

## The Unauthorized Biographies of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius

Nicole Guenther Discenza  
University of South Florida

Alfred's Latin sources have excited much discussion, and rightfully so; knowing these sources helps us understand both Alfred's goals and methods, and what books were available in late ninth-century Wessex. Among these Latin sources, the short *vitae* of Boethius have received little attention, except in the recent dissertations of John Brinegar and David Pratt—and now, in the Boethius Project.<sup>1</sup> Yet the first changes to the text that a reader of the OE Boethius encounters involve those *vitae*: Alfred used Latin lives of Boethius to provide a historical introduction the audience needed to start this difficult dialogue. To see how the Latin *vitae* inform Alfred's Boethius is to see a microcosm of Alfred's whole practice: examination reveals Alfred's breadth of knowledge and careful selection of details, his skill at weaving together disparate sources, and themes very much distinct from Boethius's *De consolatione*.

Rudolfus Peiper's 1871 edition of *De Consolatione* prints six *vitae* that precede the text in various manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> Peiper's edition can be difficult to find, and more recent editions do not print these later accretions with the text, so they are often forgotten.<sup>3</sup> They were not, however, forgotten by Fabio Troncarelli, who reprints the first five,<sup>4</sup> or by Brinegar and Pratt. Brinegar argues for Alfred's use of *vitae* I, V, and VI (or versions

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Brinegar, "Books Most Necessary": The Literary and Cultural Contexts of Alfred's *Boethius* (PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000), and D. Pratt, 'The Political Thought of Alfred the Great' (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> R. Peiper, ed., *Anicii Manlii Severini Boetii Philosophiae consolationis libri quinque* (Leipzig, 1871).

<sup>3</sup> The best edition available now is L. Bieler, ed., *Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii Philosophiae Consolatio*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 94 (Turnholt, 1957), and I have used that for quotations and citations from the *De consolatione* [references are to book, prose or metre, and section number].

<sup>4</sup> Fabio Troncarelli, *Traditioni Perdute. La Consolatio Philosophiae nell' alto medioevo*, Medioevo e umanesimo 42 (Padua, 1981); the *vitae* are on 24–6.

close to them); Pratt argues for the availability and Alfred's probable use of *vitae* I and II, observing that Fabio Troncarelli places the first five *vitae* in the ninth century.<sup>5</sup> As Peiper notes, *vita* VI occurs only in one manuscript, and there only in a thirteenth-century marginal addition.<sup>6</sup>

For full details, I must refer you to Peiper's edition, Troncarelli's work, and of course, the forthcoming work of the Boethius Project. Peiper's edition shows most *vitae* occurring in more than one manuscript, and many manuscripts containing more than one *vita*: for instance, Peiper's MS A contains all of the first five *vitae*; B has the first three; J has *vitae* III and IV; and so on. Peiper's manuscripts are continental, but some diversity can be assumed for England; I hope the efforts of Joe Wittig and Rohini Jayatilaka will help to clarify the English tradition further as the Project progresses.

Obviously, the manuscript tradition is very complicated. We cannot tell exactly what Alfred saw (or did not see); I see possible parallels between Alfred's text and all the *vitae* except III (though I cannot say definitively he did *not* see III!). Rather than go into all the details of the various *vitae*, I would like to concentrate on two *vitae* that have wording closest to Alfred's—and that illustrate some of the most interesting problems. For those *vitae* are Peiper's I and VI: *Vitae* I seems to have been widely available, probably in Alfred's time, and both Brinegar and Pratt see it as a likely source. *Vitae* VI, however, is that more obscure one found only in one manuscript, in a much later hand. These two *vitae*, or something like them, became in Alfred's hands keys to unlocking the

---

<sup>5</sup> Troncarelli, *Traditioni Perdute*, 28–9; Brinegar, 'Books Most Necessary', 100–103, and Pratt, 'Political Thought', 272–4.

<sup>6</sup> Peiper, *Anicii Manlii*, xxxv.

text in a very different way than the real Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius would have us do.

