CHAPTER 1

Boethius, the Prisoner, and
The Consolation of Philosophy

Philip Edward Phillips

The Consolation of Philosophy (ca. 524) holds a prominent position in a long line of literary, political, and religious works produced by writers who were imprisoned and executed for their beliefs and whose words inspired later writers and thinkers to seek a higher and more lasting sense of truth and justice. Although Boethius was not the first person to write an account of unjust incarceration, his Consolation participates in a rich tradition of literary works, both autobiographical and fictional, dealing with the experience of imprisonment and the quest for human freedom. Boethius’s life and career reveal a Christian educated according to the classical tradition and dedicated to public service whose fortunes were reversed in a moment. He fell from the highest civilian office to the depths of prison, where he awaited the king’s order of execution. Boethius’s fall precipitated intense reflection—manifested in a dream-vision dialogue between the narrator and a personified Lady Philosophy—on such perennial human questions as the nature of good and evil, providence and free will, and time and eternity. In the Consolation, the narrator, with Lady Philosophy’s guidance, must come to terms with his sudden physical and spiritual imprisonment, “remember” the nature of being, and ultimately affirm the providence of God, who is the Highest Good (summum bonum).

Boethius and Ostrogothic Italy

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca. 480–524/5) was born during the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, a period known as Late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages. His date of birth corresponds with the deposition and forced
retirement of Romulus Augustulus, the last Western Roman emperor, in 476 by the Hurulian leader Odoacer, who governed Italy as patrician (*patricius*) in the eastern emperor Zeno’s name but was recognized by his followers as king (*rex*).³ Odoacer ruled Italy until Theodoric and his Ostrogothic army invaded and subdued Italy, at the request of Zeno, in 489–493.⁴ Having offered his rival joint rule of Italy, Theodoric invited Odoacer to a banquet in Ravenna, at which Theodoric murdered his astonished guest with a sword and subsequently ordered the execution of Odoacer’s soldiers and family.⁵ Despite the brutality of the beginning and the paranoia and cruelty at the end of Theodoric’s long rule (489–526), most historians regard the Ostrogothic period as one of relative peace and stability.

Educated in Constantinople, Theodoric valued the administrative talents of the Roman aristocracy and employed them in governmental offices while reserving military posts for his Ostrogothic followers. Theodoric desired to retain the social infrastructure of the Roman government and to preserve many of Rome’s social institutions. He employed members of the senatorial elite, including Boethius, for their ability to govern and attend to the needs of the people. Theodoric also valued Rome’s past military and cultural achievements, and he wanted to preserve remnants of its grandeur and civilized way of life for his Ostrogothic and Italian subjects. Theodoric, therefore, sought to preserve what he considered the best of traditional Roman institutions.

The Arian Christianity of the Ostrogoths, which maintained that the Son is not coeternal with the Father, set them apart from the Orthodox Christian Romans but did not prevent their mutual coexistence. Theodoric was tolerant of Orthodox Christians, though not of pagans. Thus religious differences were not a significant problem in Italy during this time until the death of Pope Hormisdas and the ascension of pro-Byzantine Pope John I in 523, which offered the possibility of reconciliation between the western and eastern churches.

It was not long until the intellectual talents⁶ of Boethius, who received the title of *patrician* in ca. 507, came to the attention of Theodoric. In three different letters preserved in Cassiodorus’s *Variae*, Theodoric elaborately praises Boethius’s abilities and makes special requests of him because of his great learning, especially in the sciences and music. In one letter (ca. 506), Theodoric asks Boethius to create a water clock and a sundial for presentation to Gundobad to convince the Burgundian king that his own “noblemen [the patrician elite in Theodoric’s service] are famous authorities” and that the Burgundians should “not dare to think themselves the equals of us.”⁷ In another letter (ca. 506), Theodoric asks Boethius to select a trained lyre player to perform for Clovis, the king of the Franks, in order, like Orpheus, “to tame the savage hearts of the barbarians.”⁸ In a third letter (ca. 507–512), Theodoric calls on Boethius’s skills in the “unchanging science” of “arithmetic” to settle a dispute concerning the