

Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*
Translated by David R. Slavitt



A Reading Guide

How to Use This Guide

Greetings, incoming tenth graders! I am very excited to introduce you to our first text: *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius. The questions that Boethius asks and attempts to answer in this little book are questions that will appear over and over as we study medieval philosophy and literature, and are still surprisingly relevant to us as modern Christians. *Consolation's* enduring relevance made it the most popular book of the Middle Ages and ensures that it is still read and loved by many people today.

Consolation was originally written in Latin, and I have chosen a modern English translation that is not too difficult to read but also manages to maintain the beauty of Boethius' original text. That said, *Consolation* is not a "beach read." Boethius addresses weighty topics and asks tough questions. You'll need to read carefully to get the most out of this text.

Instead of annotating, you'll be filling in this reading guide as you work through the text. Answering the questions as you go will help you make sense of what you are reading. It will also prepare you for the class discussions we will hold when you return to campus in the fall. If you find that you are only partially comprehending the text, don't give up! Answer the questions as best you can, and when we are back in class together we will clear up any areas that gave you trouble.

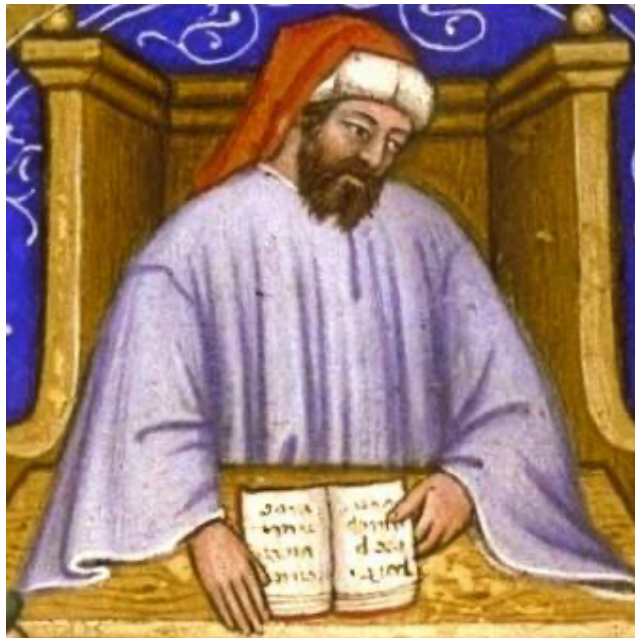
I'd also encourage you to discuss what you are reading with your parents and/or other family members. This book would even make a wonderful summer read-aloud if your family is up for it!

However you decide to tackle this text, be sure to come to our first full class together on **Tuesday, September 3** ready to **turn in your completed guide** and fully engage in a **class discussion**. I look forward to seeing you all then. Have a wonderful summer!

Introduction

Answer this introductory question before you read further in this guide or your text.

You've been falsely accused of a crime and sentenced to death. As you languish in your prison cell, the authorities take pity on you and provide you with a pen and a thick, blank journal so you can write while you wait. These are your last words; what do you write?



The imaginary scenario you just placed yourself in is the same scenario Boethius experienced at the end of his life, and *The Consolation of Philosophy* is the book he wrote as he awaited his execution.

Who was Boethius?

Last year, you studied Plato's *Republic*, which set forth Plato's vision of a Just City and the philosopher kings who would rule it. These philosopher kings would be those who knew the forms of truth, goodness, and beauty and viewed kingship as a duty rather than an avenue to power. Boethius was not actually a king, but he was otherwise a good representation of Plato's philosopher king.

Boethius lived in Rome during the sixth century AD, after the Roman Empire fell to the invading Germanic tribes. He served in the Roman government under the Ostrogoth king Theodoric. A scholar, philosopher, orator, musician, and theologian, Boethius was quite possibly the most brilliant man in Rome. He was trained from his youth in the liberal arts, and mastered Latin and Greek (a mastery of Greek was quite rare in the Roman Empire at this time). Many of Boethius' texts were used as textbooks in medieval schools and universities. At the time of his imprisonment, Boethius was working on a highly ambitious project: the translation of all of Plato's and Aristotle's works from Greek into Latin. Basically, Boethius was an accomplished genius.

