

LODI NAUTA

11 The *Consolation*: the Latin commentary tradition, 800–1700

INTRODUCTION

‘There is nothing superfluous in such a perfect work as the *Consolation* written by such a perfect philosopher as Boethius.’¹ These words, written by the twelfth-century master William of Conches, express a sentiment which was almost universally shared by readers and commentators in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The popularity of the *Consolation* was immense, in fact almost unparalleled. It was translated into different vernacular languages from an early time onwards, which ensured an unusually wide readership, in which every stratum of society is represented: kings and queens, the nobility, monks, clerics, university teachers, school masters, and lay men and women.² As a school text it was glossed by thousands of school teachers, and though it did not find a fixed and permanent place in the university curriculum, it was also frequently studied at this highest level. In this chapter we shall study some aspects of its reception, focusing on the Latin commentary tradition.³ It goes without saying that this can only be done in a highly selective way. There is a huge number of commentaries and glossed copies of the text, and many of them still await a first inspection. Courageous attempts are now being made to catalogue all the manuscripts, and to study and edit sets of glosses and commentaries.⁴ This has resulted in a much fuller but also much more complicated picture of the reception of the *Consolation*. Scholars have come to realise that the modern notion of a text written by one single author is hardly of use in charting traditions of fluent texts such as glosses and commentaries. They were often considered to be common property, and each commentator took from older works what fitted his

purpose or suited his interests. The survey presented below can therefore only be a rough and provisional one.

A major challenge for any commentator who took his (or perhaps in a few cases 'her') job seriously was the absence of overtly Christian teaching in the *Consolation*. Boethius was universally and rightly believed to be the author of some important theological treatises. So the 64,000-dollar question was: why had he opted for a consolation by reason rather than by faith at the end of his life? Modern scholars may rightly point out that there is nothing in the text that would have been unacceptable to a Christian in Boethius' time (nor, for that matter, to a Neo-Platonist of a rationalistic stamp),⁵ but such a historical perspective was generally not available to the medieval reader, who was rather worried by the presence of Platonic, heterodox opinions (such as the pre-existence of the soul and its descent through heavenly spheres to an earthly body) as much as by the absence of citations from the Bible or clear allusions to the person of Christ and Christian faith. But creative reading was the medieval scholars' strong point, and they developed various methods to solve this hermeneutical knot. This will be a major theme in what follows.

Another major theme in the *Consolation* concerns Boethius' attempt to reconcile divine Providence with human free will in Book 5. He guides the reader through a series of connected problems such as causal determinism (everything seems to be ruled by fate) and divine prescience, which seems to be incompatible with the contingency of events. In solving these 'knotty problems' he introduces distinctions which became stock elements in the medieval debates on these themes: fate and providence, God's *providentia* and *praevidentia*, four levels of understanding, two kinds of necessity (simple/absolute and conditional), eternity and sempiternity. He develops the notion that knowledge is dependent on the capabilities of the knowing subject rather than on the thing known, and the notion of God's atemporal eternity (*tota simul*), arguing that God's infallible mode of knowing things is compatible with their contingent outcome, even though this seems to be impossible from the humble, human, point of view.⁶ Medieval logicians and philosophers often quoted the *Consolation* but went much further in developing their own logical tools to attack the problems. Commentators, on the other hand, usually stuck closely to the text, but we shall see that occasionally they

drew, if their ambitions went beyond textual exegesis, on contemporary terminology and debates.

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

After Alcuin of York had introduced the text in the late eight century, the *Consolation* was soon intensively read in the monasteries and cathedral schools of the Carolingian Empire. Apart from an influential treatise on the metrical forms by Lupus of Ferrières from the mid ninth century, the two most important groups of commentaries are associated with the Anonymous of St Gall and Remigius of Auxerre. The first seems to be represented in a series of MSS dating from the late ninth to the early eleventh century, and comprising at least four different forms: (a) a corpus of marginal and interlinear glosses, (b) a more expansive version in the form of a single continuous commentary, (c) a shorter version of the previous item, and (d) stray glosses mixed with Remigian material.⁷ The Remigian tradition is the dominant one in early medieval Europe, with some forty MSS ascribed to Remigius of Auxerre and his revisers. Remigius' commentary, probably composed in the early years of the tenth century, was soon revised by other glossators, both on the Continent and the British Isles. Different versions have been distinguished, but the precise details of their dissemination remain difficult to unravel, since commentators copied freely from each other, omitting, adding and revising as they deemed fit. In addition to these two groups or traditions, there are a number of other commentaries, which seem independent from them, though to what extent is still often an open question. There is, for instance, an interesting commentary in the Vatican library, containing glosses dating from different periods.⁸ A number of them are by a Welsh hand, and seem to predate Remigius' commentary; it has even been suggested that they are in the hand of Asser, who is said by William of Malmesbury to have aided King Alfred in translating the *Consolation* into Old English; other glosses in this MS have been attributed to Dunstan from the mid tenth century. Here too, a number of questions remain unsolved.

Though there is an enormous variation in glosses, commentators pursued a common aim, namely to clarify the meaning of the text by explaining words and grammatical constructions, and by providing some background information of Boethius' allusions to Roman

history and politics, mythological lore and the natural world. This textual explanation served the wider goal of giving the text its proper place in the liberal arts curriculum by linking it to other texts, both pagan and Christian. The *Consolation* gave vivid expression to the belief that the cosmos, created by God out of pure goodness, is a copy of the divine original and hence bears the stamp of the divine, rational, plan. Since the human soul, as an image of God, is among created things closest to its creator, it would be able to learn the structure and plan of the cosmos were it not hampered by the impediments of the body – an inheritance of Adam's sin. By climbing the stairs of the liberal arts, however, men can overcome their fallen state and come to learn the structure of the cosmos and its creator. Study of such texts as Boethius' *Consolation*, Plato's *Timaeus*, Martianus Capella's *On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, and Macrobius' *On the Dream of Scipio*, was often only the beginning of the way upwards towards evangelical perfection, and needed to be complemented by Christian teaching and education. This is of course not to say that these texts were solely studied with this aim in mind. They were also studied for their mythological and historical lore, and for their natural philosophical contents, as for instance advanced astronomical diagrams in manuscripts of some of these texts testify.⁹ But early medieval readers could confidently believe that especially the *Consolation*, written by a devout Christian, was essentially in agreement with Christian teaching, indeed is just another formulation of it. Some revisers of Remigius may even have used the *Consolation* as a source book for exempla to be used in sermons and devotional literature.¹⁰

