

WORLDVIEW GUIDE

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY



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INTRODUCTION

“Count your blessings.” “It could be worse.” “The wheel of fortune.” If you’ve ever heard these phrases, you can likely thank Boethius. A high-ranking Roman official and a Christian, Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* while enduring a sudden prison sentence. The book is reminiscent of a Platonic dialogue as Boethius discusses fortune, happiness, goodness, and providence with Lady Philosophy, both a personification of wisdom and spokeswoman for the classical philosophical tradition. *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a reminder to trust in the goodness of God during desperate circumstances. Although Boethius wrote many other works of theology and philosophy, *The Consolation* was his last work before his execution in A.D. 524, and it remains his most famous and quotable.



THE WORLD AROUND

During the time Boethius wrote *The Consolation*, the world rapidly transitioned from the Roman Empire to the Medieval era. After the reign of Caesar Augustus and his degenerate heirs, the Roman Empire faced internal collapse and external attacks. Later emperors unsuccessfully attempted various reforms to revive the dying empire. However, amid centuries of economic collapse, plague, and hardship, Germanic tribes began to invade Italy. Although the Germans sacked Rome on several occasions, many historians date Rome's final fall at A.D. 476 when a Germanic ruler, Odoacer, deposed Roman emperor Romulus Augustus. The Germanic tribes, most notably the Ostrogoths, took control of Italy in the West while Roman custom survived in the East through the Byzantine empire.

Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* around A.D. 523 while awaiting trial for conspiracy against Theodoric. An Ostrogoth who had been imprisoned in the Byzantine



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius lived at the hinge between the Roman Empire and the medieval world. In fact, as “the last of the Romans and first of the scholastics,”¹ he *is* the hinge who passes on the Roman classical tradition to the medieval world—you might call him the first medieval. Although not a monarch, Boethius represents Plato’s ideal philosopher-king; he was well-gifted and trained in philosophy, possessing perfect moderation of virtue, and blessed with good fortune. The most brilliant man in Rome, he was an orator, philosopher, musician, theologian, scholar, ruler.

Boethius was born around A.D. 480 to patrician parents who died while he was young. He was raised by Quintus Aurelius Memmius Symmachus, a former consul, and later

1. Howard Patch, *The Tradition of Boethius* (Oxford: OUP, 1935), 127. Quoted in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V.E. Watts (London: Folio Society, 1998), 19. All page numbers are from the Folio edition.



WHAT OTHER NOTABLES SAID

The Consolation of Philosophy has enjoyed high praise through every age. It has been repeatedly translated into English by monarchs such as Alfred the Great and Elizabeth I, as well as by notables like Thomas More and Geoffrey Chaucer. Edward Gibbon described it as “a golden volume not unworthy of the leisure of Plato or Tully.”⁴ Bertrand Russell claimed Boethius “would have been remarkable in any age; in the age in which he lived, he is utterly amazing.”⁵

C.S. Lewis spoke highly of *The Consolation*, claiming it “was for centuries one of the most influential books ever written in Latin. ... Until about two hundred years ago it would, I think, have been hard to find an educated man in any European country who did not love it. To acquire

4. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 7 (New York: Lennox Library, 1820), 48.

5. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 347.



SETTING, CHARACTERS, AND ARGUMENT

Boethius begins his *Consolation* complaining about his sudden change in fortune. Once at the height of power, he now languishes in prison on false charges despite his righteous living. Suddenly, Lady Philosophy appears and rebukes him for his melancholy. She banishes the muses of poetry and begins to cure Boethius of his amnesia—he has forgotten his true nature, the end and purpose of the world, and the means by which God governs the universe. Book I establishes Boethius's situation and complaint, but Philosophy does not yet apply her stronger remedies because Boethius isn't ready to hear them.

She first teaches Boethius the true character of Fortune and her gifts. In Book II, Lady Philosophy presents the memorable image of Fortune's spinning wheel and reminds Boethius that Fortune has always been inconstant—this is her only constancy. Her gifts are her own,



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Boethius's situation is not hard to imagine. He was a man of talent and piety, he sought to do good to those around him, and yet he suffered for his efforts. Although he begins by making himself a martyr suffering for righteousness, Lady Philosophy quickly reminds him that life is full of transient and shifting circumstances. Fortune never ceases to spin her wheel. Despite our best efforts to secure our position, we lean over a precipice of misfortune. In a moment, someone could republish an old tweet or repeat a comment—our reputation may never recover. Our lives can change from glib to grim with the words “it’s cancer.” By the time they are forty, everyone carries around some ailment or pain that they will have to manage for the rest of their lives. We barrel down highways at sixty miles-per-hour in two-ton vehicles powered by explosions—mere feet from the semi in the oncoming lane—yet accidents seem abnormal. We do not know what tomorrow may



21 SIGNIFICANT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Describe Lady Philosophy's appearance. What does this communicate about her nature? (Book I)

Lady Philosophy appears with varying heights, at times piercing the sky. Her eyes are keen beyond men's power. She made her garments from imperishable material, yet many men have stolen fragments of them, and she is covered with film from neglect. On the lowest hem is *Pi*, with steps ascending to *Theta*. In one hand she holds books, and in the other, a scepter. Her appearance reflects Boethius's perspective on wisdom. She is both low and accessible and yet beyond the reach of the mind. Various philosophical schools have small snatches of truth but fail to comprehend the whole. She can never fully disappear yet can be neglected. Her books and scepter call to mind Plato's philosopher-king. She represents both practical wisdom—what to do in a

situation—and speculative wisdom—what is the nature of reality.

2. What prompts Boethius to write his book? (Book I)

When Boethius is suddenly imprisoned for protecting the senate, he complains that he is suffering unjustly, that the wicked are more powerful than the righteous, and that the world is only governed by random chance. While he still believes that God governs the world, Boethius does not remember how. Boethius does not fear death but grieves his loss of Fortune's gifts.

3. According to Lady Philosophy, who has banished Boethius? (Book I)

Lady Philosophy claims that Boethius has banished himself. He could never become an exile unless he wished to. The city Philosophy speaks of is the city of God. Anyone who dwells there may never be banished, yet someone can exile themselves by refusing to live there. Philosophy is more disheartened that she has been exiled from Boethius's mind than that he no longer possesses his library.

4. How does Philosophy describe Fortune? (Book II)

Fortune wears many disguises, acts friendly, and flatters, yet leaves without warning and overwhelms with pain. Her only constancy is her inconstancy. She is treacherous, traitorous, and terrifies with