

Spinning the Wheel: From Boethius to Elizabeth I and Your Tarot Deck

Materials Needed

- A computer with internet access.
- A notebook and pen/pencil or a word processing document.
- Access to an image of the "Wheel of Fortune" card from a standard Rider-Waite Tarot deck (a quick internet search will provide this).
- Access to a modern English translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, specifically Book 2, prose 2 (available for free online, for example, on Project Gutenberg).
- Access to Queen Elizabeth I's translation of the same passage (Book 2, prose 2). A searchable version is available through academic or historical archives online. Search for "Queen Elizabeth I Boethius translation Book 2."
- Optional: Art supplies (paper, markers, colored pencils, digital design software) for the creative project.

Lesson Plan

Part 1: The Wheel in Your Hand (15 minutes) - Introduction & Hook

Let's begin with something familiar. Pull up an image of the "Wheel of Fortune" Tarot card. Take a few minutes to just look at it closely. Notice the figures on the wheel, the symbols in the corners, the creature at the top. Don't worry about the "correct" meaning; focus on your own interpretation.

Activity:

In your notebook, jot down answers to the following questions based purely on your observation of the card:

- What story does this card seem to be telling?
- What emotions does it evoke? (e.g., anxiety, excitement, inevitability)
- If this card represents a situation in life, what kind of situation would it be?
- What do you think is the relationship between the figures clinging to the wheel and the sphinx-like figure sitting calmly at the top?

This powerful symbol didn't originate with Tarot. We're going to trace its roots back to a Roman philosopher in prison and the powerful queen who was inspired by his work over a thousand years later.

Part 2: The Philosopher's Wheel (30 minutes) - Core Concept

The man behind the wheel concept is Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, a Roman official who was imprisoned around 524 AD, awaiting execution for a crime he claimed he didn't commit. In his cell, he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, an imaginary dialogue between himself and a mysterious woman, Lady Philosophy. She tries to comfort him by explaining the nature of true happiness and divine justice.

One of her key metaphors is the "Rota Fortunae," or Wheel of Fortune.

Activity:

Read the following passage from a modern English translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy*

(Book 2, prose 2). In this section, Lady Philosophy is speaking as Fortune herself, explaining her fickle nature.

"Why do you mortals blame me with your daily complaints? ... I am the one who turns the ever-rolling wheel. I delight in raising up what was cast down and casting down what was exalted. Ascend, if you like, but on this condition: that you will not think it an injustice to descend when the rules of my game demand it. Were you ignorant of my ways? Did you not know of Croesus, the king of the Lydians, who was a terror to Cyrus but a short while before, and then, pitifully condemned to the pyre, was saved by a shower from heaven? Have you forgotten how Paulus shed honorable tears over the calamities of King Perseus, his captive? What else does the cry of tragedy bewail but the overthrow of prosperous realms by the unforeseen stroke of Fortune?"

Discussion & Reflection:

In your notebook, reflect on these questions:

- According to Lady Philosophy (speaking as Fortune), what is the "rule of the game"?
- How does she justify her seemingly cruel behavior? Is her argument convincing?
- Boethius argues that true happiness cannot be found in things that Fortune can give or take away (wealth, power, fame). What things do you think he would consider "true happiness"?
- How does this philosophical idea of the Wheel of Fortune compare to the Tarot card you examined? Do they tell the same story?

Part 3: The Queen's Wheel (30 minutes) - Historical Connection & Analysis

Fast forward to the late 16th century. Queen Elizabeth I, one of England's most powerful and well-educated monarchs, faced constant threats to her rule—political plots, potential invasions, and personal betrayals. She found solace and strength in Boethius's work and undertook the challenge of translating *The Consolation of Philosophy* into English herself.

Her translation is not just a school exercise; it's a window into her mind and the language of her time.

Activity:

Now, read Queen Elizabeth I's translation of the exact same passage (Book 2, prose 2). The language will be different—more complex and archaic. Read it aloud to get a feel for its rhythm.

"Why O mortalls blame me with your daily plaints? ... My nature is this, this my force, this my continual game. I turne about my whirling whele, with turning spheare I am glad to change the lowest to the highest, and the highest to the lowest. Go up if you wilt, but on this condition, that you think it no injury to com downe whan the order of my sport requires it. Wert thou ignorant of my maners? Knewest thou not Croesus king of Lydians, afrayd of late of Cyrus, but shortly after, a wretch that should have bene burnt, was saved with a shoure from above? Doost thou not remember how Paulus shedde honest teares for the calamity of his prisoner Perses? What other thing do Tragedies cry out, but the happy states overthrowen with the unlokt for stroke of fortune?"

Comparative Analysis Task:

Your task is to be a linguistic detective. Compare the modern translation with Elizabeth's. Create two columns in your notebook: "Modern" and "Elizabeth I."

- **Word Choice:** Find at least three examples where the word choice is different. For example, "ever-rolling wheel" vs. "whirling whele." What is the effect of Elizabeth's choices? Does her language feel more dramatic, personal, or powerful?

- **Tone:** How would you describe the tone of each piece? Is one more formal, more aggressive, more poetic? Why do you think a queen facing constant uncertainty might be drawn to Fortune's "sport"?
- **Personal Connection:** Which translation do you find more compelling and why?

Part 4: Your Turn at the Wheel (60+ minutes) - Creative Application

This is where you synthesize everything we've explored. The concept of the Wheel of Fortune is timeless because it speaks to the unpredictable ups and downs of life. Your task is to create a modern interpretation of the Wheel of Fortune that connects the philosophical idea, the historical context, and your own perspective.

Choose ONE of the following projects:

1. **Design a Modern "Wheel of Fortune" Card:** Redesign the Tarot card for the 21st century. What symbols would you use? Instead of kings and sphinxes, would you use CEOs, influencers, stock market tickers, or viral memes? Sketch your card (digitally or on paper) and write a short (200-300 word) guide explaining your symbolic choices and how they relate to Boethius's core message about fortune and happiness.
2. **Write a "Modern Consolation" Dialogue:** Write a short scene (1-2 pages) in the style of Boethius. The characters could be you and a mentor figure (Lady Philosophy, or perhaps "Lady Science," "Mister Stoicism," etc.). Have your character complain about a modern-day misfortune (e.g., social media failure, a lost opportunity, academic stress), and have the mentor respond using the logic of the Wheel of Fortune.
3. **The Queen's Diary:** Write a fictional diary entry from the perspective of Queen Elizabeth I, dated shortly after she finished translating this passage. Have her reflect on a specific political or personal "turn of the wheel" she is experiencing. Why did this passage from Boethius resonate with her on this day? How does his philosophy give her strength (or frustration)? Use some of the language and tone from her translation.

Part 5: Taming Fortune (15 minutes) - Conclusion & Reflection

Once your creative project is complete, let's reflect on the central theme one last time. Boethius's ultimate point wasn't just that life is unpredictable, but that we can rise above the wheel.

Final Reflection Questions:

- After exploring these ideas, what do you think is the "antidote" to being a victim of the Wheel of Fortune?
- Has this lesson changed your interpretation of the "Wheel of Fortune" Tarot card? If so, how?
- How can an idea from a 6th-century prison cell, translated by a 16th-century queen, still be a useful tool for navigating life today?