READERS AND INTERPRETERS OF
THE CONSOLATIO IN ITALY, 1300–1550

Dario Brancato

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of an obscure Baroque text, published in Rome in 1635, the author, Giovanni Giacomo Ricci (1595–after 1643), describes his encounter with a Muse who is supposed to accompany him on his voyage to Mount Parnassus:

Mentr’io in cotal guisa descrivendo ne stava l’instabilità del mio stato, cantando i miei pianti e l’inquietudine della mia quiete, apparvemi d’improvviso amorosa Verginella, che nelle mani e nelle chiome teneva alcune roze ghirlandette di fronde e fiori, vestita di color cangiante; pareva, quasi colomba esposta al sole, cangiarsi ad ogni momento, e con benigno volto a me si rivolse, che mi porse animo di chiederle chi fosse. Sorridendo, ella mi rispose: “Ben se’ tu fuori di te stesso, che te stesso e me non conosci che sono la tua Musa.”

[While I was describing the instability of my state in that fashion, singing my lament and the anguish of my silence, a lovely Virgin suddenly appeared to me. She was holding some simple wreaths and garlands of leaves and flowers in her hands and hair; her dress was of a changing color; almost like a dove on a sunny day, she seemed to change at every moment; finally, she looked at me with such an affectionate face, that I found the courage of asking her who she might be. Smiling, she replied: “You must not be yourself, because you fail to recognize either yourself or me: I am your Muse.”]

This description of our Muse shares striking similarities with Lady Philosophy depicted in the first book of Boethius’s De consolatione philosophiae. Actually, the whole scene itself is almost a paraphrase of the first

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2 Boethius, De consolatione philosophiae [hereafter, Consolatio] I 1.1, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Munich and Leipzig, 2005): “Haec dum mecum tacitus ipse reputarem querimoniamque lacrimabilem stili officio signarem adstitisse mihi supra verticem visa est mulier reverendi admodum vultus, oculis ardentibus et ultra communem hominum valentiam perspicacibus, colore vivido atque inexhausti vigoris, quamvis ita aevi plena foret ut nullo modo nostrae crederetur aetatis, statura discretionis ambigua” [While I was thinking these thoughts to myself in silence, and set my pen to record this tearful complaint, there seemed to stand above my head a woman. Her look filled me with awe; her burning eyes penetrated more deeply than those of ordinary men; her complexion was fresh with an ever-lively
sentences of *Consolatio* 1p1. Readers of the *Consolatio*, it would seem, were not that difficult to find in Italy well after 1450, the period of time when the popularity of Boethius’s masterpiece waned. Pierre Courcelle, for example, has attributed this to the availability of original Greek sources, and has written that

À cause de cet esprit nouveau, la Consolation allait être délaissée bientôt. Cette œuvre, qui avait passionné les écoles aux temps carolingiens, puis au xiiᵉ siècle, parce qu’elle exposait un système philosophique et compensait ainsi dans une certaine mesure l’absence des originaux grecs néo-platoniciens, va perdre de son intérêt. Désormais ces originaux, répandus en Occident depuis la chute de Costantinople, attireront les esprits curieux de philosophie antique. L’intérêt littéraire de la Consolation s’est lui-même évanoui sous l'amas des commentaires scolastiques des xivᵉ et xvᵉ siècles. Les amateurs de beau style préféreront l'étude des grands classiques.4

[Because of this new spirit, the *Consolation* was soon to be abandoned. This work first enthralled schools in Carolingian times; then, in the 12th century, it began to become less interesting because it expounded on a philosophical system and, to a certain extent, made up for the absence of the Greek neo-Platonist originals. From then on, it would be those originals, which would circulate in the West after the fall of Constantinople, to attract the minds inquiring on ancient philosophy. The literary interest of the *Consolation* also disappeared under the burden of 14- and 15-century Scholastic commentaries. Lovers of beautiful style would prefer to study the great Classical texts.]

Curiously, Courcelle’s statement has always been taken for granted and justified by two facts. First, the humanist Lorenzo Valla’s (1406–57) attack against the philosophical content of the *Consolatio* in his *De vero falsaque bono* (“On True and False Good,” 1431 as *De voluptate*, “On Pleasure”; first printed 1483) and *De libero arbitrio* (“On Free Will,” 1439; first printed 1540) has been taken as the first sign of the declining fortune of the Boethian work. Second, the quantitative data collected and analyzed in recent monographs have shown that in Italy the text was no longer bloom, yet she seemed so ancient that none would think her of our time]. English translation here and throughout this chapter are quoted from Boethius, *Tractates: The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H.F. Stewart, E.K. Rand, and S.J. Tester, (Loeb Classical Library) 74 (Cambridge, MA, 1973), p. 133 (hereafter *Boethius: Tractates, Consolation*).
