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The Consolation of Philosophy

Shawna Purcell

Every generation leaves its imprint of culture on the next generation. Just as the Western civilization inherited the European culture, the Romans inherited the Greek culture. These imprints over time, are refined and built upon to create a “new” culture. As Seneca put it, “A cultivates B and B cultivates C; no one is his own master” (Seneca, 292). Focusing upon literature, we can observe the transition of the memorized and spoken epics of the Greek culture to the written works of the Romans that are intertexted with allusions to particular epics. As twentieth century readers we can understand earlier works such as the *Consolation of Philosophy* by reading it against a traditional background and applying the four fold scheme of interpretation. The following discussion will show how Boethius has deeply woven into his poems the philosophies and writing styles of his predecessors Homer, Seneca, Ovid and Plato, including the Stoics.

The work begins with an elegiac poem that familiarizes the reader with the mental state of the prisoner. It doesn't begin with an invocation to a muse, which is so abundant in the Homeric works, but suggests that he was involuntarily driven by the Muses to write. “I who once composed with eager zest am driven by grief to shelter in sad songs” (Boethius, 35). Three paragraphs into the prose there seems to be more of an invitation of Philosophy's Muses rather than a direct invocation such as “Begin, Muse when the two first broke and clashed” (75). This was also the case in the *Aeneid* in which Virgil didn't begin with an invocation until the fourteenth line. The scene of a divine being, Philosophy, appearing to a wretched man may recall an

earlier memory of Thetis appearing to Achilles. This poem introduces some natural aspects of the poetry and lays out a prelude to the work concerning Fortune. Boethius describes his situation as the act of Fortune who “gave me wealth short lived then in a moment all but ruined me” (35). The latter part of the phrase can be imagined as a blanket covering him, a magical “poof,” or dark, thick clouds. Ovid, who was at one time in this same situation, described the work of Fortune in one of his poems of exile. “When night falls here, I think of that other night when the shadow fell once and for all and I was cast out of the light into this endless gloom” (Saubach, 71).

The opening elegiac poem of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* is enhanced by phrases that consist of the nature and order of things. Images of the natural world and order are created by using stormy weather, seasonal changes and the heavens as metaphors to explain the journey that Boethius must encounter to reach a peace of mind. The first line of poem two, book one states “So sinks the mind in deep despair and sight grows dim / when the storms of life blow surging up the weight of care, it banishes its inward light.” We can interpret this as the mind representing the soul, descending from a higher level and sinking into the physical body, which, as Plato believes, hinders the soul from attaining the truth. This idea is also found in Seneca’s *De Consolatione ad Marciam*: “It [the soul] constantly struggles against this weight of the flesh in the effort to avoid being dragged back and sunk; it ever strives to rise to that place from which it once descended. There eternal peace awaits it when it has passed from Earth’s dull motley to the vision of all that is pure and bright” (Slavitt, 10).

The emphasis on the change and movement of nature was also characteristic of the Stoic philosophy of natural science (Bassore, 89). God was thought to be the active source and mate-

rial items passive, being acted upon. Boethius supports this hypothesis in poem two of book one with statements such as “Storms of life blowing up the weight of care / The frozen fairness of the moon / Why spring hours are mild with flowers manifest / Ripe autumn at the full of year.” These statements demonstrate nature changing from different states of matter (liquid to solid) and the seasonal changes (spring to autumn). It also suggests that there is a source, God, that creates the “storms that roar and rouse the seas, the spirit that rotates the world, the cause that translocates the sun.” The main idea of nature here is that there is an explanation for everything, and that nature is capable of acting and being acted upon. With the changing seasons introduced we can now look to Ovid for his perception and use of seasonal changes in his poetry. In the *Tristia* and *Episulae Ex Ponto* Ovid writes about the seasonal changes as not wanting to occur naturally in his microcosm of a tormented world. “The summer solstice does not shorten the days, or the winter shorten the nights. The seasons here come late, as if they too were reluctant” (Slavitt, 71). “The earth out here has hidden itself as if in shame under the permafrost and constant snows. The fields, untilled, produce nothing nor do the vines and trees on the naked hills” (Slavitt, 127). Ovid also uses the seasons as a measure of time, exemplifying how slowly the days pass while waiting for his execution, by expressing that the four seasons didn’t seem to progress from winter to fall.

