PRISON NARRATIVES FROM BOETHIUS TO ZANA

Edited by

PHILIP EDWARD PHILLIPS

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For my students in the University Honors College
at Middle Tennessee State University and in the
Great Books in Middle Tenneessee Prisons program
at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution,
Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility,
and the Tennessee Prison for Women

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Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments

This interdisciplinary volume examines the lives and selected works of writers from the sixth century to the twenty-first century—Boethius, Sir Thomas Malory, John Lilburne, John Bunyan, Henry David Thoreau, Louise Michel, Alice Paul and members of the National Woman's Party (NWP), Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Huddie William Ledbetter ("Lead Belly"), Malcolm X, and Mehdi Zana—whose prison experiences profoundly affected their ideas and works. This unique collection, which emerged from the Spring 2012 Honors Lecture Series on "prison writing" at Middle Tennessee State University, should interest and inspire a wide range of readers. Each chapter provides overviews of the figures' lives, offers a close analysis of their works, and discusses the context and significance of their representative prison writings. In addition to offering selected bibliographies of suggested reading for each writer, the chapters provide questions for further reflection as an aid to individual readers, classes, and book groups.

The preparation of this volume has involved the collaboration of many talented scholars from a wide range of disciplines. In addition to the chapter authors, I would like to thank Sharmila J. Patel, Erica I. Rogers, and Fabio Troncarelli for their helpful assistance and suggestions. I am grateful to the librarians at the Boston Athenæum and the James E. Walker Library for providing materials necessary for the completion of this project. I would like to thank senior editor Brigitte Shull, editorial assistant Ryan Jenkins, production assistant Rachel Taenzler, and the production and marketing team at Palgrave Macmillan; project manager Kyriaki Tsaganis at Scribe; and indexer Chris Cecot. I am grateful to Michael D. Allen, vice provost for research and dean of the College of Graduate Studies at Middle Tennessee State University, for awarding me a Dissemination and Service Support Grant. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Dean John R. Vile and the University Honors College at Middle Tennessee State University for supporting this project, from lecture series to published book.

Introduction

Philip Edward Phillips and John R. Vile

In 1777, an English court condemned the Reverend William Dodd to be hanged for hatching a loan scam from which he profited. None other than Samuel Johnson thought the penalty was too harsh and participated in a minor literary fraud of his own by penning a plea for mercy titled *The Convict's Address to His Unhappy Brethren* under Dodd's name. Although this plea was unsuccessful and Dodd was hanged on June 27, 1777, when a friend later questioned Johnson about whether Dodd could have published such a lucid work, Johnson attempted to disguise his own authorship by responding, "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."[1]

As one who has led discussion groups among Tennessee prisoners, the editor knows firsthand that confinement in prison, like the threat of execution, can indeed lead to serious reflection and that years that might otherwise have been wasted in prison have often proved to be productive times for those with a pencil or pen. He accordingly organized a lecture series on "prison writing" at the University Honors College at Middle Tennessee State University in the spring of 2012. He invited speakers from a variety of disciplines and perspectives to use this forum as a way of developing ideas that could be captured in book form for prisoners, students, and general readers who might find that their own busy lives might profit from the reflections of those who might have had little but time on their hands. The result is this book. It contains selected works of prison writers from the sixth century to the twenty-first century, who were imprisoned for their beliefs and who drew strength from their prison experiences to advance their respective causes and inspire others in the process.

The volume includes extended discussions of such diverse writers as Boethius, Sir Thomas Malory, John Lilburne, John Bunyan, Henry David Thoreau, Louise Michel, Alice Paul and members of the National Women's Party (NWP), Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Huddie William Ledbetter ("Lead Belly"), Malcolm X, and Mehdi Zana. Each figure—with the possible exception of Ledbetter, who

represents a more obsequious approach to springing open prison doors—epitomizes the tradition of speaking truth to power and being willing to sacrifice physical freedom, or even life itself, in the service of that truth. Several of the figures included in the collection allude to the examples of their predecessors, whose reflections on their struggles inspired them, just as the accounts in this book might inspire reflection and action from others. All the chapters introduce the authors' lives, offer close analyses of their works, and discuss the context and significance of the prison narratives.

