Dialogues of Love and Government
Dialogues of Love and Government: A Study of the Erotic Dialogue Form in some Texts from the Courtly Love Tradition

By

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
IN LOVING MEMORY OF AVRIL BRUTEN
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present volume started life as a PhD thesis at the University of Turin. I therefore owe my greatest debt of gratitude to my two supervisors, Ruth-Anne Henderson and Lucia Folena. In the course of my doctoral studies, I also received some invaluable help from my undergraduate tutors, Nicholas Perkins and Avril Bruten of St. Hugh’s College, Oxford. Professor Carter Revard of Washington University very kindly read through the first drafts of the “Introduction” and “Part One” of this thesis, offering some comments on elements of dialogue and dialogism in lyric poetry that have left an indelible mark on the final product. Professor John Sutherland of University College London has likewise been very generous in reading through and commenting on several conference papers I have given on the research presented in this book.

Two sections of this book have been published in shorter and different forms. Many of the ideas contained in “Chapter Two” of this volume were first aired in an article published in Turin University’s annual volume of English Studies, in an article entitled “Morpheus Bound: Imagination, Dialogue and Lyric Transformation in La Fonteinne Amoureuse, Le Paradis d’Amour and The Book of the Duchess” (Turin: Trauben, 2004). A shorter version of my chapter on Usk is published in Carr, Clarke and Nievergelt, eds. On Allegory: Aspects and Approaches (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007). I am indebted to Mary, Kenneth and Marco for some very useful editorial suggestions made during the preparation of that volume. I presented earlier drafts of my sections on Hoccleve and on Chaucer’s The Legend of Good Women at the Leeds International Medieval Congress, 2005, and at the SELIM conference in Seville, 2004, respectively.

The cover illustration for this volume (Cotton Nero A.X., art. 3 f.42v) and the Chaucer portrait in Chapter Four, Part IV (Harley MS 4866, f.88) are reproduced by permission of the British Library. The image of the dialogue between “Thomas” and “Reason”, also in Chapter Four, Part IV, is reproduced by kind permission of Durham University Library.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: DIALOGUE, APOCALYPSE AND EROS

Part I: Critical Background

In this study, I will analyse and seek to explain the recurrent use of the Boethian dialogue model in literature concerned with courtly love. In doing so, I intend to cover new ground on two accounts: first, in considering the use of Boethius as a writer of philosophical dialogues rather than of dream visions and, secondly, in exploring the relationship between dialogue and erotic love and its political implications. The broad, almost universal, influence of Boethius in the Middle Ages has been much documented, as has the tendency to write parodic reworkings of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Brian Cherniss’ superb book on the “Boethian Apocalypse” genre in the Middle Ages is perhaps the study which could be said to most closely resemble my own. However, while Cherniss offers a fine analysis of the relationship between Boethius and his imitators and the Apocalypse genre, he does not consider the fusion which Boethius carries out between this form and the traditions originating with the Socratic dialogue, nor does he pay much attention to the recurrent central theme of love in these works.

Other studies of one or more of the various literary works which I will here consider, such as Judith Ferster’s *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* and Nicholas Perkins’s *Hoccleve’s Regiment of Princes: Counsel and Constraint*, focus above all on advice dialogues as reflecting and subtly interrogating the role of the writer of political advice to the king and their place in the tradition of advice literature which began with the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*. In other words, they consider dialogues of government, without focusing in depth on the relationship of politics to the recurring theme of love. They tend to concentrate on the political uses of dialogue rather than the philosophical and theological traditions.

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1 Cherniss 1987.
2 Ferster 1996.
behind the form. James Simpson’s essays on Hoccleve’s treatment of Boethian dialogue in the “Prologue” to the *Regiment of Princes* and of Isidore of Seville’s very Boethian *Synonyma* in the “Prologue” to the *Series*, both of which have been of considerable influence to my thinking in this study, focus above all on the stoical ideas and not on the forms of these texts. In *Chaucer’s Philosophical Visions*⁴, Kathryn L. Lynch suggests that Chaucer’s repeated ironic use of the dream vision form reflects his sensitivity to contemporary philosophical developments – namely, the rise of nominalism as opposed to modes of thought based on abstraction. Whilst by no means refuting these claims, I approach the tendency from a different angle, taking the opposite starting point and rooting my observations not in subsequent philosophical developments but in the older traditions and development of the dialogue form itself. Finally, I would present this study as a possible companion piece to Thomas L. Reed Junior’s *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Ethics of Irresolution.*⁵ In this superb study, Reed distinguishes between “vertical” and “horizontal” forms of dialogue – between the hierarchical teacher-pupil dialogue and the more egalitarian debate or flyting. As his title suggests, Reed concentrates above all on the “horizontal” kind of dialogue – the debate. This study, by contrast, will focus on the “vertical” genre, unearthing a number of concerns very similar to those brought out by Reed’s study.

In his “Introduction” to *Boethian Apocalypse*, Cherniss is very critical of Anne Payne’s classification of the *Consolatio* as a “Menippean Satire”. Payne bases her definition of Menippean Satire on a short passage from Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* and on Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, describing it as a genre which “questions […] not an ideal standard, but the possibility of an ideal standard”:⁶

> Questioning and complaining about the universe is a pervasive activity of both characters and author, but those who complain are treated comically and those with the ‘answers’ ironically.⁷

It is basically a satire of ideas, a genre which ironises the notion that a single theory or conception can reflect and satisfy the word’s infinite variety. As Cherniss points out, a major problem which arises from Payne’s arguments is the immense literary territory the “genre” seems to cover. Lumping “Candide, Gulliver’s Travels, […] Brave New World […] the Satyricon, Gargantua and Pantagruel, […] Portnoy’s Complaint”, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, and the

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⁴ Lynch 2000.
⁵ Reed 1990.
⁷ ibid.
complete works of Lucian and Chaucer together under a single generic heading suggests that the genre is, in Cherniss’s terms, something of a “literary catchall”. Payne states that, at least in the Middle Ages, didactic dialogue was one of the most common forms of Menippean Satire:

Menippean satire frequently employs a dialogue between a pair of stereotyped characters speaking from two differing, clear-cut levels of perception. One is a know-it-all who is free of the restrictions and responsibilities faced by ordinary human beings. The other, his interlocutor, has a view of man’s struggle with his human burdens different from the one the know-it-all proposes but is persuaded to listen, like it or not.

