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978-1-107-41576-8 - Boethius: Some Aspects of his Times and Work

Helen M. Barrett

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

BOETHIUS, in that little masterpiece *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which he wrote while awaiting in prison the moment of execution, shows himself acutely conscious of the instability of Fortune's gifts, of the insecurity of all the good that may come to a man from the kindness of external circumstance. He recalls how swiftly and unexpectedly he was cast from the height of prosperity and public honour to the depth of misery and disgrace.

Could he when he wrote thus have foreseen the fate of his reputation with posterity, he might have discerned in its faded lustre another example of that fickleness of Fortune which he had so startlingly experienced in his lifetime.

Boethius is little read now. To the great majority even of those whose reading is wide, hardly more than his name is known, yet by his translations and interpretations of Aristotle he influenced thought in the Middle Ages to an extent that is quite immeasurable; and, though he did not live to carry out his project of making Plato also available in Latin for those who knew no Greek, his greatest work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, was one of the most important channels by which Platonism reached England and Western Europe. There is much evidence to show how powerfully this book appealed to leading minds of succeeding ages in many lands. Doubtless it made its way also to the hearts and minds of humbler folk of whom there is no record, for the book attempts to

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solve a problem which has strained the mind of man as far back as the days of Job and can never cease to occupy it. "The most popular book of the Middle Ages", is the judgment of Hastings Rashdall and of John Burnet concerning *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

To go no further than our own land for a few of the famous names that are associated with the book: King Alfred valued it so highly that he laid upon himself the task of translating the *Consolation* for the instruction and edification of his people, or rather of paraphrasing and interpreting it, for he did not keep by any means closely to his text; Geoffrey Chaucer, besides showing in his poetry many marks of Boethius's powerful influence, made a prose translation of his greatest work; Sir Thomas More, though by his day Plato and Aristotle were themselves available as they were not for earlier lovers of the book, valued the *Consolation of Philosophy*, commended it to his children's study and evidently had it in mind when he named the book he wrote during his own imprisonment, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*; Queen Elizabeth felt the book's spell and made her own translation of it; and a writer so rarely carried away by enthusiasm as Edward Gibbon has called the work "a golden volume not unworthy of the leisure of Plato or Tully".¹

But the interest one feels in a personality that has exercised so powerful an influence on men's minds in past ages is increased by the problems which certain aspects of his life and work set us. One question in particular has puzzled students of Boethius's writings. Was he a Christian?

¹ *Decline and Fall*, vol. iv, chap. xxxix, p. 201 (Methuen).

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From the sixth century right down to the eighteenth Boethius was universally regarded as an eminent son and supporter of the Church; his authorship of the theological tractates that stand in his name was not called in question; by many he was looked upon as a martyr who had died for the Catholic faith; in the neighbourhood of Ticenum where he was imprisoned the people revered him as "Saint Severinus", and in 1883 Pope Leo XIII sanctioned his cult as a saint for the diocese of Pavia.

Yet it was to philosophy rather than to religion that Boethius turned for consolation in his misery and for help to bear with courage and serenity the calamity which had befallen him; and while the *Consolation of Philosophy* is in spirit profoundly religious and contains no word hostile to or critical of Christianity, yet of thought that is distinctively and unmistakably Christian it is hard to find a trace. A noble and lofty theism is assuredly there, but not what one could unhesitatingly name Christian theism.

There is a problem then in the question of the relation of Boethius to Christianity, such as does not arise in connexion with the other famous examples of prison literature. It would hardly be possible, it would be at any rate very strange and difficult, to take the last words such a man wrote about ultimate questions, while awaiting in prison the summons to death, as anything other than the most exact expression possible for him of his real thought. If Christianity were his religion, why is there no reference to it in such a book as this, his last?

And the reader who tries to solve the problem thus raised by a study of the *Consolation of Philosophy* soon finds himself confronted by another, no less puzzling though of a different character, and not less absorbing—what

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was the real cause of Boethius's sudden degradation and imprisonment, and what if any was their justification.

