

# AFTER STOICISM



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*Last Words of the Last Roman Philosopher*

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To Torrey



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# Preface

## THE LAST ROMAN PHILOSOPHER

This book tells the story of a man whose long study of philosophy had given him respectable answers to all of life's hard questions. Then life happened. He was a high-ranking Roman senator and cultured man of letters, wealthy and well-connected, happily married and a father to children he admired. He was as privileged as they come. Then he was accused of treason, convicted without fair trial by the Gothic king who had been his friend, and sentenced to death. Awaiting his execution in prison, he withered in despair.

The man's name is Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (480–524 AD)—or simply Boethius, as he is usually called. He is the greatest Roman philosopher of the sixth century AD. That might not sound like a great accomplishment if your mental timeline includes the sixth century in the so-called “Dark Ages.” But he really was an excellent philosopher, and in his day probably knew more of the history of philosophy than anyone else in Western Europe. As, not for the last time, the lamps were going out all over Europe, the Last Roman Philosopher did his part to make sure that history was not lost.

Somehow, though deep in depression, Boethius found it within himself to survey the whole course of his life (even the darkest parts), come to see it as good, and die in hope. But this was no psychological miracle. His mind was full of the wisdom of the past, stocked over decades of study. In the barren time, he looked within and found a feast of words to give him hope. We

need to do our part, for ourselves and for future generations, to make sure his story is not lost, and to make his hope our own.

The wisdom that Boethius has to share is in large part the wisdom of the ancient philosophical movement known as Stoicism: through the practice of the virtues, we can achieve a tranquility of mind that is imperturbable despite the ups and downs of fortune. It holds out the hope of a life free of suffering. But Boethius has more to offer. He goes beyond Stoicism by affirming all that is wise in that venerable tradition but aiming higher, showing how true happiness and not just the absence of suffering can be the object of reasonable hope.

#### LAST WORDS

A book called *The Consolation of Philosophy* comprises the last words of Boethius. He wrote this book in prison, awaiting execution. Though little read today outside of the ivory tower, it exerted enormous influence on centuries of Western thought and culture. A literary and philosophical masterpiece in its own right, it is also at least equally important as a conduit, from antiquity through the Middle Ages, of a whole way of looking at the world—a worldview—different in so many ways from our own. As a scholar, I have one foot in ours and another in his. My hope for this book, then, is to make that worldview intelligible and attractive, and to invite readers to struggle toward the hope it has fostered in so many people in the millennium and a half since *Consolation* was written.

#### A NOTE ON *CONSOLATION*

*The Consolation of Philosophy* is *prosimetric*—that is, composed of alternating prose and meter (poetry). *Consolation* is divided into five books, and each book is divided into several sections.

Typically, for each prose section there is a poetry section—only the end of book 1 and the end of book 5 break this rule. When I'm referencing a prose section, I add a "p" next to the section number (e.g., 1.1p), and if a poetry section then an "m" (e.g., 1.1m).

My own book contains many references to *Consolation*. Reference without quotation is indicated by "C" for *Consolation*, followed by the section number (e.g., C 1.1m). For quotations, I have mostly used the translation by Scott Goins and Barbara H. Wyman. Page numbers following a section number refer to their translation (e.g., C 1.1, 2). Quotation from a different translator is indicated by the translator's last name followed by page numbers of his or her translation (e.g., C 1.1, Watts, 3).



# 1

## The Whole Garment

### STRANGER THINGS

I went to a public high school in Southern California, and after graduating with pretty good grades, I still had never so much as heard of Boethius, let alone read *Consolation*. The only book from the so-called “Dark Ages” that we were ever assigned was *Beowulf*, which is not bad and bears some traces of influence by *Consolation*. But my classmates and I were assigned another book about a man in prison awaiting his execution. It was by a Frenchman, Albert Camus, and it was published in the amazingly enlightened twentieth century, in the middle of World War II.

