

Deanne Williams
Department of English
York University
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3
dmw@yorku.ca

Boethius Our Contemporary
The Consolatio in Medieval and Early Modern England

In erthe is not oure countre
- Chaucer, *The Romaunt of the Rose*

It was the fall of 1593, and Queen Elizabeth was turning sixty. In recent years, many of her closest friends and confidantes had died, bringing a new generation to the Privy Council, and raising the inevitable question of succession. At home, there was the plague, and abroad, there was the war with Spain and the recent conversion of Elizabeth's former ally, Henri III, to Catholicism. Just around the time of her birthday, Elizabeth set herself the task of translating Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae*. Why would the queen, at the height of her powers, and so preoccupied with worldly matters, choose to translate this masterwork of prison literature, a piece of highly abstracted learning designed to console the wholly disempowered?

The answer lies in the English reception of Boethius, and in particular, in the Boethian lyrics of Geoffrey Chaucer. As these lyrics -- *The Former Age*, *Fortune*, *Truth*, *Lack of Stedfastness*, and *Gentillesse* -- rework well-known passages from Boethius, they place the constructs of the *Consolatio* within the kinds of real-world concerns that the queen faced every day at court. Focusing less upon the delights of philosophy than upon the demands of courtiership, the lyrics replace Boethius's confidence in eternity with a dissatisfaction with the contemporary, transforming the isolated Boethian cell into the

hothouse environment of the court, and setting aside the consolations of death for an analysis of the trials faced by the living.

Like Elizabeth I, Chaucer translated the *Consolatio*, and he took great pride in this accomplishment.¹ In his *Retractions*, he lists his *Boece* first among the works for which he thanks “Lord Jhesu Christ and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of heaven” (X. 1088).² Translation here is an act of grace, allowing Chaucer to show himself as diligent, selfless, and godly.³ By promoting *Boece*, Chaucer also deflects attention away from his avid participation in the erotic strain of Boethian reception. Inspired, perhaps, by the idealized female presence of Lady Philosophy, vernacular poets such as Jean de Meun, Jean Froissart, Eustache Deschamps, and Guillaume de Machaut translated the philosophical dialogue of the *Consolatio* into the language of *eros* and *amor*.⁴ The manuscript illustration of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in British Library, MS Cotton Nero a.x, illustrates the ease with which the structures of Boethian consolation are adapted to the concerns of vernacular romance [figure one].⁵ Depicting Lady Berthilak visiting Sir Gawain in his bedroom, this image recalls the iconography of Lady Philosophy visiting Boethius, a tradition documented extensively in the appendix to Pierre Courcelle’s *La Consolation de Philosophie dans la tradition littéraire*.⁶ It frames the painful lessons of love that Gawain learns at the Berthilak castle through the Boethian experiences of exile, imprisonment, and even tyranny.

As the *Consolatio* mediates between this-worldly desires and other-worldly longings, its reception establishes a dialogue between the life of the mind and the impulses of the body. However, Chaucer’s Boethian lyrics add a third element to the reception of the *Consolatio* that is neither spiritual nor erotic. Situating Boethius within

the world of the late-medieval courtier and poet, they offer a blend of courtiership and interiority that constitutes an alternative to the dichotomy between love and philosophy. These lyrics express a profound sense of distance and of difference from a simpler past, removing themselves from the *Consolatio* itself as well as from the erotic preoccupations that characterize so many other vernacular adaptations of Boethius.

As the medieval scholar and editor Rossell Hope Robbins observes, “Chaucer’s major influence on the fifteenth century was not through the *Canterbury Tales*, but through these formal, conventional lyrics.”⁷ Frequently anthologized through the fifteenth and into the sixteenth centuries (with some of them finding their way into Tottel’s 1557 *Miscellany*), these lyrics were collected and popularized by readers who saw their own concerns reflected in them.⁸ Many of them have courtly connections.⁹ At a time of political and religious upheaval and their attendant personal anxieties, they express a sense of loss and anxious attention to the dynamics of social relationships that would have resonated with the troubles faced by readers and writers who were reeling from everything from the Wars of the Roses to Henry VIII’s break with Rome. Using familiar Boethian passages to express alienation and dissatisfaction, these lyrics shape the reception not only of Chaucer but also of Boethius. When, in 1593, Elizabeth I translates the *Consolatio*, she is neither hiding away with her books nor nursing love’s wounds, but participating in the Chaucerian practice of finding, in Boethius, the words to process political problems.

Chaucer’s problem was love poetry. In the *Legend of Good Women*, the God of Love complains that Chaucer’s translation of the *Roman de la Rose* and his *Troilus and Criseyde* highlight women’s wickedness instead of their goodness, accusing him of

dwelling on the tragic, destructive potential of romantic love. With all the righteous assertiveness and rhetorical aplomb of Lady Philosophy herself, Alceste steps up to answer these charges, leading with the *Boece*. Here, translation appears next to godliness: it is an act of devotion comparable to that of penning a saint's life"¹⁰

And for to speke of other holynesse,
He hath in prose translated *Boece*
And maad the lyf also of Seynt Cecile.
He made also, goon ys a gret while,
Origenes upon the Maudeleyne.

(F. 424-6)

[And for to speak of other holy acts, he translated Boethius in prose, and also the life of Saint Cecilia. Quite some time ago, he also did Origen's *On Maria Magdalene*.]