More importantly, Boethius was a good man. He was virtuous. He would have preferred to limit his interactions with the 'barbarian' Ostrogoths that ruled Rome, but he was a dutiful Roman. He served in Rome's government reluctantly, out of a sense of duty rather than in pursuit of personal power, and eventually became one of King Theodoric's most trusted officials. By age 25, he was serving as a senator in the Roman Senate. He was made Consul of Rome in 510, and was later named Magister Officiorum (head officer) of the Roman State. In 522, his two sons were named joint consuls.

Everything seemed to be going right for Boethius, but his fortune was about to drastically change.

Why was Boethius Sentenced to Death?

Do you remember the Arian controversy? The Arians believed that Christ was created by God and was therefore unequal to, separate from, and less divine than the Father. This heretical belief denies the eternal existence of the Trinity and claims that Christ is a created being and less than fully God. The Council of Nicaea condemned Arianism in 325, but many people ignored the council's outcome and

continued to hold to these beliefs, including many of the Ostrogoths (such as King Theodoric) who had been converted to Christianity by Arians.

During the sixth century, Justin I was the emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire in Constantinople. Justin was staunchly anti-Arian and took measures to combat Arianism both within his empire and the Church as a whole. Theodoric resented Justin's interference in these matters, and was displeased at some dealings between the Roman Senate and Justin's court that had the potential to increase Justin's authority in Italy. Because of this, anyone in Rome who appeared to be trying strengthen ties with Justin was looked at with suspicion, including Boethius.

As previously mentioned, Boethius was one of Theodoric's trusted officials. But there were other officials who despised Boethius because he tried to keep them from taking actions that would increase their own wealth and power while harming innocent people. These officials wrongly accused Boethius of treason, claiming, among other things, that he was colluding with the Senate to ensure their safety and trying to draw the Senate closer to Emperor Justin in Constantinople. The Senate did not defend Boethius, and he was imprisoned for a year and then executed. Under the Ostrogoths, executions were usually painful and horrific, and I will spare you the details here. After his death, Boethius was venerated right away as a martyr.

Why did Boethius write *The Consolation of Philosophy*?

While Boethius was imprisoned, he was provided with writing supplies. He wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* from his prison cell in 523 AD as he awaited his trial. It was his last work before his execution in 524 AD, and is his most widely read work.

As *Consolation* begins, an imprisoned Boethius is lamenting his loss of fortune and feeling very sorry for himself. He is visited by Lady Philosophy, who reminds him that he used to be one of her best students, but that in the midst of his sufferings he has forgotten the wisdom that he acquired from her teachings. She sets out to answer all of Boethius' questions on the nature of fortune and true happiness, good and evil, and fate and free will, and help him remember who he is and recover the wisdom he has lost.

Can you imagine Boethius' state of mind as he sat down to write? He knew his time was running short, and the issues he wrote about in *Consolation* are real issues, issues of life and death importance. His book was widely read and influenced countless other medieval thinkers (many of whom you will be studying this year). And now, you get to read it! It's a privilege that so many people your age will never have.

Introductory Questions and Final Notes:

Look up the word 'consolation' and write a definition here:

Have you ever been consoled by a friend or family member? Have you ever consoled someone? In your experience, what does consolation look like?

Now it's time to crack open your copy of *The Consolation of Philosophy* and start reading Boethius' famous text for yourself. As you read, you'll work through the questions and explanations in this reading guide.