This book, called *The Stranger*, tells the story of a man named Meursault, whose mom has just died and whose amoral apathy gets him involved in an acquaintance’s squalid domestic dispute. His involvement ends when he shoots a man on the beach in broad daylight. His first shot is lethal. But then he shoots four more bullets into the man’s body, just because. After his conviction for murder, he is sentenced to death. To the priest who comes to visit him, he exclaims that the fact that each of us is going to die means that our lives are meaningless. A man’s life matters no more than a dog’s. There is no responsibility, there is no judgment. Nothing matters. Meursault says all this in a rage, hands at the priest’s neck. Prison guards rescue the priest, who departs in sorrow, leaving the prisoner alone.

Some find the ending of *The Stranger* grimly comforting, a sort of mysticism for naturalists. “I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe,” and finding it so much like himself (that is, benignly indifferent), he feels that he is happy and has led a happy life. He concludes the novel with a declaration of his one ultimate hope, that “on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.”<sup>1</sup> We will see by the end of this book the grounds of Boethius’s hope for rather more than howls of execration.

If we consider the history of philosophy from the middle of the twentieth century to the present day, Camus (1913–1960) and his sometime-friend Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) have good claim to be among the philosophers most influential on the broader culture. When they are celebrated, it is for their efforts to imagine the conditions for living a subjectively fulfilling life in a world that is objectively meaningless. They believed the most important of these conditions was authenticity, and authenticity was, in their eyes, the condition that civilization itself had been built up to suppress. Anything that the subjective individual could ever feel as external imposition on how to conduct one’s life is, for that very reason, an enemy of authenticity and must be opposed. Everything from basic manners and etiquette to moral obligations and religious authority has to go.

While we enjoyed generational connections to the world they hated, their influence was limited and they could be appreciated as a sort of corrective voice of contradiction, like an old court jester. But they did their work too well. The grandparents of the millennials are dying out. We are all existentialists now, and we can hardly bear it. Most of us would rather not forge our own existence but grow into the full measure of who and what we are under the tutelage of the inherited wisdom of countless generations

1. Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Gilbert, 154.

of humans trying to human well, mediated to us through these civilizing institutions.

But we don't realize just how much has been taken from us. So our longing for the stability of cultural inheritance is currently manifesting as a mania for remakes: from *Cinderella* to *Ninja Turtles*, it seems that every story you or your parents knew as kids is making a comeback. The hugely popular Marvel and DC films draw on the ancient repository of comic book characters going all the way back to the 1930s but whose heyday was the 1960s. In early 2023, Warner Bros. announced its plan to make new *Lord of the Rings* films—and Peter Jackson's famous films, themselves adaptations of Tolkien's great story from the 1950s, are barely twenty years old. Our taste for nostalgia may not be new, but the newness of what we can collectively feel nostalgic about is peculiar.

But not everyone has forgotten the deep past. As we grope ahead into our post-postmodern future, many are looking back centuries, not decades, for guidance. The scholarly project of remembering the great sages of the past is, thankfully, beginning to find major expression outside the ivory tower. There is a widespread yearning to reconnect with our past and invite it to inform how we live our lives today. "Ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls."<sup>2</sup>

#### TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

King Alfred the Great (849–899) is among the great figures of history who changed his world for the better by looking to the old paths. The welfare of the Anglo-Saxons needed more than just hard-won peace with the Vikings. Knowing the importance of education and religion for civic flourishing, Alfred undertook a revival of both. He recruited eminent scholars to come to his

2. Jeremiah 6:16 (King James Version).

court and establish a culture of learning in his lands.<sup>3</sup> Alfred himself learned to read and write, and even learned Latin. His translation of *Consolation* is the first in (Old) English, and the first in a vernacular language. Probably Alfred had some assistance in preparing his translation. But it's less important to know his precise degree of Latin prowess than to know that as this good king was trying to refound civilization on the isle of Britain, *Consolation* was one of about half a dozen books he and his advisors prioritized in their translation project.<sup>4</sup>

Doubtless part of the appeal of *Consolation* to the king of the Anglo-Saxons lay in its promise that while there are many things we cannot control, we do have control over our own actions and our own characters. If a good life is measured not primarily by one's fortunes (which we cannot control) but by one's character (which we can), then, difficult as life may be in ninth-century Wessex or twenty-first-century America, we can still forge good lives: noble, purposeful, fulfilling. This is one of the most important themes of *Consolation*, and it is the part of *Consolation* that has the most affinity with Stoicism.