The God of Love's list of scurrilous Chaucerian material places the burden on Alceste to respond with a similar catalogue of high-minded, religious works. Her list implies an anxiety, on Chaucer's part, that his participation in the construction of amorous poetry out of Boethian material overshadows the scholastic traditions of translation and commentary. However, there just isn't that much for Alceste to work with: as the *Retractions* confirm, there's only the *Boece* and a saint's life or two. Indeed, when Chaucer lists these accomplishments in the *Retractions*, his language gets increasingly vague as he moves from *Boece* to various "bookes of legendes of seintes, and homelies, and moralitee, and devocioun."

So Alceste feels the need to pad Chaucer's resume. Many scholars have contended that Alceste's reference to "Origenes upon the Maudeleyne" refers to a lost Chaucerian translation of the Pseudo-Origen homily *De Maria Magdalene*.¹¹ However, the corresponding section in the G version of the *Legend of Good Women* refers to another so-called "lost" translation, this one Pope Innocent's *De Miseria condicionis humane*, a discussion of asceticism that Chaucer draws upon in the *Man of Law's Prologue and Tale*.¹² It is possible that Chaucer is including translations that he has every intention of making but hasn't quite gotten around to doing. And perhaps by the time he revised the poem, he considered the *De Miseria* to be a more interesting future project than the *De Maria*.

Another option, however, is that Chaucer is making a joke, characteristically, at his own expense. The God of Love puts Chaucer in the position of having to grasp at straws in order to make his translation of *Boece* look like part of an *oeuvre* of learned and spiritual, rather than erotic, material. Faced with the personal desire, and fictional necessity, to balance his stories about romantic love with work of a more salubrious nature, Alceste (and Chaucer) must embroider the truth. The *De Maria* and the *De Miseria* thus become the translation equivalents of that fictitious Trojan authority, Lollius. Perhaps Chaucer is also poking fun at the God of Love himself, who fails to recognize the Boethianism that informs the Chaucerian works to which he takes such great exception, such as his translation of the *Roman de la Rose* and especially the *Troilus*.

The interchange between Alceste and the God of Love acknowledges a situation that Chaucer appears to believe should be otherwise, if he were more high-minded and

his readers more godly.¹³ This sense of conflict between the erotic and the philosophical explains other Boethian moments in Chaucer's work, in which he pokes fun at his characters or narrative persona, highlighting their distance from the great philosopher. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, for example, the moment when Chauntecleer is captured by the fox provides the occasion for the narrator to meditate upon Boethius's account of divine foreknowledge:

But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren
As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn,
Or Boece, or the Bisshop Bradwardyne
Whither that Goddes worthy forwityng
Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thyng. *constrains*

(VII. 3240-4)

[But I can not distinguish good from bad arguments, like the holy doctor Augustine, or Boethius, or Bishop Bradwardine, concerning whether God's great foreknowledge constrains me necessarily from doing something.]

After considering in detail the extent to which Chauntecleer was predestined for his fate, the narrator washes his hands of the whole question:

I wol nat han to do of swich matere
My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere.

(50-52)

[I will have nothing to do with such things, as you know, my tale is of a cock.]

Highlighting the absurd task of applying Boethian philosophical tools to explain the experiences of a barnyard fowl (however correct they turn out to be), these lines suggest

Chaucer's discomfort with the application of Boethian language to the solipsistic struggles of the lover. The poet's ongoing identification with the lusty, lyric, Chauntecleer, performing for the delectable Pertelote, reminds the reader that this kind of poetry has less to do with the eternal than with the diurnal yearnings of a cock.

In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the "lothly lady" invokes Boethius in her lesson to the knight about the importance of judging people by their actions:

Thenketh hou noble, as seith Valerius,
Was thilke Tullius Hostillius,
That out of poverte roos to heigh noblesse.
Redeth Senek, and redeth eek Boece;
Ther shul ye seen express that it no drede is
That he is gentil that dooth gentil deedis.

(III. 1166-70)

[Think about how noble, according to Valerius Maximus, was Tullius Hostillius, who rose from poverty to great nobility. Read Seneca and also Boethius: there you shall find it expressed without doubt that he who is gentle does gentle acts]

Although Boethian philosophy (here, the lothly lady is citing the discussion of good versus wicked deeds in *Consolatio* III, pr. 4) is easily distilled and transposed into a romance framework, the old woman's reference to Boethius is inappropriate in many ways. It is, as is the case so often in Chaucer, anachronistic: the days of King Arthur, when the story is set, historically coincide with those of Boethius, making it impossible for her to be reading Boethius as an *auctor* at the level of Seneca, much less Chaucer's fourteenth-century translation of him. To mention learned figures such as Seneca and

Boethius at all jars with the tale's generic affiliation with Arthurian romance, and especially with the idea of a knight's quest for what women most desire. While it appears implausible that such a humble figure should be so literate, her reading material hints that she may actually be an aristocratic, "exceptional" woman: a status confirmed by her transformation at the end of the tale.

Ultimately, however, this passage gestures toward the ways in which Boethius is, in fact, profoundly appropriate to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. As in the *Consolatio*, a mysterious woman teaches virtue to a man who is a bit of a hard case (although Boethius's dreamer was, of course, no rapist). In her speech, the lothly lady quotes Lady Philosophy on the virtues of loving poverty and despising riches, and the importance of judging people by their actions and not by their wealth, status, family or even beauty. Of course, the lothly lady's purpose is to prepare the knight not for death but for marriage. The Wife of Bath's prayer, "Jhesu Christ us sende/ Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde" (1259), refers back to the bedrooms that appear throughout the marriage segment of the *Canterbury Tales*, as well as to Boethius's bed in the *Consolatio*, thus invoking more generally the various uses and pleasures of beds and bedside visits. In a similar vein, the knight's exhausted expression of resignation at the end of the tale ("for as yow liketh, it suffiseth me") pokes fun, cheekily, at Lady Philosophy's prodigious loquacity: anything to get her to stop talking.

