Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy

Translated and introduced by

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Outline

On the Consolation of Philosophy is laid out as follows:

- **Book I:** Boethius laments his imprisonment before he is visited by Philosophy, personified as a woman.
- **Book II:** Philosophy illustrates the capricious nature of Fate by discussing the "wheel of Fortune"; she further argues that true happiness lies in the pursuit of wisdom.
- **Book III:** Building on the ideas laid out in the previous book, Philosophy explains how wisdom has a divine source; she also demonstrates how many earthly goods (e.g., wealth and beauty) are fleeting at best.
- **Book IV:** Philosophy and Boethius discuss the nature of good and evil, with Philosophy offering several explanations concerned with evil events and why the wicked can never attain true happiness.
- **Book V:** Boethius asks Philosophy about the role Chance plays in the order of everything. Philosophy argues that Chance is guided by Providence. Boethius then asks Philosophy about the compatibility of an omniscient God and free will.

The Lady Philosophy

On the Consolation of Philosophy was written in AD 523 during a one-year imprisonment Boethius served while awaiting trial—and eventual execution—for the alleged crime of treason under the Ostrogothic King Theodoric the Great. Boethius was at the very heights of power in Rome, holding the prestigious office of *magister officiorum*, and was brought down by treachery. This experience inspired the text, which reflects on how evil can exist in a world governed by God (an example of theodicy), and how happiness is still attainable amidst fickle fortune, while also considering the nature of happiness and God. In 1891, the academic Hugh Fraser Stewart described the work as "by far the most interesting example of prison literature the world has ever seen."



Miniatures of Boethius teaching and in prison from a 1385 Italian manuscript

Boethius writes the book as a conversation between himself and a **female personification of philosophy,** referred to as "Lady Philosophy". Philosophy consoles Boethius by discussing the transitory nature of wealth, fame, and power ("no man can ever truly be secure until he has been forsaken by Fortune"), and the ultimate superiority of things of the mind, which she calls the "one true good". She contends that happiness comes from within, and that virtue is all that one truly has because it is not imperiled by the vicissitudes of fortune.

Boethius engages with the nature of predestination and free will, the problem of evil and the "problem of desert", human nature, virtue, and justice. He speaks about the nature of free will and determinism when he asks whether God knows and sees all, or whether man has free will. On human nature, Boethius says that humans are essentially good, and only when they give in to "wickedness" do they "sink to the level of being an animal." On justice, he says criminals are not to be abused, but rather treated with sympathy and respect, using the analogy of doctor and patient to illustrate the ideal relationship between prosecutor and criminal.

> A page of a medieval French translation of Boethius' „Consolation of Philosophy" in the manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fr. 809, fol. 40r. The miniature shows Boethius (left) with Philosophia (the personification of philosophy); on the right side of the picture the Wheel of Fortune.

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affections de lame qui lui tolent
a cognoistre la verite de sa maladie
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prouuant toutes les choses de fortune

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tendre les parolles de son maistre
et de bien retenir et recueillir en son cuer
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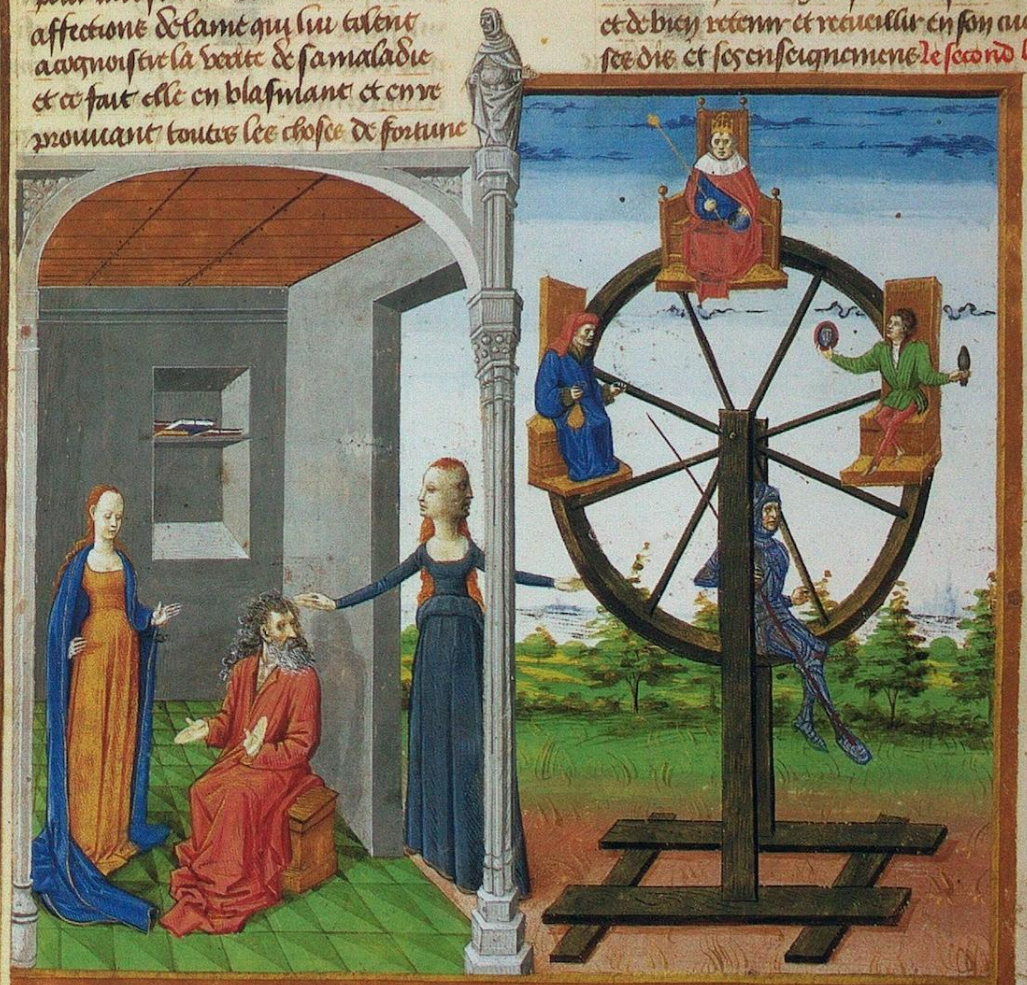