While it is fairly common to condemn societies that use the whip, the stocks, or other forms of corporeal punishment for crimes, civilizations have to be fairly advanced and wealthy to develop a system of prisons where they can punish individuals by locking them away for long periods of life. Although exile and confinement are old practices, the prison—of which Bentham's Panopticon is the model[2]—is largely an invention of the nineteenth century. We have moved from societies of *spectacle* to societies of *surveillance*,[3] so it stands to reason that most well-known prison literature has come from the past two hundred years. Still, the writers featured in this collection had some notable predecessors. Although Socrates was not technically "in prison," Plato and Xenophon both captured his words and actions prior to his decision to drink the hemlock prescribed for him by the Athenian jury. In the *Crito*, when offered the opportunity to escape from prison and an unjust death sentence, Socrates states, "[W]e ought not to retaliate or render evil for evil to anyone, whatever evil we have suffered from him."[4] In the *Gorgias*, Socrates explains further that suffering the worst form of injustice, even imprisonment and death, is preferable to acting in an unjust manner, for "the unjust or doer of unjust actions is miserable in any case."[5]

St. Paul was one of a number of early Christians who composed letters from prison,[6] often referring to himself as a "prisoner for Christ,"[7] and on at least one occasion, apparently drawing inspiration for spiritual warfare by observing the armor of a soldier who was stationed by his side.[8] Paul's self-identification as a prisoner for Christ—literally, as a prisoner in Rome, and figuratively, as captivated by Christ—concentrates his mind and contributes to his spiritual insight into the mystery of Christ. The afflictions he suffers as a prisoner for the sake of Christ reinforce his message to his readers to remain strong internally while facing external persecution.

The essays in this collection focus on the experiences of a diverse array of prison writers from late antiquity to the twenty-first century. In "Boethius, the Prisoner, and *The Consolation of Philosophy*" (Chapter 1), Philip Edward Phillips recounts the life of the late fifth- and early sixth-century Roman philosopher Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius and discusses his masterpiece of prison literature, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, composed while awaiting execution.

Boethius preserved the best of what remained from classical Roman culture and applied logic to contemporary theological issues, preparing the way for medieval scholasticism. In the *Consolation*, a work of alternating poetry and prose that employs elements of consolation, dream vision, and Socratic dialogue, a personified Lady Philosophy leads the prisoner from despair to a recollection and affirmation of the Highest Good, which is God. The *Consolation*, which was one of the most popular and most frequently glossed manuscripts throughout the Middle Ages,[9] also inspired vernacular translations into Old English, traditionally attributed to King Alfred the Great; Middle English by the "Father of English Poetry," Geoffrey Chaucer; and early modern English by Queen Elizabeth I. Interestingly, all three had suffered exile (in Alfred's case, when fighting the Vikings) or imprisonment (Chaucer as a prisoner of war in France during the Hundred Years' War, and Elizabeth in the Tower of London under Queen Mary). A "bestseller" of the Middle Ages, the *Consolation*'s poignant message of hope continues to inspire readers today.

In "'For This was Drawyn by a Knyght Presoner': Sir Thomas Malory and *Le Morte Darthur*" (Chapter 2), Amy S. Kaufman reminds readers that Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, one of the best known medieval versions of King Arthur's legend, sprang from the inhospitable setting of a late medieval prison. Although Malory's identity, the truth of the accusations against him, and the reasons for his imprisonment are matters of debate and conjecture, one can at least determine how prison made its way into Malory's story of Arthur. Malory's nostalgia for simpler times, his idealization of true love, and his longing for justice endure, shaping Arthurian legend even today.

In "The Self-Incriminator: John Lilburne, the Star Chamber, and the English Origins of American Liberty" (Chapter 3), Robb A. McDaniel delves into John Lilburne, the foremost leader of the seventeenth-century "Leveller" movement, who was the most celebrated political prisoner of the English Civil War. Imprisoned repeatedly for his political activities, he was tried, convicted, and tortured by England's infamous Star Chamber court; exiled once for libel; and tried twice by Oliver Cromwell for treason, for which he was acquitted to great acclaim, although not, finally, released. His early prison writings attacked religious intolerance and England's Anglican state church, and he eventually wrote a number of groundbreaking defenses of civil liberties—including due process, self-incrimination, trial by jury, and equal protection of the law—all while under lock and key. While in the Tower of London, he also coauthored the first modern effort to create a written constitution grounded in popular sovereignty, a development that would ultimately see its most mature fruit in the New World.

