

The Goddess Fortune The image of the goddess Fortune is one of the Middle Ages's chief literary devices for persuading the reader that this world is a sorry one. Fortune is a legacy from pagan Rome who was used to good effect by Boethius in his *Consolation* and to less good effect by hundreds of writers following Boethius. She is generally imagined as constantly turning a vertical wheel that has chairs fastened on its rim; in one of these chairs man rides, sometimes on the ascendant or at the apex of the wheel's orbit, but always in the end dashed down to its lowest point, where he ends his life in misery. (For one vivid description of Fortune, see King Arthur's dream, as told by Malory.) In the *Consolation* Fortune is made the means by which Boethius persuades the reader to put no trust in the seeming goods of life and to accept its ills without complaint. Ultimately, Boethius tells us, Fortune is merely the agent of the benevolent Prime Mover who governs the universe. Translated into specifically Christian terms, Fortune should become the agent of God, exercising his inscrutable will on earth, as she appears in Dante. But once again the full and mature vision proved beyond the capability of the majority of medieval writers, in whom Fortune becomes a purely malevolent power whose function is to make life miserable. Writers, the piety of whose motives it is impossible to doubt, interpreted all history as proving nothing more than that Fortune holds all men in her malicious sway. Works such as Boccaccio's *Falls of Illustrious Men*, Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*, and Lydgate's *Falls of Princes* consist of a series of biographies of eminent men betrayed by Fortune—"tragedies," according to the medieval definition. Though these writers thought that they were serving Christianity and mankind, in their enthusiasm for railing at Fortune they often seal themselves up within a moral vacuum: a man becomes a "tragic" figure merely by falling from high to low, and it does not matter that he might richly deserve his fall, so that Nero's life is as tragic as that of the worthiest of heroes. In the general disparagement of life's values, even those values which lie at the heart of Christianity tended to disappear.

BOETHIUS: *From The Consolation of Philosophy*¹

[FORTUNE DEFENDS HERSELF]

O man, wherefore do you recriminate me with your daily complaints? What wrong have I done you? What goods have I bereft you of that were yours? Strive or argue with me concerning the possession of riches or of dignities before whatever judge you will, and if you may show me that any mortal man has ever received any of those things as his and his alone, then will I grant freely that those same things were yours which you now seek.

When nature brought you forth out of your mother's womb I received you naked and wanting all things, and I nourished you with my riches, and was ready and eager to sustain you through my favor: and now that makes you impatient with me. And I surrounded you with all the abundance of all the goods that are in my control. Now it pleases me to withdraw my hand. You have had grace such as one has who has made use of someone else's goods: you have no right to complain as if you had really lost all your possessions. Why do you complain then? I have done you no wrong. Riches, honors, and other such things are of my right. They are my servants and recognize me as their mistress. They come with me, and depart when I turn away. I can confidently say that if those things whose loss you complain of had been yours, you would not have lost them.

1. Based on Chaucer's Middle English rendition (Book II, Prose 2).

Shall I alone, then, be forbidden to exercise my right? Surely it is permissible for the sky to bring bright day and after that to cover the day with dark night. The year too has leave to apparel the face of the earth now with fruit, now with flowers, and sometimes to destroy them with rain and cold. And the sea has a right sometimes to be calm and blandishing with smooth water, and sometimes to be horrible with waves and winds. But the desire of man, which cannot be quenched—shall it force me to be steadfast, although steadfastness is strange to my ways? Such is my nature, and this game I play continually: I turn the whirling wheel and the circle spins. I am glad to change the lowest to the highest, and the highest to the lowest. Mount up if you will, provided you do so under this condition, that you will not maintain that I do you wrong though you descend down when the rules of my game require it.

DANTE: [Fortune an Agent of God's Will]²

"Master," said I to him, "now tell me further, this Fortune, on which thou touchest to me, what is it, which has the goods of the world so in its clutches?"

And he to me: "O foolish creatures, how great is that ignorance which harms you! I would have thee now receive my opinion concerning her. He whose wisdom transcends all, made the heavens, and gave them their guides, so that every part shines on every part, distributing equally the light. In like wise for the splendors of the world, He ordained a general mistress and guide, who should from time to time transfer the vain goods from race to race, and from one blood to another, beyond the resistance of human wit. Wherefore one race rules, and another languishes, pursuant to her judgment, which is hidden like the snake in the grass. Your wisdom has no withstanding of her: she foresees, judges, and pursues her reign, as theirs the other gods. Her permutations have no truce; necessity compels her to be swift, so often comes he who obtains a turn. This is she who is so set upon the cross, even by those who ought to give her praise, giving her blame amiss and ill report. But she is blessed and hears this not: with the other Primal Creatures she turns her sphere, and blessed she rejoices."

2. From *Inferno* VII.48 ff., in Charles Eliot Norton's translation. Dante is discussing Fortune with Virgil, his guide through Hell.