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The Consolation of Philosophy

Heather Springgay

The general situation and theme within Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, and the *Phaedo*, contain striking similarities, but even more striking are the differences that redefine Boethius' work. The *Consolation* presents a work that in its basic text describes the time before Boethius' execution, while the *Phaedo* examines Socrates before he is put to death. In each work similar discussions on death and dying are presented. These aspects of the works, however, are where the similarities end. Instead, by placing Lady Philosophy in Socrates' position, the reader is able to examine the *Phaedo* as a dialogue on the life, death and rebirth of philosophy.

The deathbed philosophies within each of the works greatly parallel each other. Socrates' ideas of life and death presented in the *Phaedo* highlight the advantages of dying and create an image of a heaven and hell which differentiates from the idea of a single afterworld, Hades, that is represented in the mythology of the time period. Socrates begins the dialogue telling Cebes to inform Evenus that if he is a true philosopher, he will accompany him in death. This unexpected and unconventional statement is questioned by Socrates' visitors, and he proceeds to clarify his remark. He explains that "those who really apply themselves...to philosophy are directly and of their own accord are preparing themselves for death and dying" (64a). This means that a true philosopher does not focus on but abhors the body and its needs and instead concentrates on the soul. Thus, by separating the body from the soul one is able to seek and find in death, the ultimate separation, true wisdom (66e). By presenting these ideas, Socrates puts himself in the position of someone who is about to

acquire supreme wisdom. In the *Consolation*, Philosophy explains that those who control great wealth (65) or hold high office (70) never reach true happiness. She also states that happiness cannot be acquired through physical pleasure (90). Philosophy, much like Socrates, explains that anyone who strives for the body and not the soul is feeble and weak (91), and once dead a person's conscience is freed and it will detest earthy proceedings (75). Thus the same ideas of soul worship, leading to a happier life/death, are present in both the *Consolation* and the *Phaedo*.

Both works try and show the existence of life after death. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates continues to prove that the soul, or life, exists before and after death. By taking as fact that things come from their opposites—big comes from small and small comes from big—he says that the same is true for life and death (71d). Once the existence of the soul before and after death is established, the question of its location is presented. The location, according to Socrates, is much like the Christian idea of heaven and hell. He explains that the earth is threefold. People who are alive exist on the middle layer surrounded by semi-brilliance. The top layer is a brilliant world that is constructed of areas of vivid color. This part of the world can only be reached by the true philosopher after death. The third lower world is Hades where souls that have committed great transgression in life are sent after death (112a). In the *Consolation*, it is also shown that God is true happiness, and although one cannot be true happiness he or she can be part of it (102-103). It follows that those who believe in God, for this time period and location, are Christians who also adhere to the idea of life after death.

In the *Consolation*, Boethius presents his case for personal salvation. Philosophy compares his situation to that of Socrates, in that their deaths were brought about because of their “con-

tempt of the pursuits of immoral men" (39). He also insists that his only reason for taking office is his desire to do good (41), and that he was falsely accused of a crime by men who were forced through debts and threats of exile to present incriminating testimony (42). Thus, Boethius is comforted by his knowledge of existence after death and that he will then in the presence of God and therefore become a part of true happiness. Socrates is also content in the knowledge that as a true philosopher, he will reach the top layer of earth and obtain true wisdom.

Each dialogue contains a myth that enhances the information surrounding Boethius' and Socrates' situations. The myth, presented in a poetic format, within the *Consolation* (144), gives accounts of the deeds accomplished by epic heroes. The poem ends with a description of some of Hercules' duties and his acceptance of life with the gods after his death because of his achievements. In association with Boethius the myth places him in the seat of an epic hero and only with approval of a superior being, Lady Philosophy, will he ascend to heaven. In the *Phaedo* (58b) the myth of the pilgrimages to Delos is presented by Phaedo in a conversational format. When Apollo, out of pity, spares the lives of the seven youths and maidens they are in effect reborn, but their rebirth must be approved by Apollo. What differentiates the two myths is that Boethius obtains his approval for heaven near the end of the dialogue and because of his deeds in life, while Socrates is granted entrance to the upper earth at the beginning of the dialogue without any apparent reason. These differences could stem from the cultural background of Boethius and Socrates. Boethius' thought developed from Christian ideals, which require a disciple to work at being good to obtain entrance to heaven. Thus, the poem chosen examines the work done by heroes to be accepted to heaven. Socrates background relates more to the idea of upper class superiority. In

