1991

The Use of a Predecessor in Boethius' on the Consolation of Philosophy

Mark Arvieux
Portland State University

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives/vol1/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthós (1990-1996) by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.
Through our lives, we are affected not only by events that transpire in our time, but by past events as well. Indeed the past shapes our lives as much as the present. Therefore, when we endeavor to examine a work of literature, we must look to the predecessors of the writer in an attempt to discern the past influences that helped him or her to develop viewpoints. Even a philosophical treatment of life such as *On the Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius will be altered by the author whose works or opinions are incorporated into it.

Let us define predecessor and the different aspects of the term before making a specific statement on the work. In a sense a predecessor would be a person who came before the tradition or had aspired to the same goal as the author. A predecessor need not be a person solely, because through the reader, a work of literature becomes its own entity, with the authors’ words and intentions becoming a set of inherent characteristics like genes, that define the work but do not limit it. If this is so, then a work of literature may be molded to aptly fit this description of predecessor. A
tradition is merely a trail worn down by the repeated passing of minds on the same path toward the same goal. It is the essence of the predecessor. All these things may and must be considered then in order to examine the many conscious and unconscious influences that shape the work of the considered author.

How then may predecessors be incorporated into a work? Simply speaking, there appear to be two possibilities. An author may quote directly from a work, or paraphrase. This would cause the readers' attention to be drawn momentarily to the task of recalling the quoted material and the conclusions reached by the reader in reference to this work. Another possibility consists of the author integrating a predecessor in an attempt to further the points made by the predecessor, or even to make a contrast between these points and those of the author under consideration.

Boethius himself lived from 480 to 524 A.D. The traditions open to him would be the Greek literary tradition, from Homer to Hesiod and further. The Greek philosophical tradition would be an option, and indeed it would be fairly impossible for Boethius to write a work without founding it some way in this tradition. Also he would be open to the entire Christian tradition as it had developed to this time. We are told that Boethius wrote *On the Consolation of Philosophy* while in jail awaiting execution. This would surely bring to mind the writings and philosophy of Plato and the Socratic tradition.

In *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius is visited by a personification of the god Philosophy. Boethius is upset because he is being unjustly put to death while more obvious criminals run rampant. Philosophy proceeds to cheer him up by showing him that it's all out of our hands and that the bad are better left unpunished because the act of continued bad behavior is punishment enough. She explains this by explaining the ultimate good as God, because he is all the manifestations of good combined. The tendency of all life on earth is shown to be this good. Evil becomes literally nothing as it is not on this path, therefore it does not exist at all. Providence and fate are shown to be the forces that move the world toward this goal. Providence is the desire or manifestation of the will of God, and fate is simply this force as it is experienced by those who are farther
Boethius uses predecessors on two different levels in his work. They are either mentioned in reference to a specific topic being discussed, or used as predecessors to the overall theme of the work. The most evident topical references are to Plato and the style of speech used in Homer and the epic tradition. A manifestation of the Stoic concept of “fourfold interpretation” is encountered later in the book as Philosophy explains the relationship between the senses, imagination, reason, and intelligence. Philosophy often speaks in the style of Homeric characters, and the prayers and invocations to God are very reminiscent of this style. The predecessors to the theme of *On the Consolation of Philosophy* seem to be the Christian tradition and the philosophy of the Stoics. When explaining the being and nature of God and his relationship to man, Philosophy seems to be describing a Christian concept of God. Her explanation of fate and providence mirrors almost exactly the Stoic definition of these intangibles. The Stoic idea that life tends toward divine order becomes the argument used by Philosophy to give life meaning.

As well as using Stoic ideas as a basis for his own opinions, Boethius sets the book up in an interesting fashion with regards to the allusions he makes. Throughout the beginning of the work, he refers almost exclusively to the principles of Stoic philosophy. The concept alluded to most often seems to be determinism. The Stoic philosophy did not really allow for man to have a free will. Boethius was much distressed by this idea. As the issue of free will arises later in the text, Boethius' allusions begin to shift. As Henry Chadwick notes, there is a marked shift in Boethius' allusions, from Stoic thought to a more clearly neo-platonic concept of providence in the end. Neo-platonists believed that although God may know all that will and has happened, his foreknowledge does alter the course of events in human experience. This allows man to have free will in his actions, because God's knowledge of them does not change the fact of occurrence.

Another interesting operation in the work is that of the poetry. At the center of the writing is a poem called "O Qui Perpetua". All the other poems in the book fall away from here. The poems that mirror each other in placement also have the same meter. This was noted by
Gruber, whose work is discussed in Chadwick. This seems to allow one to draw upon Homer, or specifically, the *Iliad*, as a predecessor. With this we see Boethius as a tragic hero. Sentenced to die, he is aware of his fate, but is troubled by his inability to accept it. As for other topics in the work, such as the nature of God and happiness, Boethius is pleased by Philosophies' explanation. Throughout the discussion of fate and free will, Boethius is constantly troubled by questions. This seems to further enforce Boethius' inability to accept his fate. Perhaps like Achilles he worried about being remembered after he was gone.

An interesting complication I encountered was the "God" mentioned so often in the work. If these are indeed references to the Christian deity, how is it that Philosophy becomes a separate divinity? Boethius follows the aforementioned pattern in his use of predecessors. They either serve to emphasize a particular point, or they act as foundations for further elaboration of ideas.

With the explication of a work we realized that no literature is independent of its environment, but is indeed a reflection of it. With this current assignment, we move closer to understanding the nature of writing and how culture is derived from history, rather than being a separate body. If we can determine the predecessors a writer uses, and deem this a conscious choice we see that the line between past and present blurs. The times and lives of our own predecessors are made more accessible and tangible to us through the realization that inside us all are histories and museums, one as fascinating and enlightening as the next.