Reading guide and study questions -- Boethius and *The Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 524 C.E.)

**What is *The Consolation of Philosophy*?**

Have a look at this [Youtube video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k83NopYGRjg) for a quick intro.

The first thing to notice about this text is that it's an "allegory": its characters are both "real" and symbolic. Lady Philosophy's height, touching the very sky with the top of her head and being lost to human sight, indicates that philosophy as a concept goes beyond the human condition and beyond human reason to the realm of the divine.

You may also have noticed how this text, although growing out of a historical narrative (Boethius's imprisonment and subsequent execution on grounds of treason by the emperor, Theoderic), is philosophical in nature, taking for granted the reader's acquaintance with Platonic philosophy. The only Plato you need to know, however, is his theory of Ideas, or Forms, which exist in the mind of the One, or God; and that our material existence is only a shadow of Ideal existence in the Mind. This Platonic outline forms the basis of all Western, Christian philosophical and religious thought.

Notice too that the text is in both prose and poetry. While we may think of philosophy as relegated to the dry textbook, ancient writers thought no such thing. As [Bruno Bettelheim](http://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/14/obituaries/bruno-bettelheim-dies-at-86-psychoanalyst-of-vast-impact.html?pagewanted=all) says (*The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 35), "Plato--who may have understood better what forms the mind of man than do some of our contemporaries who want their children exposed only to 'real' people and everyday events--knew what intellectual experiences make for true humanity. He suggested that the future citizens of his ideal republic begin their literary education with the telling of myths, rather than with mere facts or so-called rational teachings. Even Aristotle, master of pure reason, said: 'The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth.'" So one way to evaluate the *Consolation* is to look at its combination of myth, history, and art and to judge its effect on the reader. How convincing is the *Consolation*? Does it change your impression of "evil"? How should the individual deal with evil, according to Boethius? What are the questions Boethius doesn't ask?

**Outline of *The Consolation of Philosophy***

BOOK ONE -- Introduces narrative situation; introduces Lady Philosophy and her appearance; assumes the world ruled by divine reason

BOOK TWO -- The deconstruction of Fortune, describing her nature (note the poem against avarice, Chapter 2) and the transience of worldly goods (Chapter 5); the myth of the golden age (poem at the end Chapter 5--cf. Book 3, Chapter 11); the benefits of adverse fortune and the primum mobile, love (Chapter 8)

BOOK THREE -- The deconstruction of worldly goods: riches (Chapter 3), honor (Chapter 4), power (Chapter 5), fame (Chapter 6), bodily pleasure (Chapter 7); supreme good and supreme happiness identified with God (see Chapter 9's invocation to God, Platonic proof and the myth of Orpheus in Chapter 12)

BOOK FOUR -- The deconstruction of evil: the evil are unhappy (Chapter 4); the difference between providence and fate

BOOK FIVE -- To get a sense of how this neoplatonic text handles the doctrine of free will, parse this: “Divine prescience runs ahead of everything and recollects it to the eternal present of its own knowledge. It does not change because it does not need to, having already foreseen the change you made at the last moment.”

From Alan Gaylord, Dartmouth, on Chaucernet, message ID# 01JEPLE23NCK8ZE7LR@OREGON.UOREGON.EDU, August 13, 1999

"To wit (as most know, to be sure): Boethius, though a Christian, undertook the philosophical exercise of making his *Consolatio* [the Latin title of the text] a summary of classical philosophy, without naming Christ or Christian doctrine or citing the Bible (he of course also wrote explicitly Christian theological treatises). So no Cupid, no cupidity or charity (I believe Augustine brought the term, \*caritas\*, into prominent use). . . .Likewise, "the Wheel of Fortune" does not comprise Boethius's philosophical definition of tragedy; rather, it is a **metaphor** for the experience of life one attributes to "Fortune" when one lacks sufficient philosophy to understand God's providence. The structure of the *Consolatio* is to begin with soft or sweet medicines, common language, and the \*doxa\* [doctrine; think “orthodoxy”] of false philosophy and to deconstruct these during the first three books of the work. But Books 4 & 5 are severely dialectic; Fortune is vaporized as a concept and a non-reality; and Boethius is led to see that by putting their loves on false goods, humans derive a false picture of causality and a false teleology. Boethius does not quite put it that way, but the only "real" tragedy from a philosophical standpoint would be to contumaciously resist the instructions of Philosophy . . . ."