The *Wife of Bath's Tale* embodies the contradictory nature of Chaucer's relationship to Boethius. On the one hand, Boethius represents the world of higher learning (a world that, for all the learned women that constitute the exception to this rule, engenders a culture of masculine entitlement that exists on a continuum with the

presumptions of Chaucer's rapist knight). On the other hand, however, the tale embraces Boethius's easy assimilation to the concerns of lovers, underscoring the fact that Boethius himself gives women a voice through the figure of Lady Philosophy, who, like Chaucer's lothly lady, teaches Boethius how to be himself in the right way. Ultimately, the knight's education by the lothly lady in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* shows the productive ways in which vernacular Boethian love poetry actively engages with the *Consolatio*.

In the *Consolatio*, Philosophy describes herself with wings that can ascend to heaven, and she encourages Boethius to cloak his own thought, metaphorically, in feathers: he can fly to the stars, look down on earth, and then return home. This journey will afford him a new perspective on tyranny: "quos miseri torvos populi timent/ Cernes tyrannos exules" [Those tyrants wretched peoples fear as fierce/ You will see as exiles]. Flying through the heavens in an eagle's talons in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer is reminded of this moment in Boethius:¹⁴

"Oh God," quod y, "that made Adam,
Moche ys thy myght and thy noblesse!"
And thoo thoughte y upon Boece,
That writ, "a thought may flee so hye
Wyth fetheres of Philosophy,
To passen everych element
And whan he hath so fer ywent,
Than may be seen behynde hys bak
Cloude" – and al that y of spak.
(II. 970-78)

[‘Oh God,’ I said, ‘that made Adam, great is your power and your magnificence!’
And then I thought about Boethius, who wrote, ‘A thought may fly so high on the
wings of philosophy to pass every element; and then when it has gone so far, then
clouds may be seen behind its back,’ and everything else of which I have spoken.]

Reworking this passage, Chaucer wittily literalizes Philosophy’s metaphor when the Dreamer is scooped up to the heavens by an eagle (IV. met. 1). He frames the passage as an escape, not from tyranny but from the dichotomy between philosophy and love. Rather than reflecting upon tyrants, however, Chaucer prefers instead to reference his own work: “and al that y of spak.” The *House of Fame* and *Boece* are conventionally dated around 1380, making it possible that Chaucer had just finished translating this key passage from Boethius: one which would later furnish the climax to *Troilus and Criseyde*. Using a passage from Boethius to make a statement about his own career, Chaucer acknowledges how swiftly Boethianism moves from the scholarly activities of translation and quotation to the adaptations, appropriations and innovations of the poet.

Chaucer’s Boethian lyrics share the worldly perspective of the *House of Fame*, a poem in which the afterlife is the pretext for its preoccupation with the questions of reputation and the public sphere that motivate the living. Like *Troilus and Criseyde*, they never mention Boethius by name, yet they mine the *Consolatio* for poetic inspiration. Rather than simply repeating Boethian commonplaces, however, they make Boethius relevant to the contemporary reader.¹⁵ In *The Former Age*, based on one of Boethius’s most famous metres: “felix nimium prior aetas” [How happy was that earlier age] (II. met. 5), a reference to the contemporary vogue for “sausage of galantyne” (16), made with wine, sugar and cinnamon, situates the poem in the fourteenth century, signaling a

perspective on time that is completely different from Chaucer's source.¹⁶ Boethius uses the conditional to imagine, however hopelessly, a return to former times: "utinam modo nostra redirent/ In mores tempora priscos!" [would that our present times/ would now return to those good ancient ways!] (23-4). With the past tense, Chaucer transforms Boethian nostalgia and lodging into an inexorable fall narrative: "Cursed was the tyme, I dare wel seye/ That men first dide hir swety bysinesse" (27-8). This is a completed action, one with clear consequences.

Whereas Lady Philosophy believes in, and in fact advocates, the shift in moral values that can accomplish a return to the Golden Age, Chaucer regards the sweaty business of the human condition occurring in a perpetual state of cursedness. Unlike Boethius, he sees no hope in the possibility of returning to a simple life; instead, he expects only an inevitable downward trajectory. Out from this miserable, condition emerges the world of the dream vision:

Yit was no paleis-chaumbres ne non halles;
In caves and wodes softe and swete
Slepten this blissid folk withoute walles
On gras or leves in parfit quiete.
Ne doun of fetheres ne no bleched shete
Was kid to hem, but in seurtee they slepte.
Hir hertes were al oon withoute galles;
Everich of hem his feith to other kepte.
(41-8)

[There were yet no palace-chambers or halls; in caves and woods, the blessed folk slept softly and sweetly without walls, on grass and leaves, in perfect quiet. They did not know about down or bleached sheets, but they slept in safety. Their hearts were entirely without envy, and everyone kept their word to each other.]

