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BOETHIAN COLORINGS IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER’S EARLIER POETRY:  
THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS, THE PARLIAMENT OF FOWLS AND  
THE HOUSE OF FAME

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Presented to  
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Master of Arts

By  
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BOETHIAN COLORINGS IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S EARLIER POETRY: 
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There has been much written on Boethius and his impact on Chaucer’s greater known works, such as The Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde, yet there has not been much light shone on his other works, namely The Book of the Duchess, The Parliament of Fowls, and The House of Fame, which are a rich mix of medieval conventions and Boethian elements and themes. Such ideas have been explored through the lenses of his five, shorter “Boethian lyrics” – “The Former Age,” “Fortune,” “Truth,” “Gentilesse,” and “Lak of Stedfastnesse” – particularly because it is within these five poems that the metafictional narrative approach or framing of Chaucer’s Boethius-influenced work, through narration and possible consolations, are fleshed out and brought into focus. However, the “Boethian lyrics” are not necessary in the study of the three earlier poems The Book of the Duchess, The Parliament of Fowls, and The House of Fame. Using the convention of the frame tale with the dream vision in these three poems allows for the narrator to be brought to an understanding in each of these texts, strongly suggesting that this approach is something that Chaucer came across in Boethius’s The Consolation of Philosophy.
To merely go through and catalogue all Boethian elements as lifted directly from *Consolation* would accomplish nothing but a catalog of similarities. In that same vein, to analyze the “Boethian poems” would also be treading over familiar scholarly ground. In examining an intermediary group of texts as a bridge between Boethius’s classical philosophy and Chaucer’s courtly poetry, particularly *The Book of the Duchess, The Parliament of Fowls* and *The House of Fame*, this more concretely shows the extent of Boethius’s coloring injected into Chaucer’s writings from early in his writing career. Through close readings and secondary outside research, I am confident that another chapter of Chaucerian scholarship, one that has rarely been explored, much less written, can be added.
CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Chaucer is not only significant within the canon of English Literature for his usage of English rather than Latin in writing, but also for spreading the usage of the language – in the form of the London dialect – at the end of the Middle Ages. Further, Chaucer brought a heralding of the Renaissance through his writing. According to Derek Traversi in his book *Chaucer: The Earlier Poetry: A Study in Poetic Development*, this is exhibited through Chaucer’s integration of classical philosophy, which, along with religious notions, are found in many texts of medieval literature, and can still be accessed by the modern reader (7). It is this potent combination that has made Chaucer’s works have a great impact on the English language, literature, and culture as a whole.

Classical philosophy influences many manuscripts attributed to Chaucer, making it nearly impossible to pursue serious scholarly work on Chaucerian literature without paying some attention to the impact upon the English writer of the late 5th to early 6th century Roman Consul, aristocrat, writer, philosopher, and student of Greek philosophy, Boethius and his work *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Victor Watts states in his introduction to Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy* that “Boethius stands at the crossroads of the Classical and Medieval worlds,” and carries this further by claiming that “almost all the passages of philosophical reflection of any length in the works of Chaucer can be traced to Boethius” (xi-xii).
Boethius’s imprisonment at Pavia on the crime of treason – accused by the Ostrogothic King Theodoric the Great – is a text of prison literature that proposes many questions of life. The very question of how Boethius’s good fortune – from being in a highly respected office in Roman government to being labeled a traitor and awaiting execution in exile – turned bad is the primary purpose of this text. In order to answer this and other queries, Boethius composes his book as a conversation with Dame Philosophy, a figure who has a mysterious nature and appearance, giving a dream-like quality to the beginning of the book. She promptly diagnosis Boethius with a medical condition to explain his questioning:

‘It is nothing serious, only a touch of amnesia that he is suffering, the common disease of deluded minds. He has forgotten for a while who he is, but he will soon remember once he has recognized me. To make it easier for him I will wipe a little of the blinding cloud of worldly concern from his eyes.’ (Boethius 6)

By diagnosing Boethius’s ailment and impediment to seeking answers as being within his head and “blinded” by worldly concerns, Dame Philosophy is in effect transporting Boethius from his prison cell – metaphysically – and guiding him on a journey of the mind.

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1 The Modern English translation will be used in all quotations pertaining to *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The approaches used in this thesis do not include specific verbal echoes, particularly since the Chaucerian texts examined here were most likely written before Chaucer completed his translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, entitled *Boece*. Therefore, Boethius will be cited in Modern English in order to provide the clearest examples of Boethian content, which is what a “coloring” approach requires.
From here the dialogue progresses as Boethius and Dame Philosophy discuss the constant changes of Fortune – hence the Wheel of Fortune – and why men prosper and fail, which flows into other topics including the effects of Fame, and the link of Fate and Predestination. It is through this that Boethius is seeking answers through natural philosophy and not Christianity. By wanting a harmony of faith and reason, Boethius is able to come to an understanding of things – the term “consolation” carries much weight, implying that comfort is achieved – and is able to come back to his current situation within prison with the answers he sought.

By providing literary models and being accessible in general, it is of little surprise that the *Consolation*, according to Tim William Machan in his article “The *Consolation* Tradition and the Text of Chaucer’s *Boece,*” as one of the most popular books during the Middle Age, was translated into much of Europe’s vernacular, receiving special attention in England, where not only did King Alfred translate it into Old English for his peoples, and Queen Elizabeth I would also translate it the sixteenth century (40). Bernard L. Jefferson, in his seminal work *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius*, describes this work as the “golden book,” describing it as having broad human appeal. By finding a consolation for human suffering in the greatness of God, such a “veneration of the deity” marks the *Consolation* from its contemporaries and predecessors (47). In addressing the major themes of Fortune, Fame, Providence and Free Will, Human Nature, and Virtue and Justice, the *Consolation* reflects a sense of order and reason to the world. It is precisely this ideal that led to Boethius being regarded as a Christian saint, with readers somewhat blind to the “pagan elements” of his writing (47). By seeing Fortune
as an “instrument of God,” Boethian philosophy became a comfort to people in the Middle Ages, by making sense of the injustices of life, such as war and famine (49-50).