However, not all commentators shared the same conviction that the entire text could be so easily coordinated with Christian teaching. In particular the hymn 'O qui perpetua' (3.m9), based on Plato's mythological account of the creation of the world and the soul in his *Timaeus*, could lead to feelings of uneasiness. Boethius here clearly refers to the Platonic notion of the soul's pre-existent life, and writes that God had each soul allotted to a star, a light chariot (*levis currus*), for its companion from which it descended at its appropriate time into a body. The soul's perfect knowledge was lost upon embodiment, but 'a seed of truth' (*semen veri*) remained, and by kindling this seed through study of the liberal arts the soul could regain that perfect knowledge: knowledge therefore is recollection

(3.m6, m9 and m11, 5.m4). This cluster of passages thus formed the litmus test for any commentator. According to the Anonymous of St Gallen this terminology of 'light chariots' must be taken metaphorically: Boethius speaks in the manner of a pagan here (*gentili more loquitur*),¹¹ but he is nevertheless assured of Boethius' Christianity. Remigius of Auxerre is less hesitant and writes that Augustine held a similar opinion about the soul's descent. After giving a survey of some other opinions, he argues that the souls' 'chariots' can be interpreted as 'the subtle contemplation and intellect by which God directs man to the heavenly order (*caelestem conservationem*).¹² Other commentators were less willing to bend 'the waxen nose of the authority' in the desired direction (to use the famous image of the twelfth-century theologian Alan of Lille), though most would not go so far as the monk Bovo of Corvey from the late ninth century, who roundly declared that Boethius' words were 'monstrous comments' (*monstruosa commenta*) and that the Platonic doctrines were nothing but 'most inane fables' (*inanissimae fabulae*).¹³ Since Boethius' intention was to discuss the doctrines of the philosophers and not ecclesiastical doctrine, the *Consolation* was often 'contrary to faith', says Bovo.

WILLIAM OF CONCHES

The commentaries from this earlier period were usually written in the form of interlinear and marginal glosses. A more thorough and systematic exegesis of ancient texts became prominent in the schools in the late eleventh century, and hence commentaries developed into more systematic and comprehensive readings. They often obtained a certain independence from the authorial text and could circulate as autonomous works. An important proponent of this development is William of Conches, author of commentaries on Boethius, Priscian, Plato and Macrobius, as well as of two systematic works on natural philosophy.¹⁴ William's work is a blend of tradition and innovation both in its glossing technique and in its contents. Like his predecessors William does not comment on each and every phrase, and passes over long sections from Boethius' text in silence. Yet on the whole his approach is much more systematic and comprehensive. He usually starts with a lemma, placing it in the wider context of the argument and then descending to the level of explanation of words.

William is also innovative in using the commentary for developing new areas of knowledge, in particular in the field of natural philosophy, but here too the difference between his and earlier texts is one of degree rather than of kind. William intersperses his glosses with long digressions on natural philosophical themes such as the elements, winds and planets, convinced as he is that the *Consolation* embodies profound truths which have to be clarified with the aid of all possible branches of learning. Hence, the commentary already shows all the hallmarks of William's daring reading of the cosmos *secundum physicam*. As such it is a typical product of the early twelfth century when scholars began systematically to study the natural world along rational and physical lines.

Connected to this is William's interpretation of Boethius' Platonism. Here too we find the same blend of tradition and innovation. He shares the Christianizing tendencies of his predecessors, but leaves them far behind in originality and audacity. Drawing on the literary theory of *fabula* derived from Cicero, Macrobius and Isidore, according to which truths can be found beneath the veil (*integumentum* or *involucrum*) of fabulous narratives, William searched for profound truths behind the veil of pagan fictions and fables.¹⁵ Such an integumental reading was applied to several types of texts. We may distinguish the following 'functions':

- (1) It could be a vehicle for the Christianization of (a) pagan myths and philosophy, and (b) fabulous narratives with possible base and improper elements. Christianization often means moralization, neutralizing possible heterodox, base or improper elements. Examples of (a) are the Platonic account of the origin and descent of the soul, the notion of knowledge through recollection, and the concept of the World Soul. Examples of (b) are the fables of Orpheus (3.m12), Ulysses and his comrades (4.m3), and the labours of Hercules (4.m7). Thus the souls' chariots, for instance, in Boethius' 'O qui perpetua' are identified with reason and intellect, because they bring the soul to knowledge of heavenly and earthly things, or, alternatively, with the stars, since it is by stellar influence that the soul can live in the body.¹⁶
- (2) This accommodation of pagan myth and metaphor to Christian dogma, however, could put that dogma into a new

light: the dogma could become ‘infected’ by association with the pagan notion: the prime example is William’s identification of the Platonic World Soul with the Holy Spirit (3.m9), by which the World Soul was not only absorbed into Christian thinking, but also exerted its influence on discussions about the precise status and nature of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity in general.¹⁷ The *integumentum* could lead to a reconsideration of the established reading, but admittedly this was often an unintentional effect.¹⁸

- (3) Unlike in (1) where ‘deviant’ texts were ‘domesticated’, an integumental reading could also be used to challenge established readings of texts or events. In William’s works this often takes the form of rationalistic–naturalistic readings of biblical passages (the creation of man from warm mud, the formation of Eve, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, all of which were interpreted by William in a naturalistic way). This demythologization or profanation of sacred truths may seem to be different from the search for *veritas* beneath pagan fables by having recourse to *integumenta*, but for William the difference did not seem to be so fundamental.¹⁹ When faced with ecclesiastical opposition, William was willing to recant and accept the conventional and established readings of these passages, but this did not diminish his belief in the correctness of his approach; he even offered a new piece of naturalistic explanation of Adam’s expulsion from Paradise.²⁰