The appendix shows the similarities: I have used italics in *Vita* I and underlining in *Vita* VI to indicate passages that match similarly marked ones in Alfred's biography of Boethius. Several of the historical and biographical details seem to come from one or both *vitae*. The involvement of Goths, a threat to Rome, Theodoric's execution of Pope John, Theodoric's general mistreatment of Romans, secret letters to Constantinople, and the incarceration all seem to have been suggested to Alfred by *vitae*. The wording is close enough that Alfred may have these passages in mind, or ones very similar to them.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the dark shading marks portions that Alfred does not use; these details about genre and the execution of Boethius appear nowhere in Alfred's work. It is possible that Alfred saw truncated versions of one or both of these *vitae*, of course, or some combination of the two that did not include the shaded portions. He may also have been working from memory and only recalling the most important portions of these *vitae*, but the wording seems so close at moments that I think it likely Alfred saw something more or less resembling one or both of these *vitae*, but chose to use those portions that would support themes of his main text and those supplying his readers the background they needed to understand why this famous, learned work starts with a guy lying on the floor crying. Indeed, Alfred's biography of Boethius seems admirably suited to prepare

---

<sup>7</sup> For Alfred's *Boethius* I have used *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford, 1899) [references are to page and line number]. Pratt, 'Political Thought,' 274, notes that a passage in Gregory's *Dialogues* also connects Theodoric with the Pope's death, but the wording is not at all similar; see Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, ed. A. de Vogüé, Sources chrétiennes 251, 260, 265 (Paris, 1978–80), IV.31.3–4.

readers with only a dim acquaintance with late antiquity or Rome very quickly for a text that will plunge them into the abyss with a man very much formed by late-antique Rome.

Note too Alfred's rearrangement of materials. The italicized and underlined portions of the passage—the direct borrowings—are broken up and mixed together with each other and Alfred's own words. Much of this biography shows no relation to the *vitae*. Alfred must have had other sources as well, whether in specific written texts or memories of other histories he had read and heard. Pratt proposes that Alfred confused the Gothic invasion mentioned at the start with Alaric and Radagasius's based on Orosius's *World History*, whether in the Latin or the Old English version.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, how Alfred got from Theodoric to the Gothic invasion at all is an open question. As Malcolm Godden notes in his recent article, Theodoric's people were not the same as Alaric's, and Alaric and Radagasius's individual romps through Italy had nothing to do with each other or with Theodoric's rule.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the connection between Rædgota's invasion and Theodoric's rule was suggested by the odd dating in *vita VI*, which connects Theodoric with a 405 invasion by Odoacer. (It would in fact be very difficult for Odoacer to invade Italy in 405 as he had not yet been born.) The Old English version has the same odd translation of Radagasius as Rædgota, as Janet Bately discusses in her edition, but whether Alfred was reading the Orosius or the Orosius-translator was reading him is unclear.<sup>10</sup> Orosius's Latin version of the passage is longer and mentions

---

<sup>8</sup> Pratt, 'Political Thought,' 272. For the Latin text, see Paulus Orosius, *Pauli Orosii Historiarum aduersum paganos libri VII*, ed. C. Zangemeister, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 5 (Vienna, 1882).

<sup>9</sup> M. R. Godden, 'The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: rewriting the sack of Rome,' *Anglo-Saxon England* 31 (2002), 47–68, at 62.

<sup>10</sup> *The Old English Orosius*, ed. J. Bately, Early English Text Society, ss 6 (London, 1980), xci–xcii. Godden also highlights several other differences between Orosius or the OE Orosius and Alfred's account; see his 'Anglo-Saxons and the Goths,' 59–66.

Scythia (Orosius VII 37.5) as Alfred does but the OE Orosius does not, but neither source defines the invaded area as ‘between the mountains and the island of Sicily,’ as Alfred does.

Other details have no clear source. That Theodoric was an Amuling and an Arian Alfred could have learned from any of a number of saints’ lives of Boethius or other sources—but which one? Theodoric’s betrayal of the Roman people, promising friendship and rights but reneging, could be in another source, or could be Alfred’s dramatization of the brief accounts that the *vitae* provide. Alfred’s sources prove difficult to identify partly because Alfred is so skilled at joining them. If you ignore the italics and underlining in the Old English—and if you are practiced at reading Sedgefield’s edition, you should be quite good at that—I think you will feel no seams or bumps as Alfred moves from one *vita* to another to his own words and back. His story seems fuller and more compelling than *vita* I, which goes into a dry tangent about genre, and certainly beats *vita* III (not given here) which tells you more about Boethius’s name than you ever wanted to know, especially if you don’t read Greek or your copyist couldn’t handle it. Readers unacquainted with the Latin, or unable to read it—the bulk of Alfred’s audience—would finish the biographical introduction prepared to start into the main body of the text with some understanding of the narrator’s situation, probably a given for Boethius’s original audience. Yet Anglo-Saxon readers would not recognize how much change Alfred had made, or even how much learning must have gone into it. The opening feels natural, and it fits with what will follow.