In our own time, as many of us are following in the footsteps of Alfred by looking to the past as a source of wisdom for living well, Stoicism has become, by far, the most popular ancient school of thought. The contemporary public philosopher Ryan Holiday's Stoic trilogy—*The Obstacle Is the Way*, *Ego Is the Enemy*, and *Stillness Is the Key*—has sold several million copies. Mark Manson's pair of crassly titled books, which we can shorten to *The Subtle Art* and *Everything*, have sold even more copies. Manson's central concept, "not giving a [dang]," is basically a modern translation of the Stoic concept of *apatheia*, which is a kind of cultivated detachment that helps us remain unperturbed through life's roller coaster. And there are dozens of similar books and websites,

3. Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Boethius*, xiv.

4. Phillips, "The English Tradition of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*," 222–24.



higher-brow, lower-brow, for kids, for parents, for intellectuals, for bros, all explaining and recommending a Stoic way of life.

But I suspect that Stoicism appeals to us for reasons different from Alfred's and the Anglo-Saxons'. We live in comparative luxury and peace. It is easy to become complacent and self-indulgent in times like ours. It is easy to become soft and to find discomfort intolerable. It is also easy to become spoiled, blaming whatever we think are our problems on everything but ourselves.

Obviously, moral obligation and our many dependencies on each other make us partially responsible for each other. There is a lot of wisdom, for example, in being able to take a look at anyone convicted of a crime, even a capital crime, and see not only the individual criminal but the community that let that person down, see that in some sense we together have produced the criminal. But I suggest that this is no longer an urgent lesson for society to learn. It is now a well-entrenched component of our collective wisdom.

Again, obviously our bodies, including our brains, sometimes pose significant obstacles toward maintaining that sense of life as good and meaningful. Deeper understanding of the physiological basis of forms of mental suffering like depression and anxiety has been helpful for many people, myself included. But here too, it is no longer urgent for us to be told over and over that "mental illness is like any other medical illness."<sup>5</sup> It may even be harmful.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps more important to hear that we are not our brains, and that except in extreme and rare cases, having a mental illness does not obliterate our ability to make choices and take action.<sup>7</sup>

The lesson we need to relearn is how much really is in our control—what *truly belongs to us*, in the idiom of the Stoics—and what we are therefore personally responsible for. And that is

5. Malla et al., "Mental Illness Is Like Any Other Medical Illness."

6. Saxbe, "This Is Not the Way to Help Depressed Teenagers."

7. Schwartz and Gladding, *You Are Not Your Brain*, 21.

where the Stoics are so helpful. If human happiness depends on anything *outside* us, then we are bound to be miserable. This is because everything outside us is something we either *will* lose or something we *can* lose. (In this sense, even good health, including good mental health, is something “outside” us.) So even if we get exceptionally lucky and ride a wave of good fortune our whole lives, still our happiness will be marred by the knowledge that we *might* lose our good fortune, and that we *will* die, and by the fear following on that knowledge. So real happiness, if it is possible, must not depend on these losable goods of fortune.

I think most of us understand this, even if we find it challenging to live it out. A more difficult lesson for people like us is how to deal with misfortune. If good fortune is not what makes us truly happy, shouldn't it follow that bad fortune is not what makes us truly unhappy? Yet we struggle to draw the inference. Our unhappiness, we think, is not the sort of thing we have control over. Instead, our unhappiness is due to other people or classes of people. Or it is due to our mental or physical health problems. Or our lack of resources. Or, or, or.

But notice the fallacy here. We already agree that good fortune doesn't guarantee happiness. But if you didn't have any of the misfortunes listed above, you'd have very good fortune indeed—and that wouldn't be enough to make you happy! It follows that whatever is really responsible for your unhappiness is not your bad fortune but something else.

The Stoics identified one of the secret ingredients of the happy (or unhappy) life. It's you.

