Boethius among the Navajo

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Boethius and Lady Philosophy
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The title “Boethius among the Navajo” may require some explaining. This essay comes from my teaching of “The Healing Journey,” a cross-disciplinary course on suffering and healing. Taking a page from Viktor Frankl,¹ the course centers on the role of meaning in responding to illness and grief and in promoting recovery. Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*² has represented the classical tradition in the course, and the social science readings included, among others, an essay entitled “Navaho Medicine” by Donald Sandner,³ a Jungian analyst. In addition, Sandner’s book, *Navaho Symbols of Healing*,⁴ provides a detailed, careful study of Navajo medicine men and healing ceremonies. Reading these

²Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V. E. Watts (New York: Penguin, 1969); James J. O’Donnell’s Commentary on Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae* (Bryn Mawr, Penn.: Bryn Mawr Commentaries, 1990) reproduces Winthrop Weinberger’s Latin text from CSEL, vol. 67. The *Consolation* will generally be cited between parentheses within the essay’s text by Book and prose (pr.) or metrum (m.) number—e.g., III, m. 9, for Book III, metrum 9.
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works in conjunction has led me to view the *Consolation* in a Navajo context.

Navajo healing ceremonies include elaborate chants, prayers, and sand paintings. Into lives stricken with disease, misfortune, and sorcery, the rites seek to bring a sense of control, order, and harmony with broader social and divine powers. I suggest that these ceremonies also provide a concrete and dramatic approach to the following questions: What is comforting in the *Consolation of Philosophy*? More specifically, how do traditional texts, arguments, and myths "console" Boethius? Literary and historical studies survey the work's sources, structure, and influence, but rarely address these questions directly. And precisely here a Navajo perspective may help. The chants and sand paintings "define and give meaning to the Navaho universe, and they transfer that meaning—and its secret power—to the patient."\(^5\) Similarly, as Boethius recalls patterns of meaning from classical mythology and Neoplatonic metaphysics, he is transformed from dispirited victim to integrated God-seer. In addition, the *Consolation* and Navajo ceremonies both promote similar states of mind. The Navajo rites may or may not cure a patient of disease, but they always aim at the symbolic healing that Boethius calls "consolation." As Sandner remarks, "The true purpose of the chants is to put the patient in a calm and peaceful state, free from evil of all kinds, so that he may accept with equanimity whatever may befall him."\(^6\) Boethius and the Navajo patient both attain points of view that transform their attitudes toward misfortune and illness. They find peace of mind as initially chaotic, isolating experiences of loss and pain become integrated into an ordered whole of traditional meanings.\(^7\)


In this paper I investigate three aspects of the *Consolation*: Lady Philosophy’s appearance and liberation of Boethius from Fortune’s wheel; the cosmological poem (III, m. 9); and the myths of Orpheus, Ulysses, and Hercules as models for Boethius’s progressive healing. In each case, comparison with Navajo ceremonies will highlight the mythic and performative features of the *Consolation*.

**Navajo Healers and Lady Philosophy**

The Navajo tradition recognizes three classes of healers: (1) herbalists who claim no special knowledge of the sacred; (2) diagnosticians or diviners, often women, who display shamanic gifts of trance experience and hand-trembling; and (3) chanters, generally male—also known as “medicine men”—who specialize in rites that involve singing and sand painting. In analyzing the *Consolation*, I focus on the chanters and their practices. Unlike shamans, the chanters derive power not from any capacity for ecstasy, but from knowledge. They are intellectuals and ritual masters who, through long apprenticeship, have learned the chants that bear the Navajo symbolism and mythology. They sing about heroic travels beneath the earth and into the sky, about conflicts and monster slaying, but make no claim to experience such voyages or conflicts themselves. Rather, they use traditional symbols, narratives, and rites to manipulate sacred powers on behalf of their patients.