For Alfred does not use this biography simply to entice readers into a less narrative and more difficult text than the opening suggests, although certainly that must

be one of its functions. Alfred replaces Boethius's own biography with this addition. Boethius tells his own story in the Latin text, mostly in I pr. iv. There, the Latin narrator gives a long, pathetic speech that lasts 145 lines of prose in Bieler's edition and then leads into I met. v, a 48-line lament. I pr. v begins, 'Haec ubi continuato dolore delatraui . . .' for which I like V. E. Watts's translation: 'Throughout this long and noisy display of grief . . .'<sup>11</sup> Alfred dispenses with most of the speech and all of the details of the accusations against Boethius; the narrator's defense is severely abridged and largely replaced with general laments about the triumph of the unjust (compare I pr. iv with 9.18–30 and 10.1–27). Biographical details in I pv. v are also gone.

Instead, Alfred confines himself to a few mentions of Boethius's family from II pr. iv, beginning with Symmachus, his father-in-law. He deals at greater length with Boethius's wife, known only as 'Simaches dohtor' (22.12); her virtues take up 22.12–22, and Wisdom touchingly tells the narrator, 'Sio liofað nu þe, þe anum, forðæmðe hio nanwuht elles ne lufað buton þe' ('She lives now for you, you alone, because she loves nothing else but you,' 22.16–17).<sup>12</sup> His sons, appointed joint consuls, display the virtues of older men (22.23–26). And that is Boethius's life in the Old English: not a complicated story of intrigue, as in the Latin, but a portrait of a family man.

Details carefully selected by Alfred show the audience not a man embroiled in plots, but also not a man in religious or contemplative life. Readers of the *Pastoral Care* and the *Dialogues* would get enough of such characters. *This* Boethius emerges first as a man of politics and worldly virtue and second in the context of his family. Boethius is

---

<sup>11</sup> V. E. Watts., transl., *The Consolation of Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, 1999), 16.

<sup>12</sup> All translations (from both the Latin and Old English texts) in this paper are my own unless specified.

very much involved in an active, secular life, and we already know from Alfred's biography of him that that is a life of political service. That thread will reemerge later.

Interestingly, Alfred omits Boethius's protestations of innocence in I pr. iii. 3, and Philosophy's echoing of them in I pr. v. 8–9. In I pr. iv. 20–2 the Latin narrator declares himself rightly accused of wanting the Senate's safety. The *vitae* assert more concretely that Boethius did send letters. Alfred removes Boethius's denial, which might make the narrator look like a liar. Instead, he presents Boethius as a reluctant martyr. *Vita* I describes 'boethius uero eius dolos effugere gestiens' ('Boethius, indeed striving to flee [Theodoric's] evils'); we might want to translate loosely 'longing to avert [Theodoric's] evils' or emphasize that he sought to protect all the senators, but the *vita* in fact seems to describe not the usual martyr who stands calmly against persecution, but a more human figure. Contrast someone like St. Lawrence on the gridiron asking to be turned so that he will be done evenly. The Boethius of the Latin text is not a martyr at all, though he is a man suffering unjustly; but the Boethius, or *Mod*, or *ic* of the Old English text must be a martyr, but not a very willing one. Lest we forget, the text reminds us (and Boethius!): 'Hwæt, we gewislice witon unrim ðara monna þe þa ecan gesælða sohton nalles þurh þæt an þæt hi wilnodon ðæs lichomlican deaðes, ac eac manegra sarlicra wita hi gewilnodon wið þæm ecan life; þæt wæron ealle þa halgan martiras' ('Listen, we know with certainty countless men who sought eternal good not only through this, that they willed bodily death, but also they willed many sorrowful tortures in return for that eternal life; these were the holy martyrs,' 26.17–21). That last clause is Alfred's addition, perhaps based on a Latin gloss (which can be found in two later English glossed manuscripts of the Latin, Trinity College O.3.7, 12v, and Cambridge University Library Kk.3.21, 24r: 'hic sanctos

martires uult intellegi,’ ‘here the holy martyrs should be understood’), and it takes Boethius from the broad tradition of resisters of tyranny to the more narrow context of martyrs. At the same time as Godden notes, ‘the Boethius of Alfred’s version is . . . outdated, as he fruitlessly tries to invoke the eastern empire in order to restore a western empire that, four centuries after Alaric, was very evidently dead.’<sup>13</sup>

