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978-0-521-69425-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Boethius

Edited by John Marenbon

Excerpt

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JOHN MARENBON

## Introduction: reading Boethius whole

‘And who will be the readership for this *Companion*?’, asked one of my contributors. ‘Not, I imagine, the philosophers, as for the Ockham and Scotus companions,’ he went on. ‘No, it will be people interested in medieval literature. But of course they will just skip the chapters on logic and theology and move straight to the *Consolation*’, he concluded, sadly – his own chapter was one of those on logic. I take a more sanguine view and think that philosophers, or at least those interested in antiquity and the Middle Ages, will be among our readers, but the chapters they want to read will be exactly those the literature specialists skip. So it will be as if this were two books bound in the same covers, about two Boethiuses who just happen to have been the same person. But that, as I shall explain, would be a great pity. This introduction is a plea to read this *Companion*, but more important, to read Boethius, whole.<sup>1</sup>

Boethius is not usually read whole for two main reasons.<sup>2</sup> The first, to which I shall return briefly at the end, has nothing in especial to do with Boethius, but is a pervasive feature of intellectual life today: the specialization that divides philosophers, theologians, literary scholars and historians and makes them each seek in figures from the past only what relates to their own discipline. The second, by contrast, is directly related to how Boethius is usually perceived. On the one hand, he is seen as an almost entirely unoriginal thinker: the textbooks on music and arithmetic with which he began his writing career, and the logical commentaries and monographs which occupied most of it, are considered to be little more than translations; the short theological treatises (*Opuscula sacra*) and his most famous composition, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, the philosophical dialogue he wrote while awaiting execution, are envisaged primarily in terms of the

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various sorts of Neoplatonic material which inform them. On the other hand, the interest and value of Boethius is found in the use medieval authors made of him. As a result, he is turned into a sort of a conduit by which ancient ideas were transmitted to the Middle Ages, a bit like a one-man equivalent of the eighth- and ninth-century translation movement that saw large parts of Greek thought made available to Arabic philosophers. Boethius himself disappears almost entirely from this view of intellectual history. Not only is he not read whole: his texts may be read, but *Boethius* is not really read at all.

The view of Boethius as a conduit is adequate for many purposes in intellectual history and the history of philosophy, but it also obscures a good deal of what is most important about this strange thinker and his effect on medieval readers. Nor is it a view that ought to be retained, since its two foundations are a questionable characterization of Boethius' work as unoriginal and an over-narrow way of thinking about influence. Boethius does not lack originality, though he is original in a complex rather than a simple sense – he is a markedly individual thinker, who owes many of his ideas to others; and in order to think about influence adequately, it is not enough to see how general positions and arguments were transmitted – we must ask about how each particular thinker and his or her outlook affected future generations. In a book I wrote a few years ago (Marenbon 2003a), I tried to combat the conduit view of Boethius. The authors of the various chapters in this *Companion* each have their own approaches to Boethius, which may be different from, or even opposed to, mine. None the less, their work provides the material both to understand what is special about Boethius' thinking and writing, and to gauge the particularity of his influence – to continue the project I tried to begin. Let me describe briefly how, because doing so gives the opportunity for a preview of the following chapters, and it will also allow me to explain the value of reading the whole Boethius.

Boethius spent most of his life writing and thinking, but by reason of his birth and his adoptive parents he was a leader of his community, the Roman aristocracy, who, though real power lay in the hands of Theoderic and his Ostrogothic army, continued with the outward forms of Roman civility, such as the Senate and the consulship. In his late middle age, Boethius chose to enter serious politics, becoming what was in effect Theoderic's prime minister. As is well known, the decision proved literally fatal: he was quickly removed from power,

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imprisoned and executed. The social milieu into which Boethius was born and where he played a prominent role moulded his peculiar combination of interests, attitudes and ambitions, whilst the outcome of his disastrous venture into politics provided the stimulus and the setting for the *Consolation of Philosophy*. John Moorhead's chapter sketches out this background, and at the same time provides an introduction for non-specialists to some of the basic ideas of late ancient philosophy.

