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## Beasts and Bestiality, Deities and Deification: Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* in Milton's *Comus*

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**Beasts and Bestiality, Deities and Deification: Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* in Milton's *Comus***

**Keywords**

beasts, bestiality, Milton, Comus, Boethius, morality, spirituality

Beasts and Bestiality, Deities and Deification:  
Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* in Milton's *Comus*

Bret van den Brink

There exists in John Milton's *Comus* something of a dialectical tension between the moralities of the physical and spiritual worlds. Though the Attendant Spirit—a Platonic “daemon” in the Trinity and Bridgewater manuscripts—gets both the first and last words in the work, the central action is enacted on the physical plane, wherein the Attendant Spirit's powers appear to be quite limited (Lewis 180). The Attendant Spirit can neither prevent the Lady's encounter with Comus, nor is he able to free her once the tempter has fled. The issue of the apparent impotence of spiritual goodness to influence physical circumstances is central to Milton's work. This same issue is influentially treated by the late-antique philosopher Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Milton alludes to this work in the Attendant Spirit's opening speech and engages with its ideas and imagery throughout his masque. Milton's engagement with Boethius illuminates the central message of his masque: physical realities must always be interpreted in light of their spiritual counterparts if they are to be judged correctly. For both authors, correct judgement is crucial, for it determines whether one is on the path to becoming a beast or a god.

Before proceeding to Milton's allusion to Boethius, it is worthwhile to remark on the formal similarity of their works. *The Consolation*

*of Philosophy* is a Menippean satire purged of the genre's traditional comic elements—the work is essentially a theoretical argument given in dialogue and interspersed with poetry. A masque, on the other hand, is “in essence a courtly ritual [. . .] defined above all by its visual and musical complexity—its scenery, costumes, and choreography” (McDowell 227). *Comus* subverts the masque form by focusing on words and arguments rather than a luxurious bombardment of the senses. This logocentrism is particularly emphasized in the debates between the two brothers and between the Lady and Comus. Moreover, Milton's choice to publish the masque further separates it from its original ritual context. This prioritizes “the written text” over “the spoken event,” purging the work of what may be seen as its genre's superfluous ornamentation (Teskey 111). Milton's conscious self-distancing from the masque tradition by emphasizing argument over imagery and the composed text over its corporeal enactment has the cumulative effect of making *Comus* formally quite similar to Boethius' austere Menippean satire.

This measure of formal similarity is accompanied by an allusive tie in the opening monologue of the text. The opening alludes to the myth of Circe—the witch who in Homer's *Odyssey* transforms Odysseus' crew into swine. Milton's titular character, Comus, is presented as the offspring of Bacchus and Circe; this demigod follows in his father's footsteps by tempting humans to debauchery and in his mother's footsteps by changing them into beasts (ll. 46-77). The more proximate spur for Milton, however, is not Homer but Boethius. That Boethius is the more proximate spur is demonstrable for two reasons: firstly, in both Boethius and Milton the humans are transformed into various beasts rather than swine; and secondly, in both

Boethius and Milton the physical transformations are not merely physical in nature, but are allegories for spiritual decay (Boethius 119; Milton ll. 70-71).

To understand the nature of this decay, one must first understand the brushstrokes of Boethius' thought. The philosopher, following Aristotle, understands humanity as the "rational animal" with rationality, the ability and inclination to pursue the truth, being the defining feature that separates humans from beasts (24). Aligned with this classical tradition, he conceptualizes rationality not merely as the definitive feature of humanity, but its purpose. And, as Alasdair MacIntyre demonstrates, in such a classical understanding to fulfill one's purpose is to be good (59). Hence, in Boethius' schema, the rational human fulfils their purpose and is thus a good person. Moreover, for Boethius, as a Christian Neoplatonist, goodness (the proper object of the will) is coextensive with truth (the proper object of the intellect), both of which are coextensive with being as such and exist in their fullness in God's essence (118). From these principles Boethius deduces that someone who pursues the excellencies of the intellect is not merely a good person but a "divine" person and that someone who abandons the pursuit of these excellencies has "descended to the level of beasts" (118).