When the narrators fail to rise to the occasion of their (impending) martyrdom, both interlocutors have little sympathy. In the early passages, they are unmoved by the character’s suffering: ‘illa uultu placido nihilque meis questibus mota’ (‘with placid face and not moved at all by my complaints,’ I pr. v. 1); then ‘se Wisdom þa 7 seo Gesceadwisnes him bliðum eahum on locodon; 7 he for þæs Modes geomerunge næs nauht gedrefed’ (‘Wisdom and Discernment looked on him with blithe eyes; and he was not at all disturbed by Mod’s groaning,’ 10.29–11.2). A little later, Philosophy/Wisdom has become impatient: ‘Sed delicias tuas ferre non possum’ (‘But I am not able to bear your whims’ II pr. iv. 11), in Old English: ‘Ac ic ne mæg adreohan þine seofunga for þam lytlan þe þu forlure’ (‘But I cannot endure your lamentations for that little which you have lost,’ 23.21–2; see also 14.28–15.3 and I pr. vii. 9/15.20–3). Both Philosophy and Wisdom tell the narrator he will have to learn to accept his fortune; Wisdom reiterates his admonition, increasing its force (II pr. iii. 12 and 20.17–19 and 22.22).

The response of the narrators varies, however.

Tum ego: Speciosa quidem ista sunt, inquam, oblitaque rhetoricae ac musicae melle dulcedinis tum tantum cum audiuntur oblectant, sed miseris malorum altior sensus est; itaque cum haec auribus insonare desierint insitus animum

---

<sup>13</sup> Godden, ‘Anglo-Saxons and the Goths,’ 64.



maeror prae grauat. — Et illa: Ita est, inquit; haec enim nondum morbi tui remedia, sed adhuc contumacis aduersum curationem doloris fomenta quaedam sunt; nam quae in profundum sese penetrent cum tempestiuum fuerit ammouebo. (II pr. iii. 2–4)

Then I said, ‘Indeed those things are beautiful, and smeared with the honey of sweet rhetoric and music that please so much while they are heard, but for the miserable the sense of evils is deeper; and thus when these things cease to sound in my ears, sadness weighs down my soul inside.’ And she said, ‘Thus it is, for these are not yet remedies for your disease, but are certain salves for the contumacious sadness that resists a cure; for I will make things penetrate you more deeply when the time is right.’

The narrator in the Old English is more humble; instead of complaining about the lack of a cure, he admits his own guilt. Wisdom is then more accusing and shifts the context from illness to sin:

Ða cwæð þæt Mod: Ic me ongite æghwonan scyldigne, ac ic eom mid þæs laðes sare swa swiðe ofðrycced þæt ic inc geandwyrðan ne mæg. Þa cwæð se Wisdom eft: Þæt is nu giet þinre unrihtwisnesse þæt ðu eart fulneah forþoht. Ac ic nolde þæt þu þe forþohte, ac ic wolde þæt ðe sceamode swelces gedwolan; forðæm se se ðe hine forþencð se bið ormod, ac se se ðe hine sceamað se bið on hreowsunga. (19.26–20.1)

Then *Mod* said, ‘I understand myself to be guilty in every way, but I am so greatly oppressed with the sorrow of this pain that I cannot answer you.’ Then said Wisdom again, ‘That is still your unrighteousness, that you have very

nearly despaired. But I would not want you to despair, but I wish that you were ashamed of such errors; because he who despairs is proud, but he who is ashamed of himself is in sorrow.’

While neither account is particularly favorable to our narrator, Mod’s acknowledgement of sin paves the way for redemption, casting the character in a more familiar mode: the man who must learn to recognize his pride to advance spiritually, like Benedict with Scholastica in the *Dialogues* (166.23–168.29) or Zosimus in the *Life of Mary of Egypt* (see Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints* II, 2-52).<sup>14</sup>

After the narrator’s first admission of guilt (19.26–20.1), Wisdom gradually warms to him. Where Philosophy merely begins to lecture on the evils of fame (II pr. vii. 2), Wisdom introduces his speech, ‘Eala, Mod, eala . . .’ (‘Alas, Mind, alas,’ 41.8). The narrator accepts both his guilt and his fate:

To þæm þu me hæfst nu aretne 7 ofercumene mid þinre gesceadwisnesse, þæt me nu ðincð ðætte no þæt an þæt ic ðas unwyrd aræfnan mæg ðe me on becumen is; ac þeah me giet mare frecenes on becume, ne cwiðe ic næfre ma þæt hit butan gewyrhtum sie; forðæm ic wat þæt ic maran 7 hefigran wyrðe wære. (50.15–20)

You have now so cheered and overcome me with your discernment, that it now seems to me that not only can I endure this misfortune which has come upon me, but though yet more misfortune come upon me, I would never again say that it is without desert; for I know that I am worthy of more and heavier.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ælfric, *Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, Early English Text Society, os 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881-1900).