Between the ninth century translation of the *Consolation* by King Alfred and the 16th century translation by Queen Elizabeth I, Chaucer’s translation of the text, referred to as *Boece* (circa 1382-86), underscores the consistent appeal of this philosophical work, and it sets the stage for the philosophical basis of each text that he had either composed beforehand or afterwards. Accompanying *Boece* are five poems written between 1380-87 often referred to as the “Boethian lyrics,” entitled “Gentilesse,” “Fortune,” “Lak of Stedfastnesse,” “The Former Age,” and “Truth,” all of which are saturated with Boethian philosophy. These short poems were the most popular for Chaucer. Jane Chance, in her article “Chaucerian Irony in the Boethian Short Poems: The Dramatic Tension Between Classical and Christian,” argues that “Chaucer found particularly interesting the second book of the *Consolation,*” due to the emphasis on Fortune and her subsequent speech on the “great chain of love” (235). Chaucer may have been further “encouraged” by the long tradition of translation, and that “the thematic juxtaposition of the Late Classical and the Christian is skillfully rendered through the double levels of each poem apparent in tone, imagery, diction, and even point of view” (235). Such an apparent devotion to the translation of a text, according to Piero Boitani in his work *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame,* must leave an indelible mark of considerable “influence” on anything that the translator writes, and cannot be discounted in the pursuit of scholarship, particularly one that is so important considering the time period in which Chaucer was
composing and the textual tradition from which he is writing (153). It is precisely this strong influence that this work sets out to explore.

Rather than “influences,” a more appropriate term to describe Chaucer’s usage of Boethius is “Boethian coloring,” meaning that the theories and ideas presented within *Consolation* have been engaged by Chaucer, and thus “color” his poetry. There must be caution, however, to not allow the term “coloring” to be used when examining Chaucerian texts for the goal of a source study. Instead of finding direct or verbatim similarities between Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy* and Chaucer’s texts, there are interpretations within the text, particularly upon close reading and analysis. For example, it is doubtful that the narrators of these poems actually achieve the comfort that is found in the consolation that Boethius finds at the end of the *Consolation*, and instead come to an understanding in regard to the answers each seek. However, the narrators are still able to function in the Boethian role – mirroring Boethius’s perspective through the narrative – through coloring the context in which the poems were composed. This is markedly different from deliberate repetition of a key Boethian passage or scene, which is contrived and is not considered “coloring”; it does not alter the perspective of the poem organically.

The term “coloring” is used in this respect in a scholarly essay written by Susanna Fein, entitled “Boethian Boundaries: Compassion and Constraint in the Franklin’s Tale,” found in the book *Drama, Narrative and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales*, in which she describes the Boethian impact on “The Franklin’s Tale,” mostly through the dialogue of the characters, which exhibit distinctly Boethian ideals, particularly in regards to Book II
of Chaucer’s *Boece*, the scene in which examines Fortune’s role in the life of man, calling into question man’s obedience. It is here that the idea of constraint and obedience is examined, which parallels aspects of “The Franklin’s Tale” according to Fein:

Indeed, the Franklin offers the tale itself in a spirit of obedience to the bounds set up by the Host:

> “Gladly, sire Hoost,” quod he, “I wole obeye
> Unto your wyl; now herkneth what I seye.
> I wol you nat *contrarien* in no wyse
> As fer as that my wittes wol suffyse.
> I prey to God that it may plesen yow;
> Thanne woot I wel that it is good *ynow.*” (V 703-708)

Two words in this humble speech, *contrarien* and *ynow*, hint at the strongly Boethian coloring of the tale to come (196).

Looking at the text in this context, the effect of this tale would not be the same if there were not a coloring of Boethian ideals. It can be further argued that any of Chaucer’s works would not have the same effect or resonance on the reader without Boethian coloring. Written between 1392-95, after *Boece* and the “Boethian lyrics,” “The Franklin’s Tale” would seemingly be the perfect candidate for an in-depth discussion of Boethian colorings within Chaucer’s text, perhaps because of the assumption that the most heavily colored works would be those that came after *Boece*, since the translation is complete at that point, and thus the influences and elements are most internalized. In fact, most Chaucerian scholarship has focused heavily on studying
only the Boethian coloring found in two of the texts written in the same time period as
Boece itself, those being Troilus & Criseyde and “The Knight’s Tale,” resulting in more
discussion about the Boethian qualities in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus & Criseyde
than in any other works.

However, there are earlier works that are heavily colored with Boethian
philosophy, written years before the transcripts of Boece and the “Boethian lyrics” had
begun to be circulated. Jefferson describes how Boethian influence can be catalogued,
based on Chaucer’s texts:

[F]irst, when he knows the Consolation indirectly through other sources
or superficially; the second, coming after the translation, when he was
fired with the thought of the Consolation; the third, when his interest
became more quiescent, breaking out only at intervals as was suggested
from time to time in the subject matter of his later poetry.