Furthermore, for Boethius both goodness and divinity are identified with happiness (89). For Boethius, then, a vicious person may be subjectively pleased, but, under the final analysis, they are objectively wretched. Moreover, a somewhat virtuous person may be subjectively disturbed, but objectively happy, or at least happier than the vicious person. Milton's Lady appears to be in this category when she anticipates danger in the forest and

says, “These thoughts may startle well but not astound / The virtuous mind” (ll. 210-211). For Boethius, the most virtuous person, the true philosopher, would recognize the superiority of the state of their spirit over their body’s disposition, and so would dwell in a blissful state of dispassion.

Given his philosophy, Boethius reprises the myth of Circe in a rather unique way. He conceives of a “limit to Circe’s / power” in which the minds of Odysseus’ crew are preserved even while their bodies change (120). In such an apparently wretched scenario, he thinks that those who are virtuous, those who have not willingly abandoned their intellectual nature, could still be happy. And so, he warns,

Those poisons are much more toxic  
That creep within and infect  
The mind and the soul, while they leave  
The outer shell untouched. (120)

For Boethius, it is better for one’s body to appear bestial than for one’s soul to be bestial. Likewise, any merely bodily harm is negligible when compared with the harm that viciousness does to the soul. Insofar as one considers the well-being of the soul, as vice is wretched, so virtue is blessed; and, as the wretchedness of vice is the punishment for viciousness, so the blessedness of virtue is the reward for virtue. And, as spiritual reality is independent of physical reality, physical circumstances have no ultimate effect on this spiritual order.

To what extent then does Milton’s imagery and thought in *Comus* converge with (or diverge from) that of Boethius? The imagery is similar, but altered. As has been mentioned above, the tale no longer centers on

Circe, but rather on her son Comus. Perhaps more significantly, in Boethius it is the entire physical aspect which is transformed; meanwhile in Milton it is only the face, “[t]he express resemblance of the gods,” which is made “brutish” (ll. 69-70). Despite the shift in this imagery, thematically this still aligns quite neatly with Boethius’ thought. While in the verse sections of *Consolation* Boethius portrays Odysseus’s crew as being tricked into becoming beasts, in the prose sections he portrays humans as making themselves into beasts by abnegating the divinest part of themselves, their intellects.

While Milton borrows and alters the mythic imagery from Boethius’ poem, he simultaneously reproduces the philosophical content of Boethius’ prose. The Attendant Spirit concludes his account of Comus’ transmogrified followers by perfectly mirroring the closing of Boethius’ account of the myth. No longer does the intellectual soul remain aloof from the body’s alterations; instead, the soul’s corruption is the highlight of the change:

And they, so perfect is their misery,  
 Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,  
 But boast themselves more comely then before  
 And all their friends, and native home forget  
 To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty. (ll. 73-77)

Their forgetfulness is reminiscent of the forgetfulness of the soul which Platonism considers concomitant with bodily existence, but more than this, these bestial revellers represent the profoundest depths of human depravity. These revellers represent that state of being in which the intellect is entirely abandoned in favour of the carnal passions: they are the beasts that humans

must become when they forsake their humanity and its orientation towards the divine. Moreover, as Platonism demands, the subjective pleasure of these revellers is condemned by the Attendant Spirit in the strongest terms as “perfect [. . .] misery” (l. 73). Their perceived happiness is mistaken.

Where Boethius portrays only the human appearance as being changed by Circe, Milton portrays Comus as changing their spiritual states. Thus, as Comus can instigate this transformation which Circe cannot, Milton can write that he “[e]xcells his mother at her mighty art” (l. 63). However, it is not the potion that causes this inward change, but rather Comus’ temptation. Hence, he cannot simply force the Lady to drink his potion. Stanley Fish recognizes that Comus, a subject always conceiving reality in terms of a merely physical plane of reference, can “imprison” the Lady in “every sense” which he can “conceive,” but Comus’ error is in his limited plane of reference (151). Hence the Lady’s terse rebuttal: “Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind” (Milton, l. 663). Her mind, her participation in the spiritual world, is not merely beyond the reach of Comus’ powers, but his very range of understanding.

