

Counting the Heads of the Hydra: the development of the early medieval
commentary on Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy

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Counting the Heads of the Hydra: the Development of the Early Medieval Commentary on Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy*

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As the work of the Huygens Institute project has shown, commentary on classical and late antique Latin texts was a major feature of Carolingian scholarship, developing into several distinct traditions and stretching across much of Europe. Different texts, whether classical or medieval, pagan or Christian, show much similarity in their commentary traditions and methodologies, and some evidence of overlap of material. Even so, each text has its own story to tell, and in analysing the early commentary tradition of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* of Boethius here, we hope to draw out both its similarities to the commentary tradition of the *De Nuptiis* and its distinctive features.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Boethian commentary tradition is the impression it gives of a multiplicity of origins, developing out of tentative beginnings in the early ninth century as the text exploded across Europe. In 4p6 of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* Philosophia remarks that the subject of fate, providence and free will is like the heads of the hydra: when one doubt is cut away, many others grow in its place.¹ She returns to the subject in 4m7, in her summary list of the labours of Hercules, where she devotes a single line to his defeat of the hydra: *Hydra combusto periiit ueneno* (with its poison burnt up, the hydra perished). For early medieval readers this was not enough, and commentators were keen to explain the allusion and tell their readers more about the hydra, including the precise details of how many heads it actually had. It is of course an unanswerable question since the number of heads multiplied each time the hydra was attacked. Nevertheless a variety of answers were offered: some say ten, some fifty, some a hundred. And again for the number of heads that grow when each one is struck off: some say two, some say three. It is a good example of Boethian commentary on classical legend, with its plurality of answers, but it is also a convenient image to have in mind when thinking about the development of early

* This is preliminary work emerging out of our project to edit the early medieval glosses on the Consolation of Philosophy. The two authors originally started working on this material in 2002 as part of a project to edit the Old English version of the Consolation of Philosophy: it had long been thought that the Anglo-Saxon translator (traditionally believed to be King Alfred) had used Latin glosses and since the glosses had never been printed it was necessary to transcribe and collate the relevant material ourselves. That edition is now finished (see *The Old English Boethius: an Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's 'De Consolatione Philosophiae'*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)), but in doing it it became clear that an edition of the early glosses was desperately needed, not least because they were clearly an important influence on many early writers as well as the Old English version and it was not feasible to print more than the most relevant parallels in our edition of the Old English text. That is what we are now engaged on (with the help of Dr Rosalind Love, and funding from the Leverhulme Trust) and we have so far transcribed and collated glosses from fifty manuscripts, plus ten others partially.

¹ *Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii Philosophiae consolatio*, ed. by Ludwig Bieler, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 94, rev. edn (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984); references are to book, prose or metre, and section number.

Boethian commentary. Commentary grew like the hydra's heads, and there was and is no stable definitive state of it, no version that can be identified as authoritative.

The Consolation was a late arrival in the early medieval literary canon. It was presumably written around 525 in Pavia, but seems to have left no mark at all until the very end of the eighth century - there are no certain references to it, no definite borrowings or allusions, no copies or extracts or fragments. In this respect, it was like *De nuptiis*, which despite some indications of pre-Caroline reception, remained relatively obscure until the ninth century. The earliest surviving manuscripts of the Consolation are four that were written in France in the first half of the ninth century. Scattered glosses appear from the middle of the ninth century and then in profusion from the end of the ninth century onwards. By the second half of the tenth century we are finding manuscripts just packed with marginal and interlinear glosses. Of over 400 medieval manuscripts of the Consolation, about eighty were produced before 1100, not counting excerpts.² They are fairly evenly spread over the three centuries, and originate in East and West Francia, the British Isles and possibly Italy. All but one of these has pre-1100 glosses. There are also a few manuscripts containing what look like continuous commentaries on the whole text but are evidently derived from marginal and interlinear glosses. The glosses and comments vary greatly from one manuscript to another, and in many cases have clearly been added in successive stages by different hands, in ways which would suggest a variety of sources and commentators. Some manuscripts have as few as five or six glosses, others as many as twelve thousand. Despite all this, as with commentaries on other classical and late antique texts,³ scholars working on the early medieval glosses on the Consolation in the last century were keen to identify or posit an original version of the commentary from which all the glosses could be deemed to derive, and preferably an original author for it. E. K. Rand in 1906 spotted a reference to Remigius of Auxerre in one late glossed manuscript and identified him as the author of the glosses it contained.⁴ H. F. Stewart identified what he took to be a more authentic form of Remigius's work in 1916, in the form of a continuous commentary in what is usually called the

