



Boethius: Life and Works

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Ancius Manlius Severinus Boethius, Roman statesman and philosopher, who is often styled “the last of the Romans,” was born at Rome in 480 and died at Pavia in 524 or 525.

Descended from a consular family, he was left an orphan at an early age and was educated by the pious and noble-minded Symmachus, whose daughter, Rusticiana, he married. As early as 507 he was known as a learned man, and as such was entrusted by King Theodoric with several important missions. He enjoyed the confidence of the king, and as a patrician of Rome was looked up to by the representatives of the Roman nobility. When, however, his enemies accused him of disloyalty to the Ostrogothic king, alleging that he plotted to restore “Roman liberty,” and added the accusation of “sacrilege” (the practice of astrology), neither his noble birth nor his great popularity availed him. He was cast into prison, condemned unheard, and executed by order of Theodoric. During his imprisonment, he reflected on the instability of the favor of princes and the inconstancy of the devotion of his friends. These reflections suggested to him the theme of his best-known philosophical work, the “*De Consolatione Philosophiae*”.

Tradition began very early to represent Boethius as a martyr for the Christian Faith. It was believed that among the accusations brought against him was devotion to the Catholic cause, which at that time was championed by the Emperor Justin against the Arian Theodoric. In the eighth century this tradition had assumed definite shape, and in many places Boethius was honored as a martyr, and his feast observed on the twenty-third of October. In recent times, critical scholarship has gone to the opposite extreme, and there have not been wanting critics who asserted that Boethius was not a Christian at all, or that, if he was, he abjured the Faith before his death. The foundation for this opinion is the fact that in the “*Consolations of Philosophy*” no mention is made of Christ or of the Christian religion.

A saner view, which seems at the present time to be prevalent among scholars, is that Boethius was a Christian and remained a Christian to the end. That he was a Christian is proved by his theological tracts, some of which, as we shall see, are undoubtedly genuine. That he remained a Christian is the obvious inference from the ascertained fact of his continued association with Symmachus; and if the “*Consolations of Philosophy*” bears no trace of Christian influence, the explanation is at hand in the fact that it is an entirely artificial exercise, a philosophical dialogue modeled on strictly pagan productions, a treatise

in which, according to the ideas of method which prevailed at the time, Christian feeling and Christian thought had no proper place. Besides, even if we disregard certain allusions which some interpret in a Christian sense, there are passages in the treatise which seem plainly to hint that, after philosophy has poured out all her consolations for the benefit of the prisoner, there are more potent remedies (*validiora remedia*) to which he may have recourse. There can be no reasonable doubt, then, that Boethius died a Christian, though it is not easy to show from documentary sources that he died a martyr for the Catholic Faith. The absence of documentary evidence does not, however, prevent us from giving due value to the constant tradition on this point. The local cult of Boethius at Pavia was sanctioned when, in 1883, the Sacred Congregation of Rites confirmed the custom prevailing in that diocese of honoring St. Severinus Boethius, on the 23d of October.

To the science of mathematics and the theory of music Boethius contributed the “De Institutione Arithmetica Libri II”, “De Institutione Musics Libri V”, and “Geometria Euclidis a Boethio in Latinum translata”. The last-mentioned work is found in various MSS. of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. There is also found among the MSS. a work “De Geometric”, which, in its extant form, is considered to be a ninth- or tenth-century elaboration of a work of Boethius. How far the work is genuine, and to what extent interpolations have crept in, is a question of more than ordinary interest for the student of general history, for on the answer to this question depends the determination of the date of the first use of Arabic numerals in Western Europe. Boethius’ philosophical works include: (a) translations from the Greek, e.g. of Aristotle’s logical treatises (with commentaries) and of Porphyry’s “Isagoge” (with commentaries); (b) commentaries on Porphyry’s “Isagoge”, translated by Marius Victorinus, and on Cicero’s “Topica”; (c) original logical treatises, “De Categoriis Syllogismis”, “Introductio ad Syllogismos Categoriis”, “De Divisione” (of doubtful authenticity), and “De Differentiis Topicis”. These exercised very great influence on the development of medieval terminology, method, and doctrine, especially in logic. In fact, the schoolmen, down to the beginning of the twelfth century, depended entirely on Boethius for their knowledge of Aristotle’s doctrines. They adopted his definitions and made them current in the schools; for instance, the definitions of “person”, “eternity”, etc.