The attempt to find answers to these questions takes one into a rather neglected period of European history, a period, however, which has its own special interest and significance, lying as it does between the ancient and the medieval world, when Italy, after enduring many years of foreign invasion, internal strife and general confusion, as one puppet Emperor succeeded another, enjoyed three decades of peace, good government and prosperity under the rule of a great barbarian, Theodoric King of the Ostrogoths. For it was this king whose trusted minister Boethius became—a strange pair to co-operate in government, the modern reader will think; the minister one of the finest products of the dying Graeco-Roman civilization, a born student, clearly meant by nature to give his life to scholarship, whose most cherished ambition it was to translate and interpret for his Roman fellow-countrymen the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle; the king a brave and able Gothic chieftain, genuinely full of admiration for the culture and civilization of the land he had conquered, yet with the barbarian element still so strong in him that at the beginning of his rule in Italy he slew with his own hand, at the banquet to which he had invited him, the ruler who had opposed his entry.

An attempt then to understand the life and work of Boethius, especially his last and greatest book, cannot well be undertaken apart from some examination of the circumstances of Theodoric's reign, and these will become clearer by a preliminary glance at the condition of the Roman world in the years just before the Ostrogoth came to Italy.

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MAIN SOURCES TO WHICH REFERENCE
WILL BE MADE

Contemporary references to the events of Boethius's life are extremely scanty; indeed, considering his eminence, surprisingly little authentic information about him has survived. Even the dates of his birth and death are not known with certainty, and unfortunately few details have come down to us of the relationship between him and Theodoric.

As for the Gothic King, the last of the Roman historians, Ammianus Marcellinus, brought his history to an end with the Battle of Hadrianople, A.D. 378, over a century before Theodoric arrived in Italy, and no great writer of that King's own time has left a connected record of his achievements.

One very important source of our knowledge of some of the events of Theodoric's reign is the *Variae Epistulae*¹ of Cassiodorus, the King's Secretary and Minister. The *Variae* are a very large collection of letters, edicts and other State papers written by him on behalf of Theodoric and his successors; they are records of extraordinary interest and value, but their author when composing State documents permitted himself to indulge in so verbose and artificial a style and to introduce so many topics irrelevant to the matter in hand, that it is a wearisome task to dig out the treasures of historical information which are undoubtedly imbedded in them. Students of this period are much in Dr Hodgkin's debt for his abridgment and translation of the *Variae*.

¹ Ed. Mommsen (*Mon. Germ. Hist.* xii); Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. lxxix. Translated and abridged by T. Hodgkin (Oxford, 1886).

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In these letters Cassiodorus makes a number of references to the varied activities of Boethius, but he maintains strict silence on the subject about which we should most like to have information, his fall from power and his execution. It is possible that Cassiodorus dealt with this event in his *History of the Goths*, but the work has perished and all that survives is an abridgment made by the Goth Jordanes¹ during the three days when, as he tells us, he has the MS. of Cassiodorus in his hands as a loan. Jordanes makes no mention of Boethius.

There does, however, survive a fragment (or perhaps a collection of fragments) of an almost contemporary chronicle of Theodoric's reign, which is important for our purpose because of what it tells us about the fall and execution of Boethius and of his father-in-law Symmachus. This is the document known as the *Anonymus Valesii*, usually to be found printed at the end of the History of Ammianus Marcellinus. It takes its name from the seventeenth-century scholar Henri de Valois who discovered it. Cessi,² the Italian editor of the *Anonymus*, divides the work into two parts which he thinks were written by different authors, the one before the death of Theodoric in 526, the other probably between 527 and 534. This second part, which recounts the reign of Theodoric, would then be written only a few years after the King's death and within ten years of Boethius's execution. In spite of a certain legendary and mythical element in the work, a narrative so nearly contemporary is of great interest and considerable value.

¹ *De Rebus Geticis*, ed. Mommsen, *Mon. Germ. Hist.* v.

² *Anonymus Valesianus*, ed. Cessi in new edition of Muratori, *R.I.S.* 1913.

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A reference to the execution of Boethius and Symmachus made by a writer alive at the time is to be found in the *History of the Gothic War* by the Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea. Procopius relates too the death of Theodoric and gives a very curious story about the King's remorse for the execution of Symmachus.