² Various lists are given by Colette Jeudy, 'L'œuvre de Remi d'Auxerre: État de la question', in *L'École carolingienne d'Auxerre: de Murethach à Remi 830-908*, ed. by Dominique Iogna-Prat and others (Paris: Beauchesne, 1991), pp. 373-97; Fabio Troncarelli, *Cogitatio Mentis: L'eredità di Boezio nell'Alto Medioevo*, *Storie e Testi* 16 (Naples: M. D'Auria Editore, 2005); Joseph Wittig, 'The "Remigian" Glosses on Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae* in Context', in *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill*, ed. by Charles D. Wright and others (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 168-200; and in *Codices Boethiani: A Conspectus of Manuscripts of the Works of Boethius*, ed. by Margaret T. Gibson and others (London: the Warburg Institute, University of London, 1995-), I, *Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland*. (1995), II, *Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland* (2001), and III, *Italy and the Vatican City* (2001).

³ One thinks here especially of the commentaries on the *De Nuptiis* of Martianus Capella, the *Satires* of Persius, and the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius.

⁴ *Johannes Scottus: i. Der Kommentar des Johannes Scottus zu den Opuscula Sacra des Boethius. ii. Der Kommentar des Remigius von Auxerre zu den Opuscula Sacra des Boethius*, ed. by Edward K. Rand (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1906), Vol. I.2, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur lateinischen Philologie des Mittelalters*, pp. 85-106.

Maihingen manuscript, and he printed extracts from it.⁵ In 1935 E. T. Silk published a full continuous commentary from a twelfth-century manuscript which he attributed to John the Scot, and which overlaps considerably with the glosses attributed to Remigius, and included in an appendix further extensive excerpts from the supposed Remigian commentary in the Maihingen manuscript, collated and partly corrected against others.⁶ Pierre Courcelle's article of 1939, expanded in his monumental study of Boethian commentary published in 1967, reaffirmed in detail the attribution of the glosses in various manuscripts to a commentary by Remigius and analysed some of its features, but noted the existence in some manuscripts of what he called a 'revised Remigius' marked by fuller comments on the problematic and controversial 3m9.⁷ And Diane Bolton in 1977 took the idea further by positing a distinction between the original commentary of Remigius and various 'reviser versions' as she called them, including one specifically English revision.⁸ But it remains the case that the supposed original commentary by one man is still no more than a hypothesis, and a rather doubtful one.⁹ There is no manuscript which can claim to represent an original version of the commentary by Remigius or anyone else. And from what checking we have been able to do so far, there is little sign of overlap or similarity between the Boethian glosses and the supposed glosses by Remigius on Martianus and Persius.

One of the areas in which this issue can be examined more closely is in the glosses on classical mythology and legend. Diane Bolton made much the fullest and most incisive analysis of these glosses, initially in her B.Litt. thesis of 1965 and then more fully in her article of 1977.¹⁰ In the latter she makes a sharp distinction between the sound glossing by Remigius and the extravagant or sloppy glossing by slightly later revisers:

⁵ Hugh F. Stewart, 'A Commentary by Remigius Autissiodorensis on the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* of Boethius', *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1916), pp. 22-42. The manuscript in question is presently in Krakow (Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Berol lat. 4°, 939: *olim* Berlin, Staatsbibliothek der Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, lat. 4°, 939, and Maihingen, Bibliotheca Wallersteiniana, I, 2, lat. 4°, 3).

⁶ *Saeculi noni auctoris in Boetii consolationem Philosophiae commentarius*, ed. by Edmund T. Silk (Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1935), pp. 305-43.

⁷ Pierre Courcelle, 'Étude critique sur les commentaires de la *Consolation* de Boèce (IXe–XVe siècles)', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 14 (1939), pp. 5-140, and *La Consolation de Philosophie dans la tradition littéraire* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1967).

