)
- Logic - heavy study of signs and the signified, and a great deal of work on verbal signs (rhetoric)
- Physics - a natural world, almost organic in nature, that has a *divinely rational organizing principle that humans can observe*
- Ethics - *human nature is to be rational and to see how reason is found in the order of the world*
  - *Even misfortune is somehow a part of the order of the universe and the thinking human must attempt to determine how*

## Literary Influence

- Boethius is mentioned by Dante in the *Paradiso*
- translated into OE by order of Alfred the Great
  - a prose version (London, British Library, Cotton Otho A.vi, mid 10c, burned) and the *Meters of Boethius* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 180, early 12c)
  - Oxford, Bodleian Lib., Junius 12, 17c – transcript of Otho made before the *Ashburnham House fire* 23 Oct 1731
  - Tolkien was very familiar with the Alfredian version
- Translated into ME by Chaucer - *Boece* - via a French translation by Jean de Meun as a crib

- Also known by Elizabeth I when she was imprisoned in the reign of Mary Tudor - translated the meters into English

### Summary Book I

- Boethius is under house arrest and is being comforted by the Muses
- Lady Philosophy appears, chases out the Muses, and asks Boethius what is wrong
- He explains the situation mentioned above and complains about his misfortunes
- Big question: Why do the good seem to suffer and the wicked seem to prosper?

### Book II Summary

- Philosophy says that humans don't know what is really theirs
- Speaks in the person of Fortune - her nature is to be changeable, so ups and downs should be expected
- Only something which cannot be taken away is truly good and truly yours
- Worldly goods like honor, wealth, power, pleasure can be taken away and so aren't really ours -if those things can't really make you happy, how can they be good?
- In fact, misfortune is good because it reveals what is true, and good fortune is bad because it only shows you what you want to see

### Book III Summary

- The good news: Humans all seek happiness
  - St. Augustine: use and enjoyment
- The bad news: wealth, rank, power, honors, pleasure all have some part in happiness, but if you pursue them as ends in themselves, they only deliver the opposite of what they claim
- Rather than becoming self-sufficient, you will become more and more dependent and self-divided
  - Only God is undivided and self-sufficient; you will only achieve true happiness by pursuing and allying yourself with the true good
- If a) God is self-sufficient and complete goodness, and b) good is the opposite of evil, then he need not pursue partial goods and cannot pursue evil ends; therefore, EVIL IS NOTHING because there is nothing God cannot do

### Book IV Summary

- The good become closer to God and most fully human as they pursue the good; the wicked become more imperfect and lose their humanity, so the good are always rewarded, and the wicked are always punished (whether or not either of them sees it)
  - If punishment corrects the wicked, they are actually happier because they move toward goodness; if they escape punishment, they are actually less happy, as they don't move closer to the good
- And yet, it seems that the good suffer and the wicked prosper – how is this compatible with divine justice?
  - Providence – the order of the universe set forth by the divine mind in eternity for all things; Fate – the way that this order works its way out in time for specific things
  - The order of the universe gives both good things and bad things to both the good and the wicked
- All fortune is good - good things make the good happy and the bad unhappy, and bad

things test the good and teach the bad

### Summary of Book V

- First big issue: if Providence and Fate rule the world, how can there be chance?
  - No such thing as random chance – chance depends on intention
  - Finding buried treasure example – chance is an unintended convergence of two intended actions – all actions have an intention of some sort behind them, but we don't coordinate, so they appear random
- Next big issue: if God intends things to happen as they do, that is predestination, and if God sees something happening, it must be going to happen, so that is foreknowledge: either way, how can we have free will?
  - Eternity is presence in all times and places; God sees all, but we can't as we are temporal
  - God can see past/present/future and observes the outcomes of all actions, but we have to work our way through time and make judgments about what we don't know for sure
  - Answer 1: the divine intent is that all creation act in accordance with its nature, and if human nature is to work our way through time the best we can with incomplete information, we must therefore have judgment and free will
  - Answer 2: it's true that to observe something, it must be happening, but don't confuse cause and effect; does observing a thing make it happen, or does its happening make it observable?
  - Emphasizes difference between absolute necessity (something must be happening because there are no alternatives) or conditional necessity (something must be happening because the conditions that allow it to happen are being met)