The other contemporary evidence we have for the events connected with Boethius's trial and execution is what he himself tells us in the autobiographical part of the first book of the *Consolation*; but this, unfortunately, is very little, and what there is consists rather of grief-stricken and indignant exclamations than of the plain straightforward narrative of events which we so badly need. Indeed, Boethius's own statement¹ that he had committed to writing an account of what had actually happened, lest posterity should be ignorant of it, shows that he was well aware that some other record was needed; but unhappily this account, if he fulfilled his intention and wrote it, has not survived.

Among contemporary writers whose work has reference both to Theodoric and to Boethius is Ennodius, Bishop of Ticinum.² His panegyric in honour of Theodoric survives and also a collection of letters. Among these a number addressed to Boethius show the great admiration felt for the philosopher by a contemporary bishop.

Since the year 1877 there has been available for students interested in Boethius a very important pamphlet which gives the text of a newly discovered fragment of

¹ *Cons. Phil.* bk. 1, pr. 4.

² *Ennodius*, ed. Vogel in *Mon. Germ. Hist.* vol. VII, and Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. LXIII.

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manuscript known as the *Anecdoton Holderi* and a very full commentary on it by Hermann Usener.¹ This will be described in Chapter x.

In the MSS. of Boethius's works there are "Vitae" purporting to give records of the author's life, but in these there is a large admixture of legend. It was from one of these "Vitae" that King Alfred drew the material for the account he gave of Boethius at the opening of his version of the *Consolation*.

¹ "*Anecdoton Holderi*", *ein Beitrag zur Geschichte Roms in Ostgothischer Zeit*, von Hermann Usener (Bonn, 1877).

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CHAPTER II

WESTERN EUROPE IN THE
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THEODORIC'S invasion of Italy at the head of the Ostrogothic people took place thirteen years after the date known in history as that of the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West, A.D. 476, the year usually regarded as the end of ancient history and the beginning of the medieval period. But whatever significance be attached to the year 476, no such catastrophic change occurred then as is suggested by the words "Fall of the Roman Empire". It is true that an important alteration took place in the legal and constitutional position of the ruler of Italy, when in 476 Odovacar, an East German chieftain, deposed Romulus, the last of a series of feeble Emperors who had been the nominal rulers in the West since the death of the great Theodosius; but it is likely that this change brought far less disturbance and suffering to the mass of the people than a number of earlier occurrences of that same period.

A rapid glance at a few of the outstanding events of the fifth century may serve to recall something of what the Roman citizens of the West had experienced in the two generations before the birth of Boethius and before Theodoric came to Italy.

The opening years of the century had witnessed the breaking of the barrier which since the earliest days of the Empire had protected the Romanized provincials within from the Teutonic barbarians without.

The garrisons along the Rhine had of necessity been

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depleted, since men were desperately needed for the defence of Italy when Alaric, fresh from the looting of Greece, arrived with his Visigoths; but despite this dangerous weakening of the Rhine defences and the withdrawal of troops from Britain his advance was not stayed; three times he besieged Rome, and finally in 410 sacked the city which had been inviolate for eight hundred years.

The sense of dismay and foreboding, the blow to men's pride, must have been well-nigh overwhelming as the news of the disaster spread from one end of the Roman world to the other, calling forth from Jerome in his cell at Bethlehem a cry of distress and horror at the thought that "the city was captured that had taken captive all the world",¹ and from Augustine in Africa the *De Civitate Dei*, written to rebut the charge that Rome had fallen through the anger of her ancient gods abandoned for the God of the Christians.

But for a time Italy was spared the humiliation of foreign occupation. Alaric died within a few months of his resounding success, and his Visigoths turned away from Italy to south-western Gaul and established themselves in a kingdom there which they afterwards extended to include almost the whole of Spain.

Meantime across the Rhine, overwhelming the weakened garrisons, had swept hordes of Teutonic tribesmen, from some of whose settlements were to arise the nations of modern Europe.

The Franks, still retaining their paganism while the other Teutonic invaders had become Arian Christians, founded a kingdom in northern Gaul on the Lower

¹ Jerome, *Epistles*, cxxxvii.