(Jefferson 150-51)

By following such an idea and textual history scheme, instead of retreading the same
ground regarding the Canterbury Tales and Troilus & Criseyde, it will be worthwhile to
explore the Boethian colorings within three of Chaucer’s earliest texts: The Book of the
Duchess, written between 1368-72, The Parliament of Fowls, written between 1380-82,
and The House of Fame, written between 1378-80. It can be safely said that there is not
nearly the avalanche of scholarship surrounding these poems, as there are pertaining to
his more well-known and studied works. Traversi supports such a notion, claiming that
these three texts “are recognized by scholars as representing important stages in this
process [of the development of Chaucer’s writing], but are perhaps still less familiar than they deserve to be to the intelligent general reader of poetry” (7). These poems are not only important to Chaucer’s canon, but also to the canon of English literature as a whole, proving that a work made in a fairly “new” language can properly be praised, not only because of the classical elements and “tradition” that are represented, but also because of the usage of the English language alone (Traversi 11-2).

An important aspect of these works is the fact that *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Parliament of Fowls* exist within the literary genre of the “dream vision” or “dream allegory.” *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines a dream vision in the following:

A type of narrative in which the narrator falls asleep, dreams, and relates the contents of the dream. Dream visions have an allegorical aspect […], hence the generally equivalent term *dream allegory*.

Dream visions were a popular form of storytelling in the Middle Ages […] (121).

Chaucer uses the genre of dream visions by establishing a frame tale, which explains the context in which the dream vision occurs for the narrator. By doing this at the beginning of each poem, Chaucer is creating a physical boundary between the dream vision and the reader, in order to incorporate allegory into the poem.

Derek Traversi expounds upon the usage of dreams in medieval society by explaining that there existed a “medieval speculation, ‘scientific’ and philosophical, on the subject of dreams”: 
The medieval attitude to dreams was in certain respects perhaps more sophisticated than many immediately appear. [...] two kinds of dream are under consideration. There is a distinction between what were sometimes called *somnia naturalia*, "lower" dreams associated with the physical processes of the body, digestive and otherwise, and the "higher" dreams, or *somnia animalia*, based on the operations of the waking mind and rising on occasions to *somnia coelestia*, offering insight into the future and, on occasion, into some aspect of "spiritual" reality. (35)

This idea of *somnia coelestia* is one that will be revisited repeatedly throughout the explorations of Chaucer's earlier poems, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *The House of Fame*.

By having the narrators ascend and transcend in each poem, through the usage of the dream vision, Chaucer is fully incorporating the medieval conventions surrounding dreams with Boethian colorings.

The first work to be studied here will be a poem Chaucer wrote in commemoration of the death of John Gaunt's wife, Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster, entitled *The Book of the Duchess*. Described by Colin Wilcockson in the introduction to this poem within *The Riverside Chaucer*, this poem begins the prototype of the "dream poem" form that Chaucer will use in each of the three poems (329). It is in this text that the Boethian colorings of Fortune, Providence and Free Will, and Human Nature are quite prevalent and figure prominently into the context of the poem. The second work, *The Parliament of Fowls*, concerns itself mainly with the colorings of Fame, Human
Nature, and Virtue and Justice. Larry D. Benson, in his introduction to the poem, expresses that, while "greatly expand[ing] the compass of the dream vision" he used in *The Book of the Duchess*, he also focuses on love and uses the "Dream of Scipio," or *Somnium Scipionis*, as a summary and analogue (383). The final text to be examined, *The House of Fame*, is arguably the most Boethian colored of these earlier poems, and brings in more fully the Italian influence that Chaucer becomes associated with in other works of scholarship, asserts John M. Fyler in his introduction to the poem (347). While concerning itself with Fame, Human Nature, and Virtue and Justice, there is an argument that Chaucer has a much clearer idea of his poetry, despite the poem largely being seen as "incomplete" (Traversi 20). The order in which these poems are being examined is not in chronological order, but rather in "coloring" order, allowing for a progression to be observed by the reader.
CHAPAER 2:
THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS

When John of Gaunt’s wife, Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, died in 1368, Chaucer composed what would become *The Book of the Duchess* for one of the “highly elaborate annual commemorative services” that would be held for deceased nobles (Wilcockson 329). However, the poem would prove to be much more symbolically, with *The Book of the Duchess* showing a well-read poet ready to use the models he had internalized, and embarking on a growth in literary development, culminating in the goal of “writing poetry in his native language that could stand the test of confrontation with the literary monuments of the classical past” (Traversi 33). With such a lofty aim, it would have been easy for Chaucer to fail. Yet there is a sense throughout the poem that he is in complete control of his process and knows that there is a solid poem through his efforts.

Within the frame of a dream, the tale centers on the narrator as a Narrator—who wanders about the woods and into a stained glass chamber, at the beginning of a hunt, and finds the Black Knight. Composing a song for his lost Lady, the Black Knight opens up about his sorrow to the Narrator. Although Fortune has not made her formal appearance in *The Book of the Duchess* at this point in the narrative, there is a sense that while the Narrator is questioning the Black Knight as to the circumstances of his loss, he is also questioning Fortune, like Boethius, but does not realize what he is lamenting, which falls into Chaucer’s theme of the ignorant, uneducated narrator. Although
Boethius’s narrator in *The Consolation of Philosophy* is not considered uneducated, he is naïve in the fact that he does not immediately understand Dame Philosophy or how Fortune functions in men’s lives.

For this sentiment to then work in *The Book of the Duchess*, the character that is aware of his questioning of Fortune must emerge, which is what occurs in the dream of the Black Knight. Not only is there an obvious difference in class between the Narrator and the Black Knight, but there is also an awareness difference, with the Black Knight being depicted as knowing more about the functions of Fortune, whereas the Narrator is not aware of her impact on his life, perhaps even being responsible for the sorrow and lack of sleep that he is experiencing. Thus, it is necessary for the Narrator to have his dreams in order to achieve an ultimate goal of enlightenment, particularly after invoking the gods “To make me slepe and have some reste” (Chaucer 333).