In these lines, Chaucer contrasts the excellent sleep enjoyed by the ancient cave and woods-dwellers to the insomnia endured by those who live in today's halls and chambers. Establishing a dichotomy between the courtly world of "halles" and "chaumbres," on the one hand, and the bucolic "caves" and "wodes," on the other, Chaucer evokes the binary structure of his own dream visions. In the *House of Fame*, the dreamer falls asleep in his bedchamber only to find himself, first, in a great temple, and then, in a vast desert; in the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Parliament of Fowls*, the dreamer appears in both a bedroom and a wood. The chamber in the *Book of the Duchess* is, of course, decorated with the "text and glose,/ Of al the *Romaunce of the Rose*" (353-4): a reminder of the prevalence of vernacular Boethian adaptations in the degraded present. Moreover, Chaucer's references to pillows and bed linens recall his dreamer's preoccupations in the *Book of the Duchess*, offering "a fether bed ... in fyn blak satyn doutremer" and "many a pilowe" (250-54) to Morpheus in exchange for better sleep. Insomnia is a classic symptom of the unlucky in love. As Chaucer suggests, in the Edenic past, "lambish" people loved each other properly and slept well afterwards. But in the unhappy present, we are sleepless (despite our high thread counts). Halls and chambers, beds, pillows, and sumptuous coverings: these are the setting and trappings for the unhappy courtly lover.

As *The Former Age* comments on the *Consolatio*, it glosses the eroticized context in which vernacular poets situate their adaptations of the *Consolatio* as emblematic of a

fallen world.¹⁷ Scholars usually take Chaucer's references to "Jupiter the likerous" (56) and Nembrot, "desirous/ To regne," as allusions to Richard II and the subject of tyranny. Together, however, they constitute foundational examples of the fall: sexual appetite and infidelity, and the division of tongues, or the multiplicity of vernaculars.¹⁸ *The Former Age* thus laments not only a temporal and moral fall, but also a literary and cultural one: Boethius's philosophical dream vision has been transformed into an erotic one, complete with "envye" and "avaryce."

The classical and biblical figures in *The Former Age* symbolize a temporal break, setting the present apart from a distant, yet infinitely more perfect, history. As Chaucer's Boethian lyrics enter into a dialogue with the literary past, they address the idea of pastness itself. *Lack of Stedfastnesse* transforms Boethius's famous "Bond of Love" meter (II. met. 8), a paean to harmonious, universal love, into a lament for what has been "lost for lak of stedfastness." What *is*, in Boethius, becomes, in Chaucer, what *was*: "Somtym the world was so stedfast and stable" (1). What is, in Boethius, a warning ("But if love should slack the reins, all that is now joined in mutual love would wage continual war") becomes, in Chaucer, a reality: "For now a man is holde unable,/ But if he can by som collusion/ Don his neighbour wrong or oppressioun" (10-12). Chaucer recognizes that things are different from the way they were: "The world hath mad a permutacioun/ Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse" (19-20). Whereas the exiled Boethius could console himself by thinking about his former friend, Theodoric, as an alien and a tyrant, comfortable in the knowledge that as a worldly ruler he is ultimately powerless against the inexorability of death, Chaucer addresses himself directly to the king and his world; death follows less as a sweeping conclusion than as an afterthought.

In *Truth*, which appears in an astonishing twenty-four manuscripts and six early printings, including Tottel's *Miscellany*, Chaucer brings this sense of temporal decline together with a complaint against the contemporary court. Written, according to the Shirley manuscript, from a Boethian position ("vppon his dethe bedde lying in his grete Anguyssse"), Chaucer's *Truth* translates the isolated prison world of Boethius, all books and memories, into the hyper-social atmosphere of the court. Lady Philosophy frequently advises her charge against placing excessive value on riches, encouraging him to celebrate the good and to observe the stability of the divine mind.¹⁹ Chaucer's lyric communicates the same moral lesson. However, whereas in the *Consolatio*, the purpose of the lesson is to prepare its author for death, in *Truth* the lesson is offered as a means of handling the drama of social death. Chaucer's opening injunction, "flee from the press" (1), creates a world of crowds and competition, and he describes the restless activity of social jostling: "climbing" (3), "business" (8), and "wrestling" (15). The Boethian concern with the loss of power, honor, and the vagaries of fortune becomes, instead, the discourse of patronage, connections, and *Realpolitik*. While the *Consolatio* concerns an imaginary dialogue between a solitary prisoner and an apparition, Chaucer's *Truth* is deeply involved in the social whirl.

The political landscape that Chaucer sketches in *Truth* could not be farther away from the wilderness of Boethian interiority. Turning the focus of the gaze away from the divine, Chaucer consistently directs it toward the self: "suffyce unto thy thing, though it be smal" (2). Here, he emphasizes individual ethics and moral strength, fortifying instead of dissolving the self, as Lady Philosophy would have it. This individualism is pragmatic advice (or, as the French subtitle puts it, *Bon Conseyl*), presented as one side of an

ongoing conversation among those who choose to continue to lead their lives within the worldly “press.” Chaucer offers counsel for the social animal, not for the hungry soul. Chaucer’s advice, “Know thy countree” (18) refers to the passage in Boethius in which Lady Philosophy observes that tyrants are exiles in their own country, and she advises Boethius to cloak his thought in feathers, and to regard the heavens as his true home. However, aphoristic lines such as “Reule wel thyself that other folk canst rede” (6) are keyed, ultimately, to relations between self and other. “Daunte thyself, that dauntest otheres dede” (13) advocates the even-handedness necessary to achieve group cohesion, and the envoi’s “Pray in general for thee, / And eek for other, in hevenlich mede” (26-7) regards salvation as a community enterprise. Even his advice -- that the addressee break off all relations with the court, preemptively, rather than suffer the stings of rejection -- is attuned to the nuances of human psychology.