Just as Lilburne popularized democracy, John Bunyan popularized the Puritan gospel. The victim of the very religious establishment that Lilburne had

questioned, Bunyan spent years in prison for his unauthorized preaching. In "John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Nonconformist Prison Literature" (Chapter 4), Brett A. Hudson examines the Vanity Fair episode, in which John Bunyan (1628–88) redefines the alienation and persecution experienced by imprisoned religious nonconformists in late seventeenth-century England. In this episode, the pilgrims Christian and Faithful are tried, imprisoned, and sentenced for execution for having rejected the temporal allurements and obsessions of early modern culture. Just as Boethius appealed to Christian intellectuals, Bunyan illustrates for Christian Everyman how the spiritual consolations of faith far outweigh the temporal hardships of earthly prison bars and human ridicule. Baptists imprisoned for their faith in Culpepper, Virginia, would later inspire James Madison with a hatred for religious persecution that saw its flowering in the disestablishment of the Episcopal Church in Virginia and the "free exercise" clause of the First Amendment.

Whereas Boethius and Bunyan served longer sentences, Henry David Thoreau was able to parley a single night behind bars into an essay that has subsequently inspired activists from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr., who faced far greater threats to life and liberty. In "Henry David Thoreau and the Principle of Passive Resistance" (Chapter 5), Tom Strawman delineates the manifold ways in which Thoreau managed to live out his own transcendental ideal of self-reliance in his personal life as well as through the experiment at Walden Pond, a private refuge of freedom from the material slavery of his neighbors.

While Thoreau was especially interested in abolishing slavery, many others were chiefly concerned about women's rights. The next two essays address this issue. In her essay, "The Radicalization of Louise Michel" (Chapter 6), Nancy Sloan Goldberg focuses on Louise Michel, who metamorphosed from an advocate of republican reform to a radical anarchist, a transformation for which the destruction of the Commune in 1871 played a vital part, as did her imprisonment in the penal colony in New Caledonia, to be followed by further imprisonments elsewhere. Less focused on descriptions of her own suffering than on potboiling novels, poems, and plays, Michel concentrated chiefly on taking up the cause of social justice (consistent with her earlier advocacy of socialism) for members of the poor and working class.

In America, the fight for women's rights, dating at least as far back as the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, long concentrated on voting rights. Women who had been prominent in the abolitionist movement were rightly disappointed that (at least on paper), the Fifteenth Amendment (1865) sought to remove barriers to voting for black men prior to those for black or white women. In "'From Prison to People': How Women Jailed for Suffrage Inscribed Their Prison Experience on the American Public" (Chapter 7), Jane Marcellus argues

that, although members of the NWP who were "jailed for freedom" between 1917 and 1919 were able to write little while incarcerated, they later used a number of strategies to inscribe their prison experience on the American (and to some extent global) public. Imprisoned in the uninhabitable Washington City Jail and the Occoquan Workhouse in suburban Virginia for picketing the White House, the women were fed a literal "diet of worms," forced to bathe in filthy water, and sometimes beaten, chained to cells, and threatened with straitjackets. Yet under the leadership Alice Paul, a Quaker committed to nonviolence, they did not resist. Instead, they incorporated their prison experience into their picket signs, press releases, newspaper and magazine articles, and other efforts. Notably, in 1919, 26 former prisoners took part in a three-week cross-country train tour, the "Prison Special," whose message they dubbed "From Prison to People." Donning homemade replicas of the "cloth of guilt" they had been forced to wear in jail, they "performed" prison by giving dramatic readings, singing jail songs, and playing the comb to raise awareness of the administration's actions. This chapter examines the various discursive strategies—personal accounts, political rhetoric, humor, and street theater—that the women used to incorporate their prison experience into the argument for women's full citizenship, and it shows the various ways they subverted patriarchal power.

The twentieth century witnessed the rise of the totalitarian state, variously manifested in Russia, Germany, China, and in their smaller would-be imitators. The Russian state would one day be called to task by Alexander Soltzhenitsyn, whose novels from the Gulag would be recognized by a Nobel Prize, followed by self-imposed exile in the United States. In a previous generation, a German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had given up the opportunity to spend the war years in America and had returned home to Germany, where he joined those who sought to remove Adolph Hitler, who had used his own prison experience to write his vitriolic *Mein Kampf*, from power. In "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Exemplar of Costly Discipleship in Action" (Chapter 8), John R. Vile shows how Bonhoeffer's *Prison Writings*, while sometimes enigmatic, contain clues as to how faith, family, and other cultural factors enabled him to stand against one of the most virulent ideologies of all times. His own hanging in the dying moments of Hitler's regime testify to the willingness of a man to heed St. Paul's call to those who were willing to offer transformed lives as sacrifices to God.[10]