William is less original in his exegesis of the major themes of Book 5 on God’s providence and human free will. But it is easy to overlook William’s achievement here. He is the first commentator who gives a fair synopsis of the complicated text, taking care not to lose sight of the drift of the argument. And while he generally stays close to the text, on a few occasions he draws on contemporary terminology and debates. For instance, Boethius argues that, as soon as one realizes that knowledge is dependent on the capacities of the knowing subject rather than on the object known, it will become clear that one and the same object may be viewed from different perspectives, and that God may (fore)see events which in themselves are not necessary, in his eternal and immutable gaze. William here quotes from Boethius’ commentary on Porphyry where a distinction

is made between 'an understanding by conjunction' (as in 'man is an animal') and 'an understanding by abstraction or division' (as when a line is conceptually abstracted from a body, though it cannot exist separately from it). Abelard makes use of the same Boethian distinction, distinguishing between two different senses of 'I understand a thing otherwise than it is':²¹ (a) the mind abstracts when it attends just to one aspect of something, for example when I regard a man only as substance or only as a body, without implying that man consists only of substance or only of body ('otherwise' qualifying 'I understand'), and (b) the mind regards the nature of a thing different from its true being, for example when I regard man's nature as being only substance or only body ('otherwise' qualifying 'than the thing is'). Only in the latter case would I be mistaken. The same sort of distinction is applied by William to God's knowledge: God understands things differently from what they are, since he sees them 'as immutable and invariable, even though they are mutable and variable', but this does not mean that his knowledge is erroneous.²² God's infallibility does not entail the necessary outcome of events and acts of free will.

In the last paragraphs of the commentary William discusses the syllogism 'What God foresees, it is necessary to occur; but God foresees everything. So it is necessary that everything occurs' (*Quod deus providet, necesse est evenire; sed deus cuncta providet. Ergo necesse est cuncta euenire*).²³ Having refuted two current explanations, William proceeds to give his own interpretation, which makes use of a distinction between 'split' or 'cut' (*incisus*) versus 'non-split' or 'uncut' (*non incisus*) syllogisms. The first is defined as a syllogism which consists of a modal major premise, a 'simple' (i.e. non-modal) minor and a 'simple' conclusion. The 'non-split' or 'uncut' syllogism consists of only modal or only simple statements. William's suggestion seems to be that we can only derive a simple conclusion ('it will occur'), rather than the modal one ('it will necessarily occur'), from this syllogism since the major is split into two parts of which one is stated in the minor premise ('God foresees everything') and one part in the conclusion ('it will happen'). It may seem that William has allowed the modal operator to vanish into thin air, but unfortunately the text is too brief, and may even be corrupt, in order to assess his interpretation. But what is interesting is that William here introduces a distinction which must have been a very recent addition to the philosopher's armoury. We find another early use of it in Abelard's

Logica ingredientibus (dated 1118–20), which is exactly contemporary with William's commentary. Abelard was probably misled by such a phrase as *Initium primae incisionis*, which is found in some MSS of the Latin translation of Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*; *incisio* is the Latin rendering of the Greek word *τμήμα*, which was the technical term for dividing books in the Aristotelian corpus.²⁴ The phrase caught up in logical treatises from the twelfth century, but at first there may not have been a standard interpretation of it, which is not surprising in view of the difficulty of Aristotle's modal logic and the fact that the *Prior Analytics* was only beginning to be studied in the Latin West in this period. Thus Abelard's example consists of two modal premises and a non-modal conclusion; later texts take such a syllogism to consist of a modal major premise, a non-modal minor, and a modal conclusion, according to Aristotle's own discussion in his *Prior Analytics* (1.9–10, 15 and 21), without using such a term however.²⁵ It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss William's exegesis of Book 5 any further, but it may be said that as a whole it is an impressive piece of work, which for the first time pays careful attention to the overall structure of the argument.

William's work became the standard commentary during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. His own work survives in at least seventeen MSS, and a thirteenth-century revision in at least eleven MSS.²⁶ In addition there is a great number of manuscripts which contain 'Conchian' material, for instance commentaries in the form of compilations in which parts of William's work are mixed with other (Remigian) commentaries, and the marginal commentary that accompanies the Latin text of the *Consolation* and Jean de Meun's translation, *Li Livres de Confort de Philosophie*.²⁷ But while William's commentary, in one form or another, was widely copied or exploited, there are a number of MSS with glosses or commentaries which are independent from his. Here we enter a terra incognita. Further research into these and other anonymous MSS must also verify the impression that the thirteenth century was relatively uninterested in Boethius' masterpiece.²⁸

NICHOLAS TREVET

In the fourteenth century William's dominant position was taken over by the Dominican scholar Nicholas Trevet, whose commentary

dates from around 1300. It became the late medieval commentary par excellence. More than a hundred MSS have survived, not counting various kinds of adaptations, usually made for teaching purposes. It is not difficult to see why medieval readers appreciated Trevet's work, even though modern scholars have been slow to recognize its value: it is comprehensive, highly organized, clear, and on the whole scholarly and judicious.²⁹ Trevet lived at a time when the Dominicans were engaged in a reasoned, undogmatic defence of Thomistic positions, and it comes as no surprise to see him using Aristotelian–Thomistic positions in order to clarify Boethius' text, in particular on cognition and free will. This does not mean, as has often been maintained, that he was hostile towards Boethius' Platonism. Like William of Conches, he did not doubt seriously that behind Plato's words a 'sane' (*sanus*), acceptable philosophy was to be found. As Trevet reminded his readers several times, Plato often transmitted his philosophy in fables and metaphors, in the manner of ancient theologians, and 'therefore Boethius, particularly in his metres, where he is retaining the poetic style, uses Platonic terms, which are acceptable with a reasonable understanding (*sano intellectu*)'.³⁰ Far from being unsympathetic to this figurative way of speaking, Trevet follows Macrobius in fully accepting as legitimate the category of fabulous narratives which proceed by 'honest words' and which are the property of philosophers. He cites Boethius' myth of Orpheus, Plato's myth of Er and Cicero's account of Scipio's dream as examples, and his interpretation of the Platonic account of the soul clearly seems to imply that Plato's *fabulae* must be placed in this category too.