The following three chapters look at Boethius as a logician. Even his most extreme advocate could not pretend that in the majority of his logical writings he was expressing his own ideas. Boethius, like his Greek contemporary Ammonius, was working within a scholastic tradition, where a commentator's job was mainly to pass on some of the various existing views about how to interpret each passage of Aristotle and choose which he thought best. One recent scholar, James Shiel, went further, suggesting that Boethius did no more than translate an already existing selection of material into Latin. In his chapter, Sten Ebbesen looks in detail at Boethius' task as an Aristotelian commentator and how he performed it. He shows that Shiel's view is unlikely and suggests that, most probably, Boethius chose Porphyry as the main basis for his comments, but also added material from other sources. The decision to make Porphyry his main source was a very important one, which shows that Boethius had a distinctive approach to philosophy – that he was exercising an originality in deciding whose ideas to follow. By contrast with the tendency of some of the exegesis of Boethius' own time and immediately before, Porphyry tried mostly to follow an Aristotelian line in his approach to logic and the metaphysical questions linked to it, looking back especially to the Peripatetic philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias.<sup>3</sup>

Another important decision Boethius made – easy to overlook because it is so clearly in front of our eyes – was to devote himself so thoroughly to logic. In the middle of his career, he announced that he intended to translate and provide commentaries on all the works of Plato and Aristotle that he could find.<sup>4</sup> Although it is true that his plans for a lifetime's work were cut short by his entry into politics, imprisonment and execution, even before these unexpected events Boethius had in practice decided to concentrate on logic in a way that would make completion of the whole plan very unlikely: he decided to write double commentaries on the main texts, and he went on to

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produce textbooks and a commentary on branches of logic that Aristotle had not fully developed. The decision to follow Porphyry and so Aristotle, and the choice to spend so much time on logic, fit together. They show Boethius as someone for whom, despite his partiality for Neoplatonic metaphysics, a different way of thinking, based on Aristotle, in which metaphysical problems are closely linked to questions about argument, language and cognition had its own validity and special interest. The philosophical subtlety and breadth of this mixture of what we would now describe as philosophy of language, philosophy of mind and metaphysics is brought out in Margaret Cameron's chapter, which shows the rewards to be gained by accepting that Boethius may have found many of his ideas elsewhere (usually Porphyry), and then taking what he writes seriously as philosophy.

In the latest logical texts he wrote, Boethius had moved to areas where he could not simply exercise his distinctive choice of source and follow it. One group of them was devoted to the theory of topical argument, a branch of logic that derived from, but had much altered since, Aristotle's *Topics*. Boethius had at his disposal Cicero's untheoretical and legally-oriented treatise and material (now lost) by the fourth-century Peripatetic Themistius. He had, at the least, to compare and combine their different systems in his *On Topical Differentiae*, whilst in his long commentary on Cicero's *Topics* he had to think independently about the text he was discussing, using his knowledge both of legal history and the history of logic. Christopher Martin discusses these writings, but his chapter concentrates especially on the strangest of all Boethius' logical works, his treatise on hypothetical syllogisms. Here Boethius claims that he is, for the most part, reasoning independently of any sources, and there is no good reason to question his claim. Martin's analysis brings out some of the peculiarities of Boethius' approach and so the limits to his capacities as a logical innovator. Even so (see below) this ponderous textbook is of immense importance in the history of logic.