With the idea of medieval dream speculation in mind, it can be ascertained that the Narrator is having at least *somnia animalia*, given his ignorant state, and may be able to achieve the level of *somnia coelestia*, particularly through the dream of the Black Knight. Arthur W. Bahr, in the article “The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative in Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*,” explains that this is further exemplified with the usage “trouthe” as the theme, “investing commonplace Boethian and biblical themes with an infectious urgency that is hinted at even in the Black Knight’s formulaic ‘be my trouthe,’” which is also seen within the first stanza (54):
That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
Ne me nys nothing leef nor looth. (Chaucer 6-8)

By invoking truth, by both the Narrator and the Black Knight, there is a sense that the dreams have truth to them as well, and emphasizes to the audience that the dreams should not be dismissed as simply made-up wonderings of the mind’s imagination. The combination of these two elements supports the idea of the Narrator reaching somnia coelestia.

Obviously, with an actual historical event placing the poem in context, there is the suggestion that the Narrator (narrator) of this poem is functioning in a slightly autobiographical function; however, the “melancholy” narrator also owes a great deal to the conventions of French literature of the time, which also provided important sources for Chaucer’s writings (Wilcockson 330). Perhaps it is because of the apparent French sources that some may even question the amount of Boethian coloring within the poem.

It is even argued by Jefferson that the “influence of Boethius [on The Book of the Duchess] is only indirect through Roman de la Rose and the Remède de Fortune,” and goes on further to assert that “[t]here is nothing essentially Boethian. [Chaucer] has concerned himself primarily with the fickleness of Fortune, rather than with her other attributes” (55). This statement seems to dismiss the Boethian coloring of The Book of the Duchess altogether.

However, there is compelling evidence within the text that seems to support the idea that this is, indeed, a Boethian colored work, and that mainly comes from the
characters themselves, proving to be prototypes and predecessors for the characters and narrators that Chaucer would use in his later Boethian works of “The Knight’s Tale” and *Troilus & Criseyde*. John Lawlor, in his article “The Patter of Consolation in *The Book of the Duchess*,” argues that by this extension, *The Book of the Duchess* can be viewed as both a stand-alone text that can be appreciated on its own, or as a supplement to scholarship concerning “The Knight’s Tale” and *Troilus & Criseyde*, rather than a “background” to Chaucer’s more popular works (626).

Perhaps one of the most obvious instances of Boethian coloring comes from the first lines of the poem, which seem to mirror the same feelings of despair and mourning that Boethius expresses in the first Book of *Boece*. Here, within the first lines of *The Book of the Duchess* the Narrator is asking for sleep in order to escape from the sorrowful state in which he is existing:

> I have gret wonder, be this lyght,
> How that I lyve, for day ne nyght
> I may nat slepe wel nygh noght;
> I have so many an ydel thought
> Purely for defaute of slep
> That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
> Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
> Ne me nys nothing leef nor looth.
> Al is ylyche good to me –
> Joye or sorowe, whereso hy be –
For I have felynge in nothyng,
But as yt were a mased thyng,
Always in point to falle a-doun;
For sorwful ymagynacioun
Ys always hooly in my mynde. (1-15)

Such a sentiment is found in the first poem of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, where the narrator – Boethius – is also crying out for help, just as the narrator in *The Book of the Duchess* does. Again, there is a despondent narrator who is need of answers:

I who once wrote songs with joyful zeal
Am driven by grief to enter weeping mode.
See the Muses, cheeks all torn, dictate,
And wet my face with elegiac verse.
No terror could discourage them at least
From coming with me on my way.

[…………………………………………………………]

Death would be blessing if it spared the glad
But heeded invocations from the wretch.
But now Death’s ears are deaf to hopeless cries,
His hands refuse to close poor weeping eyes.
While with success false Fortune favoured me
One hour of sadness could not have thrown me down,
But now her trustless countenance has clouded,
Small welcome to the days that lengthen life.

Foolish the friends who called me happy then:

For falling shows a man stood insecure. (Boethius 3)

It becomes obvious in comparing both passages that the narrator of each is in mourning and thus has taken their grief onto paper by composing a poem. The narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* seems to feel as if he is in a prison of his own mourning, with the “melancholye” that he is stuck in, disallowing for “slepe” and having “felynge in nothyng.” The narrator of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, however, is in an actual prison and is reflecting on how he “once wrote songs with joyful zeal,” but is now constantly sad and feels that Fortune has betrayed him, as the Modern English translation explains it (3). What further ties both of these passages together is their shared experience of human nature, particularly when it comes to coping with sorrow. Both want to alleviate their respective pains, and it is only human to literally “ask” for help when at a low point, which is what these two narrators are doing.

What leads to Fortune and her role in the dream of the Black Knight is when the Narrator inquires into the Black Knight’s own grief, which can be thought of as a metaphor for the Narrator’s actual grief as well. The true extent of Fortune’s meddling in the Black Knight’s life is seen fully in the following passage, where the Black Knight is lamenting in the same fashion as the Narrator did at the beginning of the poem:

“Allas! and I wol tel the why:

My song ys turned to pleynynge,

And al my laughter to wepynge,
My glade thoghtes to hevynesse;
In travayle ys myn ydelenesse
And eke my reste; my wele is woo,
My good ys harm, and evermoo
In wrathe ys turned my pleynge
And my delyt into sorwynge.
Myn hele ys turned into seknesse,
In drede ys al my sykernesse;
To derke ys turned al my lyght,
My wyt ys foly, my day ys nyght,
My love ys hate, my slep wakynge,
My myrthe and meles ys fastynge,
My countenaunce ys nycete
And al abaved, where so I be;
My pees in pledynge and in werre.
Allas, how myghte I fare werre?
My boldnesse ys turned to shame,
For fals Fortune hath played a game
Atte ches with me, allas the while!