Translating the Boethian concern with the soul into the courtier’s concern with the self, Chaucer’s Boethian lyrics operate from a perspective that is more narrow and temporal than the eternal scope of their source. Their overarching sense of dissatisfaction with the present is met, not with high hopes for the afterlife but with schemes for survival in the present. Together they articulate an individual poetic subjectivity that inspires emulation by poets such as Sir Thomas Wyatt, whose *Mine Own John Poyntz* (1536) is addressed, like Chaucer’s *Truth*, to a fellow courtier.²⁰ Slightly altering Chaucer’s “flee from the press” to “fle the presse of courtes” (3), *Mine Own John Poyntz* elaborates the anti-court sentiments of Chaucer’s Boethian lyrics.²¹ Describing courtiers as “wolves these sely lambs among” (27), Wyatt recalls the “lambish people” (50) of the idealized *Former Age*; Wyatt’s lament, “I cannot wrest the law to fill the coffer/ With innocent

blood to feed myself fat,/ And do most hurt where most help I offer” (34-36) responds to the account, in *Lack of Stedfastnesse*, of how “now-a-days, a man is held unable,/ But if he can, by some collusion,/ Do his neighbour wrong or oppression” (10-12). Furthermore, Wyatt’s concern with inner virtue over external shows of power, “But true it is that I have always meant,/ Less to esteem them [ie. the powerful] than the common sort,/ Of outward things that judge in their intent,/ Without regard what doth inward resort” (10-13), elaborates the ideals of *Gentilesse*, in which Chaucer explains “For unto vertu longeth dignitee. And not the revers, sauffly dar I deme,/ Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe” (5-7), just as Chaucer’s “for fynally, Fortune, I thee defye” (*Fortune*, 8 ff) enjoys an afterlife in Wyatt’s “It is not for because I scorn or mock/ The power of them, to whom fortune hath lent,/ Charge over us” (7-9).

Wyatt’s account of the court in *Mine Own John Poytz* also takes its cue from Chaucer’s other works. References to the Canterbury pilgrims (“praise Sir Thopias for a noble tale/ and scorn the story that the knight told” ll. 50-1), and the theme of self-imposed exile (as Chaucer’s *Truth* exhorts: “Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stal!” l. 17), replace the pilgrimage site of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* with a country house library in Kent, “But here I am in Kent and Christendom/ Among the Muses where I read and rhyme” (ll. 100-101).²² Here Wyatt connects, in a very Chaucerian way, the purification and atonement achieved by Catholic pilgrimage with the practical choice to flee the court while things blow over. With matters of the court taking precedence over matters of the spirit, “Kent and Christendom” concretizes Chaucer’s Boethian advice, “Know thy contree.” Wyatt’s use of Chaucer’s Boethian lyrics in *Mine Own John Poyntz* thus offers an account of the fortunes of the Boethian self at King Henry VIII’s court.

When Wyatt was imprisoned in May 1536, his father Henry is said to have quoted from Chaucer's *Truth*, "If he be a true man, as I trust he is, his truth will him deliver, it is no guile."²³ Maintaining both the sense of contemporaneity of Chaucer's *Truth* and its political sensibility, Henry Wyattt preserves the Chaucerian practice of addressing problems of the court in Boethian terms.

The appearance of Boethius in Rowland Lockey's copy of Hans Holbein's *Family of Thomas More* [figure two] illustrates the ongoing value of Boethius as a political touchstone in Tudor England. Now at Nostell Priory in West Yorkshire, the painting, which dates from the very late sixteenth century, displays a copy of the *Consolatio* beside some flowers and mandolins. It has the look of a book that has just been put down by a reader who plans to return to it momentarily.²⁴ It rests just behind the right shoulder of John More, creating a mini-tableau of worldly vanity, in which images of earthly delight are countered by an acknowledgement of mortality and the trials of life. Lockey used the Boethius to replace the prayer books that appear in Holbein's 1527 sketch for the original painting, now lost. Intended to disguise the family's Catholicism, it emblemizes the humanist ideals of learning identified with the More household, foregrounding the significance of classical, and specifically Stoic, philosophy in Thomas More's professional and personal identities.²⁵

Yet as the book reflects the family's learning and political connections, it also recalls the trials of More's imprisonment and execution, drawing attention to the important parallels in the lives of Boethius and Thomas More. Both were men of letters who took on high-ranking public positions only to be accused of treason. As they languished in prison, they wrote lasting works of consolation. The Lockey painting thus

recalls the execution that More suffered in 1533, just as Boethius had been executed a thousand years before. More even brought a copy of Boethius with him to the Tower when he was imprisoned for opposing Henry VIII's proposed divorce. There he composed his own Boethian treatise, *A Dialogue of Comfort In Tribulation*.

Elizabeth I took up the *Consolation of Philosophy* as a translation project sixty years after More's execution. While the queen may have been unaware of the copy of the *Consolatio* that had graced the bookshelf in the More family portrait, she could not have forgotten the Boethian story of More himself: the man who wanted to stop her mother's marriage to her father, who would have regarded her as illegitimate, and whom her father had to silence in order to ensure Elizabeth was born in wedlock. Indeed, Boethius would have made Elizabeth think of her own experience on the wrong side of the prison bars: the most recent published translation of the *Consolatio*, by George Colville, had been dedicated to her half-sister, Queen Mary I, in 1556 (although Elizabeth's ambassador Thomas Chaloner printed a translation of the songs in 1563). Translating Boethius may also have put Elizabeth in mind of her cousin, James I, who brought along his own a copy of Boethius to prison, where he penned his own consolatory volume, the *Kingis Quair*.

