Boethius’s Works on the Topics

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The De topicis differentiis appears to be the mature product of an excellent mind. It shows the same acumen, subtlety, and care as Boethius’s other logical treatises; and it seems to build on the training and insight Boethius manifested in his earlier treatises. It is a complete study of the discipline for finding arguments, both dialectical and rhetorical. Boethius works his diverse material, from different traditions and from different disciplines, into one coherent and elegant system unequaled, as far as I know, in any of the material that has come down to us from antiquity and the early middle ages. Not only does he attempt to expound and reconcile the different divisions of Topics, but he also provides a theoretical foundation for the whole discipline. His analysis of rhetoric, he claims, is original with him; and the more one studies that analysis, the more one is inclined to believe him. His treatment of the Topics themselves is radically different from anything in Aristotle’s Topics and contains much that is not in Cicero’s Topica. His treatise, then, seems to be an original and important logical work. And the natural, common-sense view one gains from reading the De top. diff. and the companion piece In Ciceronis Topica, with their many cross-references to Boethius’s other works on logic, is that Boethius was a highly trained scholar with admirable philosophical gifts, who wrote a number of independent and original logical works in addition to his translations of Aristotle.

But a thesis which runs counter to the common-sense view has been published; James Shiel in his article Boethius’ Commentaries on Aris-

1 The De top. diff. is one of the last works Boethius produced. See L. M. De Rijk, On the Chronology of Boethius’ Works on Logic II, Vivarium 2 (1964), 153-154 and 157-161.
3 See the notes to my translation of Bk. IV in my dissertation. See also Michael Leff, The Logician’s Rhetoric: an Analysis of De diff. top. Liber IV, paper presented at the ninth annual medieval conference at Kalamazoo, Michigan.
Totle has argued that Boethius's works on logic are not original compositions but are rather his translations of Greek Neo-Platonic scholia on Aristotle's *Organon*. His thesis seems to be gaining currency; two eminent scholars in the field, Minio-Paluello and De Rijk, accept or support it. In this article, after considering very briefly some treatment of Shiel's thesis in the literature, I want to discuss the thesis in detail as it applies to Boethius's work on the Topics. My main concern is to examine and discuss Shiel's evidence for his counter-intuitive theory; if it does not stand up under scrutiny, we are free to return to the common-sense view and to take Boethius's works on the Topics, at least, to be just what they appear to be—his original compositions.

Scholars discussing Shiel's work differ about just how extensive his thesis is meant to be. C. J. De Vogel thinks Shiel is arguing that "every line and every word of Boethius' commentaries and treatises was a translation of Greek notes." L. Minio-Paluello seems to think Shiel's claims are narrower and do not cover anything from the two treatises on the Topics except the Themistian material in Bk. II of *De top. diff.* There are two main reasons for taking Shiel's thesis as Minio-Paluello does: first, the claim that these treatises are translations of Greek scholia is especially implausible; and secondly, Shiel nowhere argues such a claim explicitly. But I think a close reading of Shiel's article supports something more nearly like De Vogel's view. The problem Shiel sets himself concerns the status of all Boethius's works on logic. At the beginning of his article, Shiel says, "The present article therefore proposes to examine the other extant results of Boethius' promise, the commentaries and treatises. Are they really original or are they too translated from Greek?" (p. 217). As he begins to summarize, he speaks of the conclusion he is about to draw as a general conclusion about all the Boethian commentaries and treatises he has mentioned (and these include the treatises on the Topics) (p. 241); and the conclusion he goes on to draw is that Boethius's contribution to medieval philosophy was nothing more than that of a translator and transmitter (pp. 243-244).

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8 Cf., e.g., *Les traductions*, p. 360.
9 Both *In Cic. Top.* and *De top. diff.* depend on Latin rhetorical and philosophical treatises, namely, Cicero's *Topica* and/or *De inventione*; and it is extremely strange to think of Greek Neo-Platonists reading and commenting on Cicero.