⁸ Diane K. Bolton, 'The Study of the *Consolation of Philosophy* in Anglo-Saxon England', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 44 (1977), pp. 33-78.

⁹ See for instance Wittig's 2007 paper challenging the notion that Remigius had anything to do with it all and arguing for a gradual accumulation of glosses rather than a single original commentary (Wittig, 'The "Remigian" Glosses', pp. 168-200). Our own analyses of much fuller material suggest that there is no central or core or original version.

¹⁰ Diane K. Bolton, 'Manuscripts and Commentaries on Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae* in England in the Middle Ages' (unpublished B. Litt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1965), and 'Study of the *Consolation*', pp. 33-78.

Like the late Latin writers, including Boethius himself, Remigius rationalized mythological stories but he did not give long elaborate allegorical explanations such as the later Boethius commentators were to do, nor, on the other hand, did he take the stories seriously and condemn pagan deities as immoral demons as the early Christians and even some of the early Boethius commentators had done. Using Mythographus I and Servius, which he appears to quote from memory, recalling the sense rather than the exact words, Remigius offered a straight-forward account of the story to explain Boethius's allusions and a rationalization of the mythology. The revisers, however, seem to have had no coherent attitude beyond that of copying as many sources on the subject as they could find, frequently side by side and contradicting each other.¹¹

There are two problems with this. Firstly, the sharp distinction made here between what Remigius wrote and what the revisers wrote is not one that can be verified from the manuscripts, indeed it seems to come down to a circular argument. Initially Bolton, building on Courcelle's work, defines Remigius's commentary as the material preserved in the brief extracts printed by Stewart in his article of 1916 plus the brief extracts printed by Silk, supplemented by the glosses in two Continental manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh century and two English manuscripts of the twelfth century, plus *some* of the glosses in two other English manuscripts of the end of the tenth century.¹² This is complicated enough, but when one turns to her analysis of the three main mythological metres, 3m12, 4m3 and 4m7 and the more precise list of witnesses that she gives there, it becomes much more complicated. This is her list of manuscript witnesses for the different versions:¹³

R Remigius

Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 17814 (B.N. 17814).

Paris, Bibl. Nat. nouv. acq. lat. 1478 (B.N. 1478).

Oxford, Corpus Christi Coll. ms. 59 for III m.12.

Cambridge, Gonville & Caius Coll. ms. 309/707 (G & C) for III m.12 & IV m. 7

Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 15090 (B.N. 15090) for IV m. 7.

T Trinity type

Cambridge, Trinity Coll. ms. 0. 3. 7. (1179).

B.N. B.N. type

Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 6401A (B.N. 6401A).

Antwerp, Musée Plantin Moretus ms. 190 (A, first hand).

Geneva, Codex Bodmer 175 (Bodmer) for III m. 12 & IV m.3.¹⁴

Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 17814, odd glosses in III m.12 & IV m.3.

¹¹ Bolton, 'Study of the Consolation', p. 44.

¹² Ibid., p. 39.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

¹⁴ This manuscript, formerly in the Bodmer collection, was sold to a private collector in 2005.

K Kk. type
Cambridge, Univ. Libr. ms. Kk. III 21 (Kk).
Geneva, Codex Bodmer 175 for IV m. 7.
Antwerp, Musée Plantin Moretus ms. 190 (A, second hand).
Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 17814, odd glosses, especially in IV m.7.

R here is supposedly Remigius's commentary, while B.N., T and K represent three different revisions. But as we see, the first witness listed under R, Paris 17814, also appears as witness for two of the revised versions; Antwerp and Geneva are listed as witnesses for two versions, and Paris 15090 is listed as witness to Remigius for 4m7 but not apparently for its glosses on 3m12 and 4m3. And though she does distinguish two different hands for the glosses in Antwerp, such distinctions are often hard to make in practice with short glosses, and they are absent for the other manuscripts. There is a suspicion here that the definition of what Remigius wrote and what the revisers wrote is more selective and subjective than just manuscript distribution - it involves picking some glosses from a manuscript and discarding others. It gets even more difficult when one looks at individual glosses. Here is Bolton's comment on the first line of the Ulysses metre, 4m3:

Remigius, glossing IV m. 3.1, says that Ulysses and the other kings of the Greeks, wanting to return to their homeland, were delayed in Italy.¹⁵ A copyist, probably equating the homeland with Italy, made Ulysses and his companions 'kings of the Romans' and this reading is found in all the other versions. The progressive deterioration of a proper name can be exemplified by Circe's island, Aea. This appears in the accusative in R as 'eam', in B.N. 17814 and K as 'ceam', in B.N. as 'cenam', and finally in T as 'coceam'.¹⁶

If we look at the manuscripts themselves, these statements about what Remigius wrote, or what the R group of manuscripts attests, look very doubtful indeed. In the appendix where she prints the gloss in question, she records the variant *reges grecorum* and attributes it to R for Remigius:

Ducis id est Ulixes post actum bellum Troianum sicut et reges Romanorum^a volens redire in patriam, delatus est Italiam et primum ad Eam^b insulam in qua erat Circe, filia solis.

^a Romanorum] Grecorum R.

^b Eam] Ceam K; Cenam B.N., A; Coceam T; *recte* Aea. ¹⁷

(Leader, that is Ulysses; wishing after the Trojan war, like the other kings of the Romans, to return to his native land, he was carried to Italy, and first to the island of Ea in which there was Circe, daughter of the sun.)

¹⁵ This is a misreading of the gloss; it reports that all the kings were wishing to return home but does not imply that all were delayed in Italy, only Ulysses.

¹⁶ Bolton, 'Study of the Consolation', p. 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

But of the five manuscripts which she has cited as witnesses for Remigius three are apparently not witnesses for this metre and of the other two one has ‘Greeks’ and the other ‘Romans’, and the Maihingen manuscript which was the basis for Stewart’s and Silk’s extracts from Remigius also has ‘Romans’ (as do many other manuscripts). Similarly the reading *eam* is found only in the second of her two witnesses apparently used for Remigius’s glosses on 4m3, though it does also occur in a few other manuscripts not used by Bolton. It was also the original reading of a tenth-century English manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 14380, ff. 1-64, which she describes not as R but as mainly of B.N. type,¹⁸ though a scribe has added a ‘c’ above the line to make *ceam*. In both cases the first witness listed under R, Paris 17814, has the ‘non-Remigian’ reading but is apparently deemed here to be representing one of the revised (or corrupted) versions. It rather looks as if the principle was a circular one: readings were identified as original and Remigian in the first place because they were sensible or in modern terms correct or tallied in some other way with what should be original or Remigian, not because of their manuscript distribution or the evidence of textual history.¹⁹

The other problem with her summary account of the difference between Remigius’s glosses and those of the so-called revisers is the negative slant on the latter: ‘no coherent attitude beyond that of copying as many sources on the subject as they could find, frequently side by side and contradicting each other’. It stems of course from the assumption that the later glossators or revisers started with Remigius’s own perfectly adequate commentary in front of them, and they were just gratuitously adding more material, but the existence of such an original commentary is a very questionable hypothesis as we have seen. The evidence suggests rather something more like gradual accumulation in many places. Explaining Boethius’s allusions was not easy, for various reasons, and different commentators made different guesses or used different sources. Those glosses were then conflated as manuscripts travelled around Europe and their glosses were copied and collated with others. To take one example, Rome, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 3363 was produced in France in the first half of the ninth century, as one of the earliest surviving copies of the *Consolation*. A few glosses were added in the second half of the century, in France. Then it travelled to Wales or Cornwall, it seems, and an insular glossator working there at the end of the ninth century added a vast number of further glosses.²⁰ What his sources were we cannot

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁹ In the case of the first example, the likeliest explanation is perhaps that the original gloss just had *reges*, as in the Trier manuscript (Trier, Stadtbibliothek, 1093) and a few others, and different glossators made different attempts at further identification.