Soon after, Wisdom addresses him by name for the first time: ‘Geþenc þu nu be ðe selfum, la, Boethius’ (‘Think now about yourself, Boethius,’ 58.24–5). The Latin has only pronouns here (‘te ipsum,’ ‘you yourself,’ III pr. iii. 5), and in fact, Philosophy never addresses Boethius by name. Our Old English narrator may still seem at times a little petulant:

Ða cwæð ic: Me þincð þæt ðu me dwelle 7 dydre, swa mon cild deð; lædst me hidres 7 ðidres on swa þicne wudu ðæt ic ne mæg ut aredian. Forðæm ðu a ymbe sticce fehst eft on ða ilcan spræce þe þu ær spræce, 7 forlætst eft ða ær ðu hi geendod hæbbe, 7 fehst on uncuðe; þu ic nat nu hwæt þu wilt. (100.4–9)

Then I said, ‘It seems to me that you mislead and deceive me, as a man does a child; you lead me hither and thither in such a thick wood that I may never go out. For after a while you take up again the same speech you spoke before, and leave it again before you finish it, and take on an uncertain matter; I do not know what you want.’

But for the most part, Alfred’s text recasts him a little. Where the Latin introduces a narrator who has forgotten the ways of philosophy and slips into self-pity but, upon recognizing his error, can gradually climb out, the Old English text gives us (as Pratt notes) a sinner.<sup>15</sup> But that sinner, we know from the outset, will become a martyr, dying at the hands of a follower of ‘þam arrianiscan gedwolan’ (‘the Arian error’, 1.7). His name is linked with a pope’s. Both in Old English and Latin, the Boethius-character is a very human one, flawed and doubting. In Old English, however, he is not just a model of

---

<sup>15</sup> Pratt, ‘Political Thought,’ 274.

coming (back) to the proper philosophical approach to life, but a martyr who must rediscover his moral bearings.

The narrator, then, becomes more of a religious model in Alfred's hands than in Boethius's. At the same time, he also provides a model of governance—not just of the self, as Boethius's Latin text advocates, but of others. The Old English biography, with its emphasis on Boethius's service to the Roman senate and people, where the king failed to recognize his duty to serve them, sets the stage. Philosophy repeatedly advises the narrator not to worry about others; his own mind, or soul, should be his only concern. Philosophy treats political power as simply a good of fortune, at best a mere reflection of true power that can lead those who desire it away from God, *the* true power and good. She advocates turning away from it and towards God. Alfred, however, mutes the criticism of worldly power. Wisdom does admonish the narrator, 'Ac þu ðe fortruwudest for þinre rihtwisnesse 7 for þinum godan willan; wendest þæt þe nanwuht unrihtlices on becuman ne meahte, swelce þu wolde þa lean eal þinra godena weorca on þisse weoruld habban' ('But you were overconfident in your righteousness and in your good will; you thought that nothing unjust could ever happen to you, because you wanted to have the reward of all your good works in this world,' 18.21–5). Yet a later exhortation becomes merely a caution against the wrong kind of these things. Philosophy says

Atqui hoc unum est quod praestantes quidem natura mentes sed nondum ad extremam manum uirtutum perfectione perductas allicere possit, gloriae scilicet cupido et optimorum in rem publicam fama meritorum. Quae quam sit exilis et totius uacua ponderis sic considera. (II pr. vii. 2–3)

But there is one thing that is able to lure minds that are outstanding in nature indeed but have not yet come to the farthest point in perfection of virtue, namely, the desire for glory and fame for the best merits in public life.

Consider how feeble and empty of all importance this is.

The Old English limits the condemnation: ‘an yfel is swiðe to anscunianne . . . þæt is þonne wilnung leases gilpes 7 unryhtes anwealdes 7 ungemetlices hlisan godra weorca ofer eall folc’ (‘one evil is greatly to be shunned . . . that is the desire for false glory and wrongful power and immoderate reputation for good works,’ 41.9, 12–14). This passage suggests that a true glory, a right power, and a moderate fame are good things.