#### THE STOIC MOMENT

Stoicism began at the end of the fourth century BC, when its founder, Zeno of Citium (334–262 BC), started teaching his philosophy in the Stoa Poikile, a grand sort of covered patio in

the Agora, or town center, of ancient Athens. Zeno's teaching career began not long after the close of a triple-generation of philosophical greatness extending from Aristotle (384–322 BC) to his teacher Plato (428–347 BC) to his teacher Socrates (469–399 BC). So towering were this trio that, a couple hundred years later, the shrewd Cicero (106–43 BC) could with some justification complain that everything truly insightful about Stoicism could already be found in Aristotle and Plato<sup>8</sup>—an antique equivalent of A.N. Whitehead's (1861–1947) famous twentieth-century quip that the whole history of Western philosophy is “footnotes to Plato.”<sup>9</sup>

The charge has some justice when it comes to ethics—our main focus here—but really shortchanges the Stoics, especially their most brilliant exponent, Chrysippus (279–206 BC), with respect to the two other fields of inquiry the Stoics really cared about: logic (or dialectic) and physics (or natural philosophy). Recent scholarship makes a powerful case that Gottlob Frege's (1848–1925) groundbreaking work in logic in the nineteenth century was, after all, dependent on Stoic antecedents<sup>10</sup>—and Frege is widely regarded as having brought an end to two thousand years of Aristotelian hegemony in logic.

In physics, the Stoic doctrines of strict physical determinism and pantheism owe more to Heraclitus (540–480 BC) than Plato or Aristotle.<sup>11</sup> And long before Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) popularized eternal recurrence as a therapeutic device, the Stoics boldly proclaimed a literal eternal recurrence: never-ending time punctuated by conflagrations in which everything burns, the world is reconstituted, and history repeats itself, over and over again.<sup>12</sup>

8. Cicero, *De finibus* 5.1.

9. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 39.

10. Bobzien, “Frege Plagiarized the Stoics.”

11. Long, *From Epicurus to Epictetus*, 266.

12. Sandbach, *The Stoics*, 78–79.

But it is for their contributions to ethical theory and practice that the Stoics enjoy such high esteem today. They have little to say about social or political thought, but they have a great deal to say about how to conduct our lives individually. In short, theirs is an ethic of personal responsibility. That their ethical vision does not ramify out to political philosophy is most definitely a limitation, but it is not necessarily a fault. There is much to learn from the Stoics if we focus on what they focused on rather than what they did not.

Stoic ethics, as with all ethical thought from classical antiquity, starts with the question, *how do I live a truly flourishing life?*<sup>13</sup> Its focus then is primarily on well-being or happiness, not duty or law.

Stoics teach that without personal virtue—good moral character—no one can be truly happy. Without *temperance*, your natural desires for food and drink and sex will overwhelm your life. Without *justice*, you will defraud other people and live in fear that they will try to do unto you as you do unto them. Without *prudence*, you will not be able to think well either about how to achieve your goals or even what to aim for. And without *fortitude*, you will not be able to persevere through those inevitable difficult times. Thus, even if you happen to enjoy excellent health and wealth and all the external goods for which most folk pine, without virtue you will be incapable of enjoying these in a way that is actually good for you. Moreover, without virtue, you will live in a state of fear and anxiety, lest your goods be taken from you. Finally, without virtue, if and when these goods are taken from you—and you can be sure they will be—you will be miserable for the loss of them. Virtue therefore gives you the capacity to enjoy external goods without being too attached to them; Stoics call this state *apatheia* or the correct emotional detachment from the kinds of goods that you can lose.

13. Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 27.