²⁰ In the account of the glosses in this manuscript in Godden, ‘Alfred, Asser, and Boethius’, in *Latin learning and English lore: studies in Anglo-Saxon literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. by Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe and Andy Orchard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), vol. I, pp. 326-48, the insular glosses were identified as the work of a commentator working in Wales, but in a subsequent article Patrick Sims-Williams (‘A New Brittonic Gloss on Boethius: *ud rocashaas*’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 50 (2005), pp. 77-86) suggested that the Brittonic phrase was more likely to be Cornish or Breton than Welsh. A Breton provenance for the main glosses is unlikely at this date, because of the insular script.

tell, but he seems to have known variant readings of Boethius's text that are otherwise unrecorded so could well have been drawing some of his glosses too from glossed manuscripts that we do not know of and that do not survive. Other glosses were added by other glossators in the same region. Then early in the tenth century the manuscript moved to England and St Dunstan collated it with other glossed manuscripts and added further glosses. Later in the century some of these glosses were copied from the Vatican manuscript into another which became one of the sources used by a big expansion of Boethian commentary in late tenth-century England, which may in turn have influenced later Continental manuscripts. Revisers like Dunstan were not mindlessly adding anything that came to mind. He was comparing different versions of Boethius's text and recording variant readings that would affect the sense, as indeed was the Cornish/Welsh glossator. In the same spirit, he was comparing different interpretations of the text and recording them.

It is certainly true that as a result of this gradual, accumulative process glossators frequently supplied more than one explanation of the text, often at odds with each other, and that they sometimes supplied glosses that worked against the implied argument of the text - sometimes very explicitly, more often not. It is also true that their explanations are often at odds with modern conceptions of the classical names and stories. But we should perhaps hesitate to insist on privileging our own notions of what a commentary should be - that is, an explication of what the original reading of the Boethian text was, plus a coherent and structured account of what Boethius meant by it and what background information he was assuming in his readers; still less should we hypothesise an original commentator who produced such a commentary. Two other functions at least can be in play with early Boethian commentary. One is the encyclopaedic - a wish to extend the educative and scholarly value of the text beyond its immediate concerns to make it a starting-point for a wider discussion of the arguments and information it contains. The other is the combative - a wish to register the fact that there are variant versions of the stories to which Boethius alludes, and that different opinions might be held by readers on some of his arguments. Important school-text though it was, the *Consolation* and its author did not receive the kind of veneration that modern readers have often given them. Early medieval commentators knew he was wrong sometimes, or that the two speakers in the dialogue were being allowed to mislead, distort or simplify for the sake of argument. And a third principle may also be at work: the pressure to interpret the allusions in a way that fits with a particular reading of the *Consolation*, which is, consciously or not, different from what we might think of as Boethius's general intention. There is also at times an evident pleasure in packing lots of different interpretations in, and in expanding the allusions, often rather inventively. Compare for example this gloss on Alcibiades, who is mentioned in passing by *Philosophia* in 3p8 as an example of human beauty:

Alcibiades patronomicum cuiusdam pulchre mulieris a ueteribus celebratae uel Herculis mater corpus appellatur pulchrum. Alcibiadis quidam fuit dux grecorum pulcherrimi corporis uel sicut ferunt quaedam femina pulcherrima fuit. uel quidam poeta uel Hercules qui in iuuentute glaucitatem adeptus est.

(Alcibiades was the patronymic of a certain beautiful woman celebrated by the ancients; or the mother of Hercules, whose body was called beautiful. Alcibiades was a general of the Greeks with a very handsome body; or as some say she was a very beautiful female; or a poet; or Hercules who in his youth acquired a bluish-grey colour.)

Or note again this one on Busiris in 2p6, of whom Boethius only says that he used to murder his guests and was himself killed by his guest Hercules; the gloss in some English manuscripts reads:

Busiridus rex fuit Aegipti qui triduo pastus hospites immolabat; postea immolatus est ab Hercule; uel sacerdos aegiptius; uel rex cuius meminit Virgilius consul Romanorum.

(Busiridus was a king of Egypt who fed his guests for three days and then sacrificed them; afterwards he was sacrificed by Hercules; or he was an Egyptian priest; or a king whom Vergil mentioned; or a consul of the Romans.)