Described as "a clumsy rendering," and "anything but exact," Elizabeth's translation of Boethius has been appreciated more for the insights it offers into Queen Elizabeth's pastimes, than for its merits as a translation.²⁶ Recently it has been considered evidence of her Protestant conviction and of her excellent education, as Roger Ascham's model pupil.²⁷ But Boethius is a rather perverse choice for voicing an allegiance to religious reform. And although Elizabeth was, to be sure, a credit to her teachers, when she turns her attention to Boethius a half-century after leaving the schoolroom, she was

surely thinking of more than the joys of double translation. Instead, Elizabeth's translation filters Boethius through Chaucerian eyes. For Elizabeth, translating Boethius signals not only a return to the structures of learning that defined her youth and education, but also a strategy for processing the challenges she faced as a ruler.

For Elizabeth, Boethius had long supplied the discourse for the political intrigues and romantic disappointments that characterize the decidedly sublunary atmosphere of the court. Imprisoned at Woodstock Palace by Queen Mary from 1554-55, the twenty-one year-old Princess Elizabeth brings the Boethian complaint against Fortune together with the Chaucerian complaint against the court.²⁸

Oh fortune, thy wresting, wavering state
Hath fraught with cares my troubled wit,
Whose witness this present prison late
Could bear, where once was joy flown quite.
Thou causd'st the guilty to be loosed
From bands where innocents were enclosed,
And caused the guiltless to be reserved,
And freed those that death had well deserved.
But herein can be nothing wrought.
So God send to my foes as they have thought.

Finis. Elisabetha the prisoner, 1555.

At the time, the imprisoned Elizabeth had no idea that she would not be meeting a Boethian fate herself. Her charcoal inscription, transcribed by various visitors to the palace, transforms a philosophical complaint into the full-scale testimony of a scarred

witness. Chaucer's *Fortune* accuses, "This wrecched worldes transmutacion ... Governed is by Fortunes error" (1-4). As the poet bewails his outcast state, he repudiates Fortune. Casting the goddess, following Boethius, as a deceptive strumpet, he holds up Socrates as a model of someone who "knewe wel the deceit of hir colour" (21). Replacing Boethian Stoicism and Chaucerian repudiation with a plea to God for assistance, Elizabeth has every expectation that God will repay the crimes of all her enemies, including Fortune herself. Nevertheless, Elizabeth's accusations are couched in a social framework inherited from Chaucer. She is less concerned with abstract concepts of right and wrong than with the unjust treatment of the guilty and the innocent, just as Chaucer's *Fortune* makes the distinction between "frend of effect and frend of countenance."

In 1587, by this point well into her fifties, Elizabeth engaged in a verse dialogue with Sir Walter Raleigh on the subject of Fortune. Not the first of such exchanges for the pair (the first concerned whether or not Raleigh should attempt to "climb" into Her Majesty's affections), these lyrics explore the involvement of Fortune in the waning of the queen's affections for Raleigh. The courtier complains, "Fortune hath taken away my love" (307) and consoles himself with the thought that he is not alone, that "Fortune conquers kings" (308). Here, he takes on for himself the position of being beyond Fortune that Chaucer's *Fortune* credits to Socrates alone: "But love farewell – though Fortune conquer thee/ No fortune base or frail shall alter me."²⁹ Defying, not Fortune, but love itself, Raleigh removes himself not only from the court but also from the process of courtship. In her brilliant reply Elizabeth casts herself, not as a king, but as Socrates, who was known for his indifference to the dance of love: "though Fortune were not blind/

Assure thyself she could not rule my mind.” She takes up Raleigh’s sly identification of her as a king, only to reject it outright:

Fortune, I know, sometimes doth conquer kings,
And rules and reigns on earth and earthly things,
But never think Fortune can bear the sway
If virtue watch, and will her not obey

Here Elizabeth places them both outside the vernacular discourse of Boethian erotics, reinscribing them, instead, within the strict terms of the *Consolatio*.

Translating *Consolatio* III., metre 6, in 1593, Elizabeth infuses a Chaucerian sense of pastness to reflect upon her own history of contested legitimacy. Chaucer’s *Gentilesse*, inspired by the same metre, not only supplies the key terms “stock” (as in, “this first stok was full of rightwisnesse”) and “vice” (as in “Vyce may wel be heir”), but also the idea of framing Boethius within the context of contemporary politics. Chaucer’s *Gentilesse* infuses his Boethian source material with a sense of historical sweep, emphasizing the firstness of the “firste fader” and then moving from the “first stok” to his “heir.” For Elizabeth, this historical turn inspires her to situate her translation within her own lived experience:³⁰

All human kind on earth
From like beginning comes:
One father is of all,
One only all doth guide.
He gave to sun the beams
And horns on moon bestowed;

He men to earth did give
 And signs to heaven.
He closed in limbs our soul
 Fetched from the highest seat.
A noble seed therefore
 Brought forth all mortal folk.
What crake you of your stock
 Or forefathers old?
If your first spring and author
 God you view,
No man bastard be,
 Unless with vice the worst he feed
And leaveth so his birth.

Here, Elizabeth renders Boethius's "nullus degener exstat," as "no man bastard be." Translating *degener*, a term for "base or degenerate," as "bastard," Elizabeth recalls how she was declared a bastard by her father following the execution of her mother, Anne Boleyn, in 1536. She foregrounds the Boethian idea of considering God as true father instead of a biological father, in order to argue that all have access to nobility. Calling into question the pride people take in their ancestry, Elizabeth in effect disowns her own father, just as he had disowned her. She thus erases the legacy of bastardy that had dogged her reign (this historical context also allows us to read the "horns" on the moon through the lens of accusations of adultery). Elizabeth's concluding line, "and leaveth so

his birth” is a stark recognition of her individual singularity, distinguishing herself from her Tudor heritage, just as Chaucer broke with history.