Just like William of Conches, who spoke about 'adapting' (*adaptare*) the controversial literal meaning (*littera*) of the text to an acceptable, deeper meaning (*sententia*),³¹ Trevet too speaks of explaining the literal account in terms of an acceptable interpretation of the passage. His explanations of the various passages where Boethius alludes to souls descending into bodies and losing their knowledge on account of their embodiment show that he is aware that some hermeneutic force has to be used to coordinate the controversial *littera* to an acceptable *sententia*. But while the modern reader may feel uneasy at such a 'twisting', the medieval commentator saw nothing strange or unnatural in it (or did not even recognize it as 'twisting'), used as he was to distinguishing between two meanings, a literal and a figurative one, or more. Thus when Boethius talks about the loss of the soul's perfect

knowledge upon embodiment ('the soul who is not totally forgetful of itself', 5.m3), Trevet explains, he is echoing Aquinas' teaching, that the soul has a twofold being – connected to the body and separated from it – and, correspondingly, a twofold way of knowing. In the embodied state, the soul must have recourse to phantasms; in the disembodied state, the soul receives forms from God by which it attains knowledge. The disembodied state is less natural and less perfect than the embodied state; yet in another way it comes prior to it, because in this state the soul is immaterial form (*forma immaterialis*), not the corporeal form (*forma corporis*), and hence knowledge is not dependent on the bodily senses. Having presupposed these things (*hiis suppositis*), Trevet writes, one can construe the literal sense accordingly (*expone litteram sic*).³² At the end of this passage Trevet must admit, however, that those who take Boethius here to treat souls as descending into bodies and losing their knowledge on account of their embodiment have the *littera* on their side, and yet the *sententia* will be false.³³

In his commentary on 3.m9 Trevet's explanation comes close to William's. The star, which is said by Boethius to be the soul's chariot, can mean the soul's immortal power, by means of which, when the body has been dissolved, the soul flies out from it. Alternatively, it can mean 'the cultivation of devotion and justice, by reason of which the soul is carried up to heaven after the dissolution of the body'.³⁴ And Boethius' next verse about God dispersing the souls in the heavens and on earth should not be understood in the Platonic way, but they are said to be sown on the face of heaven because of the power acquired from heaven, from which the union of soul with body derives its period. The soul's heavenly home and its companion star are interpreted in terms of the mediating influence of the stars on the union of soul and body and the duration of that union.

What the *glosa ordinaria* was for biblical commentators Trevet's work was for commentators on the *Consolation*, and we find his work in countless MSS either in its original format or in the form of glosses extracted from the larger work, sometimes mixed with Remigian and Conchian glosses. Other commentators such as Pseudo-Thomas, William Wheteley and Tholomaeus de Asinariis clearly built on Trevet's work, shortening, revising and simplifying it.³⁵ From the later medieval period we also have a number of commentaries, apparently independent from Trevet's, though the vast majority of them have hardly been studied so far. Pierre Courcelle was scathing about

them, including Trevet's work, but he obviously judged them solely on the basis of their merits in correctly explaining the text.³⁶ But a commentary could of course serve more purposes than giving a mere explanation of the text, and it is often a good barometer of intellectual and institutional developments of the time.

WILLIAM OF ARAGON

This can clearly be seen in the case of William of Aragon's commentary, extant in at least five MSS.³⁷ In all likelihood the commentary predates Trevet's work; the once usual date of 1335 was based on a misreading of the colophon in one MS.³⁸ It is an original work, taking a somewhat different approach from that of Conches and Trevet. William's Aristotelian reading of the *Consolation* is underscored by his exclamations that 'Boethius knew Aristotle very well' and that we should not impute to him the *crimina Platoniorum*.³⁹ He frequently brings down the Platonic atmosphere of Boethius' text to the Aristotelian world of sense, suppressing the Platonic overtones for instance in 3.m9.18, where Boethius says: 'You bring forth, with the same bases, souls and lesser living beings.' According to William of Aragon, some have interpreted this as referring to the souls of good and bad angels (*calodemones* and *cacodemones*) on the one hand and human souls on the other, but William concludes that Boethius must have meant the souls of men and those of animals and plants: 'Because we have no philosophical experience of these other souls, we should not impute this [doctrine] to such a philosopher.'⁴⁰ But William was not the anti-Platonist that modern scholars, without having the full text at their disposal, have taken him to be. He quotes from Proclus' *Elementatio theologica* (in William of Moerbeke's translation) and the *Liber de causis*, and refers to Hermes Trismegistus.⁴¹ Without referring to the notion of the soul's pre-existence, William claims that for Plato recollection is the process of learning which starts with the soul's first principles, from which knowledge of all things can be derived. Through deduction from these first principles potential knowledge is turned into actual knowledge: 'Hence, when we read Boethius in this way, we should not condemn Boethius or Plato.'⁴² On the question whether Plato and Boethius did not consider the body to be an impediment to intellectual cognition William simply states that he believes that Plato, when speaking about bodily impediment,

referred to the soul's perfect knowledge after its separation from the body, for in this life the body is a natural companion to the soul and a *sine qua non* for intellectual activities. In view of his reputation as being an anti-Platonic Aristotelian, it is remarkable to see William trying to save Plato, without relinquishing his Aristotelian position on the vital importance of sense perception as the starting point for intellectual cognition; it is Plato's followers rather than Plato himself who are attacked for their crimes (*crimina*).⁴³ But William simply ignores the question of how the soul can arrive at its perfect knowledge in a life without a body. And elsewhere he interprets the spatial character of the descent, by which the soul becomes less free, in terms of an ever increasing dependence on the body. The terminology of *descendere* (descend), *cadere* (fall) and *labi* (glide down) is adopted but stripped of its Platonic overtones. William of Aragon blandly claims that his interpretation of Boethius's words shows that those who have argued that Boethius is speaking here about a descent of the soul have misunderstood the text.⁴⁴

Thus, like William of Conches and Nicholas Trevet, William of Aragon interprets the descent in terms of an ever closer dependence of the soul on the body. Though in many details their interpretations agree, their motivations are not entirely similar. William of Aragon did not really believe that Boethius needed to be rescued from heterodox Platonism, for at root Boethius was a follower of Aristotle, and even at the level of words Boethius was no genuine Platonist.

