Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy

When we are introduced to Boethius at the beginning of his text, he’s having a bit of a mental breakdown. This could be because, instead of enjoying his regular work of translating Philosophical texts, he’s rotting in a jail cell. The great and honorable Boethius, who pulled no punches when berating the corruption within his government, was something of an annoyance to his seedy superiors. As such, they falsely accused him of conspiracy, landing him jail to await an unfair trial, which would eventually end in his execution. In his miserable state, Boethius laments the great “unfairness” of his situation, spewing angsty drivel into nothingness as the three Muses of Poesie egg him on. In this weakened state, with inevitable death looming above, Boethius finds himself overwhelmed by emotions, and unable to consult his stores of philosophy and logic. He wallows in his misery, and allows self-pity and frustration to control his mental processes. This is until an immaculate woman descends from the heavens, though Boethius cannot initially identify her, and banishes the Muses, allowing Boethius to begin collecting himself. Lady Philosophy has come to Boethius in his hour of need, to console him in the face of death, and rid him of the illusory conceptions that cripple his otherwise brilliant mind.

Doom is a rather difficult thing to face down, and despite his vast intellect, Boethius too succumbs to this innate human fear. He feels that his position is extremely unjust, given that he has committed no crime, and led a life of honor and generosity and to boot. Lady Philosophy, however, doesn’t have time for Boethius’ petty complaints, and immediately begins to dissect them, trying to uncloud his fearful mind. She states, “the time… calls rather for healing than lamentation”, (Song II) chastising Boethius for his behavior. As a veteran student of Philosophy, Boethius is portrayed as familiar with this woman and her teachings, making it all the more insulting that he is not utilizing their lessons in his dark time. Philosophy chides, “I bestowed such armour on thee as would have proved an invincible defense, hadst thou not first cast it away” (Song II), underscoring the notion that a developed philosophical paradigm can undermine the seemingly chaotic malice that inevitably pervades human existence. This sets Boethius on a proper path to restore a more rational perception of his position, freeing him from the emotions that have so greatly reduced his understanding.

Lady Philosophy is fairly upset that her star pupil has so readily abandoned her teachings, and begins drilling her lessons into him once more, as a sort of crash course on philosophy. She compares his situation to other great Philosophers, such as Socrates or Zeno, who suffered unjustly *only* because of their associations with her teachings. Surely, Boethius should not consider himself immune to the tragedies that befell these great men. Another very important part of *Consolation* is Philosophy’s depiction and assessment of Fortune. Fortune, by her very nature, is beyond the scope of what is “fair”, existing as a universal dispenser of both good and bad. Her actions need no reason, and no justification; life will take you from high highs to low lows, and Fortune is to “blame”. Ultimately, a man is entitled to his own thoughts, but allmaterial things are borne from Fortune, and thus, one should not experience anguish when she chooses to recall them. For this reason, tying happiness to the possession of things will only lead to misery - one must cherish their possessions and privileges when they abound, but must not mourn them upon their departure. After all, no material thing passes from this life into the next. She argues that Boethius should be happy for the little life he has left, and for the fact that his loved ones will live on. After some back and forth on the subject, Boethius suggests that, “true and perfect happiness crowns one with the union of independence, power, reverence, renown, and joy” (Book II, IX). Philosophy notes that he needs to identify the source of these forms of good, which bestow happiness, and Boethius concludes that, “We must invoke the Father of all things, for without this no enterprise sets out from a right beginning” (Book II, IX), recognizing God as the ultimate source of goodness and happiness. Mortals are incapable of understanding God’s almighty plan, which works to ultimately bring about good, and should not waver in their beliefs when the good deeds go unrewarded, or bad ones go unpunished.

In my own ignorance, I did not initially believe *Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy* would apply to my daily life, much less affect my greater outlook upon existence. As it is so curtly put by Philosophy, we are capable of being “invincible” to the ravages of life, so long as we make good use of the lessons offered to us through Philosophy. Perception is everything, so to speak, and Boethius himself states that, “nothing is wretched, but thinking makes it so” (Book II, IV), revealing the power that the individual’s paradigm has over his or her situation. Philosophy asks, “Art thou striving to stay the swing of the revolving wheel?”, going on to say, “stupidest of mortals; if it takes to standing still, it ceases to be the Wheel of Fortune” (Book II, I). This semester has been fraught with troubles I did not expect to encounter; my physical health, romantic relationship, and schoolwork have all endured a drastic hit due to the resurgence of depression in my life. It is far too easy to sink into a feeling of hopelessness, neglecting any of the blame for such difficulties, and believing the world to be scheming against me. However, *Consolation* has really called me on the carpet, obliterating my primary complaint that I shouldn’t “deserve” such a condition. To believe that humans get what they deserve is foolish - it will lead to frustration when I witness the wicked being rewarded, or any good deeds of my own go unnoticed. Instead, I long to re-forge the “armour of invincibility” that Philosophy refers to, ascending beyond the reactionary realm of emotions and into a more peaceful state of rational acceptance. After all, if Fortune decided to be “fair” to me, I deserve to spend 50% of my life in anguish. *Consolation* has driven me to look for and appreciate the blessings that “Fortune” sends my way, and to remain politely detached from those that take their leave.