Observing Comus’ limited range of understanding, the Lady declares him to be unable to argue “[a]gainst the sun-clad power of chastity,” and diagnoses him as having neither “ear, nor soul to apprehend / The sublime notion” of virginity (ll. 782, 784-785). In a similarly vein, Boethius has Lady Philosophy, the personification of wisdom who descends from heaven much like Milton’s Attendant Spirit, sing, “The grandeur of heaven eludes the corrupted soul, / And only those who can see with their eyes and their minds / Can observe this light, brighter than any sun” (92). Both authors



draw their epistemological metaphors of light from the allegories in Plato's Republic. In the Allegory of the Sun of the Good, Plato writes, "What the good itself is in the intelligible realm, in relation to understanding and intelligible things, the sun is in relation to sight and visible things" (1129). In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato describes how a prisoner who escapes from the darkness of the cave would "need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above" (1134). For all three authors, the data of the senses, represented by sight, is unreliable unless it is registered by a soul trained in the virtues, as represented by the eyes' adjustment to sunlight. This idea is somewhat heightened in Milton's masque, for he shifts the imagery from the "sun" to the "ear," and so the sense of sight to that of hearing. Again, one detects Milton's logocentrism. Although interpretation is required for all sense data, words occupy a privileged place, requiring mediation from the interpreter, and so the virtuous education of the interpreter is all the more crucial for arriving at an adequate understanding. The Lady has this formation but Comus does not.

As she is not yet a spirit liberated from her body, this moral formation is still ongoing, but as her moral development moves onwards, she is becoming ever more divine. In both Boethius and Milton, the bestial descent of vice is matched by the divine ascent of virtue. Boethius goes so far as to suggest that virtuous people "become gods [. . .] by participation in his [God's] divinity" (89). The term for being made a god is deification, and has a long tradition in Christian thought, though it is somewhat neglected in early-modern theology. Fairly similar to Boethius' account of deification is the Elder Brother's teaching that virtue transforms the body "by degrees to

the soul's essence / Till all be made immortal" (Milton ll. 462-463). Admittedly, as Nicholas McDowell emphasizes in his recent biography which highlights the influence of Platonic philosophy on the young Milton, the poet here uses the language of being made a spirit rather than a god (241). McDowell suggests that this distinction is drawn because Milton wishes to use a strictly Platonic idiom rather than one of Christian salvation. Contra McDowell, it may be more accurately stated that Milton presents a fusion of Platonic and Christian elements in the masque. Certainly, the heart of this doctrine is present in the masque, and at least one account of deification is presented via the history of Sabrina, who is made a goddess in "a quick immortal change" (l. 841). Indeed, the Christian symbolism in the masque manifests itself through most clearly through the character of Sabrina, for she, as Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns observe, "liberates the Lady through a ritual sprinkling redolent of Church sacraments" (84). Perhaps more important, however, is Milton's depiction of the Attendant Spirit as a creature who, on behalf of Jove, descends from heaven in the opening of the masque to save the Lady, and returns to this heaven at the conclusion of the masque, exhorting mortals to follow him along the path of virtue.

It is remarkable how closely Milton's portrayal of the heaven from which his Attendant Spirit descends resembles Boethius' portrayal of the heaven towards which the mind purified by philosophy ascends. As Boethius describes "the house of stars" as lying before the "upper air" wherefrom "the king of kings" reigns, so Milton's Attendant Spirit resides "[b]efore the starry threshold of Jove's court" (108; l. 1). As Boethius writes that the liberated spirit residing in such a place "can look down on the earth with

contempt,” so Milton’s Attendant Spirit describes his home as lying “above the smoke and stir of this dim spot / Which men call earth” (108; ll. 5-6). As Boethius says that the liberated spirit shall see earth’s “wretched people fear their tyrant rulers” and view them “all as exiles,” so Milton’s Attendant Spirit sees earth’s people as “[c]onfined” by “low-thoughted care” while “[s]triv[ing] to keep up a frail, and feverish being” (108; ll. 6-8). In short, the heavens of the two writers are the abodes of spirits who look down upon the inhabitants of earth with pity.