A couple final notes before you begin:

1. Do not write in your text! You'll be returning *Consolation* at the end of the school year in good condition and with no markings. I have left space in this reading guide for additional notes you might want to jot down as you read.
2. *Consolation* is divided into five books, and each book is divided into multiple parts. Each part consists of a poem and a prose section. Each poem develops a theme discussed in the previous prose section. **This reading guide only covers Books I-III and Parts I-IV of Book IV.** The remainder of the text is fairly challenging, and you are not expected to read it on your own. We will discuss the ideas presented in the remainder of Book IV and Book V when you return to campus in the fall.
3. Keep in mind that there is a difference between Boethius the author of *Consolation*, and Boethius the character in the text. Boethius the character is in a miserable state and has forgotten the purpose of life, but this is not the case for Boethius the author, who has chosen to write himself as a character in this way in order to better illustrate the process of enlightenment for his readers.

Book I Questions

Part I

Read Boethius' opening poem on p. 1-2. What is his state of mind?

As Boethius is writing his poem, surrounded by his poetic muses, a woman appears in his cell. Illustrate this woman in the space below, relying on the description given on pp. 2-3.

How does this woman address Boethius' muses? What does she accuse them of (p. 3-4)?

For discussion: Do you think it is harmful or helpful to 'wallow' in sadness by writing sad poetry, watching sad movies, listening to sad music, etc.? Explain.

Part II

Read the woman's poem on p. 5. She is describing how Boethius has changed since she last saw him. How has he changed?

The woman lays her hand on Boethius' chest and provides a diagnosis. What is his sickness (p. 6)?

Part III

The woman uses her skirt to dry Boethius' eyes. What effect does this action have on Boethius (pp. 6-7)?

Boethius now recognizes the woman. Who is she, and why has she come (pp. 7-8)?

Lady Philosophy names several other philosophers that she taught over the years. List them here (pp. 8-9):

According to Lady Philosophy, why did these great men die (pp. 8-9)?

Which groups of philosophers does she call 'pretenders' and accuse of tearing her dress (p. 8)?

Part IV

Lady Philosophy asks Boethius, “Why are you still weeping?” How does he respond to her – what is his accusation? Answer from the first paragraph of his response (pp. 10-11).

Boethius goes on to complain very loudly and lengthily about the ways he has been wronged. List at least four of his complaints (pp. 11-18):

Part V

Read Boethius’ poem on pp. 18-20. Here, Boethius claims that the Starmaker (God) seems to be in control of some things, but not everything.

List some things that Boethius claims are under God’s control (pp. 18-19):

What does Boethius claim God could control, but chooses not to (p. 19)?

What supposedly results from this lack of control?

At the end of the poem, what does Boethius ask God to do (p. 20)?

For Discussion: Do you agree with Boethius? Does he accurately describe the state of our world? If so, does this mean that God is not in control? Explain.

How does Lady Philosophy respond to Boethius' poem? Is she moved (p. 20)?

Lady Philosophy claims that Boethius has been 'banished' from his 'native country'. She goes on to state that this country is not 'merely geographical', meaning it can't be found on a map. What is this 'native country', and who is ultimately responsible for Boethius' banishment (pp. 20-21)?

Part VI

Lady Philosophy begins Part VI by asking Boethius some simple questions that will aid her in her diagnosis. Write down Boethius' responses to the following questions:

- 1) Is it your view that life is a series of chance events? Or do you think it has an order and a rationale (p. 23)?**

- 2) By what means does [God] guide natural events (p.23)?**

- 3) Do you remember the purpose of things and the goal of Nature's order (p. 24)?**

- 4) What is the source of all things (p. 24)?**

- 5) What is a man (p. 24)?**

After she has finished questioning Boethius, Lady Philosophy provides a more specific diagnosis.

What is the cause of Boethius' illness (p. 24)?

What is the cure (p. 25)?

Additional Notes/Thoughts on Book I:

Book II Questions

Part I

What does Lady Philosophy claim is the cause of Boethius' depression (p. 27)?