The trayteresse fals and ful of gyle [...] (598-620)

This echoes the Narrator’s own lament prior to his dreams, leading to the conclusion that
the Black Knight is an extension of the Narrator on a higher intellectual realm, or that the
Black Knight and the Narrator are indeed mirror images of one another. Thus the Black Knight’s “compleynt” is that Fortune has been false, particularly in regards to the chess game that he committed himself to – just as Boethius committed his fate to Fortune himself in *Boece* – and no longer wants to be subservient to her whims. Such “compleynt” is found in the following passage, where the Black Knight compares Fortune’s manipulations of him to a game of chess:

At the ches with me she gan to pleye;
With hir false draughtes dyvers
She staal on me, and tok my fers.
And whan I sawgh my fers awaye,
Allas! I kouthe no lenger playe,
But seyde, “Farewel, swete, ywys,
And farewell al that ever ther ys!”

“Therwith Fortune seyde ‘Chek her!
And mat in the myd poyn of the checker,
With a pon errant!’ Allas,
Ful craftier to pley she was
Than Athalus, that made the game
First of the ches, so was hys name. (652-64)

In essence, the Black Knight is admitting what Boethius already wrote about centuries earlier, that Fortune is not always the same, but rather, constantly changing.
Dame Philosophy, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, diagnoses the narrator’s misunderstanding of Fortune as a medical condition in Book II:

‘If I have fully diagnosed the cause and nature of your condition, you are wasting away in pining and longing for your former good fortune. It is the loss of this which, as your imagination works upon you, has so corrupted your mind. I know the many disguises of that monster, Fortune, and the extent to which she seduces with friendship the very people she is striving to cheat, until she overwhelms them with unbearable grief at the suddenness of her desertion. […]’

(Boethius 22)

In short, both Boethius and the Black Knight – and for that matter, the Narrator, if the Black Knight is an extension of himself – cannot accept that Fortune has turned her Wheel, resulting in the loss of their material fortunes and personal happiness. Dame Philosophy tells Boethius that he is “wrong if [he thinks] Fortune has changed towards [him]. Change is her normal behaviour, her true nature. In the very act of changing she has preserved her own constancy” towards all men (Boethius 23). Such an attitude of lament towards Fortune is found in “The Knight’s Tale” and *Troilus & Criseyde* when the main characters must also face a turn of events, thus making the Black Knight a character from which later Chaucerian characters would be further developed.

Extending from the dialogue concerning the Black Knight losing in the game of chess with Fortune is the idea of Providence and the question of if there is truly Free
Will. Dame Philosophy addresses this in Book V as the “old complaint about Providence,” and explains, “[e]verything that is known is comprehended not according to its own nature, but according to the ability to know of those who do the knowing” (126). In short, Dame Philosophy is explaining that a man cannot know his Providence, but can have at least some idea of what is going to happen. Traversi points out that, rather than blaming Fortune for his maligned state, the Black Knight – and again, the Narrator – are placing blame on the wrong force, and instead should look to Providence, stating that “Fortune can only be overcome by those who are able to look beyond the apparent finality of her operations to the Providence that really, if obscurely, controls them” (Traversi 44). Thus, in order to come back from a “turning of the Wheel” and pursue happiness once again, man should look beyond the rhetoric and chess-tactics of Fortune, such as using men as pawns in a giant chess game, in order to achieve a higher understanding of the universe, their spirituality, and themselves. This kind of insight can only be achieved in a state like *solemnia coelestia*, which is what the poem may be reaching for, in seeing that Fortune is not the true villain.

The Black Knight, in the final stanzas of *The Book of the Duchess*, seems to have achieved this enlightenment, even after the rousing “chess” speech in which the Black Knight seems to have a grudge against Fortune for his misfortune and loss that he had suffered, causing him to become depressed and lament his loss. He even seems rather calm and somewhat happy recollecting about his lost Lady. The Narrator, however, does not realize such a revelation until he innocently asks the Black Knight where his
Lady is now currently, particularly after a passage pertaining to honor and dignity in regards to her affections:

“Sir,” quod I, “where is she now?”

“Now?” quod he, and stynte anoon.

Therwith he was as ded as stoon
And seyde, “Allas, that I was bore!
That ys the los that here-before
I tolde the that I hadde lorn.
Bethenke how I seyde here-beforn,
‘Thow wost ful lytel what thow menest;
I have lost more than thow wenest.’
God wot, alls! Ryght that was she!”

“Allas, sir, how? What may that be?”

“She ys ded!” “Nay!” “Yis, be my trouthe!”

“Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!” (1298-1310)

As Lawlor asserts, it at this moment that “the work of consolation has been done,” particularly within the area of love and how a lover’s death is not the worse kind of disaster that can befall a person; rather, it is infidelity, which in essence would be the fickleness of Fortune at its fullest extent (642). To have this sort of understanding – and the idea of a love transcending even death itself – is a leap of faith for not only the Black Knight, but for the Narrator himself.
However, the role of death cannot be underplayed, and this is not what Chaucer, or Boethius, for that matter, had in mind. Instead of only an earthly view of love, the consolation of this book involves a more “complete view of love,” which allows for man to not only view life for what it is in its entirety, but with the “reality of death” taken into account as well (Traversi 53). In a way, the pity that the Narrator feels for the Black Knight – which stays with him even upon waking and encourages him to put his dream into “rime” – has the last word in *The Book of the Duchess*, which allows the reader to question as to whether or not the consolation served here is conclusive or open to interpretation (Lawlor 645). After all, it was this pity and compassion that allowed the Narrator to have an epiphany concerning sorrow and Fortune. But can the reader – or Chaucer, for that matter – be sure of such a “consolation,” or if the Narrator only reached an understanding, as the Black Knight has appeared to do.

In the final lines of the poem the Narrator wakes up and the reader goes back to the frame tale of the Dream. The Narrator decides to record what happened in his dream:

> Therwith I awook my-selve,
> And fond me lying in my bed;
> And the book that I had red,
> Of Alcyone and Seys the king,
> And of the goddes of sleeping,
> I fond it in myn honde ful even.

> Thoghte I, “this is so queynt a sweven,
> That I wol, be processe of tyme,
Fonde to putte this sweven in ryme

As I can best"; and that anoon. —

This was my sweven; now hit is doon. (1324-34)

In wanting to preserve the answers found in the Dream, the reader is to assume that the understanding of things being the way they are is what the Narrator will assert in his writings. However, such a conclusion is unknown.

This is perhaps why Traversi describes the final lines of *The Book of the Duchess* as “inconclusive in a way that is very typically Chaucerian: inconclusive, evasive of final resolutions, without being in any way indefinite or dishonest” (Traversi 53). This theme of “inconclusive” resolutions – or unfinished endings of poems – is one that will extend into the next two texts that will be discussed here. Perhaps it is because of how Chaucer left *The Book of the Duchess* that he will leave other works in the same manner throughout his career.
CHAPTER 3:
THE PARLIAMENT OF FOWLS

The Parliament of Fowls, written following Chaucer’s composition of the dream and frame tale work The Book of the Duchess, follows the same mode of storytelling as the previous work and expands upon the theme of the melancholy narrator and the dream that leads to enlightenment. Once again having the narrator reach solemnia coelestia – which as Traversi emphasizes, is a level of dreams “offering insight into the future and, on occasion, into some aspect of ‘spiritual’ reality – not only emphasizes the inherent wisdom of such dreams, but also helps the reader relate more to the narrator and subject of the poem (35). Chronologically, The Parliament of Fowls was composed after, arguably, the most Boethian piece of these three earlier poems, The House of Fame, yet, in order to preserve the theme of Boethian coloring, scholarship is served best by exploring this text prior to The House of Fame, and therefore out of chronological order.

On Saint Valentine’s Day, the lamenting of the frustrated narrator commences the frame tale of The Parliament of Fowls, who is in need of answers and turns to the Dream of Scipio (Somnium Scipionis) – which he briefly summarizes and ruminates on – prior to going to sleep. Once asleep he encounters Africanus from the aforementioned work next to his bedside, ready to guide him through his dream. After entering through a gateway, Africanus and the narrator encounter a lush, beautiful environment, in which Venus dwells – since the narrator is in quest of serving Love – which leads to the epynonymous meeting place in the halls of Nature. Upon encountering the various classes of birds,
Nature calls the parliament to start the annual meeting, which dissolves into a cacophony of disagreement. It is only when Nature agrees to a short-term resolution that order is restored and the dream thus ends. The narrator is then left to continue on his intellectual journey for the answers he seeks through books.

Perhaps the broad appeal of the poem is found in what D.S. Brewer describes in an introduction to an edition of this poem as “the variety of tone, the brightness of description [and] the vivid realism of the birds’ debate, which are instantly attractive,” and goes on further to state that these qualities are enhanced and “matched by the rich significances and subtle complexities of mood which lie beneath the surface of the poem” (1). Such commentary only touches the tip of the surface of The Parliament of Fowls. As mentioned previously, Troilus & Criseyde and “The Knight’s Tale” are the two Chaucerian texts that most heavily saturate scholarship that examine the Boethian influences on Chaucer; by stark contrast, The Parliament of Fowls is the scarcest, with few entries. This very fact makes the task of closely examining this text even more difficult, yet it has reaped some unexpected rewards.

However, what sets this work apart is that the composition is more finished and polished than the other two poems that are being examined. This is not to say that The Parliament of Fowls is not inconclusive, much like its predecessors The House of Fame, and The Book of the Duchess, but its inconclusiveness is in a much more subtle style (Traversi 78).

In The Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer assembles a mass of birds that are from clearly defined classes, like the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales, which are usually seen
as a commentary on classes, or estates, and their differences. The birds of prey maintain
the highest estate, followed by birds that eat worms, with waterfowl and birds that live on
seed at the lower end of the classes. These mostly suitors, at Nature's command, are
discovered through yet another dream, just as truths were discovered in *The Book of the
Duchess*. Again, there is *solemnia coelestia* achieved by the end of the poem and is an
enlightened consolation through dreams that is inspired by a book – thus Chaucer is
reminding of how influential a text can be upon even just one person in two ways. First,
the dream is, again as it was in *The Book of the Duchess*, a story within the frame tale of
the narrator, who falls asleep after reading *Somnium Scipionis* (Dream of Scipio), with
Scipio himself as a guide within the dream. Second, there exists the continuous theme of
Chaucer's narrator speaking directly to the reader. By having the usually naïve narrator
speaking to the reader, relatively understanding the Boethian aspects of this dream, then
these ideas become accessible to anyone, underscoring the popularity of Boethius's *The
Consolation of Philosophy* in the Middle Ages.