Of course, this pity is saturated with hope, for the inhabitants of earth can, and do, ascend to heaven. Lady Philosophy exhorts the prisoner, “Philosophy has wings with which you can fly, ascending / As an exaltation of larks to heaven” (Boethius 108). The virtuous mind can “fasten” on these wings, and soar “even higher beyond the spheres / Of air,” until, at last, it reaches “[t]he awesome dazzling light / Where the king of kings wields his royal scepter / And holds the reigns that control the world” (108). Later, Lady Philosophy elaborates that “[c]elestial and divine beings have clearer judgements,” and “human souls are more free when they persevere in the contemplation of the mind of God” (150). Milton’s Attendant Spirit warbles a very similar tune:

Mortals that would follow me,  
 Love virtue, she alone is free,  
 She can teach ye how to climb  
 Higher than the Sphery chime. (ll. 1018-1021)

For these writers, freedom, in its highest sense, is the ability to flourish in accordance with one’s nature, unimpeded from exterior restraint. This flour-

ishing is nothing other than moral development, culminating in a vertical ascent past the spheres of the Ptolemaic universe, towards the Empyrean Heaven. Here the liberated spirit finds its beatitude in union with God.

To fully appreciate the nature of this beatitude, it is necessary to touch once more on the formal aspects of the two works, alternating as they do between philosophical arguments and lyric poetry. Both writers would have each element illumine the other in their works, but both, again following Plato, are wary of the possible immoral influence that poetry may have when divorced from reason (1030). Boethius and Milton both foreground the possible abuse of poetry early in their works. In the opening of his work, Boethius portrays himself as indulging his sorrows with lyric poetry, as tragic Muses encourage his intemperance as he lays in bed—discovering him thus, Lady Philosophy reprimands him and sends the Muses away (4). Lady Philosophy is not against poetry as such; she sings to Boethius to console him, but she is against poetry that usurps the reason (5). Likewise, the first character to sing lyric poetry in Milton's masque is the malevolent Comus (93-144). There is something seductive to Comus' tetrameters, and many of his lines would not seem out of place in Milton's playful lyric "L'Allegro." Nonetheless, Milton, of course, does not view poetry as essentially corrupt, and the next character to sing is the virtuous Lady shortly after she invokes God as "the Supreme Good" (ll. 217, 230-243).

Neither Boethius nor Milton would follow Plato in expelling poets from their ideal cities or heavens. Indeed, Milton would be horrified at such an infringement on personal liberty. Nonetheless, their ideal poets would be those who pursue such poetry as would not conflict with truth, for in the

simplicity of God's essence, truth and beauty, like truth and goodness, are one (Boethius 84). As Boethius presents his ideal poet in Lady Philosophy, so Milton presents his ideal poets in the Attendant Spirit and Sabrina.

Although both authors portray the ecstatic movement into God as the culmination of the moral life, and both writers hold an ideal of poetic beauty wed to philosophical truth, Boethius does not choose to end with poetry while Milton does. The content of the two endings is similar insofar as they are heavenly ascents. Boethius closes his work with an ascent to God through contemplation. Specifically, he closes his work with meditations on the nature of eternity, the consequent compatibility of divine providence and human freedom, and the ultimate justice of God. As Boethius establishes that true happiness is found in pursuing the goods of the intellect, it is clear that these theoretical meditations are themselves intended as a foretaste of heaven (175). Milton, on the other hand, ends with the Attendant Spirit literally returning to heaven, singing as he soars. Indeed, from the Attendant Spirit's invocation of Sabrina onwards, the remainder of the masque is sung by the two benevolent deities (ll. 859-1023). The differences between these endings may be marked down to a difference in emphasis; however, it may be that Milton wishes to transcend the boundaries between philosophy and poetry, suggesting that the beatitude toward which the good life tends is better captured in poetry than prose, even if it is a poetry bound by the chaste limits of philosophical truth.

Looking towards this end to things, Boethius closes *The Consolation of Philosophy* with this exhortation: "Do not be deceived. It is required of you that you live in the constant sight of a judge who sees all things"

(175). That is to say, everyone is accountable for their actions, and everyone is obligated to live justly, for they live under God's omniscient judgement.