The theological works of Boethius include: “De Trinitate”; two short treatises (*opuscula*) addressed to John the Deacon (afterwards Pope John I); “Liber contra Eutychem et Nestorium”; and “De Fide Catholicis” (generally regarded as spurious, although the only argument against its genuineness is the lack of manuscript authority). These were much studied in the early Middle Ages, as is testified by the number of glosses found in the MSS. as far back as the ninth century (e.g. glosses by John Scotus Erigena and Remi of Auxerre). To the theologians of the Middle Ages generally they appealed as the genuine works of the Christian martyr, Boethius. In modern times, those who denied that Boethius was a Christian were, of course, obliged to reject all the *opuscula* as spurious. However, the publication of the so-called “Anecdota Holderi” (ed. by Usener, Leipzig, 1877) brought to light a new argument for their genuineness. For, as Cassiodorus ought certainly to have known which works of Boethius were genuine, when he wrote “[Boethius] scripsit librum de ancta Trinitate et capita quaedam dogmatica et librum contra Nestorium”, he settled the

question as far as four of the treatises are concerned.

Boethius' best-known work is the "Consolations of Philosophy" written during his imprisonment—"by far the most interesting example of prison literature the world has ever seen." It is a dialogue between Philosophy and Boethius, in which the Queen of Sciences strives to console the fallen statesman. The main argument of the discourse is the transitoriness and unreality of all earthly greatness and the superior desirability of the things of the mind. There are evident traces of the influence of the Neo-Platonists, especially of Proclus, and little, if anything, that can be said to reflect Christian influences. The recourse to Stoicism, especially to the doctrines of Seneca, was inevitable, considering the nature of the theme. It does astonish the modern reader, although, strange to say, it did not surprise the medieval student, that Boethius, a Christian, and, as everyone in the Middle Ages believed, a Christian martyr, should have failed, in his moment of trial and mental stress to refer to the obvious Christian sources of consolation. Perhaps the medieval student of Boethius understood better than we do that a strictly formal dialogue on the consolation of philosophy should adhere rigorously to the realm of "natural truth" and leave out of consideration the lesson to be derived from the moral maxims of Christianity—"supernatural truth".

The work takes up many problems of metaphysics as well as of ethics. It treats of the Being and Nature of God, of providence and fate, of the origin of the universe, and of the freedom of the will. In medieval times, it became one of the most popular and influential philosophical books, a favorite study of statesmen, poets, and historians, as well as of philosophers and theologians. It was translated into Anglo-Saxon by King Alfred the Great, and into Old German by Notker Teutonicus; its influence may be traced in Beowulf and in Chaucer, in Anglo-Norman and Provençal popular poetry, in the first specimens of Italian verse, as well as in the "Divine Comedy". The important part which it played in Dante's mental struggle after the death of Beatrice is described in the "Convito", where, strange to say, it is referred to as "a book not known to many". Echoes of it and citations from it occur frequently in the "Divine Comedy". For instance, the lines which Tennyson paraphrases by "a sorrow's crown of sorrow" are themselves at least a haunting memory of Boethius' "In omni adversitate fortunæ infelicissimum genus est infortunii fuisse felicem" (De Consol. Phil., II, Pros. IV). That the "De Consolatione" was a favorite study of the theologians as well as of the poets is evidenced by the numerous imitations under the title "De Consolatione Theologiae" which were widely read during the later Middle Ages.

William Turner. "Boethius." *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912.

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