SOME LATER MEDIEVAL COMMENTARIES

From roughly the same time we have some other lemmatic commentaries. We have already mentioned Tholomaeus De Asinariis, a jurist from Asti, who belonged to the powerful family of the De Asinariis.⁴⁵ He completed his commentary in 1307, which shows how quickly Trevet's work, which is one of its sources, was circulating in Italy.⁴⁶ Boethius' fate was congenial to this author, since he too had suffered personal adversity: as a result of civil strife, culminating in the defeat of the Ghibelline faction in Asti in 1304, he was exiled from his home town and lost his properties. In the preface he identifies himself with Boethius. The work has not been studied, but from the few sentences published by Courcelle it appears that he duly Christianizes Boethius without ignoring the fact that Boethius was a Platonist. Thus where

Boethius leaves open the question whether fate works by divine spirits acting as servants to providence, or whether the course of fate is woven by the service of the soul or the whole of nature (6 pr. 6) or by still other means, Tholomaeus glosses '*spirits*, that is the divine Holy Spirit', put in the plural by Boethius 'because it is a multiple force, viz. spirit, intellect, counsel, as is said in the Bible'.⁴⁷

Another commentary, extant in at least nine MSS, was written by the Dominican scholastic Guglielmo da Cortemilia (Guillemus de Cortumelia, † 1342).⁴⁸ It is a huge work, even more extensive than Trevet's, on which it seems to be based. Guglielmo suggests that Boethius speaks the language of the Platonists but without holding their opinion, for instance on knowledge as recollection to things known in a previous life.⁴⁹ This commentary too has hardly been studied. Less ambitious is the commentary by William Wheteley, preserved in three MSS, and completed in 1316 when he was rector of Yatesbury and master of Lincoln school. It is a simplified version of Trevet's work for the use of his grammar school pupils.⁵⁰ Some sixty years later the Flemish schoolmaster Renier of St Truiden wrote a much more extensive work. It became the source not only for the 'Ghent Boethius' – a translation plus massive commentary in Dutch, printed in 1485 by Arend de Keyser in Ghent – but also for Arnoul Greban's commentary dating from the mid fifteenth century; the latter also incorporated explanations from William of Conches and Trevet.⁵¹

A different kind of commentary was written by Denys the Carthusian (c.1470). It is written as a dialogue between master Denys and pupil Joannes, with the text divided into *articuli*. Denys explicitly says that his commentary aims at the religious and erudite men rather than schoolboys.⁵² The title is significant: *Enarrationes sive Commentaria*, by which Denys means that from this text one can distil philosophical and theological truths.⁵³ His Boethius commentary forms a kind of diptych with his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius, for in both works one of the central arguments is that the human mind, at its highest level, can perceive spiritual realities intuitively, without having recourse to phantasms. He explicitly sides here with the Cologne Albertists against Thomistic teaching.⁵⁴ In the famous passage from 5 pr. 4 Lady Philosophy distinguishes four different cognitive faculties, sense, imagination, reason and intelligence, and of the last it is said that it transcends the boundaries of the

created world, gazing 'on the simple Form with the unsullied sight of the mind'. While Boethius is clearly referring to the divine mode of cognition, Denys applies these words to the human intellect. Human intelligence can contemplate directly spiritual realities such as the divine ideas, and even the divinity itself. But while Denys uses Boethius here as a source for a mystic theology of an intuitive contemplation of God, he is well aware of the more problematic passages e.g. on the soul and its descent. He says he is not sure whether Boethius took the notion of the world soul in the same (pagan) way as Plato did. And if Augustine and Boethius endorsed the pre-existence of the soul, we should not follow them. Like his predecessors, Denys interprets the soul's chariot in terms of God's grace and spiritual aid.⁵⁵

QUAESTIONES COMMENTARIES

The survey so far suggests that Boethius' place in the curriculum was in the pre-university years, in the grammar schools and religious houses before students were sent to the university. But though there is no evidence that the *Consolation* belonged to the main stream of university teaching, it is mentioned in the records of some German universities of the later medieval period (Erfurt, Prague and Vienna), and also in a number of 'Introductions to Philosophy' (for example in a thirteenth-century guide to the Parisian Arts courses).⁵⁶ That it was frequently read in the universities in the later Middle Ages is also suggested by the existence of some *quaestiones* commentaries on the text. These commentaries consist of a series of questions, derived from the text of the *Consolation*, but often loosely connected to it.⁵⁷ Some of them are of a fairly simple nature, and seem to have served as vehicles for explaining basic points in logic, epistemology, natural philosophy and ethics to the young student. The format in answering a question basically follows scholastic patterns of argumentation, giving pro and contra arguments and quoting Aristotle as the main *au-toritas*. Of a different kind is Pierre d'Ailly's question-commentary, dating from about 1380, which consists of only two *quaestiones* on themes derived from the *Consolation* which were however also highly relevant in fourteenth-century discussions on the relationship between natural reason and faith.⁵⁸ The first consists of eight articles and discusses, using and quoting a number of scholastic authors,

'whether a philosopher, through philosophical enquiry, can achieve true knowledge of human beatitude by using natural reason'. Siding with Ockham on the question of beatific vision, his answer is that, using 'natural light' (*in naturali lumine*), it is probable that human beatitude can only consist in union of the rational soul with God in the life hereafter.⁵⁹ The second question consists of six articles and deals primarily with the question of whether the contingency of events can be reconciled with God's eternal and immutable foreknowledge of future events. The answer would surely be 'yes', but D'Ailly has apparently run out of time and does not develop his answer.⁶⁰ However, in this second question he deals with a number of related issues, often drawing on and quoting extensively from Gregory of Rimini. He discusses for instance whether God is the author of sin, the status of astrology, the nature of divine knowledge, the status of the past (and whether God can undo the past), and chance. Though hardly surprising, it is interesting to see Boethius featuring in a late medieval debate on divine knowledge, where he is quoted by Gregory of Rimini and by D'Ailly in support of the view that there is no succession, no before and after, and no divine ideas or other intermediaries in God by way of which he would know his creatures.⁶¹ One may deplore this use of Boethius, as Courcelle did in his influential study, but that is to miss an important point: far from showing the 'defects of the educational system of that time' ('les défauts de l'enseignement à cette époque'),⁶² it is a work which testifies to the importance allotted by scholastics to the *Consolation* as a primary source of some important questions concerning divine knowledge and human free will.

HUMANISM

At the end of the medieval period humanist modes of reading and commenting on ancient texts began to prevail. This was to some extent a natural development from medieval glossing techniques, and humanists were often indebted to their medieval predecessors for traditional historical and linguistic explanations.⁶³ As we have seen, the *Consolation* had often been a school favourite (especially in the schools of North-Western Europe), and though the reading of it had never been limited to the grammar school – it had a widespread circulation among the laity and at the courts – this was certainly its

principal place in the curriculum. We should therefore not expect too wide a gap between the medieval and humanist grammatical commentaries, especially in view of their close links to the schools. Humanist school teachers, however, laid greater emphasis on grammar and style, often neglecting philosophical issues. Their commentaries are often concatenations of notes on words and grammatical constructions, with occasional glosses on history and mythology. In Italy this process can already be seen in the commentaries of Pietro da Muglio († 1383), respected friend of Petrarch and Boccaccio, and, to a lesser extent, Giovanni Travesio (c. 1411).⁶⁴ In Northern Europe there are two interesting examples of humanist commentators who will be briefly discussed here.