Stoic detachment helps you recognize that the good things you enjoy are not after all the foundation of your happiness. Stoic happiness is not what we would think of as ecstasy or bliss or euphoria, but more like tranquility or serenity (*ataraxia*)—even keel, come what may. And when, either at death or sometime before, you are forced to part with your external goods, you are not miserable for the loss of them but acknowledge they were never yours to begin with and were never truly under your control. So the Stoics teach not just that you need the virtues to be happy—they add that with the virtues, you have all you need for happiness. This is the foundation of the radical Stoic claim—faintly echoed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) many centuries later—that only virtue is unconditionally good.<sup>14</sup>

In their insistence that the virtuous person can be happy in any circumstance, Stoics don't mean that you can trick yourself into finding unpleasant things pleasant, as though roadkill could start smelling like roses if you tried hard enough. Instead, they recognize that while many things in life are hard, how we react *to*, and act *in*, difficult circumstances is in large measure *up to us*. You can let your bad fortune overcrowd your spirit and leave you sad. Or you can not let it. "I am condemned to death. Do I have to die moaning and groaning as well? To incarceration. Do I have to complain about it?"<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, the vast majority of the writings of the early Stoics, including Zeno and Chrysippus, have been lost. For what remains of their work, we are dependent on fragments and reports scattered throughout the works of later philosophers and historians such as Cicero, Diogenes Laertius (180–240), and Johannes Stobaeus (fifth century AD). But there are also eminent later Stoics, some of whose complete works we do still possess. Among these are several who are nearly household names:

14. Cicero, *De finibus* 3.3.

15. Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.1.22, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Waterfield, 72–73.

Seneca (4 BC–65 AD), Epictetus (55–135), and Marcus Aurelius (121–180)—the latter surely the most famous not only because of his great book, *Meditations*, but also because he was emperor of Rome and, well (you know I have to say it), was the father of the evil emperor Joaquin Phoenix—I mean Commodus—in Ridley Scott’s hugely popular film *Gladiator*.

Boethius’s *Consolation* is saturated with references and allusions to Stoic authors.<sup>16</sup> Usually, these authors are not explicitly quoted but instead woven seamlessly into the fabric of the *Consolation* itself, as though they were as familiar to Boethius as pop music and internet memes are to so many of us. *Consolation* is a book that couldn’t have been written without Stoicism, but it is not a Stoic book. Boethius is a philosopher who belongs to no particular school. He learned from all of them. In fact, he seems to have read everything there was to read. But he was no dilettante. He was a real philosopher with the humility to read widely from the wise men of the past but also the boldness and creativity to do original work.

#### LADY PHILOSOPHY

Boethius was also one of those rare people who seem to be able to do more than one thing really well. Born into a cultured and prominent senatorial family, Boethius would himself grow up to be a politician, but a politician who led a scholarly life—or was it a scholar who led a political life? Actually, it’s hard to say. We know from his books he was a talented scholar; it seems from the historical records that he was a talented politician. Boethius’s father and grandfather served terms as consuls, and Boethius himself and his two sons after him followed the family tradition. After his father’s death, Boethius, still a boy, was taken into the household of Symmachus (d. 526), *paterfamilias* of an even more

16. Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 458–520.

cultured and prominent senatorial family, into which he eventually married. His term as consul came in 510, and in 522 he was appointed Master of Offices, an administrative post one historian describes as a hybrid between head of central intelligence and personal secretary to the emperor—or, in Boethius’s own day, to the Gothic King Theoderic (454–526).<sup>17</sup>

Amid all the toil of politics, Boethius kept up his intellectual interests. His philosophical life was not a mere hobby. In fact, he saw his intellectual work as part of his political work, part of the way he would serve the common good. In his commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories*, he said, “Although the cares of my consular office prevent me from devoting my entire attention to these studies, yet it seems to me a sort of public service to instruct my fellow-citizens in the products of reasoned investigation.”<sup>18</sup>

So close to power, so committed to philosophy. We have in Boethius something approaching the ideal of the philosopher-king of Plato’s *Republic*<sup>19</sup>—as Boethius himself recognized (C 1.4p). The problem, however, is that Boethius was neither king nor emperor, and shared his power with fellow senators, hardly any of whom had the philosophic disposition. Boethius would eventually be forced to choose between the moral idealism of philosophical life and the cynical pragmatism of political life. We know the choice he made. Of his efforts transmitting Greek philosophy to his Roman peers, Boethius said, “I shall not deserve ill of my country in this attempt.”<sup>20</sup> His country begged to differ.