Puis se teut vng
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Interpretation

In the *Consolation*, Boethius answered religious questions without reference to Christianity, relying solely on natural philosophy and the Classical Greek tradition. He believed in the correspondence between faith and reason. The truths found in Christianity would be no different from the truths found in philosophy.[6] In the words of Henry Chadwick, "If the *Consolation* contains nothing distinctively Christian, it is also relevant that it contains nothing specifically pagan either...[it] is a work written by a Platonist who is also a Christian."[7]

Boethius repeats the Macrobius model of the Earth in the center of a spherical cosmos.

The philosophical message of the book fits well with the religious piety of the Middle Ages. Boethius encouraged readers not to pursue worldly goods such as money and power, but to seek internalized virtues. Evil had a purpose, to provide a lesson to help change for good; while suffering from evil was seen as virtuous. Because God ruled the universe through Love, prayer to God and the application of Love would lead to true happiness.[9] The Middle Ages, with their vivid sense of an overruling fate, found in Boethius an interpretation of life closely akin to the spirit of Christianity. The *Consolation* stands, by its note of fatalism and its affinities with the Christian doctrine of humility, midway between the pagan philosophy of Seneca the Younger and the later Christian philosophy of consolation represented by Thomas à Kempis.[10]

The book is heavily influenced by Plato and his dialogues (as was Boethius himself).[10] Its popularity can in part be explained by its Neoplatonic and Christian ethical messages, although current scholarly research is still far from clear exactly why and how the work became so vastly popular in the Middle Ages.

Influence

From the Carolingian epoch[12] to the end of the Middle Ages and beyond, *The Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the most popular and influential philosophical works, read by statesmen, poets, historians, philosophers, and theologians. It is through Boethius that much of the thought of the Classical period was made available to the Western Medieval world. It has often been said Boethius was the "last of the Romans and the first of the Scholastics".

Translations into the vernacular were done by famous notables, including King Alfred (Old English), Jean de Meun (Old French), Geoffrey Chaucer (Middle English), Queen Elizabeth I (Early Modern English), Richard Graham, 1st Viscount Preston (English, 1695–1696), and Notker Labeo (Old High German).[13][14][15][16][17] Other English translators include George Colville (1556), Henry Rosher (H. J.) James (1897), Walter John (W. J.) Sedgefield (1899), and Richard H. Green (1962). Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* was translated into Italian by Alberto della Piagentina (1332), Anselmo Tanso (Milan, 1520), Lodovico Domenichi (Florence, 1550), Benedetto Varchi (Florence, 1551), Cosimo Bartoli (Florence, 1551) and Tommaso Tamburini (Palermo, 1657).

Found within the *Consolation* are themes that have echoed throughout the Western canon: the female figure of wisdom that informs Dante, the ascent through the layered universe that is shared with Milton, the reconciliation of opposing forces that find their way into Chaucer in *The Knight's Tale*, and the Wheel of Fortune so popular throughout the Middle Ages.

Citations from it occur frequently in Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Of Boethius, Dante remarked: "The blessed soul who exposes the deceptive world to anyone who gives ear to him."[18]

Boethian influence can be found nearly everywhere in Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry, e.g. in *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Knight's Tale*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Franklin's Tale*, *The Parson's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*, in the character of Lady Nature in *The Parliament of Fowls* and some of the shorter poems, such as *Truth*, *The Former Age* and *Lak of Stedfastnesse*. Chaucer translated the work in his *Boece*.