Of course, this change comes immediately after the most famous addition to the Boethius, the lengthy passage where the narrator explains the needs and responsibilities of rulers (40.6–41.6). Other additions make similar points. Wisdom never fully answers the narrator’s query, ‘Hwæt is on ðis andweardan life wynsumre 7 betere þonne þæs cyninges folgað 7 his neawest, 7 siððan wela 7 anweald?’ (‘What is more pleasant and better in this present life than the king’s retinue and his presence, and after that wealth and power?’ 65.5–7).<sup>16</sup> Wisdom’s response that rule does not make a man better than he was does not contradict Alfred’s earlier addition: ‘Þonne secge ic eow buton ælcum tweon þæt ge magon þurh hine becuman to anwealde, þeah ge no þæs anwealdes ne

---

<sup>16</sup> Compare *Soliloquies* 63.1–5: ‘Ac ic þe wolde acsian hweðer þu wene þæt mæge habban eall þæt ðet þu nu hæfst butan þines hlafordes freondscype. Þa cwæð ic: ne wene ic þæt ænig man si swa dysig það he þæs wene. Þa cwæð heo: genoh rihte ðu hyt understentst’ (‘But I want to ask you whether you think that you could have all that you now have without your lord’s friendship.’ Then I said, ‘I do not think that any man is so foolish as to think that.’ Then she said, ‘Rightly enough you understand it.’) and 87.18–88.25, where a comparison to the narrator’s full trust in an earthly king reveals how much more he should trust in Christ. At 94.2–6, prison and the king’s favor are compared with the afterlife. Alfred sees no problem figuring the king as an earthly parallel to God; see *King Alfred’s Version of St Augustine’s Soliloquies*, ed. T. A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA, 1969).

wilnigan' ('Then I say to you without a doubt that you can through [wisdom] come to power, although you do not want that power,' 35.20–1).

In Alfred's text the good leader, represented by Boethius's efforts, contrasts with the tyrannical king: Nero, in many tales of abuses of power which Alfred takes relatively unchanged from his source text, and Theodoric in several of Alfred's additions and elaborations. That use of Theodoric is only possible with the biographical introduction that Alfred provides; without it, a reader might simply not understand what is being criticized. Worse, as Pratt notes, Theodoric appears as a Germanic warrior-hero in some Old English poetry;<sup>17</sup> the introduction alerts readers *not* to think of those heroic traditions here.

Alfred's Boethius as a man devoted to the right use of power throughout the text makes perfect sense in light of the introductory biography of him. This narrator is not just a philosopher, but a Christian ruler—the kind of Christian ruler Alfred's whole program aims to produce. This ruler is introspective but does not shirk his public duty. Boethius in Alfred's text is not, of course, a modern, fully fledged 'character,' but he has enough personality and personal history to provide a model for Alfred's readers. Alfred uses Latin sources to construct this model somewhat differently than Boethius's own text does. *Vita* I, or something very close to it, seems very likely to inform Alfred's portrayal. *Vita* VI presents serious problems of transmission, but it also seems close to Alfred's story in places; I think some version of what would become this *vita* most likely circulated in Alfred's time, although its exact shape is now difficult to determine. Alfred weaves these two *vitae* together with other sources—possibly other *vitae*, probably

Orosius's *History* or the Old English version, and others we cannot yet identify. At the same time, he forgoes the pedantry of *vitae* I and III and the melodrama of the execution in *vita* VI. His own elaborations develop a specific portrait showing a very particular Boethius: a man deeply involved in the government of his own time for religious and moral reasons, not self-interest. This biography then informs the text itself—or, from another perspective, the text that Alfred produces required this biography.

So readers meet Boethius as a reluctant martyr and a caring family man very much involved in public life. At the same time, he is a repentant sinner who recognizes his own failings and need to amend. The Old English text envisions no conflict between personal spirituality and public involvement, although such tension is very much present in the *De consolazione*, forcing the rejection of public life. Alfred's exact sources and borrowings may prove difficult to trace because of his strategic reworkings, but what *is* clear is that Alfred uses these little Latin *vitae* to help him reshape the *De consolazione* into the OE Boethius, a text central to the Alfredian corpus. That corpus in turn aims to reshape readers' own lives through Alfred's unauthorized biography of Boethius.

---

<sup>17</sup> Pratt, 'Political Thought,' 272.