It was his role as Master of Offices that really forced Boethius into the rough and tumble of Roman politics. King Theoderic was not a pagan but an Arian, that is, a follower of the heresy of Arius, according to which Jesus Christ is not God—a heresy

17. Chadwick, *Boethius*, 46.

18. Boethius, *In categorias Aristotelis* 2, in Troncarelli, “New Words on Boethius,” 7.

19. Plato, *Republic* 5 473c–d. All Plato references found in *Complete Works*, ed. Cooper.

20. Boethius, *In categorias Aristotelis* 2, in Troncarelli, “New Words on Boethius,” 7.

that proved hard to kill despite its condemnation long before at the Council of Nicaea in 325. From Constantinople, the Eastern Emperor Justin I (450–527) contemplated strategies for bringing what remained of the Western Empire under Byzantine control. When they looked east, Boethius and his fellow senators could see both the idea of Rome and the orthodox faith still in ascendancy. It would have been impossible not to be sympathetic.

Theoderic had pursued a policy of religious toleration, letting the non-Arians and their pope practice their own religion. But that policy had to be reexamined under Justin's reign. The new emperor worked hard for the unity of orthodox Christians in the East and West, brokering a resolution of a temporary schism between Eastern and Western orthodox Christians in 519. Constantinople once again looked to Rome for religious leadership. It was intolerable that the pope should be at a heretic's mercy for the exercise of his ministry. Would Justin attempt to liberate the Italian peninsula? Theoderic became suspicious. He lost trust in some of the senators, or at least the ones who were more than nominally religious. Like Boethius.

And also like one of Boethius's fellow senators, Albinus. This pious man may or may not have been conspiring with some of Justin's officers against the king. But a lower secretary named Cyprian wanted the king to believe that he was. Albinus was denounced. The king convicted him without trial, then accused the whole senate of complicity in Albinus's alleged treason.

Boethius had to do something. And he had to do the right thing. Rising from his seat, he addressed the king: "Cyprian's accusation is false. But if Albinus did it, both I and all the senate have acted with a single counsel. It is false, my lord king."<sup>21</sup>

Could Boethius have guessed what this short speech would cost him? Maybe. But then again, he might have liked his chances. He and Theoderic knew each other well. Boethius knew

21. *Anonymus Valesianus 2*, in *Boethius*, trans. Chadwick, 48.



Theoderic couldn't govern without the senate. And Boethius himself was a big deal—Master of Offices—and knew it. It was without a doubt a brave thing to do, but there is some reason to think that Boethius did not believe as he chose his words that his defense of Albinus would cost him his life. Brave, but not (yet) heroic. In fact, at one point Boethius comes close to expressing regret for getting involved at all: “Surely you recall how I defended them all with no regard for my own security. . . . But you see what results my innocence has brought. Instead of receiving the rewards of true virtue I suffer the penalty of a crime I didn't commit” (C 1.4p, 21).

The rewards of true virtue. Boethius understood a lot about true virtue, but he deeply misunderstood its rewards. Until that fateful day at court when he rose to refute Cyprian's accusation, life had gone exceedingly well for him. The practice of virtue and the enjoyment of all of fortune's favors went hand in hand. What a pleasant life! Until it wasn't. And Boethius's world was undone. He was quickly tried and sentenced to death. He endured a stint in prison, in Pavia, long enough to compose *Consolation*. Historical records do not tell us what sort of prison he was confined in. It may have been a dungeon or it may have been more like “house arrest.” But we know he wasn't enjoying the comforts of his own home, because *Consolation* testifies that he no longer had access to his home library (C 1.5p). Wherever he was, he knew that with every page he wrote, he drew closer to violent death.