We are not likely to confuse Lady Philosophy with a Navajo chanter. Not only is there a difference in gender, but she looks more like a mythic figure from the chants themselves. As the *Consolation* opens, Boethius laments his ruin at Fortune’s hands, and Lady Philosophy appears with burning eyes and apparently shamanic powers. She combines great age and youthful vigor, and her height varies between

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8 On these categories, see Sandner, *Navaho Symbols*, 26–33, 72; and Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 99–103. While most chanters are male, Reichard comments that there have been female chanters, although she never knew one (xlv–xlv). Reichard herself learned the Shooting Chant and encountered no objections on the grounds of her sex.
“average human size” and a sky-piercing elevation that lifts her above human sight (I, pr. 1). This latter trait suggests a shamanic element closer to Navajo diviners than to the chanters. Further, her work as physician combines the functions of diagnosis and healing that the Navajo separate.

Yet Lady Philosophy and the chanters still share common features. Both make house calls, and their therapies include extensive talk and song. Specifically, the chanters’ mastery of traditional knowledge suggests a parallel to Philosophy’s use of poetic and mythological traditions, as well as speculative ones, to heal Boethius. Since both sing their patients to health, I shall concentrate on the Consolation’s poetry.

Philosophy’s first poem contrasts Boethius the astronomer “who once was free / To climb the sky” with his present state as prisoner:

His neck bends low in shackles thrust,
And he is forced beneath the weight
To contemplate - the lowly dust.

(I, m. 2)

This contrast becomes basic to the Consolation’s progress, as Philosophy redirects the prisoner’s gaze from earth to the heavens. Boethius’s grief indicates how deeply he had been attached to worldly things, such as his positions in the Roman aristocracy and in Theodoric’s court. Philosophy notes how this attachment has clouded his vision and led him to forget his identity or true nature, the end or purpose of things, and how the world is governed (I, pr. 6). With this diagnosis completed, the Consolation becomes a process of healing recollection in two stages: first, Boethius’s purifying detachment from Fortune and her goods; and, second, a renewed vision of his place in a divinely ordered universe.

The first stage resembles the purification rites that begin Navajo healing ceremonies. Evil forces must be expelled before the good can be assimilated. Like the medicine man’s evil-chasing prayers and rites, Lady Philosophy’s early songs and arguments free Boethius from
sacred: four mountains mark the corners of the Navajo world and another its center. Other paintings map the heavens. Blessing Way portrays Father Sky, complete with constellations and central figures of the moon and sun. Similarly, the Hail Chant includes a portrait of the night sky, along whose northern and southern borders appear “the masked heads of the Cyclone and Storm People, who make the heavens move.”

A completed painting “becomes a holy altar upon which ‘the gods come and go.’” For Sandner, following Eliade and Jung, these paintings are images of the primordial and ever-present beginnings. With the chants that narrate the deeds of the gods and heroes, the paintings form a complex ritual in which the patient “is carried ‘back’ to the origin of the World and is present at the cosmogony.” This movement to the origins heals and restores meaning.

In the rituals, the patient enters the hogan and sits facing east on the painting. The medicine man resumes his chant and prayers, and with moistened hands he touches the sand figures and presses the sand onto the patient’s body. He touches the figure’s feet and then the patient’s feet and continues similarly for “the knees, hands, shoulders, breast, back and head of the figure and the patient, praying for the restoration of each member.” Two related events occur here: sitting on the painting reorients the patient to the Navajo world, and the medicine man pressing the sand figures to the patient ritually identifies the patient with the sand figures’ sacred powers.

The Consolation contains similar elements. The cosmological poem (III, m. 9) acts like a sand painting that orients Boethius toward the heavens and his origins, and three mythological poems

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13 Sandner, Navaho Symbols, 214.
14 Sandner, Navaho Symbols, 71.
provide exemplary narratives for his developing identification with the highest, divine good.