## Appendix: The Unauthorized Biographies of Boethius

### *Vitae* from Peiper

I. *Tempore theodorici regis insignis auctor boethius claruit qui uirtute sua consul in urbe fuit. Cum uero theodoricus rex uoluit tyrannidem exercere in urbe ac bonos quosque ex senatu neci dare, boethius uero eius dolos effugere gestiens, quippe qui bonis omnibus necem parabat, uidelicet clam litteris ad grecos missis nitebatur urbem et senatum ex eius impiis manibus eruere et eorum subdere defensionem. Sed postquam a rege reus maiestatis conuictus iussus est retrudi in carcerem. In quo repositus hos libros per satiram edidit imitatus uidelicet marcianum felicem capellam qui prius libros de nuptiis philologiae et mercurii eadem specie poematis conscripserat, sed iste longe nobiliore materia et facundia ei praecellit quippe qui nec tullio in prose nec uirgilio in metro inferior floruit.*

*In the time of King Theodoric, the distinguished author Boethius, who became consul in his city because of his virtue, became famous. When King Theodoric wanted to exercise tyranny in the city, however, and to sentence all the good men of the senate to death, Boethius, indeed acting to flee the evils of he who was preparing the death of all those good men, indeed, sending letters secretly to the Greeks, struggled to free both the city and the senate from those impious hands and to put them under Greek defense. But when he had been convicted as a traitor by the king, he was ordered thrown in prison. Languishing in there, he produced these books as a satire, imitating indeed the blessed Marcianus Capella who earlier wrote books concerning the marriage of Philology and Mercury in this kind of short poem, but this one excels that by far with its nobler material and eloquence; for it distinguishes itself as not inferior to Cicero in prose nor to Virgil in verse.*

VI. Anno dominice incarnationis quadringentesimo quinto odaacer quidam rex barbarus inuasit ytaliam. contra quem seno imperator constantinopolitanus misit theodoricum regem gotorum commendans ei precipue senatum romanum et populum. at ille contra occiso odaacro et inuasa ytalia omnem pene nobilitatem romanam disperdidit. Denique simachum socerum Boecii ferro interfecit. ad quem idem boethius tum alios tum librum de trinitate transcripsit. Nec minus fame necauit iohannem papam. ad quem idem boethius adhuc dyaconum librum contra nestorium et quedam alia edidit. postremo et ipsum boetium insimulatum apud se quod literas imperatori de libertate romana misisset apud papiam carcere clausit. Deinde post scriptos ibidem de consolatione libros eductum quasi ut se de obiectis purgaret circumsedentibus amicis interfecit. Sequenti anno theodoricus rauenne subita defecit morte. Boethius autem honorifice tumulatus est papie in cripta ecclesie. et uocatur sanctus seuerinus. a prouintialibus. quod ei prenomen fuit.

In the 405th year of the Lord's Incarnation, a certain barbarian king, Odoacer, invaded Italy. Zeno, the emperor at Constantinople, sent against him Theodoric, King of the Goths, commending to him especially the Roman senate and people. But instead he killed Odoacer and, invading Italy, destroyed almost the whole Roman aristocracy.



At last he killed Simachus the father-in-law of Boethius with a sword; for him the same Boethius had written first other books, then a book about the Trinity. Moroever he killed pope John through hunger; for him, when he was still a deacon, the same Boethius had written a book against Nestor and some others. At last he imprisoned Boethius himself, who was accused of sending letters to the emperor about Roman liberty, in prison in Pavia. Then, after Boethius had written the books about consolation there, he was brought out as if to purge himself of the accusations and Theoderic killed him, with his friends standing around him. The following year Theoderic died a sudden death at Ravenna. Boethius, however, was buried with honor in the church crypt at Pavia, and he is called Saint Severinus in the provinces, for that was his first name.

*Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii Philosophiae consolationis libri quinque.* Ed. R. Peiper (Leipzig, 1871), xxx–xxxv, xxxiii–xxxv.