He was still in his early forties when he died. But already he finds himself “in old age's gloom. Old age came unsought: / hastened by evil, commanded by pain. / With hair whitened, and skin trembling loose, / my worn frame shakes” (C 1.1m, 4). Beauty faded, body sore, he longs for death. But not like one of his heroes, Socrates. Socrates looked forward to his death as the gateway to closer communion with the gods.<sup>22</sup> True philosophy,

22. Plato, *Phaedo* 63e.

he said, is to practice for dying and death. But all Boethius wants right now is to be free from pain. His inner monologue is one long complaint. He even complains that death “refuses to close my weeping eyes.” Now that Fortune has “changed her cheating face,” his “wicked days drag forward endlessly”; indeed, his whole life has to be reinterpreted in light of his downfall: he has never been happy (C 1.1m, 4–5). Call no man happy until he is dead, Solon taught.<sup>23</sup> One swallow does not make a spring, nor does a short time make us happy, added Aristotle.<sup>24</sup> Boethius is entirely bereft of hope.

And then his guest appears to him in prison, unexpectedly and suddenly, quite close, towering over his head. It was a woman, her face youthful but also full of years. Her eyes a piercing fire. Boethius, the greatest living philosopher in all of Europe, did not recognize her. She was Lady Philosophy.

#### REPAIRING THE GARMENT

There are three paradoxes about Lady Philosophy that we learn almost as soon as we meet her. There is the paradox of age: “Her face was vital and glowing, yet she seemed too full of years to belong to this generation” (C 1.1p, 6). Every reader of Tolkien will here remember the Elves. Of Arwen Evenstar it was said that “her white arms and clear face were flawless and smooth . . . yet thought and knowledge were in her glance, as of one who has known many things that the years bring.”<sup>25</sup> But Boethius the author would have been thinking rather of gods, and specifically Athena of the flashing eyes, goddess of wisdom.<sup>26</sup> Possibly also of Sophia (i.e., Wisdom) in the Bible, who says of herself that “the

23. Herodotus, *The Histories* 1.30–3.

24. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7 1098a. All Aristotle references found in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols., ed. Barnes.

25. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 2.1, 227.

26. Homer, *Iliad* 1.194–222 and *Odyssey* 6.14–81, 14.187–440, as noted in Boethius, *Consolation*, trans. Goins and Wyman, 5n6.

Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.”<sup>27</sup> And yet just a few lines down she’s establishing a home like a young farmer’s wife: Wisdom has “built her house . . . slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.”<sup>28</sup> And maybe he was thinking even of the mysterious woman in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, who appears to Hermas sometimes as an old woman and sometimes as young.<sup>29</sup>

There is the paradox of height: “Her height was hard to tell; at one moment it was that of any ordinary human, but at another she seemed to strike the clouds with the crown of her head” (C 1.1p, 6). We all know the cliché about having one’s head in the clouds. That might go all the way back to Aristophanes, who ridiculed philosophers and especially Socrates for his devotion to celestial things: in one play the character Socrates says of “the clouds of heaven” that they are “goddesses of men of leisure and philosophers. To them we owe our repertoire of verbal talents: our eloquence, intellect, fustian, casuistry, force, wit, prodigious vocabulary, circumlocutory skill.”<sup>30</sup> A little more seriously, there is also the priestess Diotima, who instructed Socrates that the true way of love—contrary to the imaginations of his drinking buddies—led up through our earthly loves into heaven.<sup>31</sup> The author might also have had an even more solemn image in mind: the extremely tall woman in the Bible, often associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the “great portent” who “appeared in heaven, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”<sup>32</sup> One of Mary’s devotional titles is “Seat of Wisdom.”

27. Proverbs 8:22–23.

28. Proverbs 9:1–2.

29. *The Shepherd of Hermas* 18, in *Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Holmes, 209.

30. Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, in *Four Plays*, trans. Arrowsmith, 46.

31. Plato, *Symposium* 201d.

32. Revelation 12:1.

And most importantly, there is the paradox of her dress. Lady Philosophy wove it herself. It was made “of the finest thread, skillfully woven and imperishable” (C 1.1p, 6). It’s not the sort of garment that moth and rust can corrupt. But for all its imperishability, it has been damaged: “This same garment had been ripped by the hands of some violent men, who had torn away from it what bits and pieces they could” (C 1.1p, 6). If violent men can rip away pieces of her dress, it seems to follow that the dress is not imperishable. Rip enough pieces away and there is no more dress.