Badius Ascensius published his commentary, written for the schoolboys (*aetas imbecillior*) in 1498.⁶⁵ It is predominantly philological in nature, but it is not true, as has been claimed, that he discarded the medieval *interpretatio christiana*, and looked down on the work of Pseudo-Thomas, whose commentary often accompanied Badius' work in print.⁶⁶ Badius Ascensius often speaks with respect of Pseudo-Thomas, and even defends him on the latter's interpretation of the creation of the souls: when Pseudo-Thomas writes that souls are created daily in order to be infused into bodies, this should not be understood as meaning that they are created first and then united with bodies. Badius Ascensius refers to Augustine, but leaves the question to theologians for discussion. Boethius' 'returning fire' was glossed by Pseudo-Thomas as *charitas*, which is not absurd, Badius Ascensius writes, because it is only charity which can lead us to heaven. 'But because all the other things [in this metre] are couched in Platonic terms, this too can be understood in a Platonic way', and Badius Ascensius then proceeds to quote Virgil's famous lines on the spirit nourishing heaven, earth and all the rest (*Principio caelum ac terras camposque liquentes, Aeneid* 6.724–32) by way of parallel.

His commentary on 3.m9 is brief and passes over the reference to the pre-existence of soul. In his comment on 3.m11 he expresses some reservations about Boethius's adherence to the Platonic doctrine of knowledge as recollection in 3.m11, suggesting that Boethius does not say that Plato spoke the truth. The very words 'Plato's muse' already suggest that we must look for a different understanding of these words. Badius Ascensius then gives the traditional explanation

in terms of the soul's innate first principles from which potential knowledge can be actualised. Faced with Boethius's words 'I strongly agree with Plato' at the beginning of the next section (3 pr. 12), his answer is basically that Boethius did not accept Plato's argument in its entirety (*totum illud dictum Platonis*) but only something similar: namely that knowledge is based on first principles that are innate. Boethius' purpose was only to point out that, by the weight of grief, men could lose their knowledge of things which they had known previously.

The Dutch commentator Joannes Murmellius, whose work was published in 1514, bears even more clearly the stamp of the work of a humanistic grammar teacher.⁶⁷ Like Badius Ascensius, he focuses on the grammar, style and terminology of Boethius, and shows a critical attitude to the transmission of the text, which sometimes leads to emendations. His range of quotations is wider than that of Badius Ascensius, and these quotations often serve to underline the high moral-proverbial value of the *Consolation*. Thus, far from functioning solely as literary adornments, these quotations helped to give the *Consolation* its place in a wider network of edifying works, which comprise not only pagan but also Christian literature (including the Bible), ancient as well as modern. They were the vehicles by which classical literature was delivered to youth, and they helped to convey the idea of the compatibility of the moral sayings in all these different works.

The belief in this compatibility is also reflected in Murmellius' reluctance to express strong opinions about Boethius' Platonism vis-à-vis his Christianity. He himself calls Plato's *Timaeus* a 'very beautiful book' and a 'very noble dialogue', and he notes that "'O qui perpetua", by far the most beautiful and erudite poem, is almost exclusively derived from Plato's *Timaeus* by Boethius's admirable genius'.⁶⁸ His commentary on these verses consists for a large part of long quotations from the *Timaeus* in the translation of Ficino (he quotes regularly from Ficino's works). At one point he addresses the reader saying that, although Plato's opinions on the world soul and on souls of lesser beings are not approved by all Christians, 'Boethian Philosophy follows Plato carefully and prudently', and that in turn he, Murmellius, 'will expound carefully the elements of Platonic doctrine'. Murmellius then gives a brief catalogue of opinions on the question of whether heavenly bodies are animated, which must

confirm the same point, namely that Christian faith is neutral on this issue: witness the positions of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.⁶⁹

Only in 3.MII does he criticise the Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul as ‘most vane’ (*vanissimum*); Plato is said to have used ‘the highest and incredible eloquence’ (*summa et incredibili eloquentia*) when he spoke about the notion of knowledge as recollection, and the authority of Augustine (‘of all mortals by far the wisest’) is invoked, though not quoted, to refute this “Platonicum dogma”.⁷⁰ The notion of recollection of knowledge is explained along traditional lines: the soul would have known all the things it could possibly know, if the body had not weighed it down.⁷¹ And the Boethian ‘seed of truth’, remaining in the soul after embodiment, is described as a certain principle and starting point, from which man is suited to perceive truth and acquire knowledge.⁷² Yet it is clear from the ample quotations from Plato and Platonic authors such as Ficino, as well as from the non-committal way in which they are often presented, that Murmellius considers his role as commentator to consist primarily in clarifying philological points and providing sources (from which moral lessons could be drawn) rather than in giving verdicts on the doctrinal soundness of the opinions expressed in the text. Thus, in his comments on 5 pr. 2 where Boethius alludes to the pre-existence of souls, Murmellius simply writes that this is taken from Plato, without trying to give it a Christian reading, and the same is true for his comments on other such passages (e.g. on 5 pr. 3).