Not everyone in prison is a hero. Indeed, one hopes that most who are confined within the walls of a prison, at least in democratic nations, are there because they deserve punishment. The punishment is arguably a recognition by society of their own responsibility and culpability, albeit not necessarily an indication that they lack skills and talents and certainly not an indication that they have forfeited all rights. Mark Allan Jackson's essay on Huddie William Ledbetter ("Lead Belly"), titled "'The Jail House Is Full of Blues': Lead Belly's Prison

Pleas" (Chapter 9), shows how skillful and well-placed inmates can sometimes use their talents to mitigate punishments that they otherwise deserve. In Lead Belly's case, he was able to craft lyrics that appealed to those with the power to issue pardons. He is accordingly not so much remembered for his own shortcomings as for his signal contributions to American music, which continue to find reflection in modern jazz and blues as well as rap lyrics.

Like Ledbetter, Malcolm X (and another activist, Elbridge Cleaver) landed in prison as a result of his own wrongdoing. Malcolm X found himself transformed by his prison experience, aided in part by Alex Haley, who wrote the book *Roots* that became a miniseries in the 1970s. Drawing in part from the writings of Frederick Douglass, prison became the place where Malcolm X learned the magic of words. Sadly, as Laura Dubek shows in "*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and the African American Quest for Freedom and Literacy" (Chapter 10), Malcolm also came to the realization that his hero's words were on a higher plane than his actions. His willingness to challenge members of his own community and to engage in conversations about race is ultimately more important than his own death in a hail of gunfire.

Although Malcolm X's approach to politics is often contrasted with that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the end of his life showed far greater convergence. Although this book does not devote a chapter to the subject, some familiarity with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" would contribute to a fuller understanding of Malcolm's work. King employed an epistolary style similar to St. Paul to appeal to the conscience of fellow white clergymen who questioned his "unwise and untimely"[11] actions in Birmingham and his willingness to go to jail, urging him instead to be patient. Drawing from a natural law tradition articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas and Henry David Thoreau and secularized in the American Declaration of Independence and in Gandhi's theory of nonviolent resistance, King justified his own campaign of nonviolent protest as a way of helping America secure the dream that all men were created equal. King would further articulate this dream in his historic speech to those who marched on Washington, where he argued for a society that would judge individuals by the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin. On another occasion, King proclaimed, "we face a world of crisis," but "crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. We would like to think that it will bring salvation to the hearts of men and the truth that unearned suffering is redemptive."[12]

In the final chapter of the volume, "Mehdi Zana and the Struggle for Kurdish Ethnic Identity in Turkey" (Chapter 11), Kari Neely argues that self-identification and its expression are fundamental to a civil society. She illustrates, however, that shortly after it was established, the modern Turkish state sought to suppress Kurdish identity. Mehdi Zana, the Kurdish human rights

activist who became the mayor of the predominantly Kurdish city of Diyarbikir in 1977, had become an internationally known Kurdish figure by the late 1970s. In his book *Prison No 5: Eleven Years in Turkish Jails* (1997), Zana recounts his imprisonment as a Kurdish political figure after the military coup of 1980, his torture and that of other Kurdish leaders, and the effects these had on not only the Kurdish leadership but also the Kurdish community. Neely's essay, using *Prison No. 5* as its guide, traces the erasure of Kurds from Turkish history and society, starting with the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1924 through the use of legal legislation enacted since 1980 in Turkey that labels Kurds as "terrorists" unworthy of human rights even while international organizations demand that Turkey recognize Kurds as minorities. In sometimes numbing detail, Zana broadcasts atrocities that a regime sought, like the Kurds themselves, to silence.

Throughout history, nations have imprisoned millions of men and women, few of whom have left with bestsellers in their hands. Those who have done so, especially those such as Nelson Mandela, in *Long Walk to Freedom* and *Conversations with Myself*,[13] have contributed immeasurably to discourse on the human experience, on politics, on race, and on other issues of contemporary significance. More important, they have epitomized the words of Jesus who cautioned that it was more important to fear those who could destroy the soul than those who could merely confine or destroy the body.[14] Prison walls have clearly been far more successful in confining bodies than in confining ideas, and the essays in this volume suggest that the human experience is significantly deeper because of this limitation.