In her desire to fit the *Consolation of Philosophy* into such a category, Payne tends to see irony at every turning, exaggerating the limitations in Philosophy’s authority and reading her as a somewhat absurd, pompous figure. Cherniss’ sensitive and intelligent re-classification of such works as “Boethian Apocalypses” illuminates the ways in which such inconsistencies, limitations and ironies as do exist in Philosophy’s discourse are very much part of the Apocalypse genre to which Boethius’ work belongs. In this introductory section I will, in a sense, seek to carry on where Cherniss left off, focusing above all on Boethius’ combination of the Apocalypse genre with the Platonic / Socratic dialogue form. I will suggest that the limitations of scope and authority inherent in the Apocalypse genre are also very much present in the dialogue form, and demonstrate that Boethius’ fusion of the two made for a form with a great deal of potential for irony, satire and ambiguity. I will seek to avoid falling into the trap of seeking out ironies in the *Consolatio* where there are none to be found. My focus will be not so much on the comic elements in the *Consolatio* as on the potential for irony which its form afforded to other texts.

**Part II: Plato’s Socratic Dialogues and their Erotic Structure**

In his otherwise excellent study of Boethius’ use of the dialogue as literary form, Seth Lerer is rather cursory in his treatment of Plato as a writer of dialogues. He contrasts Plato to Cicero, suggesting that Plato’s belief that dialectic could lead to knowledge of the forms meant that he was less interested than Cicero in the drama of dialogue itself – with the “dynamic of disputation”. He quotes an article by F.M. Cornford which argues that the different stages of argument are “mere stepping-stones which are kicked away in the ascent to correct

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8 Cherniss 1987, 31.
10 Lerer 1985, 36.
definition.”¹¹ I would tend to disagree - and would not be alone in doing so - that Plato was uninterested in the dramatic nature of dialogue. Plato’s dialogues would surely lack much of the literary and dramatic power which accounts for their enduring popularity if they were not replete with the tension which arises from an encounter between two or more different human beings. In this study, I will take Plato, rather than Cicero, as my main pre-Boethian point of reference, because I intend to focus primarily on the Platonic link between dialogue and Eros, which will prove particularly relevant in exploring the use of the dialogue form in love literature. I would argue that understanding “what Boethius really did” with the dialogues of Plato who, whilst not the inventor of the Socratic dialogue form, was surely its best-known and most influential proponent, is fundamental to understanding what Medieval authors “really did” with Boethius. I will follow Lerer in also taking into account the later dialogues of Augustine and Fulgentius and the ways in which they compare to Boethius’ adaptation of the form. Like Cherniss, I will also pay special attention to Boethius’ use of the Apocalypse genre. I will suggest that Boethius’ combination of Socratic dialogue with Apocalypse was among the primary motivating factors for the repeated use of the form for ironic purposes by later authors.

Plato’s Socrates is profoundly mistrustful of monologue in any form. Indeed, during his Apology, where he is forced, for once, to make a lengthy speech in front of an assembled crowd, he repeatedly expresses a considerable degree of discomfort about the situation in which he finds himself, and his condemnation to death is, to some extent, blamed upon the jury’s refusal to engage with him in his own favoured manner:

All these people, who have tried to set you against me out of envy and love of slander – and some too merely passing on what they have been told by others – all these are very difficult to deal with. It is impossible to bring them here for cross-examination; one simply has to conduct one’s defence and argue one’s case against an invisible opponent, because there is no one to answer […] Very well, then, I must begin my defence, gentlemen, and I must try, in the short time that I have, to rid your minds of a false impression which is the work of many years. I should like this to be the result, gentlemen, assuming it to be for your advantage and my own; and I should like to be successful in my defence, but I think that it will be difficult, and I am quite aware of the nature of my task.¹²

He remarks that had he not refused to perform the kind of emotive rhetorical display expected in the courtroom he might have been spared his life:

¹¹ ibid.
¹² Hamilton and Cairns eds. 1969, 18D-19A.
It is not a lack of arguments that has caused my condemnation, but a lack of effrontery and impudence, and the fact that I have refused to address you in the way which would give you most pleasure. You would have liked to hear me weep and wail, doing and saying all sorts of things which I regard as unworthy of myself, but which you are used to hearing from other people.\textsuperscript{13}

Of course, Socrates is here above all justifying his refusal to beg for a pardon. However, I would argue that he is also referring more generally to the genre of emotive rhetorical fireworks which one would expect in a courtroom. The court would have expected Socrates to deliver an extended rhetorical monologue, appealing to the emotions, not to the intellect. Such a monologic form was anathema to Socrates, for whom communication is all about the teacher’s profound dissection of what the student “knows”. Platonic dialogue rests on the theory that knowledge cannot be taught – cannot be expounded monologically to the student. Knowledge of the Good, for Plato, is not learned, but remembered.\textsuperscript{14} In a number of dialogues, Plato has Socrates present a theory that all the knowledge we can ever have is latent within us. Most notably, in the \textit{Meno}, Socrates leads an uneducated slave to expound a complex mathematical theorem by asking him a series of questions. As Seeskin puts it, such a theory of knowledge means that “teaching” aims to “draw” the pupil “out” and not “fill” him or her “in”\textsuperscript{15} (it is perhaps worth noting that the Latin etymology of our modern verb “educate” – “ex-ducare” – indeed suggests the latter rather than the former of these two definitions of teaching). Monologic, expository prose will simply not do. It can sway the individual student’s will through rhetorical flair and the apparent authority of the speaker, yet there can be no guarantee that the student has really, deep down within his or her soul, grasped, recognised and recollected the point being made. Thus when, at a certain point in the dialogue to which he gives his name, Protagoras grows impatient with Socrates and asks him to “get to the point” even though he has not fully recognised one of the premises on which the dialogue’s conclusion will be based, Socrates rebukes him, saying that to do so would be to go against the principles of the dialogue process, which he clearly deems vital if the “point” is ever to be fully comprehended:

I don’t think it is quite so simple, Socrates. I can’t really admit that justice is holy and holiness just; I think there is some difference there. However, he said, what does it matter? If you like, let us assume that justice is holy and holiness just.