The Italian composer Luigi Dallapiccola used some of the text in his choral work *Canti di prigionia* (1938). The Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe quoted parts of it in his opera or music theatre work *Rites of Passage* (1972–73), which was commissioned for the opening of the Sydney Opera House but was not ready in time.

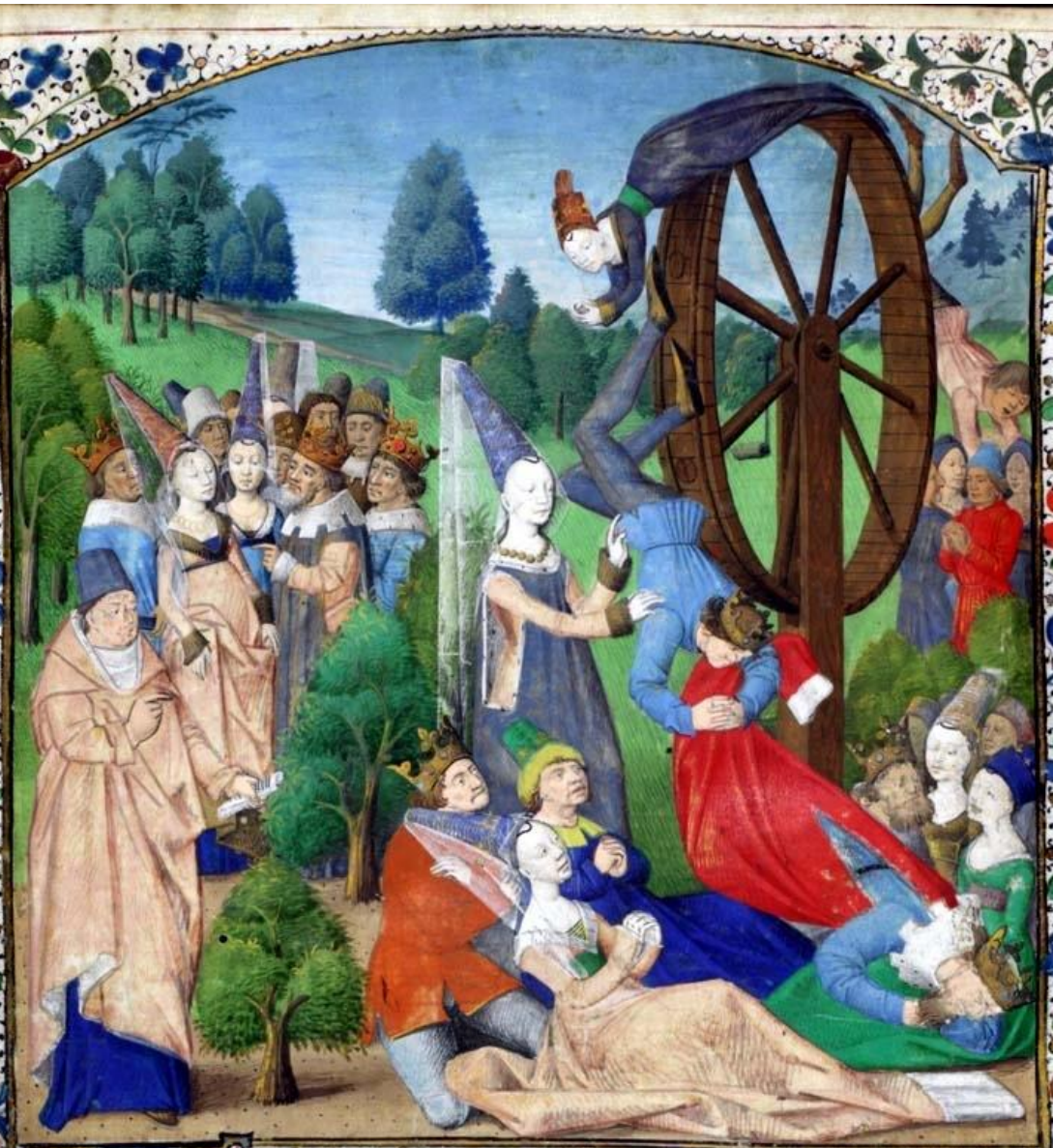
Tom Shippey in *The Road to Middle-earth* says how "Boethian" much of the treatment of evil is in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Shippey says that Tolkien knew well the translation of Boethius that was made by King Alfred and he quotes some "Boethian" remarks from Frodo, Treebeard, and Elrond.

Boethius and *Consolatio Philosophiae* are cited frequently by the main character Ignatius J. Reilly in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980).

It is a prosimetrical text, meaning that it is written in alternating sections of prose and metered verse. In the course of the text, Boethius displays a virtuosic command of the forms of Latin poetry. It is classified as a Menippean satire, a fusion of allegorical tale, platonic dialogue, and lyrical poetry.

Edward Gibbon described the work as "a golden volume not unworthy of the leisure of Plato or Tully."[20]

In the 20th century, there were close to four hundred manuscripts still surviving, a testament to its popularity.



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