fact, he greatly inflates the idea to include a philosophical superiority. Through examining the other Platonic dialogues Socrates appears to believe himself one of the best philosophers of the time. When he is challenged, for example in the *Protagoras*, he attempts to turn attention back to himself and his theories by throwing a fit. In an attempt to win the discussion he cuts it short before Protagoras has a chance to continue. Thus giving the illusion to himself, and perhaps to his audience, that he has outsmarted his opponent. This superiority can be seen throughout the *Phaedo* in his attitude toward his own death. He believes that he is the true philosopher and will reach the upper layer of earth upon his death. But, in re-examining the poem his entrance is approved by a god, just as the youths and maidens are. With this his philosophical superiority is questioned. In both of the dialogues it appears that their entrance to a heaven is assured, only Socrates' assurance comes at the beginning of the work and Boethius' at the end. Meaning that Boethius had to work and learn the way to obtain true happiness before Lady Philosophy would allow his entrance to heaven while Socrates was just allowed to enter out of pity.

In comparison with the *Symposium* a relationship can be drawn between Diotima's teachings to Socrates and Lady Philosophy's instructions to Boethius. In the *Symposium* Socrates describes how he was taught about the god of love by Diotima. She describes him as a spirit who covets what he doesn't have, beauty and goodness. Later within the same text Socrates is placed in the position of the god of love by Alcibiades. In doing so Socrates then desires that which he does not have, beauty. In relation to the *Consolation* it can be seen that Boethius covets what he does not have, philosophical happiness. To be happy he tries to acquire that which does contain this happiness, Lady Philosophy. In doing so he expands his relationship with Lady

Philosophy from teacher and student into beloved and loved. With this the *Consolation* can be seen as a relationship of love in which Boethius attempts to obtain Philosophy's affection and approval before his death with the hope that she will allow him to enter into heaven and philosophical happiness.

The question of the source of all things is assessed in each of the dialogues, but with different results that again point to Boethius' and Socrates' distinctly different societies for their origin. Boethius' answer to Lady Philosophy's question of the origin of all things is God. He also later states that God is the origin of true happiness, thus showing his affiliation with the Christian church that has encompassed Roman society throughout his lifetime. With this answer Boethius creates a basis for the discussion throughout the rest of the dialogue, but in the end it is a culturally dependent answer. On the other hand, Socrates' answer to the question is that all things stem from their opposites. This answer does not have its origin in the views of his society. Instead it is created from what appears to be a philosophical mind. Due to the culturally dependent answers used within the *Consolation* each of the works take on a slightly different tone in which Boethius' comments have a religious origin. This points to one of the major differences between Boethius' work and Plato's, the ideas and theories within the work are not alike because of the societal influences that each author has experienced. Boethius has been surrounded by Christianity all of his life, while Plato was a student of Socrates at a time when Christianity was nonexistent.