In any case, whatever we may think of them, the multiplicity of contrasting glosses and the instances of odd or conflicting glosses do represent what contemporaries saw and read. Whether anyone actually read anything resembling what Bolton or Courcelle conceived as the commentary of Remigius is to be doubted. It does not survive among any of the eighty early manuscripts, and that is not just a matter of our not having manuscripts that are early enough. The Vatican manuscript's insular glosses predate Remigius's supposed commentary and the Old English adaptation, written in or very soon after Remigius's lifetime, was already using glosses that, in Bolton's terminology, count as 'reviser' versions. What we can be certain of is that tenth- and eleventh-century readers read something resembling what Bolton and Courcelle call the revisers' work - manuscripts of the Latin text with a huge variety of glosses in the margins and between the lines, often giving multiple interpretations of a name or allusion. So, even if we could reconstruct a hypothetical original version which answered to Bolton's account of how Remigius dealt with classical allusions, it would not represent what most contemporary readers of the Consolation saw.

Part of the challenge for glossators trying to deal with classical references was that Boethius was so allusive. We have already seen this with the hydra, Alcibiades and Busiris. The *tour de force* is the summary list of Hercules's twelve labours in eighteen short lines in 4m7. Similarly Ulysses is the subject of 4m3 and part of 4m7, but in neither case is he introduced by name. In 4m3 he is referred to simply by the phrase *uela Neritii ducis*, 'the sails of the general of Neritium', while in 4m7 he is simply *Ithacus*, 'the man from Ithaca.' The conundrum was not helped by the many different ways in which the Latin text might appear in the manuscripts: *Neritii* appears as *niretii*, *naricii*, *niricii*, *niretu*, etc. Given the use of two different territorial identifiers it is not surprising that the Anglo-Saxon translator was puzzled: was Ulysses the ruler of Neritos or of Ithaca? He resolved the issue by recording at the outset that he was ruler of two kingdoms, Retia and Ithaca (or as the versifier has it, Retia and Thrace).²¹ Similarly 3m12 on the Orpheus story refers obliquely to the Thracian bard, the three-headed porter of the underworld and the avenging goddesses, without giving names. The glossators got the first two right, as Orpheus and Cerberus respectively, but were less sure about the avenging goddesses, *dae ultrices*: some say they are the Furies, some say the Parcae or Fates, some manuscripts record both possibilities. The Anglo-Saxon translator went for the Parcae, but for the three-headed porter he hedged his bets and went for both Cerberus and a three-headed Charon, the ferryman of Hades.²²

²¹ *Old English Boethius*, B 38.3-5 and CM 26.7-8.

²² *Ibid.*, B 35.216-26 and CP 23.18-29.

Sometimes Boethius gives the name of the character but no more, leaving it unclear to later readers who exactly he meant. When in 2m7 Philosophia sings of the evanescence of fame, asking where are now Brutus and Cato, which Brutus and Cato did she mean?²³ Some glossators think Brutus here is the first consul of the Romans, the expeller of the Tarquins, but others say he was a consul who killed himself, presumably indicating the later conspirator against Julius Caesar, and others combine the two, saying he was the first consul who killed himself. Of Cato, some glossators identify him as a consul, which points to Cato the censor (234-149BC), others as a philosopher, which points to his great-grandson Cato the conspirator (95-46BC). Modern translators and commentators are uncertain too, and it would be hard to argue that Boethius himself expected or even wanted his allusion to be clear. In his commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* he actually offers the statement 'Cato is a philosopher' as an example of logical ambiguity because it could be true or false - it would be true if referring to the younger Cato but false if referring to the older one, he explains.²⁴ The name Cato was for him a typical example of ambiguity. It would of course be peculiarly appropriate in a song on the evanescence of fame to cite two names which were both famous and yet uncertainly identifiable. And the uncertainty leaves open the question of Philosophia's political sympathies and the nature of fame: are Brutus and Cato famous because they murdered Caesar, or because they were heroes of the early republic?