In the *Iliad* Homer’s gods would often interfere with war and save a particular hero’s life by clouding the attackers’ vision, thus saving the hero from death. One example of this is in book twenty when Zeus “poured a mist across Achilles’ eyes, wrenched the spear from stalwart Aeneas’ shield and hoisted him off the earth (20.370), and later Achilles brushes away the “mist from his eyes, the magic, god sent haze” (20.388). This adaptation of Homeric

material into Boethius' work is seen in the third poem of book one. It begins: "The night was put to flight, the darkness fled, and to my eyes their former strength returned." Boethius is referring to Philosophy as "wiping away the tears that clouded his eyes so he could see the light." Turning to a Christian source, Ephesians 1:18, the same concept of a divine being helping an individual see through their "clouded" vision is seen. "Having the eyes to your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you." The latter connection helps support the notion that Boethius was a Christian.

Plato's influence on Boethius is shown throughout the work, but my focus will be on book three. Here, the Platonic idea of the ascent of the soul consisting of two parts, education and recollection is shown in poems one and ten (Boethius, 22). These two poems can be read against book seven of the *Republic* in which the Allegory of the Cave is described. Boethius is calling to those that by "false desires are enchained in wicked bonds" of the earth such as wealth (Boethius, 104). He explains that gold and green emeralds which are found deep within the earth bind the soul more heavily to the body and material items. If one is to stay in the bondage of this "cave" he will not know and understand true goodness. If this hypothetical individual is forced outside of the cave into the true light he will slowly learn and become accustomed to the light and "will say that the sun's own rays are not so bright" (3.10).

Boethius moves from a Stoic philosophy to a Neoplatonic one near the end of his work. The allusions to myths throughout the work suggest that he was also influenced by Neoplatonism. The myths are placed in specific points throughout the work depending on the discussion at hand. One such myth from Homer that was used included Circe and the companions of Odysseus. Boethius refers to Circe as a magical god-

dess who “mixes cups she has touched with a spell” (4.3). Homer, on the other hand, doesn’t go as far as to suggest that she was making incantations, but he does portray her as being magical, using her wand to turn the men into swine. By adding incantations into the Circe myth, Boethius is able to make it more magical, showing the enchantment she held over the men. In Homer’s version the men take the form of swine, whereas Boethius has added such animals as a boar, lion, wolf and tiger. There are wolves and lions that Circe has tamed in the original text, but the men do not take the form of these kinds of animals. The thought of men becoming the type of animal which they most closely resembled was a traditional theme of Greek ethical discourse. This is also seen in the *Phaedo* (81d), thus allowing one to make the assumption that Plato believed in the theory of human reincarnation into animals. Boethius also seemed to favor the metaphorical example of man becoming the animal he resembled. The main idea that he was trying to portray by using the myth is that “only the mind remains” (4.27). He believed that despite evil vices and corruption that a man may encounter, his mind remains good. Boethius changed some aspects of the myth but stayed true to the original Homeric text, “They had the heads of swine and the voice and the hair and the body, but the mind was steady as before” (10.240). This poem interprets Philosophy’s argument that when people are overcome with wickedness they become subhuman and portray animal behaviors of a specific kind and type. This is characteristic of the Neoplatonist belief that the mind is a force that does not change due to outside influences.

Boethius’ predecessors have laid the foundation for the creation of his own unique work. Homer provided stable ground elements from which following generations could learn and build upon to create many new masterpieces of literature. It is

nearly impossible for one to estrange themselves from their cultural heritage. Everything that we learn and discover has roots deeply embedded within predecessors. Like the planets, each unique, but made of similar elements, Boethius attained his own notoriety by building on the works of his predecessors.