Lady Philosophy's cosmological poem marks the *Consolation's* exact center: her critique of Fortune's false goods ends, and she begins to direct Boethius's attention toward the one, divine good that is the source and goal of all things. Like the sand paintings—especially those of the night sky—the poem offers the prisoner a vision of world order that consoles and heals. With Philosophy's help, Boethius struggles to place himself within this world order and thereby to see his situation from a renewed, coherent perspective.¹⁷ From this point on, he seeks to become God "by participation" (III, pr. 10).

Let us look at this poem more closely.¹⁸ Drawing on Plato's *Timaeus* and its Neoplatonic commentators, Lady Philosophy prays to the *sator*, the sower or father, of heaven and earth, who "rules by everlasting reason." Compelled by no outside causes, but only by the form of "highest good" within, the creator brings forth all things. This procession occurs in stages. First, the divine mind (*mens*) contains within itself a world of exemplary beauty, and by shaping "unstable matter" in its likeness confers lawful order on the whole, so that the competing elements of hot and cold, wet and dry, remain in harmony. Spreading through the limbs of this organized whole, the worldsoul (*anima*) then takes on two circular motions: one that returns to itself and encircles the divine mind and another that "turns in pattern similar the firmament." The circling heavens thus reflect the soul's own motion. In a final creative procession, "souls and lesser lives" emerge, "Which from above in chariots swift Thou dost disperse / Through sky and earth." Human souls thus find themselves scattered through the heavens down to earth, where they are embodied and occasionally—like Boethius—imprisoned. Having sketched the


origins and patterns of the world order, the poem immediately states these souls’ goal: “by Thy law benign they turn / And back to Thee they come through fire that brings them home.” The process here reverses, as our minds begin an odyssey homeward toward contemplation of the divine. Lady Philosophy therefore urgently asks the following:

Grant, Father, that our minds Thy august seat may scan,
Grant us the sight of true good’s source, and grant us light
That we may fix on Thee our mind’s unblinded eye.
Disperse the clouds of earthly matter’s cloying weight;
Shine out in all Thy glory; for Thou art rest and peace
To those who worship Thee; to see Thee is our end
Who art our source and maker, lord and path and goal.

(III, m. 9, lines 22–28)

THE CONSOLATIONS OF MYTHOLOGY

While the cosmological poem maps the cosmic order and directs Boethius’s attention toward the divine, it remains very much a philosopher’s prayer. It lacks the personal, narrative features of Navajo sand paintings and chants, where vivid tales of the Holy People, such as Changing Woman, Monster Slayer, and Rain Boy, call Navajo patients to identify with specific sacred powers. Boethius’s healing also requires similar mythic role models if he is to participate fully in his divine “source and maker.” As Seth Lerer has noted, Philosophy’s poems about three classical heroes—Orpheus, Ulysses, and Hercules—reflect Boethius’s own situation and moral growth.

19 Reichard, Navaho Religion, 112.

terms, they indicate Boethius’s “identification” with mythic heroes and thereby carry his healing forward.

The first narrative poem offers the questionable role model of Orpheus. Like Boethius at the work’s opening, the grief-stricken Orpheus sings “tearful melodies,” lamenting his wife’s death. These songs subdue the animals, “But his passions unpressed / Burned more fiercely in his breast” (III, m. 12). “Complaining of the gods above,” he travels down to hell, where his songs again conquer everyone but himself. The lord of the underworld allows Eurydice to return with Orpheus, on one condition:

“But let him, too, this law obey,
Look not on her by the way
Until from night she reaches day.”
But who to love can give a law?
Love unto itself is law.
Alas, close to the bounds of night
Orpheus backwards turned his sight
And, looking, lost and killed her there.

(III, m. 12, lines 44–51)

The moral of Orpheus’s story is to cut passionate attachments and not look back to Fortune’s goods. To emphasize her point, Lady Philosophy frames the story between praise for abandoning “earthly chains” and a summons to the “upward way” of heavenly contemplation. She thus directs Boethius’s gaze toward the heavens and reminds him of where he has been. Looking back to his earlier state, he recognizes how his own grief had blinded him to the divine order and provoked his complaints against Fortune. Yet Winthrop Wetherbee has noted an ambivalence in this poem which “gives eloquent expression to the very impulse it is intended to curb, the attachment to earthly things.” 21 Indeed, who can give love a law? The poem thus creates an

undertow that threatens Boethius’s progress up to this point; it risks his continuing to identify with Orpheus, rather than his learning Philosophy’s lesson and moving on.