The third name cited by Boethius in this metre, Fabricius, is less ambiguous but it remains unclear what aspect of his legend Boethius was alluding to; he is identified in the text only as *fidelis* - where are the bones of the faithful Fabricius, he asks. Some modern commentators think this is a reference to the dealings of the consul Fabricius with Pyrrhus of Epirus, which might suggest that his faithfulness was to his enemies (he rejected the offer of Pyrrhus's doctor to poison him, and sent him back to Pyrrhus).²⁵ Continental glossators thought Fabricius was a consul of the Romans who rejected a huge pile of gold offered by the Sabines, saying that the Romans did not wish to possess gold but to rule those who possessed it. The English glossators think he was a king of the Romans who similarly turned down the legions or legates of the Samnites. But the English glossators record another theory as well, that he accepted the gold and was put to death by the indignant Romans who poured molten gold down his throat saying 'be satisfied with this.' Was the glossator who added this just not noticing Boethius's *fidelis*, or was he suggesting that the story known to him did not at all support Boethius's adjective? Or did he read it as irony - the word *ironia* is one of the commonest annotations in the Consolation. Boethius may well have meant this name to be unambiguous and readily identifiable, along with the relevant story, but an Anglo-Saxon reader of the glosses, seeing such contradictory stories, may well have been reminded again of the uncertainties of fame. The Anglo-Saxon translator famously substituted the smith Weland from Germanic mythology at this point - a figure who could also be read both positively and negatively, we might note.²⁶

²³ *Ubi nunc fidelis ossa Fabricii manent / quid Brutus aut rigidus Cato?* (2m7.15-16).

²⁴ *Anicii Manlii Severini Boetii Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri hermenias (editio secunda)*, ed. by K. Meiser (Leipzig: Teubner, 1877-80), II, 5.

²⁵ Joachim Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius, 'De consolatione philosophiae'*, 2nd edn, *Texte und Kommentare* 9 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p. 225.

²⁶ *Old English Boethius*, B 19.16-21 and CM 10.33-42. In the Old English poem *Deor*, Weland is represented sympathetically as a captive of King Nithhad but the next stanza turns

In some cases glosses are at odds with the Boethian versions. In 4m7 Boethius alludes to the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon, to placate the goddess Diana and allow the Greek fleet to proceed to Troy. The language underlines the apparent awfulness of the event: he bought the winds with blood, and putting off his father's role for that of a priest cut the throat of his daughter. As an example of those who fight their way through all the obstacles to get to the stars and should be followed by Boethius's readers, it is extremely puzzling and has troubled modern commentators.²⁷ (Are we invited to think back to Boethius's own pleasure in the success and continued prosperity of his sons, and to read it as an earthly weakness that he should learn to set aside like Agamemnon? And to Orpheus's love for his wife which led him to lose his own eternal happiness?) But the glossators all give a different version of the story in which Diana or Minerva intervenes at the last minute, snatches Iphigenia away and substitutes a deer for the sacrifice. Was this just the only version they knew, or were they consciously correcting Boethius's story?

Another possible case is the story of Regulus. Boethius mentions him only as an example of the illusory nature of power: he had scored a famous victory over the Carthaginians but was then in turn defeated and captured by them.²⁸ The glossators tell two different stories, both pointing to the nobility and self-sacrifice of Regulus. In one he returns to Rome to negotiate an exchange of prisoners but advises the Senate against the exchange and returns voluntarily to Carthage where he is killed. In the other, he returns to Rome on parole, rejects the embrace of his wife because he considers himself unfit and degraded, and refuses to allow himself to be ransomed, again returning voluntarily to his death in Carthage. Both stories suggest Regulus's own control over his destiny, in a manner quite at odds with the lesson which Boethius draws - 'do you think that any man has power when he cannot prevent others doing to him what he did to them?'

It is hard to guess at the motives of those who initiated such glosses, or those who copied them, but it was perhaps not as mindless and incoherent as Diane Bolton suggests. Sometimes the apparent folly is due to the uncertainties of copyists, often faced with cramped and difficult writing in margins and between the lines, rather than the original glossators. In 1p3.6 *Philosophia* mentions the attacks made on her before the time of Plato:

nonne apud ueteres quoque ante nostri Platonis aetatem magnum saepe certamen cum stultitiae temeritate certauimus.

(Did I not often in ancient times, before the time of my Plato, wage a great war with rash stupidity?)

Several English manuscripts gloss the passing reference to the time of Plato with something incomprehensible about an invasion of Rome and Plato's villa:

to the forlorn state of Nithhad's daughter Beaduhild after Weland's violent revenge on her.

²⁷ See discussions by Gerard O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 221-34; *Cicero: On fate (De Fato) & Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy (Philosophiae Consolationis) IV.5-7, V*, ed. by R. W. Sharples, Classical Texts (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1991), p. 211; and Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by Patrick G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 155-56.