But the paradox of height might help to resolve the paradox of the dress. Lady Philosophy’s height knows no bounds. Remember how Aslan looked bigger to the Pevensie children when they returned to Narnia? “Aslan,’ said Lucy, ‘you’re bigger.’ ‘That is because you are older, little one.’”<sup>33</sup> Boethius is old in the ways of philosophy, but in his current state he has forgotten who he was. To his grief-drunk sight, the Lady appears to shrink and grow, haphazardly. If he had clear sight, wouldn’t she grow taller the more he grew in wisdom? If so, then her gown really is imperishable, however many pieces violent men rip away.

Wisdom is endless. One man’s portion of wisdom is not. To paraphrase Heraclitus, the eternal Logos that makes us wise is infinite and available to all, but most people live as though their wisdom is their own.<sup>34</sup> T.S. Eliot made this philosophical fragment an epigraph to his poem *Four Quartets*, in which he tells us that “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.”<sup>35</sup> The problem with the violent men is their pride. They thought they’d found the whole of wisdom. But they had only a tatter. They claimed the tatter as their own, ignorant of the endlessness and so imperishability of Lady Philosophy’s dress.

33. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 380.

34. Heraclitus 10.2, in McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 116.

35. Eliot, “East Coker” 2, *Four Quartets*, 27.

But who are these violent men? Lady Philosophy doesn't name names, but she does name schools. Socrates and Plato are named as model philosophers, and Socrates especially—not in spite of but because of his martyrdom for Philosophy's sake. But after Socrates, “the Epicurean and Stoic herds and all the rest tried to snatch his legacy, every man for himself. They grabbed me, too, as their prey while I shouted and struggled against them, and they ripped this garment of mine, which I had woven myself. As they went away with some little shreds torn from it, they thought that I had yielded myself completely to them” (C 1.3p, 12). These are difficult words to read. It's best not to treat them blithely. Those who tear at Lady Philosophy's dress have violated her, defiled her.

Wait, Stoicism? If you don't know much about Epicureanism, don't worry, we'll get to that later, in chapter 3. But Stoicism? Isn't that the view that says we shouldn't worry about what fortune brings us, good or bad, because true peace of mind is not dependent on fortune but on our own virtuous character? What could be bad about that? How could such a philosophy be likened to a violation of Philosophy herself?

The first thing to say is Lady Philosophy evidently considers at least some Stoics her followers. Only a few lines after accusing the “Stoic herds” of violence against her, she singles out two Stoics for special praise. So her condemnation of Stoicism can hardly be a blanket condemnation of everyone everywhere who has claimed Stoicism for their own philosophy. Instead, the problem she is getting at is school-mentality, identifying oneself so much with a school of thought that one cannot receive wisdom from any other school. This mentality is what nowadays we would call ideology. Philosophy's greatest enemies, those violent men, are those who in the name of Philosophy confine themselves to an ideology and teach others to do the same.

For all Stoicism's merits, it didn't get everything right. It tilts fatalistic—no room for free will. It envisions our highest

happiness as the mere absence of suffering. And it encourages a ghastly sort of detachment even from close friends and family. Boethius was attuned to these problems and offers us resources for embracing the best of Stoicism while avoiding its pitfalls. Under the guidance of Lady Philosophy, he learns to say to the Stoics that “there are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”<sup>36</sup>

Lady Philosophy knows that Boethius is bound to suffer. She has come in part so that this innocent man should not have to walk his path alone (C 1.3p). No torn tatter will suffice. Boethius needs the whole garment of Philosophy, not this or that philosopher. Boethius, the man and the author, portraying himself in his book as the prisoner he really was, summons a thousand years of philosophical thinking to help him remember who and what he is and what he can hope. When Boethius the character first sees the Lady, he doesn't recognize her. She wipes his tears with her dress. Finally he sees. “When I cast my eyes upon her and fixed my gaze, I saw it was the one whose home I had visited since my youth—the Lady Philosophy, my nurse” (C 1.3p, 11). His cure had begun. And ours can too.

36. Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.5.66–67, p. 96.