As in the case of *The Book of the Duchess*, Jefferson finds little Boethian material
in *The Parliament of Fowls*, referring to its degree of Boethian influence as of a "general
nature or doubtful" (133). He then goes on to state, "[t]he influence of Dante, Macrobius,
and Alana de Isulis is more in evidence" (133). Despite Jefferson's respected scholarly
view, it is hard to look at *The Parliament of Fowls* without seeing the imprint of Boethian
philosophy. The most Boethian colorings of this poem are dominated by the Dream of
Scipio, as known from Cicero's text, and the Great Chain of Love, which is the order of
all things living, including their society norms. It is in examining these colorings within
the text that *The Parliament of Fowls* is then better understood and more accessible to readers once the text is read in the context of Boethian philosophy.

The *Parliament of Fowls* begins with a four-stanza introduction in which “the poet speaks of the difficulties he has encountered in the pursuit of love, but does so in terms that underline the close connection between the lover’s condition and the exercise of his craft” (Traversi 78). This is seen throughout the passage in the Narrator’s emphasis on books and their place within the art of the writer. In essence, this is Chaucer speaking to the reader about the importance of books through the context of the pursuit of Love, perhaps to draw the reader into the text of the poem by setting up an accessible connection between the poet and the reader:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,
Th’assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,
The dredful joye alwey that slit so yerne:
Al this mene I by Love, that my felynge
Astonythe with his wonderful werkynge
So sore, iwis, that whan I on hym thynke
Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke.

For al be that I knowe nat Love in dede,
Ne wot how that he quiteth folk here hyre,
Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes reede
Of his myrakles and his crewel yre.
There rede I wel he wol be lord and syre;
I dar nat seyn, his strokes been so sore,
But “God save swich a lord!” – I can na
moore. (1-14)

It is after these stanzas that the importance of old books – “letters olde” – is explained more in-depth and with a purpose. By putting such “good feyth” in books, the Narrator is setting up the reader for a text that is extensively influenced by ancient and Classical texts. Detailing the reading habits of the poet, the Narrator states that he has read “a certeyn thing to lerne,” which is not fully explained (Brewer 17).

After the prologue and a transition stanza, the fourth stanza is considered to be the first stanza of the main section of *The Parliament of Fowls*, which concerns the Dream of Scipio and the summary that the Narrator tries to describe (17). The following fifth stanza, based on a work written around A.D. 400 by Macrobius, is a version of Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* (*Somnium Scipionis*). It is this text that is considered to be “one of the most influential works that brought the doctrine of classical antiquity to the attention of the Middle Ages” (Traversi 80). Here the Narrator sets the stage for his descriptions of Scipio’s dream:

This bok of which I make mencioun

Entitled was al ther, as I shall telle:

“Tullyus of the Drem of Scipioun.”

Chapitres sevne it hadde, of hevene and helle
And erthe, and soules that therinne dwelle,
Of whiche, as shortly as I can it trete,
Of his sentence I wol yow seyn the greete. (29-35)

After this stanza there is a lengthy description that serves as the “summary” to this work, imparting to the reader that is about not only “hevene and helle,” but “the triviality, deceptiveness, and harshness of the world” (Brewer 17). Although he claims to have read this text with great zeal, he was ultimately let down by it. It is after this that he falls asleep and the poem transitions from the frame tale of the narrator’s intellectual query to the dream.

The day gan faylen, and the derke nyght,
That reveth bestes from here besynesse,
Berafte me my bok for lak of lyght,
And to my bed I gan me for to dresse,
Fulfyld of thought and busy hevynesse;
For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde,
And ek I ned hadde that thyng that I wolde. (85-91)

The last two lines of the above passage, an echo of a passage in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, adds an unmistakable Boethian coloring to the poem’s initial frame. By stating that he has both the “[...] thyng which that I nolde, / And ek I ned hadde that thyng that I wolde,” the narrator is asserting that he received what he wanted, while also receiving what he did not ask for or did not consciously want (90-1).
In the third section of Book III of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Dame Philosophy engages Boethius in a serious of questions concerning wealth and true happiness after stating that money and position are “a false appearance of happiness”:

‘So first I will ask you a few questions, since you yourself were a wealthy man not so long ago. In the midst of all that great store of wealth, was your mind never troubled by worry arising from a feeling that something was wrong?’

‘Yes it was,’ I replied; ‘in fact I can’t remember when my mind was ever free from some sort of worry.’

‘And that was either because something was missing which you didn’t want to be missing, or because something was present which you would have preferred not be have been present.’

‘Yes.’

‘You wanted the presence of one thing and the absence of another?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now a man must be lacking something if he misses it, mustn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘And if a man lacks something he is not in every way self-sufficient?’

‘No.’

‘And so you felt this insufficiency even though you were supplied with wealth?’

‘Yes, I did.’ (Boethius 52)
Dame Philosophy uses this to explain that even wealth does not make a man self-sufficient; rather, it makes a man “dependent on outside help” (53). Although the narrator of The Book of the Duchess is not experiencing the same predicament with wealth as Boethius, he is finding that he cannot have the answers he seeks without a feel of general discontent because of answers he has not yet found. His heavy thoughts are due to the lack of light the narrator needs to keep reading; therefore he ponders what he has read already before falling asleep. It is through this that he transitions into the dream story in order to understand the answers he has already ascertained from the book, and to anticipate further answers.