\textsuperscript{13}ibid. 38D.

\textsuperscript{14} For an analysis of Plato’s theory of innate knowledge, see Seeskin 1987, 117-35.

\textsuperscript{15} ibid. 7.
Excuse me, I said. It isn’t this “if you like” and “if that’s what you think” that I want to examine, but you and me ourselves.\footnote{16 Hamilton and Cairns eds. 1969, 331C.}

Indeed, dialogue can only take place if “you and me ourselves” – i.e. teacher and pupil – are profoundly in tune with each other, and it can only operate on the level at which the student is able to fully understand and engage with proceedings. Protagoras cannot move on and Socrates cannot “get to the point” until this particular stage in their discussion has been fully surmounted. This need for gradual progression – the need, to borrow the Latin term used frequently in Lerer’s study, to move systematically from one “gradus” or step to another\footnote{17 Lerer points out the recurrence of forms of the word “gradus” in dialogue texts. “Gradus” is “a commonplace metaphor for the struggle through life or education”. It also, significantly, represents “the process of verbal argument: the steps towards reason and belief effected through dialectical disputation and the mastery of invention and judgement.” (Lerer 1985, 99).} – is reflected both in the structure of Socratic \textit{elenchus} in its movement from one question to the next and, as Kahn’s analysis of Plato’s dialogues illustrates, in the development through the three stages of Plato’s dialogues. The central thesis of Kahn’s study, \textit{Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form} is that many of the questions which arise but remain unanswered in the earlier aporetic dialogues (i.e. \textit{Laches}, \textit{Charmides}, \textit{Euthypro}, \textit{Protagoras}, \textit{Meno} and \textit{Lysis}) are dealt with more fully in the more conclusive dialogues of the “middle” and “later” periods. \textit{Aporia} is a necessary preliminary to the positive progress to be made in the learning process. Negative \textit{elenchus} leading to \textit{aporia} is “the first stage of education, which must purify the mind of opinions that prevent learning, and in particular the opinion that one knows what one does not know”.\footnote{18 Kahn 1996.} This process is illustrated in the \textit{Meno}. As Seeskin points out, at the beginning of his dialogue with the slave-boy in the \textit{Meno}, Socrates seems to almost deliberately lead the boy into a trap – into thinking that to double the area of a square we need to double the area of its sides. At this juncture, Socrates explains his method to Meno with a certain edge of triumph in his voice,\footnote{19 Plato, \textit{Meno}, 82E, cf. Seeskin 1987, 98-9.} which seems misplaced, considering that, for the time being he has done nothing but exacerbate the boy’s error and confusion. Of course, for Socrates, the boy must recognise his state of error and ignorance before he can proceed with the process of true recollection.

As Kahn illustrates, Plato’s late and most explicitly didactic dialogues differ from their predecessors above all in and as a result of Plato’s choice of student figures. In the \textit{Phaedrus}, Plato is highly critical of the written word, arguing...
that oral dialogue is the only way one can truly impart knowledge. A book cannot respond to interrogation and therefore cannot provide the clarification required by the individual student. Its words “can neither speak in their own defence nor present the truth adequately”. Moreover it cannot, as a good dialogic teacher should, adapt its discourse to its listeners. It can only say the same thing in the same way, regardless of its audience:

[Books] go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn’t know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong.

These problems extend to Plato’s own works which, although written in the form of an “oral” dialogic exchange reach us in book form. Highly aware of these limitations, Plato knew that his books could only ever communicate (if he was lucky) with a limited group of individuals at any one time. This can explain the greater accessibility and literary appeal of Plato’s early and middle dialogues, which are intended to convert the layman to philosophy and as a consequence are written in a more accessible style and take non-philosophers as their interlocutors. Kahn writes,

If we assume that Plato’s practice, throughout his literary career, corresponds grosso modo to the rhetorical theory of the Phaedrus, it follows that the philosophical content of each dialogue is adapted to the personality and understanding of the interlocutors. With this in mind it is easy to see that much of Plato’s work, from the Laches, Charmides, and Protagoras to the Meno and Symposium, can be conceived as a sustained protreptic to philosophy. As the choice of interlocutors indicates, Plato’s intended audience for these dialogues includes not only professional philosophers and beginners in philosophy but also the general public, and in particular the young men in search of themselves, in search of knowledge, or in search of a career, men who in the fifth century would have sat at the feet of the Sophists and who in Plato’s own day might be tempted by the lessons of Isocrates or Antisthenes. To attract these young men and to assure Socratic philosophy a place of honour and respect within Greek culture as a whole, Plato employed his talents lavishly to create a vivid, imposing portrait of Socrates, in works of such high literary quality that they would be guaranteed a broad and on the whole sympathetic audience.

This stage or “gradus” of his literary career passed, and ready to move on to more difficult, complex issues and address a yet narrower audience, Plato wrote

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20 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276C.
21 ibid. 375D.
22 Kahn 1996, 381.
the Parmenides, Thaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Timaeus, and Philebus, works where all parties in the dialogue are philosophers and in which, therefore, “Plato can deploy rigorous argument and elaborate technical method […] The intellectual tone […] is almost that of a philosophy seminar”.23 Whilst the dialogue method is still used, it is subject to none of the hiccups and stumbling blocks evident in the earlier dialogues. On the other hand, dialogue in these later works is somewhat wooden and much less dynamic, with the teacher figure delivering what could easily have been a lecture and the pupil doing little more than energetically supporting and assenting to all that is said.