Lady Philosophy devotes Book II to a discussion of Lady Fortune (personified here like Lady Philosophy herself). Read Lady Philosophy's description of Lady Fortune on pp. 27-29 and list some of the characteristics she assigns to her:

Lady Philosophy uses two metaphorical descriptions to explain the way that Lady Fortune works. Explain how each description applies to Lady Fortune (p. 30):

"If you spread your sails before the wind, then you must go where the wind takes you and not where you might wish to go."

"You want to try farming and sow your seeds in the earth, then you must expect barren years as well as years of abundance."

Read Lady Philosophy's poem on pp. 30-31 and explain what is being depicted in this image of the Wheel of Fortune.



Part II

Lady Philosophy asks Boethius to consider what Fortune might say in her own defense against his accusations. Fortune would claim that Boethius has no cause whatsoever to complain. What reasons might Fortune give to support her claim (pp. 31-33)?

Part III

Lady Philosophy asks Boethius: “Have you already forgotten the number and extent of the blessings you used to enjoy?” She then goes on to remind him of these previous blessings. What were they (p. 35)?

According to Lady Philosophy, how did Boethius respond to Fortune when he was receiving these blessings (p. 35)?

At the end of her poem, Lady Philosophy states:

**“The beauty of earth changes.
Enjoy it but never think to trust it.
As with the fleeting pleasures
of men, a stern law decrees
that nothing in life lasts.”**

How does this quote apply to Boethius’ specific situation (p. 37)?

Part IV

Boethius admits that he used to enjoy good fortune, but now is completely unfortunate. Lady Philosophy corrects him, claiming that he still enjoys much good fortune. List some of the examples she refers to (pp. 37-38).

Lady Philosophy states that “the human condition is such that even the most fortunate are not free from worry.” What are two examples that she gives (p. 39)?

Lady Philosophy asks, “Why then do men look outside themselves for happiness when it is surely to be found inside?” How is happiness found inside ourselves (pp. 40-41)?

Part V

Explanatory note: At the end of Part IV, Lady Philosophy claims that bodily pleasure cannot bring happiness. In Parts V - VII of Book II, she will name four of Fortune's other gifts that are highly prized by men and show that, under scrutiny, these gifts of Fortune are actually worth very little.

Read Part V (pp. 43-48). According to Lady Philosophy, the first of Fortune's gifts is wealth or riches. Why shouldn't we consider riches to be valuable? Share at least three reasons below.

Part VI

Read Part VI (pp. 48-52). According to Lady Philosophy, why shouldn't we consider high offices (honor) or power to be valuable? Share at least three reasons below.

Part VII

Read Part VII (pp. 52-56). According to Lady Philosophy, why shouldn't we consider glory (fame) to be valuable? Share at least three reasons below.

Part VIII

So: Lady Philosophy believes that Fortune's gifts (pleasure, wealth, honor, power, fame) are not worth much. She goes as far as to say that 'ill fortune is better for men than good.' Read the rest of Part VIII and explain how, according to Lady Philosophy, bad fortune can possibly be better for men than good fortune (pp. 56-58):

Additional Notes/Thoughts on Book II:

Book III Questions

Part I

What is Lady Philosophy planning to reveal to Boethius in Book III (p. 59-60)?

Part II

According to Lady Philosophy, what all men ultimately want is to be happy. When she speaks of happiness, she isn't referring to a fleeting feeling or emotion. Happiness is the "summum bonum," the supreme or highest good. It is eudaimonia, the only good that is desirable for its own sake rather than for the sake of something else. It is "that state that is perfect and that includes within it everything a man could want" (p. 61). Keep this definition in mind as you continue reading Book III.

Lady Philosophy goes on to state that men mistake each of Fortune's gifts as the highest good. What do men do in order to attain each of the following (pp. 61-62)?