According to Elizabethan lore, the queen accomplished the task of translating the *Consolatio* in a little more than twenty-four hours.³¹ Elizabeth had made some translations earlier in her life, most importantly *Le mirour de l’ame pecheresse* of Marguerite d’Angoulême, which she presented to her stepmother Katherine Parr on New Year’s Eve, 1544, and the following year, a rendering of Katherine’s *Prayers and Meditations* into Latin, French, and Italian. After Boethius, Elizabeth translated continued to translate Latin, choosing Plutarch’s *De Curiositate* [On Being a Busybody] and Horace’s *Ars Poetica*. Boethius thus represents a turning point, not only from French to Latin but also from the matters of the Reformation that motivated her in her youth, to the more earthly matters of morality and satire, poetry and the schoolroom that amused her in her old age.

The court offers Chaucer an alternative to the dialectic between translation and eroticism in the history of Boethian reception. And Wyatt translates the anti-courtly sentiments in Chaucer’s Boethian lyrics into a full-scale farewell to the court. While the presence of Boethius in the Lockey painting reflects the ongoing value of Boethius to signal, not religion, but political and intellectual affiliations, Queen Elizabeth returns love and death to the Chaucerian mélange of books and politics. While her poems participate in the anti-courtly, even anti-erotic Boethianism of Chaucer’s influential lyrics, her translation of the *Consolatio* fulfils their true spirit, placing Boethius in dialogue with the frailty and longing of the human heart in the fallen world.

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¹ My editions are *Boethius' Consolatio Philosophiae* 2nd ed. ed. and commentary James J. O'Donnell (Bryn Mawr: Bryn Mawr Latin Commentaries, 1990) and *The Consolation of Philosophy* trans. Richard Green (New York: Macmillan, 1962, rpt. 1989).

² *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edition, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All quotations from Chaucer will be from this edition.

³ See Alastair Minnis, "'Glosynge is a Glorious Thyng': Chaucer at work on the *Boece*" in *The Medieval Boethius*: 106-24 and "Aspects of the Medieval French and English Traditions of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*" in *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*: 312-361. See also Rita Copland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1991) esp. Chapter Five, "Translation and interlingual reception: French and English traditions of Boethius' *Consolatio*," 127-50.

⁴ On French Boethianism see *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence* ed. Margaret T. Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981); *The Medieval Boethius. Studies in the Vernacular Translations of De Consolatione Philosophiae* ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge D. S. Brewer, 1987); and Glynnis M. Cropp, "The Medieval French Tradition" in *Boethius in the Middle Ages. Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the Consolatio Philosophiae* ed. Maarten J. F. M. Hoenen and Lodi Nauta (Leiden: Brill, 1997): 243-265.

⁵ See *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁶ See Pierre Courcelle, *La Consolation de Philosophie dans la tradition littéraire.*

Antécédents et Postérité de Boèce (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1967).

⁷ See his chapter on “The Lyrics” in *Companion to Chaucer Studies* ed. Beryl Rowland (Oxford: OUP 1979): 380-402 at 382.

⁸ See Rossell Hope Robbins, *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* 2nd. ed., rev. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955): liv.

⁹ *Lack of Stedfastnesse* contains an envoy to King Richard II, and appears in the mid-fifteenth-century Harley 7333 with an introductory note that calls attention to its royal readership: “This balade made Geffrey Chaunciers the Laureall Poete Of Albion and sent it to his souerian lorde Kynge Richarde the seconde thane being in his Castell of Windesore.” See fol. 147 b quoted in Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and his Readers Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 12. See also his discussion of the fortune of this lyric in the fifteenth century, pp. 125-27.

Gentillesse was quoted verbatim by the courtier and tutor Henry Scogan (the addressee of *Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan*) in a “moral ballade” composed for his students, the sons of Henry VI. The ballade was printed by W. W. Skeat in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 7. *Chaucerian and other Pieces* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897): 238. See also Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 16. And the envoi of *Truth* is addressed to one “Vache,” identified by Edith Rickert as Sir Philip de la Vache, a courtier, and son-in-law to Chaucer’s friend, Sir Lewis Clifford, who had fallen out of favour at court in 1386. See Edith Rickert, “Thou Vache.” *Modern Philology* 1 (1913-1914): 209-225 and Alfred David, “The Truth about Vache.” *Chaucer Review* 11 (1977): 334-337.

On the lyrics' early modern reception see the discussions of the poems in *The Minor Poems* ed. George B. Pace and Alfred David, *Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* vol. 5 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982) as well as H. S. Bennett, *Chaucer in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947); Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers* and *Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII: Literary Culture and the Arts of Deceit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ The G version reads: "And, for to speke of other besynesse,/ He hath in prose translated Boece/ And Of the Wretched Engendrynge of Mankynde,/ As man may in Pope Innocent yfynde;/ And mad the lyf also of Seynt Cecile" (412-416).

Some believe that Chaucer was actually working on these translations in the late 1380s and 90s. See Robert Enzer Lewis, "What Did Chaucer Mean by Of the Wretched Engendrynge of Mankynde?" *Chaucer Review* 2 (1968): 139-58.

¹¹ See John P. McCall, "Chaucer and the Pseudo Origen *De Maria Magdalena*: A Preliminary Study" *Speculum* 46 (1971): 491-509 and Karen E. Gross, "Chaucer, Mary Magdalene, and the Consolation of Love" *Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 1-30.