In his short theological treatises, Boethius was concerned to tackle problems about Christian doctrine which were troubling the Church of his day and causing division among Christians. This aspect of the *Opuscula sacra* is treated in David Bradshaw's chapter, in which developments and issues in Greek theology at the time are used to throw light on Boethius' approach. But the *Opuscula sacra* contain

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substantive philosophical discussion. Traditionally, scholars have concentrated on the third treatise (called *De hebdomadibus* in the Middle Ages) and especially the Neoplatonic metaphysics implied by the axioms placed at its beginning. Interesting as this aspect of the texts may be, it tends to lead to the sort of speculation about sources which dissolves Boethius' own philosophical identity.<sup>5</sup> Instead, here Andrew Arlig concentrates on the analysis of individuality which is central to the doctrinally orientated *opuscula* I, III and V. His chapter provides more evidence of the rewards of looking seriously at Boethius' arguments, showing how on this topic Boethius 'define[s] the problems that will inspire generations of philosophers' and 'gestures towards' the solutions many of them will offer.

The distinctiveness and artistry of the *Consolation* does not need special pleading. In her chapter, however, Danuta Shanzer is able to bring out with especial detail and precision the delicacy and complexity of Boethius' relationship to a long literary as well as philosophical tradition, and indicate her reservations about some of the interpretations advanced by those (myself included) who are less well versed than she in the Greek and Latin literary background. By contrast, the fact that Books II, III and IV contain a tight series of arguments about the nature of the Good is often passed over too quickly, or treated vaguely in terms of Stoic and Neoplatonic sources. John Magee's chapter examines the argument about the Good in detail, paying especial attention to the way that Boethius' means of presentation deepen the philosophical position he is proposing. The discussion of divine prescience and human free will in Book V has received close philosophical scrutiny since the Middle Ages. Here the danger is rather that Boethius' arguments will not be appreciated accurately because they are taken to be addressing the problem in terms of the debate today (or even in the later Middle Ages), rather than in his own terms. Robert Sharples's chapter helps to replace Boethius' discussion within the ancient debate whilst paying critical attention to the whole range of contemporary interpretations.

Boethius, then, emerges from these discussions of different parts of his work as a highly individual thinker. His influence reflects this particularity. The chapters by Cameron and Martin on language and logic each contain brief but highly suggestive treatments of how Boethius influenced medieval logic. Cameron's section is short, not because there is too little, but rather because there is too much, to

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say. For the logicians of the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, Boethius' commentaries (and monographs) were the starting points for most of their thinking. As Cameron shows, the best thinkers were far from being servile imitators of Boethius: setting out from his writings, and sometimes giving special prominence to incidental remarks he made, the twelfth-century thinkers developed new positions, such as Abelard's nominalism. Still, the very fact that almost all these twelfth-century thinkers were engaged in developing a metaphysics and semantics on a mainly Aristotelian basis, within the framework of logic (in the broad sense defined by the ancient tradition), is the direct result of Boethius' decision to concentrate on logic and to make Porphyry his favourite among the commentators. Christopher Martin ends his chapter by showing how, from Boethius' attempts to calculate the different varieties of hypothetical syllogisms, Abelard managed to arrive at what Boethius never grasped: an understanding of propositional logic. It may be tempting to see here a simple illustration of Abelard's brilliance as a logician and Boethius' comparative lack of insight. But Abelard was not so much an alchemist, transforming base matter, as a prospector who found a vein of gold in Boethius previously hidden from everyone, including Boethius himself.

Given the vast influence of Boethius on pre-thirteenth-century logic, and the immense popularity of the *Consolation*, it is easy to forget that the *Opuscula sacra* were also foundational texts for medieval thought, hardly less important for twelfth-century theology than the commentaries and monographs for the logic of the time, and with a lesser, but still important, bearing on thirteenth-century doctrinal discussion. Christophe Erismann's chapter explores the whole range of this influence as well as studying how certain of Boethius' philosophical themes (especially the theory of individuation, analysed in detail by Arlig) were developed by medieval philosophers. Especially important for understanding the role of Boethius in the Middle Ages is his explanation of how the *Opuscula* provided 'a method for rational theology'. Without the *Opuscula*, the philosophically powerful analyses of the Trinity by Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers are hardly thinkable, and with them the whole direction of thirteenth-century theology towards more and more sophisticated treatments of the basic metaphysics needed for discussing Christian doctrine. Thomas Aquinas himself developed some of his most important

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thoughts about the nature of theology, and also about individuation, in commenting on Boethius' *On the Trinity*.