Wealth:

Honor:

Power:

Fame:

Pleasure:

Ultimately, it is not wealth, honor, power, fame, or pleasure that men really want. What are men ultimately trying to attain through the pursuit of these things?

For Discussion: Lady ends Part II with the conclusion that all men ultimately want to be happy, which means that all men ultimately pursue the “summum bonum” or the highest good, even though they may go about it in the wrong way. Do you agree? Explain.

Part III

Read Part III. According to Lady Philosophy, why can't riches provide true happiness? Or in other words, why can't riches be the highest good (pp. 65-68)?

Part IV

Read Part IV. According to Lady Philosophy, why can't honor provide true happiness? Or in other words, why can't honor be the highest good (pp. 68-71)?

Part V

Read Part V. According to Lady Philosophy, why can't power provide true happiness? Or in other words, why can't power be the highest good (pp. 71-73)?

Part VI

Read Part VI. According to Lady Philosophy, why can't glory provide true happiness? Or in other words, why can't glory be the highest good (pp. 73-75)?

Part VII

Read Part VII. According to Lady Philosophy, why can't pleasure provide true happiness? Or in other words, why can't pleasure be the highest good (p. 76)?

Part VIII - IX

In Part VIII, Lady Philosophy concludes and summarizes her argument that man cannot attain happiness through wealth, honor, power, fame, or pleasure. So what IS true happiness, and how can it be attained? In Part IX, Lady Philosophy will show Boethius what true happiness is.

Read pp. 79-81 of Part IX. Lady Philosophy claims that, ultimately, the names of these individual goods that men seek (wealth or self-sufficiency, honor, power, fame, pleasure) are (p. 81):

but their substance is:

She goes on to explain that men try, in a misguided way, to:

and that their mistake is not trying to:

At the top of p. 83, Boethius claims to understand what Lady Philosophy means by true happiness. Copy his explanation here:

Lady Philosophy asks Boethius, "Do you think there is anything in this changeable and mortal world that can provide a condition such as you have described?" (p. 83). How does he respond?

If this is true, and earthly wealth, honor, power, fame, and pleasure are not actually the true and perfect good, then what are they (p. 83)?

Lady Philosophy and Boethius now call on God to help them discover where the highest good might be found. Read the poem that Lady Philosophy sings to ask God for this help. It is a famous poem, and is full of imagery from Plato's philosophy. Do you recognize any? Read carefully and quote two verses/phrases below that you think might relate to Plato's teachings. Explain your choices.

Part X

According to Lady Philosophy, how can we know that the perfect good, or the source of all good, actually exists (p. 86)?

On p. 87-88, Lady Philosophy equates this perfect good with God. What reasoning does she give for each of the following statements?

- 1) God is not only good, but the good in him is the perfect good.**

- 2) The good in God is his own substance – he does not receive it from something outside himself.**

If these previous statements are true, then when men pursue happiness, what is it that they are actually pursuing (p. 89)?

Part XI

Lady Philosophy sum things up for Boethius here before continuing (pp. 92-94):

- **Self-sufficiency, honor, power, fame and pleasure are incomplete goods.**
- **The true good includes ALL goods gathered into one form.**
- **Therefore, unity = good.**

She then goes on to argue that “everything that exists endures and perseveres as long as it is a unity but is destroyed as soon as it ceases to be a unity” (p. 94).

Read the rest of Part XI (pp. 94-98). In the space below, copy some of the examples that Lady Philosophy uses to explain this concept to Boethius.

Part XII

In the last part of Book III, Lady Philosophy and Boethius return to the question of how the universe is governed. Why does Boethius believe that the universe is governed by God? List his arguments below (p. 99):

Next, Lady Philosophy makes an argument about the goodness of God's order and the presence of evil in the world. Fill in the blanks in her paraphrased argument below (pp 100-102):

- God needs no outside help to _____.
- He alone _____.
- God is _____ himself.
- He orders all things for the _____, since he is good and orders all things.
- Since God orders all things at the helm of goodness, all of those things, on their own, _____ by their natural inclination.
- All things voluntarily submit to God's _____ and are obedient to his _____.
- There is nothing that, in an effort to remain true to its nature, would want to try to _____.
- If something were to try to oppose God, it would not be _____ because God is all-powerful.