However, even at this most advanced level of its progress, dialogue can only ever take us so far. It is limited by the intellectual and imaginative range of teacher and pupil and, potentially, by the linguistic medium to which it is confined. Whilst the Phaedrus analyses the limitations of the written word over the spoken, the Seventh Epistle treats of the limitations of language in general. Although his main purpose in this letter is to criticise Dionysius II of Sicily for writing about subjects on which Plato had taught him, and which Plato clearly felt he had failed to understand, the letter’s critique potentially extends even to the oral dialogues which Plato and his pupil carried out and, indeed, to human understanding in general. He argues that our relationship to “the actual object of knowledge which is the true reality” consists in and is dependent upon four “entities” — “first, a name, second, a description, third, an image, and fourth, a knowledge of the object”.24 The object of knowledge in its true form is an entirely separate “fifth entity”.25 This is basically the same point that is made through the cave allegory in the Republic, where Plato argues that the prisoners in the cave would be wrong to connect the words they use to name things with the shadows they see on the walls. The true objects which the prisoners signify by their words are completely invisible to them and can be accessed only through the application of the intellect.26 In the Seventh Epistle, Plato betrays a greater degree of scepticism than anywhere else in his oeuvre as to the possibility that such a true knowledge of the forms and therefore such a true use of language can ever be attained to. Analysing the “four entities”, he concludes:

Names, I maintain, are in no case stable. Nothing prevents the things that are now called round from being called straight, and the straight round, and those who have transposed the names and use them in the opposite way will find them no less stable than they are now. The same thing for that matter is true of a description, since it consists of nouns and of verbal expressions, so that in a

23 ibid. 381.
24 Plato, Seventh Epistle, 342B.
25 ibid.
26 Plato The Republic, Book Seven.
description there is nowhere any sure ground that is sure enough. One might, however, speak forever about the inaccurate character of each of the four […] The result of this is to make practically every man a prey to complete perplexity and uncertainty […] Consideration of all of the four in turn – moving up and down from one to another – barely begets knowledge of a naturally flawless object in a naturally flawless man. If a man is naturally defective – and this is the natural state of most people’s minds with regard to intelligence and to what are called morals – while the objects he inspects are tainted with imperfection, not even Lyneus could make such a one see.27

Here Plato underlines the intense difficulty of ever using language correctly – even for the “naturally flawless man”. He expresses profound doubts as to the “teachability” of the “naturally defective” majority of the population.

It is for this reason that, even the middle and later, apparently more conclusive dialogues tend to be ambiguous and unsatisfactory: some degree of aporia is always present. Thus, for example, it is well-nigh impossible to reconcile all the various expressions of the doctrine of the Forms which crop up across Plato’s oeuvre with a fully coherent theory. As Kahn writes:

The classic doctrine of Forms, as developed in the Phaedo and Republic, is subjected to rigorous criticism by Plato himself in the Parmenides; and the objections raised against it there are never directly answered. The Forms have practically disappeared from Plato’s attempt to define knowledge in the Theaetetus, and when they reappear in the Sophist, Philebus, and Timaeus, it is not clear to what extent the conception of the Forms is actually the same. A further problem is precisely one of identity: is there a single theory that is formulated in the Symposium, Phaedo, Cratylus, Republic, and Phaedrus, to mention only the dialogues of Plato’s “middle” period in which the classic doctrine of Forms is to be found? The statements of this doctrine are so diverse and so programmatic that it is hard to know whether we can properly reconstruct a single coherent theory underlying all of these formulations.28

Moreover, whilst Plato probably expected his readers to see the wisdom of Socrates’ arguments, Socrates himself rarely succeeds in convincing and permanently converting his students. As Seeskin points out

For all of his efforts, Socrates never does persuade anyone to alter his life. His closest associates, Critias and Alcibiades, became a disgrace to the city. Meno went on to a life of treachery in Asia Minor and was executed. Laches and Nicias both met with misfortune. Neither Gorgias nor Protagoras was moved to abandon sophistry and pursue philosophy. Worst of all, his longtime companion Crito accused him of cowardice for not breaking the law (Crito 45c ff.) – thereby

27 Plato, Seventh Epistle, 343B-44A.
proving that he missed the whole point of Socrates’ speech to the jury. Callicles sums up the feeling of most respondents when, after hearing Socrates discourse on how to live a life, he says (Gorgias 513c): “I don’t know why but somehow what you say strikes me as right, Socrates, and yet I feel as most people do: you don’t quite convince me.”

Too many of Socrates’ pupils and Plato’s potential readers seem to reflect Plato’s criticism of Dionysius II:

As for those, however, who are not genuine converts to philosophy, but have only a superficial tinge of doctrine – like the coat of tan that people get in the sun – as soon as they see how many subjects there are to study, how much hard work they involve, and how indispensable it is for the project to adopt a well-ordered scheme of living, they decide that the plan is difficult if not impossible for them, and so they really do not prove capable of practising philosophy.

The execution of Socrates, perversely condemned for the Sophistry he spent most of his career seeking to combat, lies on the horizon of all the Socratic dialogues. Indeed, the trial and execution of Socrates were treated of in what appear to have been among the first of his dialogues – the Apology, the Crito - and in the Phaedo which, though probably a little later still falls into the “early” period. Profiting from T.S. Eliot’s inimitable way of putting things, one might say that Socrates’ “end” is in his “beginning”, his “beginning” in his “end”. We are never allowed to forget that failure, misunderstanding and death lie at the end of the Socratic pilgrimage: there is, as Seeskin puts it, a “sense of impending tragedy” throughout Plato’s œuvre.

