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*The Consolation of Philosophy*

Boethius

# Study Guide on Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (Part I: Books I – III)

Explain the situation in which Boethius finds himself at the beginning of the narrative.

What does Lady Philosophy use as the “gentle handling” and “gentle treatment”? What are the “strong medicine” and “more potent remedies”? (See, e.g., pages 17, 21, 26, 42<sup>1</sup>)

What role do poetry, rhetoric, and music play in the argument? Consider:

- To what degree is Boethius open to and receptive of different kinds of persuasion?
  - “Poetry . . . is still my comfort in this misery of my old age” (3).
  - “You have made a persuasive argument . . . and presented it with sweet music and rhetoric. But it satisfies only while it is being spoken” (25).
  - “I feel greatly refreshed by the strength of your ideas and the sweetness of your music” (42).
- How does Lady Philosophy view these arts, and how does she intend to use them with Boethius?
  - Lady Philosophy drives away the Muses (4), and desires that Boethius “be cured and made strong by my Muses” (5).
  - “I shall use the sweet persuasion of rhetoric . . . and I shall add the grace of Music” (21).
  - In response to Boethius’ critique: “. . . these words are not supposed to cure your disease but only to kill the pain of your obstinate sorrow. At the proper time I shall apply more deeply penetrating medicine” (25–26).

Trace the arguments that Lady Philosophy gives for the following:

- Fortune cannot bring happiness (29).
- Against riches, honor, power, fame (32–39).
- Adverse fortune is actually more beneficial than prosperous fortune (40).
- Against bodily pleasure (54).

Recount the argument from the imperfect happiness that comes from transitory goods to the existence of perfect happiness—that is, from degrees of perfection to the most perfect (61). Is the argument convincing?

Is the concluding poem of Book III a fitting end to that book? In general, how do the prosaic and poetic sections of the text relate to one another? Why does Boethius include both?

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<sup>1</sup> Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Translated by Richard Green. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- How do poetry and philosophy relate in this work?
  - “[Y]ou will have to do without the pleasure of verse for a while as I put together the pattern of my argument” (91).
  - “But I see that you are weary from listening so long to this extended and difficult discourse and want to be refreshed by poetry. Listen then, and gather strength for what is yet to be explained” (96).
- How do they relate in general?

What does Lady Philosophy teach about the body (70)?

How does Lady Philosophy justify her claim that God, who is the perfect Good, rules all things by Himself, and must dispose everything according to the good (71)?



## Study Guide on Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (Part II: Books IV – V)

Lady Philosophy claims that Boethius suffers from *improper judgment*—that he does not see things as they truly are. Do you think this diagnosis is accurate? Is her prescription a wise one? In considering these questions, see the following passages:

- A new vantage point (76<sup>1</sup>).
- Judging according to the nature of things (87).
- Reason and the power of judgment or will (103).
- Establishing a “principle” of judgment (113, 116 ff.).
- “Since all your actions are done in the sight of a Judge who sees all things” (119).

How does Lady Philosophy justify her claim that the good are always rewarded, and the wicked always punished (81)?

Recount the argument from goodness, being, and unity, that the wicked “cease to be” (82).

Does Lady Philosophy offer a convincing response to Boethius’ “hopeless conflict” between divine foreknowledge and human freedom (104 ff.)?

- What exactly are the steps of her argument?
- Is it true that “all judgment is in the act of the one judging” (111)?
- What is meant by establishing a “principle” of judgment (113)?
- Explain the significance of God’s knowledge being not foreknowledge of future events, but knowledge of a never-changing present (116).

Does the distinction between simple and conditional necessity solve the problem Boethius raises on page 117?

Is this work consoling? Is it possible that philosophy offer consolation? Consider the following questions:

- Can Lady Philosophy answer the question of evil? Why or why not?
- What distinction is made between Providence and Fate (91)? Does the understanding that comes from this offer consolation? If so, how?

How does this work address the origin of the soul?

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What is Lady Philosophy trying to accomplish in these books? Is Boethius' problem in the last two books intellectual, moral, emotional, or some combination of these?

Consider:

- After Lady Philosophy's story of Orpheus, Boethius interjects, "still depressed by [his] personal grief" (75). Note the "greatest cause of [his] sadness" (75).
- Lady Philosophy argues for the following positions:
  - The good have power, the wicked do not (77 ff.).
  - Evil does not exist (79).
  - The wicked are impotent (79, 84).
  - The wicked are happier when punished (85).
- Boethius is "amazed and shocked" to find punishments designed for the wicked imposed on good men, and the rewards of virtue seized by the wicked (89).
- Lady Philosophy's exhortation: "And you, who are advancing in virtue, should not expect to be weakened by ease or softened by pleasure. You fight manfully against any fortune" (99). "Go now, strong men!" (100).

***Suggested use:*** This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

