

Boethius and *The Consolation of Philosophy*
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ENGL 3335
Ancient and Medieval World Literature

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
 - 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