### Alfred's Biography of Boethius

ON ðære tide ðe Gotan of Sciððiu mægðe wið Romana rice gewin up ahofon, 7 mid heora cyningum, Rædgota 7 Eallerica wæron hatne, Romane burig abræcon, 7 eall Italia rice þæt is betwux þam muntum 7 Sicilia þam ealonde in anwald gerehton, 7 þa æfter þam foresprecenan cyningum þeodric feng to þam ilcan rice. Se ðeodric wæs Amulinga; he wæs cristen, þeah he on þam arrianiscan gedwolan þurhwunode. He gehet Romanum his freondscipe, swa þæt hi mostan heora ealdrihta wyrðe beon. Ac he þa gehat swiðe yfele gelæste, 7 swiðe wraðe geendode mid manegum mane. þæt wæs toecan oðrum unarimedum yflum þæt he Iohannes þone papan het ofslean. *þa wæs sum consul, þæt we heretoha hatað, Boetius wæs gehaten; se wæs in boccræftum 7 on woruldþeawum se rihtwisesta. Se þa ongeat þa manigfealdan yfel þe se cyning ðeodric wið þam cristenandome 7 wið þam romaniscum witum dyde.* He þa gemunde þara eðnessa 7 þara ealdrihta þe hi under þam caserum hæfdon heora ealdhlafordum. Þa ongan he smeagan 7 leornigan on him selfum hu he þæt rice þam unrihtwisan cyninge aferran mihte, 7 on ryhtgeleaffulra 7 on rihtwisra anwealde gebringan. *Sende þa digellice arendgewritu to þam kasere to Constentinopolim, þær is Creca heahburg 7 heora cynestol,* forþam se kasere wæs heora ealdhlafordcynnes; bædon hine þæt he him to heora cristenandome 7 to heora ealdrihtum gefultumede. *þa þæt ongeat se wælhreowa cyning ðeodric, þa het he hine gebringan on carcerne 7 þærinne belucan.* Þa hit ða gelomp þæt se arwyrða wæs on swa micelre nearanesse becom, þa wæs he swa micle swiðor on his mode gedrefed swa his mod ær swiðor to þam woruldsælþum gewunod wæs; 7 he þa nanre frofre beinnan þam carcerne ne gemunde; ac he gefeoll niwol ofdune on þa flor, 7 hine astrehte swiðe unrot, 7 ormod hine selfne ongan wepan 7 þus singend cwæð:

In that time the Goths, a people of Scythia, raised up enmity against the Roman kingdom, and with their kings, who were called Radagasius and Alaric, they sacked the city of Rome, and they seized all the Italian kingdom that is between the mountains and the island of Sicily into their power, and then after the aforementioned kings, Theoderic succeeded to that kingdom. This Theoderic was an Amuling; he was Christian, but he persisted in the Arian heresy. He promised the Romans his friendship, that they might be

honored with their old rights. But he fulfilled that promise very evilly, and he ended his life grievously with many crimes. To increase his other, uncountable evils, he ordered Pope John to be slain. *There was a certain consul, what we call a chieftain, who was named Boethius; he was in book learning and in the ways of the world the most righteous. Then he understood the manifold evil which King Theodoric did against Christendom and against the Roman senators.* He then recalled the ease and the ancient rights which they had under their old rulers, the caesars. Then he began to consider and advise within himself how he *might remove that unrighteous king from the kingdom,* and bring the power to one of better belief and greater righteousness. He then secretly sent letters to the emperor at Constantinople, *which is the great city of the Greeks and their capital, because the emperor was of the king of their former lord; he asked him that he help him restore their Christianity and their ancient rights. When the fierce King Theodoric learned that, then he ordered him brought to prison and locked in there.* Then, when it befell that the most noble man had come into such extremities, then he was as much more troubled in his mind as his mind had before been more accustomed to worldly goods; and he remembered no comfort within that prison, but he fell down prostrate on the floor, and he stretched himself out very unhappy, and, despairing, he began to weep for himself and thus singing, said:

*King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford, 1899), 7.1–8.5 (but correcting *mia manegum mane* to *mid manegum mane*).

Boethius (Anicius Manlius Severinus, Procop.), Anicius Manlius Severinus, invested by the church for so many centuries with a halo of sanctity, can hardly be excluded from a Dictionary of Christian Biography, though some criticism in modern times has tended to distinguish the Roman senator, the author of the *Consolatio Philosophiae*, from the writer of certain theological treatises which bear his name, and upon the genuineness of which depends his claim to be enrolled among the martyrs of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (480 – 524 or 525 C.E.) was a polymath and a Christian philosopher of the sixth century who was instrumental in transmitting classical Greek logic to medieval Latin scholars. Born into a high-ranking Christian Roman family and highly educated, he served as an official for the kingdom of the Ostrogoths but was later executed by King Theodoric the Great on suspicion of having conspired with the Byzantine Empire. His legacy includes textbooks on geometry, arithmetic