One of the recurrent motifs in Plato’s writing can serve both as a kind of metaphor for this process and as an explanation as to why so many medieval writers chose to use a version of this form to write about love. Eros is discussed in the prologue to the Lysis, in the Symposium and in the Phaedrus. Of these works the Symposium is of particular interest as a source of potential parallels between the Socratic dialogue process and the erotic movement. In this text Eros is described as “something which comes between” the “learned” and the “ignorant”, the “beautiful” and the “ugly”. The first point proved in Diotima’s argument is that Eros is not a god. His very being is characterised by need and desire for the Good and the Beautiful (which are more or less the same thing for Plato, inasmuch as true beauty is a facet of the Good). The gods, by

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29 Seeskin 1987, 14.
30 Plato, Seventh Epistle, 341D-E.
31 Seeskin 1987, 13.
32 Plato, Symposium 202A.
contrast, already possess “the Beautiful and the Good”. Eros is a state of perpetually aspiring towards, yet inevitably falling away from, the divine One. However, Eros is not mortal, either. Diotima defines him as a spirit, an intermediary between the human and the divine:

[Eros is] halfway between mortal and immortal. And what do you mean by that, Diotima? A very powerful spirit, Socrates, and spirits, you know, are half-way between god and man. What powers do they have, then?, I asked. They are the envoys and interpreters that ply between heaven and earth, flying upward with our worship and our prayers, and descending with the heavenly answers and commandments, and since they are between the two estates they weld both sides together and merge them into one great whole […] for the divine will not mingle directly with the human, and it is only through the mediation of the spirit world that man can have any intercourse, whether waking or sleeping, with the gods.34

Many critics, from Ficino onwards, have noted the parallelisms between Eros and Socrates himself.35 Indeed, as a “teacher” (to use a word Socrates himself would have scorned) of Platonic / Socratic philosophy, Socrates acts as an intermediary between the realm of Ideas, to which he seeks to awaken his students, and the students themselves. Eros lies not only midway between the human and the divine, between the beautiful and the ugly - he also bears a remarkable resemblance to Socrates in situating himself midway between knowledge and ignorance:

Love is never altogether in or out of need, and stands, moreover, midway between ignorance and wisdom. You must understand that none of the gods are seekers after truth. They do not long for wisdom, because they are wise – and why should the wise be seeking the wisdom that is already theirs? Nor, for that matter, do the ignorant seek the truth or crave to be made wise. And, indeed, what makes their case so hopeless is that, having neither beauty, nor goodness, nor intelligence, they are satisfied with what they are, and do not long for the virtues they have never missed.

Then tell me, Diotima, I said, who are these seekers after truth, if they are neither the wise nor the ignorant? Why, a schoolboy, she replied, could have told you that, after what I’ve just been saying. They are those that come between the two, and one of them is love.

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For wisdom is concerned with the loveliest of things, and Love is the love of what is lovely. And so it follows that Love is a lover of wisdom, and, being such, he is placed between wisdom and ignorance – for which his parentage also is responsible, in that his father is full of wisdom and resource, while his mother is devoid of either.36

Here, the love of Beauty and the love of Truth / Knowledge are closely associated. Erotic desire at its highest and purest level is essentially the Socratic quest for true knowledge, as dramatised in the dialogues. Socrates resembles Eros above all in his recognition of his ignorance and his strong desire to do something about it. In the Apology, Socrates justifies his pursuit of a philosophical life, by recounting how the Delphic Oracle once told him there was no one alive wiser than himself. Baffled by this proclamation, since he considered himself ignorant, Socrates visited and spoke to a number of people famed for their wisdom, coming away each time with the conviction that they were just as ignorant as himself, but were lacking, however, in his consciousness of that ignorance. He concluded that the Oracle’s statement was based above all on Socrates’ knowledge of his own ignorance and of the worthlessness of all human knowledge, which is the highest degree of knowledge to be attained by human beings in this world:

I made myself spokesman for the oracle, and asked myself whether I would rather be as I was – neither wise with their wisdom nor stupid with their stupidity – or possess both qualities as they did. I replied through myself to the oracle, that it was best for me to be as I was […] Whenever I succeed in disproving another person’s claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself. But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realised, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is worthless.37

Eros is the son of Need and Resourcefulness. He is condemned to a permanent state of neediness, yet employs all his considerable energies and ingenuity to find his way out of this quandary. This mixture of aspiration, brilliance and apparent progress with ultimate futility is characteristic of Socratic dialogue as it has been defined in this section.

At this point, it is worth pre-empting an attack which might be made on the approach I have taken so far in this study. Western writers in the Middle Ages of course had no direct access to Plato’s writings, except for a Latin translation

36 Plato, Symposium, 204A-B.
37 Plato, Apology, 22E-3B.
of the first part of the *Timaeus*. Whilst a great many Platonic modes of thought and ideas no doubt filtered through to them, Medieval writers will not have been able to closely scrutinise the dialogue form as it was used in Plato’s work. However, a number of Latin authors in the Middle Ages, among whom the most influential were probably Augustine and Boethius himself, had a deep and thorough awareness of Plato’s philosophical methods which was reflected in, and thus carried forward into the Middle Ages through their own writings. Augustine’s *De Magistro* provided a fine example of the Socratic question and answer technique, together with the theory of recollection:

> Velut si abs te quaererem hoc ipsum quod agitur, utrumnam verbis doceri nihil possit, et absurdum tam primo videretur non valenti totum conspicere: sic ergo quaerere oportuit, ut tuae sese vires habeas ad audiendum illum magistrum, ut dicerem, Ea quae me loquente vera esse confiteris, et certus es, et te illa nosse confirmas, unde didicisti? responderes fortasse quod ego docuisset. Tum ego subnecterem: Quid si me hominem volantem vidisse dicerem, itace te certum verba ma redderent, quemadmodum si audires sapientes homines stultis esse meliores? Negares profecto et respondere s, illud te non credere, aut etiamsi crederes ignorare, hoc autem certissime scire. Ex hoc jam nimium intelligeres, neque in illo quod me affirmante ignorares, neque in hoc quod optime scires, aliquid te didicisse verbis meis; quandoquidem etiam interrogatus de singulis, et illud ignotum, et hoc tibi notum esse jurares.38