The influence of the *Consolation* is of a scale and complexity different in order to that of Boethius' other works, despite their great importance for medieval thinkers. Unlike his logic or theology, the *Consolation* remained a central text from the turn of the ninth century through to the end of the Middle Ages and beyond, and it was the only philosophical text which consistently was read not just by students in the schools and later universities, but by a wider public, in vernacular translation. Translations of the text into Anglo-Saxon and Old High German were made in the ninth and tenth centuries, and from the thirteenth century onwards the versions in many different languages (even Hebrew) are so many that they make cataloguing them and their relationships a vast enterprise. Commentaries, too, became by the late Middle Ages no longer the preserve of the learned: information from them was incorporated into translations (Geoffrey Chaucer, for instance, makes use of Nicholas Trevet's commentary in his translation), and vernacular commentaries were also written. The chapters on the influence of the *Consolation* are divided between a study of the commentaries by Lodi Nauta and a discussion of literary uses of the text by Winthrop Wetherbee. Both contributors are able, within a short space, to give an impression of the range of the material and to move between Latin and vernacular, learned and more popular, uses. They also – especially in the treatment of the commentaries – show how Boethius continued to be used well into what is often too sharply separated off from the Middle Ages as the Renaissance and Early Modern Period.

But is there any single feature that characterizes how the *Consolation* affected medieval thought and writing, besides the very diversity and pervasiveness of its influence? Arguably there is – and it is also the feature which draws together all the diverse aspects of Boethius' writing and its effects on generations of medieval readers.

Faced by an author who spent much of his life translating and writing on logic and mathematics, yet also composed treatises on contested points of Christian doctrine, and who, preparing for death, produced a philosophical treatise remarkable for its lack of explicit Christian content, scholars have been in the habit of asking questions such as 'Was Boethius really a Christian?' or 'Did Boethius give up Christianity at the end of his life?' They rarely ask such questions



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nowadays, however, because almost everyone is, rightly, convinced that Boethius was and remained fully a Christian and the historian's task is to explain the relationship he drew in his intellectual life and writings between a philosophical culture rooted in the pagan past and his adherence to the Church and its teachings. While many of the nuances in this relationship remain to be better understood, its broad features are clear. Unlike even the most philosophically inclined Church Fathers, who infused their religious thinking with ideas from the Platonic tradition (or, as in the case of Augustine, entered into a complicated dialectic with Platonism), Boethius respected the philosophical tradition in its own integrity, not as a competitor with Christianity, but as an irreplaceable accompaniment, which leads a long way towards the same goals. It was this attitude that makes sense of his life's work: years spent with the minutiae of mathematical subjects and logic (where, even within the philosophical tradition, Boethius respected the integrity of different approaches, developing an Aristotelian metaphysics and semantics, despite his own ultimately Platonic loyalties); an approach to theology which involves developing physical and metaphysical distinctions that apply to the ordinary world and then examining to what extent they apply to God, and at what point they break down when applied to him; and, finally, providing his fictional self and generations of readers of the *Consolation* with a philosophical path to salvation which, clearly, he regarded as inadequate to some extent, but none the less as treasure.