When reading *Consolation*, I couldn’t help but think of the similar teachings found in *Job,* a book of the Biblical Old Testament. As God entertains a casual conversation with Lucifer, the point is made that perhaps, humans only cherish God when their lives are filled with good things, and thus, that their love for him is empty. God has faith in a man named Job, who has experienced abundant wealth, comfort, and happiness due to his own faith, and allows Satan free reign over his mortal affairs, so long as he does not strike him down. Satan causes Job’s entire family to die, takes his vast quantities of land from him, and finally afflicts Job with a number of diseases. As a filthy grotesque mess, utterly devoid of all of God’s “blessings”, Job still does not curse God, even when his “friends” point out the incredible hopelessness of his situation. What he does ask, akin to Boethius, is, “Why me?”, to which God replies (a bit angrily) that He, the almighty creator of the universe, should not be questioned by a mere man. God points out that even Job’s cursed, ugly form was made by Him, and that he should not question the ways of the Lord, but keep in good faith, and trust in his sovereignty. Job does so, and is eventually restored to all of his former glory, with a new family to cherish and double his initial holdings in land and animals. God’s anger heavily mirrors Philosophy’s own scoldings of Boethius in relation to Fortune, advocating appreciation of the good and acceptance of the bad. The story of *Job* has changed very little since it’s inception, with its origin in the Dead Sea Scrolls dating back to roughly 150 BCE - 70 CE. The staying power of this story suggests its vast importance and applicability; humans have a special knack for complaining about life, it seems, and must be constantly reminded that life itself is a gift and an opportunity. As a young whippersnapper who gets caught up in myself all too often, these stories provide the valuable lesson that “Why me?” is not the question to be asking, but rather, “What am I going to do about it?”

The other two tales I compared to *Consolation* are Aesop’s *The Ass and the Lapdog* and Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Little Mermaid*. In the first, an ass grows jealous of the luxurious life and praise bestowed upon his master’s lapdog, feeling that he deserves this affection, given the hard work he does in the fields. He attempts to earn the same benefits by emulating the lapdog, stampeding into the house and utterly annihilating all sorts of fragile valuables in the process. He even injures his master when he tries to affectionately leap up onto him, causing him to be chased outside, nearly clubbed to death by his master’s servants. The ass realizes the folly of striving for something you don’t have, choosing instead to be content with his current situation. Boethius himself acts like a bit of an ass in *Consolation*, and both eventually realize they should be content with where they are in life. *The Little Mermaid* presents a similar lesson; a young mermaid longs to marry a human prince, and escape her “miserable” life of isolation under the sea. In the original story, this transformation is brought on by a Witch’s potion, which gives her a pair of feet in exchange for her tail and voice. This makes capturing the attention of her prince charming somewhat difficult; all she is able to do is dance in front of him, unable to relay her affection. Interestingly enough, as she is not accustomed to having feet, each step feels like glass is being driven into her heels. Ultimately, she endures incredible suffering both physical and mental, as the prince decides to marry another. The mermaid is dissolved into sea foam and then evaporates, becoming a “daughter of the air”. Only through 300 years of good deeds can she eventually obtain a soul, and ascend into heaven. However, these conditions do not include the additional year of good deeds that becomes required *with every single tear that a child cries*. On a far different note, the modern Disney ending of the story allows Aeriel to marry her prince charming, living happily ever after despite her initial dissatisfaction and greed that drive her actions. The original ending is much more in line with Boethius’ teachings, urging caution when striving for something that is beyond reach, and the potential price of acquiring it. The Disney ending no longer enforces this serious lesson, but rather, urges the observer to take risks and live boldly, lest they miss out on an important life opportunity. Keeping in mind the horrible suffering the original mermaid eventually faced, I aspire to be satisfied, even overjoyed, with the things that I have, recognizing the potential agony I could be placing myself in by always wanting more, more, more. At least Boethius gets to die at the end of his tale; if he had to endure 300 years of suffering +1 for every child’s tear, perhaps even Philosophy would not have been able to console him.