As in Plato’s dialogues, the “teacher” should not here be concerned with “teaching”, in the sense of transmitting knowledge to the student. His or her task is rather to awaken something already latent within the student through a process of question and answer. Ratio’s method in Augustine’s *Soliloquia* is

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38Augustine 1886 (b) XII.40 [I could ask you, on the basis of the subject with which we are currently concerned, if nothing can be taught with words, and the question would at first seem absurd to you, because you would be incapable of fully grasping the question in its entirety. It would therefore be opportune that, bearing in mind your capacity to respond to your inner *magister*, I asked you: “From whom have you learnt the things which, while I am speaking, you recognise to be true, of which you are certain and which you confirm knowing? You would perhaps answer that you have learnt them from me. I would therefore pose the question, “And if I told you that a man could fly, would such a statement convince you as fully as the statement that the wise are superior to the stupid”. You, surely, would deny it and would respond that you do not believe the first statement or, even if you were to believe it, that you have no knowledge of it, whilst you knew the truth of the second statement with certainty. Thus you would realise that you have learnt nothing from my words – neither about what you didn’t know, whilst I affirmed its truth, nor about that which you knew perfectly; because, were you to be interrogated on the two subjects separately, you would swear that the first was known and the second unknown.”] (my translation).
likewise closely modelled on Socratic *elenchus*.\(^{39}\) Thus, although Medieval writers were not familiar with the conventions of Platonic writing from the texts I have cited above, they will certainly have had an indirect knowledge of those conventions and thus have been fully equipped with the knowledge to compare Socratic dialogue technique to the kind of hybrid form created by Boethius.

**Part III: From Plato to Boethius**

When he wrote the *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Boethius adopted a great number of the Platonic / Socratic conventions outlined above. The key points on which he differs from Plato often reflect the influence of several post-Socratic but pre-Boethian philosophical and literary works. Firstly, Boethius replaced Socrates, a human interlocutor, with a personification: Philosophia. A precedent for many such personifications was to be found in the notion of the mind as divided up into diverse and potentially conflicting agents, which appears in a number of occasions in Plato’s *oeuvre*. Most famously, in the *Phaedrus*, we find the soul depicted as a chariot driven by Reason and pulled by Appetite and Spirit. Whilst Spirit is docile and naturally follows rational impulses, Appetite is unruly and can lead the chariot far from its true course. He must be humbled and chastised until he learns to obey his driver, Reason.\(^{40}\) This motif of the will being, in some sense, personified in the role of the student and one of its higher rational powers being placed in the role of the teacher will prove recurrent in the texts examined in this study. In his *Soliloquia*, which may well have influenced Boethius’ text, Augustine presents himself as engaging in a dialogue with his own Reason, in which Ratio takes on the role of teacher, leading his pupil on the right path. At the beginning of this work, when he introduces his interlocutor, Augustine makes a very interesting point on the strange mixture of the individual and the universal which characterises such internal dialogues. Saying that he heard a voice, he tells us,

\[
\text{sive ego ipse sive alius quis, extrinsecus sive intrinsecus, nescio; nam hoc ipsum est quod magis scire molior.}^{41}\]

To what extent is Ratio symbolic and representative of universal reason, and to what extent does he simply constitute Augustine’s own reasoning powers? And how much difference is there between the two? In his analysis of the Middle

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\(^{39}\) cf. Augustine 1866 (d).

\(^{40}\) Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246A-B: 253ff.

\(^{41}\) Augustine 1866 (d), 2-3 [Whether it was I myself, or someone else, whether it was outside of me or within me, I just do not know, and this is exactly what I would like to know most of all] – Translation adapted from Rotelle, ed. Paffenroth, trans. 1999.
English *Pearl*, which I will look at in “Chapter Three” of this study, Theodore Bogdanos provides some fine comments on the kinds of tensions set up by such a dialogue:

By isolating and objectifying this aspect of the self, the allegorical author attains to a purer definition of the forces contending within the dreamer. Yet he aims at something more than a delineation of the hero’s inner self. The ambiguity of the figure’s identity and her dual dimension as external and internal force are a vitalizing artistic means as well, because of the ontological and spatial paradox involved. The reader is asked to maintain a taut parallel awareness of both dimensions – a simultaneously cosmic and personal-interior view of the figure’s true nature.42

The position of such personified guides is, therefore, somewhat like that of *Eros* – somewhere between the individual, transient and human and the universal, eternal and divine.

The potential “risk” that such personifications run stems from their embodiment of a certain characteristic of the human psyche in general and, possibly, of one human psyche in particular. When we come to look at later works imitating Boethius, I will show how the replacement of Philosophia with a quite obviously misplaced Esperance or a rather despotic Cupid(ity) radically destabilises the hierarchical dialogue form. When a writer deals in personifications, such as Philosophia and Fortuna, there is always a possibility that the work will be read as an unresolved *psychomachia*, an inconclusive horizontal debate between two equally matched opponents. In Boethius’ case, this risk is minimal. However, later writers in the tradition frequently took advantage of this latent potential for ambiguity. Philosophia is portrayed, if not ironically, nonetheless as an ultimately limited figure. Her limitations do not lie, as Payne would have it, in her inability to fully recognise and satisfactorily deal with Boethius’ historical, worldly complaints. Boethius would surely have attributed these failings to her worldly pupil, not to Philosophia herself. Instead, as Cherniss writes, Philosophia is limited because

as pure, rational thought, she is unable to provide certain kinds of transcendent, theological answers to Boethius’ earthly problems.43

Her shortcomings are those of reason and language – the same limitations faced by Socratic dialogue in general.