This attitude made it possible for medieval writers themselves to relate to the ancient pagan world and its philosophical culture in a way that, probably, would not otherwise have been easily open to them. To take just two examples of how the logical works and theological treatises enabled striking developments in medieval thought, consider the philosophical system Abelard developed in its own terms, hardly related to Christian doctrine, within his logical works, or how, although the only work of Gilbert of Poitiers which survives is a theological commentary, because the works he commented on are Boethius' *opuscula*, he develops within it a rationally justifiable, philosophically fascinating metaphysics. The *Consolation* too opened up possibilities, and to a far wider range of writers than in the case of Boethius' other works, but in a more complex way. The fact, recognized from the start, that the *Consolation* is a work by a Christian author written in purely philosophical terms gave a warrant both for



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reading pagan philosophical texts as hiding Christian truths, and for Christian authors to write works which, like Boethius' dialogue, contained nothing explicitly Christian even where it might be expected. But the *Consolation* is an elaborate literary structure which uses formal and verbal devices to refract the arguments it develops, posing as many questions as it answers. It is no accident that scholars still debate the extent to which the *Consolation* is supposed to show the inadequacy of purely philosophical solutions. The *Consolation* is written in such a manner as to resist a definitive interpretation, which would decide one way or the other. And so, for its more acute medieval readers – who included the most intellectually challenging of Old French writers, Jean de Meun, the finest Middle English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the greatest philosophical poet of any time, Dante – the *Consolation* problematized the cluster of issues about pagan philosophy and its relation to truth and to salvation: the paths of thought and writing it opened turned out, all too often, to lead not to the clarity of a plain, but to the darkness of a forest, where the trail is so hidden that the traveller must sit still and reflect.

There are, then, two strong reasons to read Boethius whole. First, there is a unifying theme which binds together his very diverse writings, even where the ideas in them are taken from others. Second, the literary art of the *Consolation* shows that his philosophical speculations have a depth which would not become obvious from the logical and theological works alone, though neither would it be apparent without them.

As I mentioned at the beginning, one reason why Boethius is not read whole has to do not with Boethius but with the specialization that leads exponents of different disciplines each to seize their bit of his legacy. For philosophers, at least, this specialization is not, as such, a fault, since they need to ask, when they look at texts from the past, what they mean and how much they matter as philosophy. But the identity and boundaries of philosophy are themselves far from fixed, and specialization becomes dangerous when it places them too narrowly. Reading Boethius whole, avoiding neither the technical challenges of the logic and theology, nor the obliquities of the *Consolation*, will help philosophers to set them more generously. The essays in this *Companion* are intended to further this aim, and I am grateful to the contributors for having given their time and abilities to the project. I am also grateful to Brian Davies for having

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suggested this volume to the Cambridge University Press, and to Iveta Adams, for the rare intelligence, scrupulousness and scholarship with which she has copy-edited this complex manuscript.

## NOTES

1. There is, however, an important way in which this book *fails* to present the whole Boethius. There are no chapters on his treatises *On Arithmetic* and *On Music*, both of which were very widely read in the Middle Ages. They have been excluded to leave space for an adequate treatment of the rest of Boethius' work: they are each highly technical works, and cannot be properly understood without a specialist training in ancient and medieval arithmetic or musical theory. Despite the plea against narrow specialization I am making here, it would be overambitious, however desirable, to envisage many people equipped to grasp not only Boethius as a logician, philosopher, theologian, writer and politician, but as (in his sense) a mathematician. For further information see the entries in the Appendix (p. 303).
2. There is also a practical reason why Boethius is not read whole. Whereas the *Consolation* exists in many modern English versions, and the *Opuscula sacra* are available in English, little of the logical work, except for that on the theory of topics, exists in translation.
3. This is not to say that Porphyry de-ontologized logic, as has been claimed – merely that he tried to follow a generally Aristotelian line in the Aristotelian part of the syllabus, by contrast with some Neoplatonists, who wanted to read Neoplatonic principles directly into Aristotelian logic: cf. Cameron's chapter in this book, n. 23.
4. See below, Moorhead (pp. 25–6) and Appendix (p. 310) for translations of this text and further discussion of it.
5. On the metaphysics of the axioms see especially Hadot (1963) and Maioli (1978). A brief introduction to the problems and further bibliography is provided in Marenbon (2003a) 87–90. For a good analysis of the main argument of OS III see MacDonald (1988).