²⁸ *Boethii Philosophiae consolatio*, 2p6.11.

eo tempore quando Romam inuaserunt uillam Platonem tunc decepit et tunc inuasit eos achademiam.

Bolton interprets it as a reference to the much later Roman assault on Athens and remarks: ‘There are more positive faults than mediocrity. Misunderstanding of the text gave rise to totally irrelevant glosses on ... the sack of the Academy by the Romans’, and attributes the gloss to the English reviser(s).²⁹ There is however a version of this gloss in the late ninth-century Tours manuscript (Bibliothèque Municipale, MS. 803), glossed in the early tenth century, which has no English connections, and seems to introduce Cato and an Oesippus to the story, without making any better sense:

eo tempore quando Romani inuaserunt (...) uel tunc decessit Cato et inuasit oesippus achademiam.

Other incomprehensible versions appear in other French manuscripts. But behind all this there is possibly a quite sensible and relevant gloss, though one that does not survive in any manuscript, drawn from Bede’s world-chronicle in the *De Temporum Ratione*.³⁰ Under the year 3588 (364BC) he reports that the Gauls invaded Rome and laid waste to the city for six months, and that at that time Aristotle was studying under Plato:

Galli Senones duce Brenno Romam inuaserunt excepto Capitolio, et incensam sex mensibus uastauerunt. ... Aristotiles auditor est Platonis, xviii aetatis annum gerens. (The Gauls of Senones under their leader Brennus invaded Rome, apart from the Capitol, and burnt it and laid it waste for 6 months. ... Aristotle is a pupil of Plato, continuing for 18 years.)

Then in the next entry, under 3614 (338BC), he goes on to say that the Romans defeated the Gauls and that Plato died and was succeeded as leader of the academy by Speusippus:

Romani Gallos superant ... Plato moritur, post quem academiam Speusippus tenuit. (The Romans defeat the Gauls. Plato dies, after whom Speusippus held the academy.)

The name Speusippus might have ended up as *oesippus*, as in Tours, or *esipus* and *eugesippus* as in other versions of the gloss. So the original glossator was perhaps saying that the age of Plato was the time when the Gauls conquered Rome (an event mentioned prominently for instance in Orosius) and that Plato was succeeded by Speusippus. By putting all the manuscripts together one might be able to construct an original gloss on the time of Plato looking something like this:

eo tempore quando Romam inuaserunt Galli; Plato tunc decessit et tunc inuasit Speosippus achademiam.

²⁹ Bolton, ‘Study of the Consolation’, p. 47.

³⁰ Bede, *De temporum ratione liber, capita LXVI-LXXI, Chronica Maiora*, ed. by Charles W. Jones, *Bedaes Venerabilis opera*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 123B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977).

(At the time when the Gauls invaded Rome; later Plato died and then Speosippus took over the academy.)

One could just see how a corruption of *Galli* to *uillam*, prompted by other glosses mentioning the villa, and bemusement over the unfamiliar name *Speosippus* might have got things started. It is interesting to see how such a gloss got corrupted at an early stage and nevertheless transmitted (both in France and England, over a long period) in the belief that it conveyed some important information and the hope that someone else would make sense of it.

The Consolation was presented to early readers as the story of a Roman scholar and politician who resisted the tyranny of the barbarian king, fell from power and prosperity and was consoled and cajoled by Philosophy with the help of arguments and stories from the classical past. The fiction of the dialogue no doubt required those stories to be allusive - the character Boethius did not need to be told the full stories of Orpheus and Ulysses and Hercules, or when Plato lived. But for readers the allusions needed expanding, and it was not easy to say what had been in Boethius's mind, or Philosophia's. After all, the character Boethius several times remarks on the baffling nature of her arguments and her method - like a labyrinth he says at one point.³¹ One of the things that the glossing history of the Consolation particularly encouraged was the idea that any text had a multiplicity of meanings, and it was often impossible to say which was right. For people in the tenth and eleventh century, reading the glosses on Boethius was a lesson in the fluidity of classical legend.

³¹ *Boethii Philosophiae consolatio*, 3p12.30.