AFTER THE RENAISSANCE

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the range of texts was immensely wider than 500 years before, the *Consolation* was of course no longer one of the foundational texts in the republic of letters. Nevertheless, it remained a popular work which attracted learned commentaries from scholars such as Johannes Bernartius,⁷³ Theodorus Sitzmannus, Petrus Bertius and Renatus Vallinus. They apparently did not feel the urge to rescue Boethius from his association with pagan ideas. Occasionally, a critical note is struck, for instance when Sitzmannus admonishes the reader to peruse Arnobius’ *Adversus nationes*, ‘from which it can be learnt that the Platonic dogma [namely on knowledge as recollection] is not without absurdity’,⁷⁴ but in general Boethius’ Platonism is taken for granted

without any criticism and its sources quoted in a neutral, non-committal way. Vallinus offers an historical argument why Boethius spoke of light chariots which brought souls down from the stars. He interprets these chariots as the souls' astral bodies. It would be amazing indeed, Vallinus writes, if this doctrine, which is so contrary to the Christian doctrine, would have influenced Christian thinkers and especially the 'Catholic philosophy of Boethius', were it not for the fact that only at the fifth synod, that is, many years after the death of Boethius, was it condemned alongside other errors of Origen (that is, at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553; but there had been earlier condemnations, which Vallinus does not mention). Alternatively, Boethius might simply have meant, following Themistius' interpretation of Plato's words, that the vehicle was nothing other than the soul's *ingenium*.⁷⁵ Vallinus must have been one of the first who interpreted this verse correctly in terms of astral bodies.⁷⁶

The presence of these heterodox opinions was the very reason why some thinkers felt attracted to the *Consolation*. Leibniz, who made a summary of Books 1 and 2 of the *Consolation*, wrote that his friend F.M. van Helmont 'had a special affection for this book [i.e. the *Consolation*] because he believes he can find traces of Pythagorean ideas in it'.⁷⁷ Van Helmont's friend, the cabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, was also interested in the *Consolation* for this reason, and translated it into German. But here, not for the first time, we enter into terra incognita. Much remains to be studied of the rich and varied *Nachleben* of Boethius' masterpiece.⁷⁸

NOTES

1. William of Conches 1999, 200, lines 31–4.
2. See Wetherbee's contribution to this volume.
3. But of course Latin commentaries exercised considerable influence on vernacular translations. See Minnis 1981 and some of the essays in Minnis 1987a, Minnis 1993 and Hoenen and Nauta 1997.
4. See *Codices Boethiani*, a project initiated by the late M. Gibson; three volumes have now appeared. For the early medieval period see the Oxford Boethius project at www.english.ox.ac.uk/boethius/index.html, and Troncarelli 1987. For Florentine MSS see Black and Pomaro 2000. Editions will be mentioned in due course.
5. Mohrmann 1976; Chadwick 1981, 249. See also Shanzer's contribution to this volume.

6. These themes are fully dealt with by Sharples in this volume.
7. I follow the summary of Godden (at the website mentioned in n. 4 above), which is based on Tax 2002. See also Roti 1979; Beaumont 1981, 282–4.
8. *Bibl. Apostolica Vaticana*, lat. 3363; Courcell 1967, 269–70; Troncarelli 1973, 1981, 137–96 (partial edition) and 1987, no. 133, pp. 269–70; Godden (at the website mentioned in n. 4 above).
9. Eastwood 2002 (Calcidius, Martianus Capella, Plinius); White 1981 (Macrobius).
10. Beaumont 1981, 289–90; Bolton 1977.
11. Courcelle 1967, 277, quoting from Paris, BN lat. 13953, fol. 36r.
12. Silvestre 1952, 65.
13. Huygens 1954, 397.
14. On William's commentary see Nauta 1997a and Nauta's introduction to William of Conches 1999, on which the following paragraphs are based.
15. Jeaneau 1957; Dronke 1974; Nauta in William of Conches 1999, xxxvi–xliii.
16. See William of Conches 1999, 174–5.
17. William of Conches 1999, 169. Gregory 1955, 133–74.
18. In his commentary on Macrobius, for example, William writes: "The World Soul, according to some, is the Holy Spirit, which moves and gives life to all things on earth ... but it is heretical to say that the Holy Spirit is "created", unless perchance the word "created" here means "sent"" (Southern 1979, 23; Latin text in Jeaneau's (1965) edition, 145 n. c).
19. Dronke 1974, 52.
20. Gregory 1955, 15–16 and 123–74. Cf. Elford 1988.
21. I follow the summary given by Marenbon 1997, 167 and 189 n. 37.
22. William of Conches 1999, 303–4.
23. See William of Conches 1999, 347–9, and the discussion on pp. lxxvii–lxx.
24. Minio-Paluello 1954/1972. He does not exclude, however, a common source for Abelard and later scholars who used this expression. Yukio Iwakuma has kindly informed me about the occurrence of the term *incisus* in a twelfth-century *Peri hermenias* commentary in Orléans, *Bibl. mun.* 266 (a famous big collection of logical texts). Because this commentary can be associated with the school of Jocelin of Soissons, an adversary of Peter Abelard, Iwakuma suggests that the term *incisus* may have been introduced already before Abelard. He has also found the term in a few other contemporary sources.
25. For instance the Anonymous Venetianus (mid twelfth century?), quoted by Fredborg 1988, 88 critical app. See also the *testimonia* in Minio-Paluello's edition of the Latin text of the *Prior Analytics*, *Aristoteles*

- Latinus* III.1–4, pp. 433–42. Iwakuma has an unpublished list of addenda to this.
26. On this version see Nauta's introduction to William of Conches 1999, lxxxiii–lxxxiv, and esp. Nauta 2004 for conclusive evidence that this is a non-authentic, thirteenth-century, revision.
 27. For some (early) twelfth-century MSS see Troncarelli 1987, 276 (table) and the *Codices Boethiani* volumes (n. 4 above). An interesting early twelfth-century glossed copy is discussed by Beaumont 1981 (Glasgow, Univ. Library, Hunterian U.5.19). Extracts from William's commentary were also translated into Italian. See Black and Pomaro 2000, 16 and 85–8 on Giandino di Carmignano (in Florence, BML, Pl. 23 dxt. 11).
 28. Gibson and Smith 1995–2001 I, 24–5; Courcelle 1967, 317–18.
 29. E.T. Silk's edition, which is not a very critical one, has not been published, but a microfilm could be obtained through Mrs Silk. (I do not know the current situation.) Extracts from it (on 3.m9 and m11) have been published and translated (by A.B. Scott) in Minnis 1993. On Trevet's commentary see Lord 1992; Minnis and Nauta 1993; and Nauta 1997b with further bibliography. What follows is based on Nauta 1997b and 2002.
 30. Ed. Silk in Minnis 1993, 53; transl. Scott *ibid.*, 79.
 31. In William of Conches 1965, 213.
 32. Ed. Silk in Minnis 1993, 712–13. I follow my account in Nauta 2002, 187–8.
 33. Ed. Silk in Minnis 1993, 715.
 34. Scott's transl. in Minnis 1993, 75.
 35. See on the Italian MSS Black and Pomaro 2000, esp. 19–23. See also Gibson 1984/5, 73–5. On William Wheteley see Sebastian 1973; Minnis 1981, 354 n. 23; Courcelle 1967, 322–3; Kneepkens 2003a, 217–20 and 2004. On Tholomaeus see Courcelle 1967, 320–1 and Kneepkens 2003a, 230–2.
 36. Courcelle 1967, 317–32. This part of Courcelle's important work should be read with great caution. For a critique see Nauta 2002 and 2003.
 37. I am indebted to Carmen Olmedilla Herrero for sending me a typescript of her forthcoming critical edition in *Corpus Christianorum*, which will replace Terbille's partial edition 1972 (William of Aragon 1972), which was based on only one MS.
 38. Two Old French translations, among which that of Jean de Meun, based their prologues on that of William of Aragon. Dronke 1994, 125 n. 40 doubts this priority. But, as Colker has shown, another work by William must be dated to the second half of the thirteenth century (Colker 1961, 50). The misreading was pointed out by Crespo 1973.