Ulysses, the second hero, does move on. In Book IV Lady Philosophy contrasts the virtuous who become gods and the wicked who become beasts (IV, pr. 3). In this scheme, unstable human nature hovers between the divine and the animal. Philosophy illustrates the lower boundary with a poem about Ulysses. Her tale would be equally at home in Navajo witchcraft lore or in Kafka. Adrift at sea, Ulysses and his men are blown ashore on the island of Circe, “daughter of the sun” (IV, m. 3). At once herbalist and sorceress, she gives them “Cups she has touched with a spell.” The island soon becomes a zoo, as Ulysses’ men drink and change into beasts: a boar, African lion, wolf, and Indian tiger. Bewitched, they are also bothered and much bewildered because their transformation is incomplete: they can neither weep nor speak, while “Only the mind remains / To mourn their monstrous plight.” But Ulysses, long considered a figure of virtue and the soul exiled in matter, retains his integrity. At this point, the poem abruptly cuts off the Homeric narrative and leaves Ulysses and his still bestial crew in Circe’s domain. Seth Lerer describes this as “a profoundly unsettling poem precisely because it offers no fixed center and no firm ending.”

Yet this irresolution marks the tale as a parable of the human soul’s instability and directionless wandering in a perilous world. Here classical myth would assume a postmodern face were it not for Lady Philosophy’s concluding commentary. She notes that, like Dame Fortune’s, Circe’s power is finally ineffective since it can neither penetrate nor transform the mind. Philosophy then cautions against the stronger, more insidious poisons of delusion and wickedness, which

Dethrone a man’s true self:
They do not harm the body,
But cruelly wound the mind.

(IV, m. 3, lines 37–39)

22Lerer, Boethius and Dialogue, 190.
Hercules, the third hero, does more than retain his integrity amid winds and charms. He triumphs, and alone among the classical heroes attains divine, immortal life. He thus embodies the *Consolation*’s highest ambition: to become gods by participation. Philosophy catalogs Hercules’ labors, which parallel Boethius’s own “bitter but spirited struggle against fortune of every kind.” Lerer highlights the Boethian implications of two Herculean triumphs. First, the chaining of Cerebrus, the guard dog of hell, signals Boethius’s own liberation. For the prisoner, who had been chained both literally and to Fortune’s wheel, now identifies with the hero who places monsters in chains. Second, “when Hercules can bear up the world with unbended neck, he signifies the dramatic change in the prisoner from a man whose heavy chains about his neck had forced him to look only at the dull earth.” Moreover, as Philosophy tells it, precisely this labor earned Hercules “a place in heaven as his reward” (IV, m. 7, line 31). The poem thus carries a double message: by both bearing the burdens of the world and looking to the heavens, Hercules becomes divine. Philosophy then challenges Boethius,

Go now, ye strong, where the exalted way
Of great example leads. Why hang you back?
Why turn away? Once earth has been surpassed
It gives the stars.

(IV, m. 7, lines 32–35)