- There is _____ that would or could oppose the highest good.
- It is, then, the _____ that rules things firmly but in a kindly way and _____.
- There is nothing that God _____.
- But, God cannot do _____.
- Therefore, evil is _____, because God cannot _____, and there is nothing he _____.

For Discussion: What do you think of Lady Philosophy's argument in Part XII?

1) Do you agree that, when things are being true to their nature, they always aspire toward the good? Explain.

2) Is Lady Philosophy's definition of evil as 'nothing' a good/helpful one? Explain.

Additional Notes/Thoughts on Book III:

Book IV Questions

Part I

For Discussion: Boethius is still waiting for Lady Philosophy to address the following causes of his sorrow:

- **That even though there is a ruler of the universe who is good, there is nonetheless evil in the world, even evil that passes unpunished.**
- **It seems that virtue not only goes unrewarded, but is even overthrown and trodden under the feet of bad men. Virtue pays the penalty, rather than vice.**

How can this happen in the kingdom of God, who knows all and is all-powerful, and who wills only the good?

Before we look at Lady Philosophy's response, how would YOU respond to Boethius?

Lady Philosophy will take the rest of Book IV to prove to Boethius that, in fact, "the good are always powerful while the wicked are abject and weak. Vices are never unpunished and virtue is never unrewarded."

Part II

Read pp. 109-111 and the top of p. 112. In this section, Lady Philosophy makes the claim that the good are stronger than the weak. What reasoning does she use to support this claim?

Next, Lady Philosophy takes her argument even farther and claims that evil men actually cease to exist. What does she mean by this (pp. 113-114)?

Finish reading Part II. According to Lady Philosophy, can evil men actually be happy (pp. 114-115)? Explain.

Part III

Lady Philosophy claims that “we can declare confidently that good deeds never go unrewarded and that wicked deeds never go unpunished. In every action, the result of the action is its reward” (p. 116).

What is the reward, then for good deeds (pp. 116-117)?

And what is the punishment for wicked deeds (p. 117)?

Finish reading Part III. Lady Philosophy explain in more detail here what she means when she says that evil men cease to exist. When evil men cease to be men, what do they become instead? Explain how this process works (p. 118):

Read the poem at the end of Part III. Lady Philosophy compares the transformation evil men undergo to the transformation that Odysseus’ men experienced under Circe’s curse. How are these transformations different?

Part IV

Boethius begins Part IV by expressing the wish that wicked men didn't have the power to achieve their goals. Lady Philosophy responds that they actually don't have this power and will try to prove this claim in Part IV

Read pp. 120-121. Lady Philosophy claims that when the power of evil men is taken away, it actually reduces their punishment. Explain this concept:

Lady Philosophy goes on to claim that the wicked are actually happier when they are being punished. Explain this concept (pp. 122-123):

Read the remainder of Part IV (pp. 123-128). Lady Philosophy concludes her argument with the claim that, just as we feel sympathy rather than hatred for those who are sick, we should feel sympathy rather than hatred for the wicked, since wickedness is itself a disease. What reasoning does she provide to support this conclusion?

For Discussion: Do you agree with Lady Philosophy? Does it seem to you that evil men are less happy than good men? Should we feel sympathy rather than hatred for the wicked? Explain.

Additional notes/thoughts on Book IV:

The remainder of Book IV and Book V are challenging sections that cover the complex topics of chance, fate, providence, and free will. Feel free to read them, but they are not required reading for your summer assignment, and this reading guide will not cover them. We will discuss these topics and read some additional excerpts from *Consolation* together when you return to class in the fall. See you then!