Prison Narratives from Boethius to Zana seeks to contribute to a relatively underexplored field of study.[15] Although the book takes a chronological approach, all the chapters can be read on their own in any order. The authors have focused on how the prison experiences specifically shaped writings, and each chapter ends with a series of seven questions designed to enhance discussion within groups that might choose to use this work as a starting point. Authors have included references to primary and secondary sources to which readers may turn for further information. Although authors have quoted, sometimes generously, from the works they have analyzed, most readers will find that there is no substitute for grappling directly with the original works. The ultimate measure of this book's success will likely be not the number of people who read it but the number who are inspired to read the liberating narratives that were themselves born of prison travails.

Notes

1. See George Birkbeck Hill, ed., *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, rev. by L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), Vol. 3, *The Life (1776–1780)*, pp. 165–67.
2. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 195–228.
3. Ibid., p. 217. Foucault writes that "Antiquity had been a civilization of spectacle. 'To render accessible to a multitude of men the inspection of a small number of objects': this was the problem[.] [. . .] The modern age poses the opposite problem: 'To procure for a small number, or even for a single individual, the instantaneous view of a great multitude'" (216).
4. Plato, "Crito," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Great Books of the Western World 6 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007), p. 216.
5. Plato, "Gorgias," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Great Books of the Western World 6 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007), p. 265.
6. Ephesians, along with Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon, was written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome in *ca*. 61–63 and is regarded by many as a "Captivity Epistle."
7. See, for example, Eph. 3:1 and Eph. 4:1, in which Paul refers to himself as a "prisoner of Christ" and "a prisoner for the Lord," respectively.
8. Eph. 6:22–17.
9. See Rosalind C. Love, "The Latin Commentaries on Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* from the 9th to the 11th Centuries," in *A Companion to Boethius in the Middle Ages*, ed. Noel Harold Kaylor Jr. and Philip Edward Phillips, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 30 (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2012), pp. 75–133. One way to assess the popularity of a medieval work is take stock of the number of glosses; in the case of the *Consolation*, Love records "nearly eighty extant manuscripts and fragments from the period up to about the year 1100 which transmit annotation" (pp. 82–96).
10. Rom. 12:1–2.
11. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *A World of Ideas*, 8th ed., ed. Lee A. Jacobus (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), p. 213.
12. Marin Luther King Jr., "For Martin Luther King and Boston," Southern Leadership Conference, April 23, 1965. Pamphlet, Boston Athenæum.
13. See Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1994), and *Conversations with Myself*, foreword by President Barak Obama (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).
14. Matt. 10:28.
15. Some other critical studies that examine prison from the perspective of imprisoned thinkers, writers, artists, and so on, include the following: W. B. Carnochan, "The Literature of Confinement," in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. Norvel Morris and David J. Rothman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 427–55; Jamie S. Scott, "Christians and Tyrants: The Prison Testimonies of Boethius, Thomas More, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Toronto Studies in Religion* 19 (New York: Peter Lang, 1995); Paul Strauss, *In Hope of Heaven: English Recusant Prison Writings of the*

Sixteenth Century (New York: Peter Lang, 1995); Ioan Davies, *Writers in Prison* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Elissa D. Gelfand, *Imagination in Confinement: Women's Writings from French Prisons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); and D. Quentin Miller, ed., *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013).

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.[1] 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*).[2]

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 goven 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 talents[6] 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

fraudulent debasement of currency given by the "Prefect's treasurer" as pay to his personal "horse and foot guards."[9] In 510, Boethius became sole consul of Rome, the highest honor for a member of the senatorial class.

As a patrician and a consul, Boethius was following in the footsteps of his late father, Narius Manlius Boethius (consul in 487). Although the Roman Senate had long ceased to exercise any governing power, its ceremonial and cultural significance survived, and consuls were expected to fund important civic events, such as games in the Colosseum and public work projects. Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (consul in 485), a distinguished senatorial colleague of his father, took in Boethius after Boethius's father died in 487. Descended from the *gens Symmachi*, who had been Christian since the fifth century, Symmachus was well educated in the Roman tradition, fluent in Greek, and devoted to the study of Greek philosophy. Symmachus was also interested in history and has been credited with having written a seven-volume history of Rome that is no longer extant. Symmachus ensured that Boethius received an education of the highest order, which included the intensive study of rhetoric followed by Greek and Roman literature and philosophy. He also gave his daughter, Rusticiana, in marriage to Boethius in 495, and the couple named their two sons after Boethius and his father-in-law.