These limitations – potential and real – are also shared by the visionary Apocalypse genre which Boethius combines with the Socratic dialogue form in

43 Cherniss 1987, 33.
the Consolatio. The conventions, limitations, and ambiguities of Medieval
dream / vision poetry have already been studied extensively, perhaps most
significantly by A.C. Spearing.44 I will therefore limit myself here to examining
the ways in which Boethius’ combination of this form with the didactic dialogue
could have influenced later writers. The Greek apocalypsis and the Latin
revelatio both mean “unveiling”. In the context of works such as Hermes
Trismegistus’ Poimandres or Cicero’s Somnium Scipionis, this process consists
primarily in unveiling truths in the mind of the student and in removing the
barriers which impede his or her perception of those truths – in releasing the
student from the platonic cave. Cherniss provides a fine analysis of how
Boethius’ Consolatio can be said to adapt this genre. He suggests that Boethius’
use of the form reflects the influence of both Cicero’s Somnium Scipionis
(which appears in Book VI of Cicero’s De Republica) and of Macrobius’
commentary on that work. Perhaps the most interesting element which Boethius
took from Cicero’s Somnium Scipionis is that work’s repeated use of motifs
connected to vision. Scipio initially fails to recognise his grandfather, and is
fearful upon realising who is before him:

Hic mihi […] Africanus se ostendit ea forma, quae mihi ex imagine eius quam
ex ipso erat notior; quem ubi agnovi, equidem cohorrui.45

Looking and not looking are important motifs throughout the Somnium.
Africanus repeatedly rebukes his grandson that when they are up in the heavens
he persists in gazing down towards the earth:

“Quaeser,” – inquit Africanus – “quousque humi defixa tua mens erit? Nonne
aspicis, quae in templis veneris ?”46

Boethius borrows and intensifies this theme. Like Scipio, he initially fails to
recognise his comforter and, in his fear, casts his eyes down so that he cannot
see her. His inability to recognise his teacher is associated with blindness
caused by the “veil of tears” before his eyes:

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44Spearing 1976.
45 Stok 1993, 42 [I dreamt that Africanus was standing before me … My grandfather’s
appearance was better known to me from his portrait-mask than from my memories of
translations from the Somnium Scipionis and from Macrobius’ Commentary will be taken
from this edition.
46 ibid. 17 [“How long will your thoughts continue to dwell upon earth”, asked Africanus.
“Do you not behold the regions [lit. skies / temples] to which you have come?”], Stahl,
72-3.
At ego, cuius acies lacrimis mersa caligaret nec dinoscere possem quaenam haec esset mulier tam imperiosae auctoritatis, obstupui uisuque in terram defixo quidnam deinceps esset actura exspectare tacitus coepi.47

Throughout the Consolatio, Philosohia is presented as a medic, curing her patient of blindness:

Sed medicinae, inquit, tempus est quam querelae […] Sui paulisper oblitus est. Recordabitur facile, si quidem nos ante cognouerit; quod ut possit, paulisper lumina eius mortalium rerum nube caligantia tergamus. Haec dixit oculosque meos fletibus undantes contracta in rugam ueste siccuit.48

This emphasis on the visual will prove especially interesting when we come to consider the ways in which Boethian conventions were adapted in courtly love literature. Courtly love, I will suggest, was conceived of and represented in highly visual terms, with the lover’s mental image of the lady rather than the lady herself as its main focal point. As I will demonstrate in “Part One, the lady was typically set up as a kind of “idol of the mind” by her poet-lover. A strong motive behind the number of imitations of Boethius in courtly love literature may well be the fact that the dialogue in the Consolatio essentially represents the toppling of one such female “idol” (Fortuna) by another (Philosophia). Both of these female figures are presented in highly visual terms and surrounded by abundant imagery – we need only think of Philosophia’s torn dress with the rich symbolism of its embroidery and of Fortuna’s ever-turning wheel. Boethius can thus be said to have picked up on and intensified the erotic nature of Platonic dialogue, by feminising the knowledge which the philosopher lusts after.

The second significant influence mentioned by Cherniss is Macrobius’ Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis. As Cherniss points out, the Commentarii is of interest above all in demarcating the potential limitations of the Apocalypse form. Whilst defending the use of the narratio fabulosa to deal with holy matters, Macrobius emphasises that such narratives are an unsuitable vehicle for treating of the highest and supreme God (tagathon), the First Cause (proton aition) or the Supreme Mind or Intellect (nous). The human intellect cannot

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47 Boethius 1977 and 1999 I Prosa i. [Chaucer’s translation: “And I, of whom the sighte, plongid in teeres, was dirked so that Y ne myghte noght knowen what that woman was of so imperial auctorite, I wax al abayssc hed and astoned, and caste my syghte doun to the erthe, and bygan stille for to abide what sche woolde doon afterward.”]

48 Boethius 1977 and 1999 I Prosa ii [Chaucer’s Translation: “But tyme is now”, quod sche, “of medicyne more than of compleynte … He hath a litil foryeten hymselfe, but certes he schal lightly remembren himself yif so be that he hath knouen me or now; and that he may so doon, I will wipe a litil his eien that ben dirked by the cloude of mortel thynges”. Thise woordes seide sche, and with the lappe of hir garnement yplited in a frownce sche dryede myn eien, that weren fulle of the wawes of my wepynges.”]
grasp such truths and they cannot be satisfactorily expressed in language. He argues that this kind of narrative is only suitable for dealing with the multiple lesser gods, or with spirits. Plato, of course, defined Eros as a spirit, and I have already noted how, in Boethius, Philosophy and Fortuna are personified, making them into conflicting gods / idols. Apocalyptic visions, then, even at their most elevated and authoritarian, can never entirely transcend the realm of diversity and appearance – they can never fully attain to the highest truths which would fully resolve all doubts and ambiguities. Macrobius’ classification of the five different kinds of dream, which formed the cornerstone of medieval dream theory exacerbates the reader’s sense of hermeneutic insecurity when studying these works. Although Boethius’ vision falls squarely into one of the authoritative categories (it is an “oraculum”), the fact that he presents his dialogue in such a guise means that other texts imitating his work were subject to the same Macrobian test. As Spearing has well illustrated, the existence of the two unreliable kinds of dream – the *insomnia* or nightmare and the *phantasma* or apparition – was used by many medieval writers to undermine the authority of the visions and exchanges presented, creating dream situations which were comic, ironic, surreal or disturbing. It is surely significant that Macrobius actually gives the fevered fantasies of one in love as an example of the *insomnia*.51