23 On Hercules’ divinization, see Frederick M. Schroeder, “The Self in Ancient Religious Experience,” in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 343, 354; Pindar describes Hercules as both hero and god; and to Plotinus, *Odyssey* 11.601–04 suggest that “the lower soul is Heracles the historical figure, and the higher, rational soul is Heracles himself,” who “has been translated to the Plotinian Nous.”  
24 See *Consolation* III, pr. 10; and IV, pr. 3.  
25 *Consolation* IV, pr. 7. Boethius introduces Hercules with two other exempla: Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter and Ulysses’ blinding of the Cyclops. O’Daly (*Poetry of Boethius*, 231) views all three as exemplars of “resourceful confrontation with adverse fortune”; and some medieval commentators agree (Drake, *Mythography*, 355–56).  
26 Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 195; see *Consolation* I, m. 2.
The Hercules poem reaffirms the call to contemplation of the heavens that concluded the Orpheus poem, but with the exemplary force of Hercules’ triumph. Lerer also notes that the poem “completes the cycle of mythological metra, as the prisoner passes from Hell through an earthly beastliness, to Heaven.” These poems trace a mythic itinerary that shapes Boethius’s own progress toward consolation and health. Comparison with Navajo ceremonies suggests how important these figures and their narratives are in guiding Boethius to identity with the highest, divine good. For they provide him with exemplars in an imitative, experiential sense as well as a literary one. Where the cosmological poem orients him toward his divine goal, the mythological poems provoke a progressive identification with that goal. With Hercules, he too shall ascend the heavens and become divine.

Conclusion

Boethius’s *Consolation* mixes genres to produce a subtle and powerful reversal of perspective, as we follow the prisoner’s journey from Fortune’s self-pitying victim to his Herculean participation in the divine. By placing the *Consolation* in a Navajo context, I have highlighted only the poetic and mythic features of the text and have omitted its rich ethical and dialectical arguments. Nevertheless, this selective focus may sharpen our appreciation for the cultural dynamics of consolation and healing. For in both cases it is memory

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27 Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 190; and see 185.

28 Anna Crabbe says, “In effect the ‘cure’ is over by the start of the book [V] and Philosophy views the investigation of providence and free will as something of a sidetrack” (“Literary Design in *De Consolatione Philosophiae*,” in *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, ed. Margaret Gibson [Oxford: Blackwell, 1981], 274). I would suggest that while Hercules is the last mythic exemplar, Book V’s questions cause Boethius to “hang back” (IV, m. 7, line 33). He can share Hercules’ vision only after Philosophy marks out a series of perspectives leading into the divine intellect and shifting from time to eternity (V, pr. 5–6; Duclow, “Perspective and Therapy,” 337–39).
of tradition that heals. Navajo rites are acts of social recollection. By reminding patients of traditional patterns of meaning, Navajo medicine men orient them and lead them to identify with mythic figures. Similarly, Lady Philosophy first reminds Boethius of his place in a world order through the cosmological poem, then tracks his entry into that order through the mythological poems.

Here a basic difference between Navajo healing and the Consolation also becomes suggestive. Whereas Navajo medicine men and patients play distinct roles in a social ceremony, the Consolation presents an interior dialogue between the suffering prisoner Boethius and his physician Lady Philosophy, both of whom are symbolic facets of the author Boethius. A healing integration occurs when the roles of patient and physician converge, as Boethius's prisoner comes to share Philosophy's point of view. The Consolation thus becomes an introspective, do-it-yourself ritual, where Boethius reappropriates the traditional images and arguments embodied in Lady Philosophy.

One final note: a colleague has suggested that Boethius would not be happy among the Navajo. This Roman aristocrat would indeed cut a strange figure on the reservation. Yet there remains an intriguing historical parallel between Boethius and the Navajo medicine man. Both are acutely aware of their precarious position under alien, occupying powers, and both see themselves as among the last communicators of a fading tradition. Boethius's Consolation distills and reworks classical philosophy and poetry, giving them new life to endure and to shape the medieval world. While performing chants and sand paintings for the benefit of their own people, Navajo healers have also shared their knowledge with white anthropologists, doctors, and Jungian analysts. Might they also teach us to read and experience our texts and traditions anew?

29Crabbe ("Literary Design," 258) highlights memory's role in the Consolation in comparison with Augustine's Confessions. Sandner (Navaho Symbols, 17 and 24-25) notes the "culture-bound" and social character of Navajo symbolic healing.

30Duclow, "Perspective and Therapy," 141.
References