¹² Robert Enzer Lewis, "Chaucer's Artistic Use of Pope Innocent III's *de Miseria Humane Conditionis* in the *Man of Law's Prologue and Tale*" *PMLA* 81(1966): 485-492.

¹³ As Chaucer puts it in his translation of the *Roman*: "In erthe is not oure countre/ That may these clerkis seyn and see/ In Boece of Consolacioun,/ Where it is maked mencion/ Of oure contre pleyn at the ye,/ By teching of Philosophie,/ Where lewid men myght lere wit,/ Whoso that wold translaten it. (B. 5659-5666).

¹⁴ This is the passage as it appears in Chaucer's *Boece*: "I have, forthi, swiche fetheris that surmounten the heighte of the hevene. Whanne the swift thought hath clothid itself in

tho fetheris, it despiseth the hateful erthes, and surmounteth the rowndenesse of the gret ayr; and it seth the clowdes byhynde his back... to comen to the verry knowleche of God” (IV. Metrum 1).

¹⁵ See, for example, Jane Chance, “Chaucerian Irony in the Boethian Short Poems: The Dramatic Tension between Classical and Christian” *Chaucer Review* 20 (1986): 235-45.

¹⁶ See Bruce Holsinger’s discussion on this poem’s notion of temporality, and his account of the other Boethian lyrics, in his contribution on “Lyrics and Short Poems” in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer* ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 179-212 esp. 198-204. Other important discussions of this poem include A. V. C. Schmidt, “Chaucer and the Golden Age,” *Essays in Criticism* 26 (1976): 99-115 and Andrew Galloway, “Chaucer’s *Former Age* and the Fourteenth-Century Anthropology of Craft: The Social Logic of a Premodernist Lyric.” *ELH* 63 (1996): 535-53.

¹⁷ The *Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, the *Blackwell Guide*, and the Twayne’s English Authors Series volume on Chaucer make no mention of these influential poems.

¹⁸ John Norton-Smith, “Chaucer’s *Etas Prima*,” *MediumÆvum* 32 (1963): 117-24;

¹⁹ The major passages are Book II, pr.4 and m.4; Book III, pr.11 and m.11; and Book IV, pr.6 and m.6.

²⁰ See Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Collected Poems* ed. Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969), 90. See, for discussion, Seth Lerer, “Errata: Print, Politics and Poetry in Early Modern England” in *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* ed. Kenneth Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 41-71.

²¹ See Seth Lerer, *Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 170-2.

²² “I am not now in France to judge the wine” (l. 89) may also be a reference to Chaucer’s Pardoner.

²³ See the discussion in Sylvanus Urban, *The Gentlemen’s Magazine* vol. XXXIV new series (London: John Bowyer Nichols and Son, 1850): 239. I thank David Carlson for allowing me access to his unpublished essay, “Chaucer Centos in the Wyatt Corpus” which drew my attention to this anecdote.

²⁴ See the discussion of this painting in Susan Foister, *Holbein and England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004): 247-51 and David R. Smith, “Portrait and Counter-Portrait in Holbein’s The Family of Sir Thomas More” *Art Bulletin* 87.3 (2005): 484-506.

I thank Tatiana String of the University of Bristol for her advice on this point.

²⁵ Lockey also includes a copy of Seneca’s *Epistles*, under the arm of Elizabeth Dauncey, and Seneca’s *Oedipus* lies open on Margaret Roper’s lap.

²⁶ See Brian Donaghey, “The Post-Medieval English Translations of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* of Boethius” in *The Medieval Translator/ Traduire au Moyen Age* ed. Roger Ellis and René Texier vol. 5 (Belgium: Brepols, 1996): 302-321 and *Queen Elizabeth’s Englishings*, xii.

²⁷ See Lysbeth Benkert, “Translation as Image-Making: Elizabeth I’s Translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*.” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6.3 (January, 2001): 1-20, and John Morris Jackson and Noel Harold Kaylor, Jr. “The Early Education of Queen Elizabeth I and her Later Translation of *Boethius’s De Consolatione Philosophiae*” *Medieval English Studies* 10 (2002): 183-98.

²⁸ *Elizabeth I. Collected Works* eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 45-6.

²⁹ Chaucer's lines are "O Socrates, thou stidfast champioun,/ She never mighte be thy tormentour;/ Thou never dreddest hir oppressioun,/ Ne in hir chere founde thou no saviour" (17-20).

³⁰ *Queen Elizabeth's Englishings*, 54-5.

³¹ The charts and computations that accompany the manuscript, now in the Public Records Office, parse out the time she spent at her work almost like a prison sentence: "The Queenes Ma^{tie} began her translation of Boetius, vpon the xth day October, a^o 1593, and ended it vpon the eight of November then next following, w^{ch} were xxx dayes. Of w^{ch} tyme, there are to be accompted xiiij dayes, parte in Sondayes and holly dayes, and parte in her Ma^{ties} ryding abrode, &c., taking the ayre, vpon w^{ch} her Ma^{tie} did forbear to translate. So that xiiij dayes being deducted from xxx, Remainyth xvij dayes, In w^{ch} her Ma^{tie} finished her translation. And in those xvij dayes her Ma^{tie} did neuer exceed one houre & a halfe at a tyme in following her translation. Whereby it appeerith that in xxvj or xxvij houres, her Ma^{tie} perfourmed the whole translation." *Queen Elizabeth's Englishings* ed. Caroline Pemberton EETS OS 113 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1899) ix.