The dialogues contain numerous other differences, including the association of the authors to the main characters. Boethius writes a work containing Lady Philosophy, an allegorical character, and himself holding a discussion about happiness. While Plato describes Socrates and his friends, all people who

were alive at that time, having a conversation about true wisdom and life before and after death, which is narrated by Phaedo. However, within the *Consolation* Lady Philosophy takes on the role of philosopher and directs the focus of the conversation. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is the philosopher and focuses the majority of the conversation. Thus, Lady Philosophy takes the place of Socrates, which occurs throughout the work. In the *Phaedo* Socrates spends his last hours alive explaining that he is not afraid of death because it is a rebirth. Even with his last words, "Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius," Socrates is celebrating his death. It was then common to give a cock to the healer after a sickness has passed. Thus, Socrates tells his friends that he is not dying but recovering (Tredennick, 40). Lady Philosophy attempts to convince Boethius that he should not be unhappy, despite his fate. Philosophy cites his good upbringing, political career, pious wife, his sons' healthy political career, and his father-in-laws' long and prosperous life. The outlook on the cause of Socrates and Boethius happiness differs as well. Lady Philosophy tells Boethius to be happy because of his earthly possessions. Socrates, on the other hand, explains his death as his ultimate happiness because "wisdom [is] attainable only when we are dead" (66e). In the *Consolation*, one does not even hear of Boethius' death and throughout the dialogue Lady Philosophy hints that there is a chance he may not be executed. While in the *Phaedo*, Socrates' death is continually apparent. The first appearance of Socrates within the dialogue is with a woman who begins to cry when she realizes that that day will be the last chance he has to speak with his friends. Soon after the conversation is rudely interrupted by Crito who relays a message to Socrates that he should not talk too much if he wants the poison to work in one dose (63e). The subject of his death is breached again when his comrades realize that they will not have

him there much longer to cast “magic spells” (77e). After carefully examining the differences throughout the dialogue it can be seen that the dialogue is meant to be more than a simply straight forward analysis, but also a role comparison between Lady Philosophy and Socrates.

It appears that Boethius chose to emulate the *Phaedo* to create a twofold dialogue. First, the actual work he presents, and second the work in relation to the *Phaedo*. If the *Consolation* is read with Lady Philosophy in the place of Socrates and Boethius as one of her disciples the relation between the two works takes on an entirely new meaning. The situation during and after Boethius’ death was that of utter destruction under the rule of Theodoric. After his rule ended in 526 A.D., the Roman aristocracy and the tradition of philosophy were destroyed (18). Associating Lady Philosophy with Socrates places her directly in the path of destruction. The first fold of the work examines Boethius’ life, happiness, and death sentence, but the reader never experiences his death. After relating the story to the *Phaedo* one can see that Lady Philosophy controls the dialogue and presents Boethius with comfort in life and death, much like the role Socrates plays with his visitors. Thus, Philosophy is Socrates and Socrates is Philosophy, and with the death of their disciples they will no longer exist. Within this complex web of intertextuality Boethius presents a ray of hope. Again, referring to the *Phaedo*, Socrates proposes that his death is not really a death but, because he is a true philosopher, it is a rebirth. This being true, Lady Philosophy will not actually die, but will eventually be reborn.

In removing Boethius from the focus of the *Consolation* he is then presented in the dialogue as a pupil or disciple of Lady Philosophy. Boethius, then needs to be taught how to remember, as Socrates describes knowledge in the *Phaedo*, the path to true happiness. It is not that Boethius has forgotten, in the literal

sense, but that he had acquired the knowledge before birth and must be reminded of it in life. Although there is no evidence that he has reached true happiness by the end of the dialogue he has received the information needed to achieve it. In the *Phaedo* Socrates also equips his associates with the knowledge of attaining true wisdom, but they don't necessarily reach it prior to Socrates' death.

The *Consolation* and the *Phaedo* have a common link between their major narrative theme and arguments, but the variances that occur stem from cultural differences and a deeper comparison within the text. The arguments that arise from the deathbed situation, including the origin of all things and existence of life after death, string the dialogues together. However, the discrepancies within the text allows the reader to move the characters and create a comparison between Socrates and Lady Philosophy. Thus, Boethius' work then takes on the education of himself by Lady Philosophy, in the matters of philosophical happiness, and her inevitable death and rebirth. With these comparisons the texts create an unending circular examination which allows the reader to continually re-assess Boethius' work to discover diverse new meanings which redefine the work.