Symmachus and Boethius were among the last Romans to possess a mastery of the Greek language, and they were among a small number of people to be bilingual in Latin and Greek. Interested in the idea of unity and the preservation of knowledge, Boethius translated the works of Plato and Aristotle from Greek into Latin and wrote commentaries on those works to demonstrate their essential agreement.[10] While Boethius's contemporaries may not have shared his academic interests, later thinkers and theologians throughout the Middle Ages profited from the works that Boethius translated during a scholarly life that was tragically cut short.

Boethius was also dedicated to public service, which grew out of his aristocratic heritage—attested by his four-part name, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius—and his philosophical training. In addition, he acquired a belief in the Platonic idea of the philosopher-king. Plato had thought that one who has studied philosophy and sought to understand the nature of things, one who has left the dark world of the cave and has ascended into the world of light, has a moral responsibility to return to the world and to lead others to the truth. Boethius agreed with Plato that one knows justice by comparing it to the eternal form of justice and that "[u]nless philosophers become kings in their countries or those who are now called kings and rulers come to be sufficiently inspired with a genuine desire for wisdom . . . there can be no rest from troubles."[11] Following the teachings of Plato, Boethius dedicated himself to the pursuit of knowledge and service to the state.

Boethius's maternal lineage can be traced to the *gens Anicia*, which had been Christian since the fourth century. One of Boethius's closest friends was John the Deacon, later Pope John I (August 13, 523–May 18, 526),[12] with whom he had many conversations about the Bible and contemporary theological issues. Boethius's first theological tractate, *On the Catholic Faith* (*De fide catholica*), a concise restatement of orthodox Christian teachings spanning from the Old to the New Testament, was likely the result of catechetical lectures that John imparted to Boethius. Later in his career, John approached Boethius and asked him to apply his philosophical mind to explain difficult theological matters for the benefit of the clergy and the church. Three such works, which Boethius dedicated to John the Deacon, include *Whether Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are Substantially Predicated on the Divinity* [*Utrum pater et filius et spiritus sanctus de divinitate substantialiter praedicentur*] on the nature of the divine, *Quomodo Substantiae* (also known as *De Hebdomadibus*) on the manner in which substances are good,[13] and *A Treatise Against Eutyches and Nestorius* [*Contra Eutychen et Nestorius*] on refuting theological heresies. Another work, *The Trinity is One God Not Three Gods* (*Trinitas unus deus ac non tres dii*), which Boethius dedicated to his father-in-law Symmachus, applies logic to explain the concept of God in three persons. Boethius applied logical rigor to Christian teachings and doctrines, much as Augustine of Hippo had done in his writings, thus laying the foundations for medieval scholasticism.

Boethius's service as an official in the Ostrogothic government took him away from his academic pursuits. Under Theodoric, Boethius ascended to the highest position available to either Ostrogoths or Romans in Italy. As Master of Offices (*magister officiorum*), Boethius served as an ambassador to other kingdoms, functioned as Theodoric's gatekeeper, and supervised the royal treasury. His role, therefore, would be similar to that of a combined modern-day secretary of state and secretary of the treasury. By Boethius's own account, he did not seek this office for himself, but when called on to serve, he felt bound by duty and, more practically, by an obligation to a king whose orders one could not refuse. Boethius served Theodoric well, as attested most notably by the elevation of his sons to joint consuls in 522, a moment that Boethius recalled in prison as being the happiest moment of his life.

Boethius's happiness, however, was not meant to last. At the height of his political life, while admirably balancing the demands of his scholarly endeavors with his governmental service, Theodoric accused Boethius of conspiracy and treason for having defended Albinus, a fellow senator charged with collusion with the Eastern Roman Empire. Summarily stripped of his office, Boethius was exiled from Rome and imprisoned without trial in Pavia. Boethius was denied the opportunity to refute the charges leveled against him by men of

questionable reputations, and his property was confiscated, his wife and sons were cast out of their home, and his whole world turned upside down.