Boethius illustrates this point with another vaguely Platonic image of light:

Although the rays of the sun  
 Are not strong enough to pierce  
 To the inmost depths of the earth and sea, [. . .]  
 This is not so for the great Creator,  
 Whose gaze goes deeper, unobstructed  
 By matter's opacity or night's  
 Utter blackness. (151)

The light of the sun may not be able to penetrate all things, but the light of God's goodness does. In his first song, Comus professes the perfect contrary of this principle: "Tis only daylight that makes sin" (Milton, l. 126). For Comus, wicked deeds are not sinful if they are committed in the anonymity of the night, for sins are only sins if they are known. More specifically, sins are only sins if the sinner is held accountable. For Comus, it is not the deed that is wrong but the punishment. Fish notes that Comus' thought is "perfectly coherent given his assumption that man is bound by the processes of nature" (155). Of course, from Milton's perspective, this assumption is wrong; Comus' philosophy is built on a faulty foundation. He is proven wrong in the masque: all sins are known, even beforehand, by Jove; hence the masque opens with the Attendant Spirit's descent to earth, even before Comus encounters the Lady.

From the Boethian perspective, these delusions make Comus the most pitiable character by the end of the masque. He fails to tempt the

lady, is routed by the brothers, and loses almost everything. He resembles Boethius at the beginning of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in that he is subject to a bitter turn of fortune. However, unlike Boethius, he lacks the intellectual training and moral formation that could console him with some larger perspective. He is left to wallow in his misfortune.

It may be strange to think that one ought to pity the wicked, but this is precisely what Boethius' philosophy requires of its adherents. Although it may appear as though Comus escapes his due punishment, Boethius gives two reasons for believing "that those [evil-doers] who are unpunished do not actually escape from paying the penalty for their wickedness" (124). Firstly, as previously discussed, Boethius holds that there is an objective wretchedness that accompanies wickedness, and this wretchedness is increased as one performs more wicked acts. (124). From this perspective Comus is already wretched for what he has done, and he will only get worse off if he continues along his current moral trajectory. As the brothers, despite the Attendant Spirit's emphatic advice, fail to seize Comus' wand, it is not merely possible but probable that he will resume his mischief (ll. 653, 815).

Secondly, Boethius holds that evil-doers are punished by their guilty consciences (124). Admittedly, one may doubt whether Comus will be subject to pangs of conscience; however, after his moral argument with the Lady, he experiences an intimation of transcendent justice:

[A] cold shuddering dew

Dips me all o'er, as when the wrath of Jove

Speaks thunder, and the chains of Erebus

To some of Saturn's crew. (ll. 802-805)

The allusion here is to the classical myth wherein the gods, led by Jove, defeated their enemies the titans, and bound them in the lowest division of the underworld. Milton is using the myth to parallel the biblical teaching that God shall bind the rebel angels in hell. Boethius also recognizes there to be punishments after death; some, he says, are "extremely harsh" (124). It is the anticipation of just such punishments that leaves Comus in a cold sweat, and this anxiety is a punishment itself. As the Lady is rewarded for her virtue by her virtue, Comus is punished for his viciousness by his viciousness. Thus, *Comus* portrays the vindication of spiritual truth in the face of the exigencies of the physical world.

What Milton attempts in *Comus* is very similar to what Boethius attempts in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius, having written his work while imprisoned, finds consolation in his philosophy which elevates his perspective beyond the vicissitudes of the physical world to a higher and spiritual perspective for which God is the ultimate reference point. His work is a progression from forgetfulness to wisdom and from despair to joy—and this joy is despite his imminent execution. Milton's work recognizes a certain coherence of both the physical and spiritual perspectives, giving characters arguments of similar strength for both, but ultimately prioritizes the spiritual. Hence even "if Virtue feeble were, / Heaven itself would stoop to her" (ll. 1022-1023). If one may indulge in a counterfactual, one suspects that were the Lady to have been raped or killed by Comus, or that Sabrina were to fail to release her from his seat, that she would nevertheless have endured with her virtue intact, and that her soul liberated from its body



would ascend to that spiritual plane from whence her Attendant Spirit descends and from which Boethius derives his consolation.

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