39. William of Aragon, forthcoming, 190; William of Aragon 1972, 135.
40. William of Aragon, forthcoming, 188 reading correctly *philosopho* with four MSS rather than *plato* with one MS (which was followed by Terbille William of Aragon 1972, 132 and 180, and 'emended' to *Platon*).
41. William of Aragon, forthcoming, 332 (Proclus) and 310 (Hermes Trismegistus); William of Aragon 1972, 144–5. For other references to Plato and the 'Platonists' see Nauta 2002, 190–5.
42. William of Aragon, forthcoming, 209.
43. William of Aragon, forthcoming, 209.
44. William of Aragon, forthcoming, 312, and 1972, 147.
45. Kneepkens 2003a, 212; cf. 230–1 on the preface.
46. Cf. Courcelle 1967, 320. On the link between Trevet and Italy, esp. Nicholas of Prato, see Dean 1948 and 1966.
47. Courcelle 1967, 320.
48. Kaeppli 1970–93 II, 97 lists eight MSS to which must be added Florence, BML, Pl. 76.56 (Black and Pomaro 2000, 31 and 50 n. 241).
49. Courcelle 1967, 327–8, quoting a few brief passages from Paris, BN lat. 6773.
50. Cambridge, Pembroke College 155, Oxford, Exeter College 28 and Oxford, New College 264; Gibson and Smith 1995–2001 I, 73–4, 227–8 and 237–8; Kneepkens 2004.
51. On Greban see Courcelle 1967, 329–31 and Kneepkens 2003a, 226–30; on Renier see Pattin 1982, Angenent 1991 and Kneepkens 2003a, 220–6.
52. Denys 1906, 89B. See Macken 1984 on this work.
53. Cf. Courcelle 1967, 328; Macken 1984, 48.
54. Denys 1906, 219C; cf. Macken 1984, 49 who also refers to Denys' *Elementatio philosophica, seu compendium philosophiae*.
55. Denys 1906, 379A.
56. See Rashdall 1936, I, 447–8 (Prague), II, 243 n. 1 (Vienna); Palmer 1981, 380–1; Lafleur 1988, 148–9.
57. Kneepkens 2003b (on Wolfenbüttel, 79.4 Aug. Fol.) and 2004 (on Oxford, Exeter College 28).
58. The first question is edited by Chappuis 1993. On the second question see Chappuis 1997. There is also another commentary (probably wrongly) ascribed to Pierre d'Ailly with the same implicit and explicit, but this is a running commentary on the text of the *Consolation*. See Chappuis-Baeriswyl 1984, 102–7 on Erfurt CA F 8, to which must be added Leiden BPL 133. This commentator mentions Trevet, and cites King Alfred via Trevet. The name of Petrarch is also mentioned.
59. Chappuis 1993, 32*. A full analysis of the text is given by Chappuis in Part II of her edition. The prologue may be read as a first announcement of French humanism (p. 22).

60. *ad cuius lecturae finem perueni antequam possem hunc articulum diffusius pertractare*, quoted by Chappuis 1997, 84–5 from D'Ailly's autograph Paris, BN lat. 3122. My account here draws on her article.
61. Boethius meant to say, Gregory writes, that future events are present to God's eternal mind, not in their essence (*actualiter*) but according to his mode of knowing (quoted by Chappuis 1997, 81 n. 41). On scholastic debates on divine knowledge see Hoenen 1993.
62. Courcelle 1967, 324 and 325: 'De Boèce seul il n'est plus question'.
63. This is a large subject. For some excellent treatments see Minnis and Scott (with Wallace) 1991, esp. 1–36 and chapters 8–9; Moss 1996, e.g. 69.
64. Vescovini 1958; Frati 1920; Courcelle 1967, 326–7; and Black in Black and Pomaro 2000, 25–7.
65. On Badius Ascensius' commentary see Nauta 2002, 195–9 where the relevant passages are cited from *Duplex commentatio ex integro reposita atque recognita in Boetium de consolatione philosophica et de disciplina scolastica*, Lyons 1511.
66. Courcelle 1967, 332; Grafton 1981, 413.
67. Murmellius 1847. I shall quote the reprint in *Patrologia Latina* 63: 878–1074. On Murmellius' work see Nauta 1999 and 2002, 199–201; cf. also idem 2003.
68. *PL* 63: 1025; cf. 891D.
69. *PL* 63: 1029C/D. His catalogue of opinions is indebted to Paulo Cortesi's Commentary on the *Sentences*, Book 2, dist. 4, which he quotes (1030A).
70. *PL* 63: 1036–7 (the quotation on Augustine is on 1024C).
71. *PL* 1036B, following Wis 1:9, which was often quoted at this place by commentators.
72. *PL* 63: 1036C.
73. On this commentary see Belli 2005.
74. Boethius 1823 (= editio 'Vulpiana'), 515–16.
75. Boethius 1823 (= editio 'Vulpiana'), 509–10.
76. For a modern commentary along the same lines see Gruber 1978, 284–5.
77. Letter from Leibniz to Sophie Charlotte, quoted in Coudert 1995, 130–1. On the question of Leibniz' relations with Van Helmont see also Brown 1997.
78. See Nauta 1996 for a discussion of the 'Cartesian' commentary by Pierre Cally (reprinted in *PL* 64).