In prison, far from home, Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In 524 or 525, the "last of the Romans" was mercilessly tortured and executed in Pavia. According to one account, the *Anonymous Valesianus*, a cord was bound tightly around Boethius's head until his eyes started from their sockets, after which he was bludgeoned to death with a club.[14] According to another account, the *Liber Pontificalis*, Boethius was killed by sword, after which his body was buried in a secret grave.[15] A "conspiracy of silence" followed his execution in the form of a *damnatio memoriae* ("damnation of memory"), which Theodoric issued, making it punishable by death to speak the name of Boethius.[16] Although not forgotten, the name of Boethius could not be spoken until the fall of the Ostrogothic rule in Italy.[17] According to tradition, Boethius's remains were eventually moved by Luitprand, king of the Lombards, in 721 to the Church of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro in Pavia.[18]

Throughout imprisonment, Boethius consoled himself with the belief that his father-in-law was safe.[19] However, the execution of Symmachus, who protested the unjust imprisonment and execution of his son-in-law, soon followed in 525 or 526 by order of the king, who regarded him as a threat to political stability. Symmachus's fate, and the fate of his mortal remains, may have been the same as his son-in-law's.[20] In 526, after returning from an ill-fated embassy ordered by Theodoric—consisting of the Pope, bishops, court officials, and senators—to Constantinople, Pope John I, already in failing health, was condemned to prison in Ravenna, where he died a martyr on May 18.[21] Confronted by his old age and lacking a suitable male heir to his kingdom, not to mention being wracked with paranoia over the possible reconciliation between the Western and Eastern Churches (and the potential political consequences as a result of their reconciliation), Theodoric died in 526 on the day before he was planning to confiscate property from the Catholic Church in Rome. Theodoric, whose rule had been noted for its preservation of Roman culture and dedication to religious toleration, permanently marred his reputation by putting to death not only two of Rome's greatest scholars, Boethius and Symmachus, but also the head of the Catholic Church, Pope John I. Nevertheless, the Ostrogothic king was buried in a great mausoleum in Ravenna that stands to this day.[22]

Theodoric's Ostrogothic kingdom, which in many ways postponed the complete annihilation of classical Roman culture during his reign, later fell to the Eastern Emperor Justinian's general, Belisarius, before a devastated Italy eventually succumbed to the Lombards. Theodoric's daughter, Queen Amalasuintha, eventually restored the estates of Boethius and Symmachus to Rusticiana, Boethius's widow, who was later reduced to penury because of the Gothic War and forced to beg for bread.[23] In 546, the Gothic king Totila "shielded

[Rusticiana] from charges made by his compatriots that she had destroyed statues of Theodoric out of revenge."[24] The Roman Catholic Church (the same institution that Rome had persecuted until the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity) would preserve Roman traditions, and monasteries would preserve its literature. Indeed, many believe that Cassiodorus's monastery, Vivarium, provided the model for copying and transmitting manuscripts of classical and Christian authors, including Boethius's *Consolation*, for later generations.[25]

Lady Philosophy's Consolation to the Prisoner

Exiled, condemned to a prison cell, and denied the opportunity to defend himself against unjust and politically motivated charges of treason, Boethius composed the *Consolation* while awaiting execution. A prosimetric work, consisting of alternating meters (*metra*) and prose (*prosa*) sections, *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a literary *consolatio* that participates in the Greco-Roman *lamentatio*/*consolatio* tradition by dramatizing the prisoner's educational ascent "from despair to hope, a journey facilitated by Lady Philosophy, who assumes the significant roles of Socratic teacher and spiritual physician."[26] The work "is based on the premise that the universe is governed by [the] eternal reason [of God], a belief initially 'forgotten' by [the prisoner] but eventually restored"[27] through Lady Philosophy's application of philosophical reason.

The *Consolation* begins with the narrator lamenting his fall from Fortune's favor. The prisoner contrasts his past happiness with his present misery:

> I who with zest penned songs in happier days,
> Must now with grief embark on sombre lays.
> Sad verses flood my cheeks with tears unfeigned;
> The Muses who inspire me are blood-stained.
> Yet they at least were not deterred by dread;
> They still attend me on the path I tread.[28]

While he had enjoyed writing poetry in his younger days, now the prisoner laments that he is compelled to write elegies. He takes some comfort in the company of the Muses, the companions of his youthful days. They still attend to him, but their songs serve only to increase his sorrow, which turns his mind to death:

> Alas, Death turns deaf ears to my sad cries,
> And cruel, will not close my weeping eyes.
> While fickle Fortune transient goods did show,
> One bitter hour could almost bring me low;
> Now she's put on her clouded, treacherous gaze,