Another significant contrast between Boethian dialogue and its Platonic ancestry lies in the number of lengthy monologues in the text. As I have already mentioned, Socrates was profoundly uncomfortable when required to make a speech in his own defence at his trial. When lengthy monologues do take place in Plato’s dialogues, they usually take the form of rather fantastic narratives, dealing with the other-worldly or mythical, such as the famous creation myth at the end of *Timaeus*, the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*, or Socrates’ lengthy exposition of the nature of Eros in the *Phaedrus*. Both of these myths provide a far more detailed exposition of the realm of true “being” and knowledge lying outside the illusory “cave” of transient mortal life than is ever reached through the methodical, gradual ascent of the question and answer method. From a certain point of view, then, these lengthy narrative monologues would seem to be able to reach higher than the dominant Platonic dialogue form. For Plato mythical narratives are a way of expounding truths which lie beyond the grasp of reasoning abstraction. However, because they are supra-rational, they are unverifiable. We can either accept their authority with a kind of religious faith, or deny it all together. Being extra-rational, these stories are further impeded by the limitations of language, and necessarily resort to the

49 Stahl 1952, 85-6.
50 ibid. 88.
51 ibid.
evocative power of complex, figurative allegory in an attempt to reach beyond words. These myths, for Plato, whilst representing a necessary vehicle for supra-rational, in some sense religious truths, are inevitably steeped in ambiguity and uncertainty.  

Philosophia uses monologue for much broader, more general purposes, and seems far less sceptical as to its efficacy. Indeed, in the Consolation the passage from dialogue to monologue suggests a passage to a higher level of rational understanding, not a movement beyond reason. Seth Lerer illustrates the differences between instances of silence and of monologue in the opening and closing books of Boethius’ The Consolation of Philosophy, suggesting that the more monologic mode of the work’s concluding sections is a sign of progress on the student’s part. In Book One, the Boethian narrator’s opening lyric complaint (I.metrum i.1-22) and his lengthy monologic catalogue of his woes (I.prosa iv. and metrum iv) represent the utterances of a misguided subjectivity. Dialogue must be introduced in order to return to objective reasoning. Book Two of the Consolation is mainly a monologue by Lady Philosophy, during which the Boethian narrator intervenes, briefly, on only four occasions. Locked into his own subjectivity and despair, the Boethian narrator is not yet ready to sustain dialogue. The absence of dialogue here marks a failing on his part, for which Philosophia tries to compensate through the many rhetorical questions which punctuate her discourse. By the beginning of Book Three, some progress has been made, since the prisoner is now able to keep up a sustained question-answer dialogue with his teacher. Significantly, by Book Five, the prisoner’s voice has once again disappeared. That Philosophia speaks in monologue here, however, does not mark a shortcoming in the teaching process. It rather means that the barriers between Philosophia and her pupil have been eliminated. Philosophia is, after all, essentially Boethius’ own knowledge of philosophy. At the beginning of the work, he is separated from her because his despair has cast away his reason. Now that Boethius’ reason and philosophical awareness have been reawakened, she has been reintegrated into him and he into her. Boethius and Philosophia no longer speak with two separate voices.

As Lerer points out, Boethius’ presentation of the concluding and most complex elements of his doctrine in monologic form can be said to reflect the Aristotelian preference for demonstration over dialectic. In the Posterior Analytics, Aristotle clearly associates dialectic (or at least the kind of dialectic of which he is critical) with oral question and answer dialogue. In the Sophistical Refutations, he writes that

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52 For a detailed study of Plato’s use of myth, see Brisson 2001.
53 Lerer 1985, 236.
deception occurs more commonly when we are inquiring with others than by ourselves (for an enquiry with someone else is carried out by means of words, whereas in our minds it is carried on by means of the thing itself). 54

In the *Posterior Analytics*, he argues that “the interrogative method is barred to the demonstrator.” 55 As is often the case with Aristotelian arguments, at least in the form in which they have come down to us, Aristotle’s use of his terms is rather slippery, and continues to cause a fair deal of philosophical controversy even today. There would not be space to wade into this philosophical quagmire in this chapter, nor would I feel qualified to do so. However, Aristotle’s basic point seems to be that question-answer dialogues which dialectically set one point of view up against another can only deal in opinions, not in absolute knowledge. Aristotle differs from Plato in that he does not present knowledge as innate. In a dialogue, therefore, a student will affirm the truth of a proposition, not because he knows it is true, but because he believes it to be true. True demonstration through syllogism, by contrast, deals in premises that are “true in every instance of [their subjects]” and “essential”. 56 The bare building-blocks of knowledge, for Aristotle, are passively perceived by the senses. Demonstrative knowledge can be induced by forming syllogisms with these. Demonstrative reasoning differs from dialectic because, whereas dialectic is based on both sides of an argument – one potentially true (or the vision of the teacher) and one potentially false (or the vision of the student) – demonstration deals only in the true. Unlike dialectic, which can be applied to all fields, demonstration is specialised: only geometers can reason demonstratively about geometry, only mathematicians about mathematics. 57 This is because of Aristotle’s theory that knowledge is built up rather than drawn out. Although the “immediate” premises which form the building blocks of language are unmistakable once apprehended and stored in the memory, 58 the universal premises needed to conduct an argument on one scientific subject may not yet have been encountered by someone specialised in another discipline. Whilst Boethius’ repeated references to memory, forgetting and internal blindness, already mentioned above, indicate that he followed Plato rather than Aristotle in presenting knowledge as innate, Philosophia does seem to move on from dialectical dialogue to more monologic, syllogistic demonstration as her pupil gradually improves as a philosopher.

54 Aristotle 1955, VII. 169b.
56 Aristotle 1949, I 4 B8r.
57 cf. ibid. I.vii. C4v-5r
58 ibid. II.ixx.13r-v.