It is here – immediately into the dream – that Scipio’s ancestor Africanus makes his appearance to the narrator, standing “right at my beddes syde.” This occurs because the answers that the narrator wished to seek in the Dream of Scipio could not be met through a single reading of the text, and being the classical naïve Chaucerian narrator, enlightenment must once again be met through a journey, ultimately leading to answers, or at least an understanding of how things are, as achieved in The Book of the Duchess. Regardless, the Dream of Scipio is not even the true focus of the poem itself, but rather a vehicle in reaching it. Instead, Chaucer is using the summary from this ancient text to serve as a source of authority in which he is able to introduce his own poem and dream (Brewer 18). Having Africanus act as an authority and guide for the Narrator, this move conveys to the reader that the truth can be found by looking to the ancients – the Classical tradition – and serves as a reminder of rich literary history, including Chaucer’s own
works. Without these precedents there would be the issue of credibility, and Chaucer is able to quell any fears by simply integrating Classical philosophy into his own texts.

A prime usage of Boethian coloring is the idea that Africanus is playing the part of Dame Philosophy to a naïve Narrator who has wandered into the part of Boethius. By integrating the Boethian coloring in with the aforementioned purpose of including the Dream of Scipio, Chaucer is re-imagining a complete sequence within The Consolation of Philosophy, and thus retelling it within the text.

After the philosophizing and background of the Dream of Scipio, the true motive for this text is revealed with the introduction of the actual Parliament of Fowls. The fowls are guided by a supreme sense of order, known as the Great Chain of Love, which they exhibit themselves. This concept is explained by Boethius in the following passage, found within his Consolation:

‘The world in constant change
Maintains a harmony,
And elements keep peace
Whose nature is to war.
[.................................]
And all this chain of things
In earth and sea and sky
One ruler holds in hand:
[.................................]
O happy race of men

\[\]
If Love who rules the sky

Could rule your hearts as well!’ (Boethius 45-6)

This can be summarized as a statement on order and the rules of order within Boethian colored environments, particularly within *The Parliament of Fowls*. The Parliament itself exhibits an adherence to this order as the “Seynt Valentynes” meeting is called into order:

This noble empresse, ful of grace,

Bad every foul to take his owne place,

As they were woned alwey fro yer to yeere,

Seynt Valentynes day, to sonden there.

[...............................]

That myghte men the royal egle fynde,

That with his sharpe lok perseth the sonne,

And othere egles of a lowere kynde,

Of whiche that clerkes wel devyse conne.

[...............................]

What shulde I seyn? Of foules every kynde

That in this world han fetheres and stature

Men myghten in that place assembled fynde

Byfore the noble goddesse Nature,

And ech of hem dide his besy cure

Benygnely to chese or for to take,

By hire accord, his formel or his make. (319-72)
It is here, acting within the orders of society and the Great Chain of Love, that human nature is seen anthropomorphized into the birds themselves. Although entitled a “Parliament” with lofty connotations, this “parliament” is quickly shown to be a gathering with very “human” interactions and behavior. Thus, it seems to echo the Roman Senate that Boethius was a member of, as a Roman Consul, or even the English Parliament, that existed during Chaucer’s lifetime. Divided by their social status, “the poem distinguishes between four principal classes, or – as we might say – ‘estates,’ each presented in such a way as gently to undercut their respective pretensions and to underline the element of absurdity that these imply” (Traversi 92). Again, using the positions within the food chain for classification these four estates consist of the birds of prey, the worm-eating birds, the waterfowl, and the birds that live on seed. It is here that Chaucer also notes the negative aspects of members of each estate, as to note that these birds – in being anthropomorphized – have the same flaws that their human estate counterparts also possess. It may be here that Chaucer began his social commentary writing; with such division by social status shadowing the estates satire he would later use to make distinctions within the *Canterbury Tales*.

The ultimate purpose of the meeting of the birds are to “carry out Nature’s will” by choosing a mate to breed with. However, the anthropomorphic banter continues as the their debate “explore[s] and portray[s] the subtle complexities and conflicts within human love, especially in the relation of *fine amour* to the general necessities of life and of every-day existence” (Brewer 20-1). The following passage exhibits this commentary, in
The birds are quite boisterous as they try to work out their meeting amongst themselves, much like how a human gathering could also get out of hand:

The noyse of foules for to be delivered
So loude rong, “Hav don, and lat us wende!”

 Nature, which that alwey hadde an ere
To murmur of the lewednesse behynde,

With facound voys seyde, “Hold youre tonges
there!

And I shal sone, I hope, a conseyl fynde

Yow to delyvere, and fro this noyse unbynde:

I juge, of every folk men shul oon calle

To seyn the verdit for yow foules alle.” (491-525)

The idealized Chain of Love is nearly broken by the in-fighting and self-interests of the birds themselves, disallowing for a concensus. A solution is reached only when Nature finally decides to break the stalemate – and thus end the in-fighting amongst the estates themselves and between the estates – and her infinite wisdom becomes the voice of reason. There is not a consolation found amongst the birds as they come to agreement with Nature and agreeing on her supreme goodness and wisdom, but rather a short-term understanding. Nature, at the urging of a female eagle, decides to put off any decisions of the parliament until next year, giving each bird a mate through just accord. The birds
thus celebrate Nature for her being and their source of life. Upon this development in the parliament, the Narrator – who functioned as a witness – is now free to pursue *solemnia coelestia*, according to Traversi’s commentary on medieval dream speculation, and has sense of optimism and is awakened and wishes to pursue a deeper understanding of other books:

And with the shoutyng, whan the song was do
That foules made at here flight awey,
I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,
To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey.
I hope, ywis, to rede so som day
That I shal mete som thyng for to fare
The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare. (693-99)

It is here, when considering that the narrator was lacking the answers that he needed after reading the *Dream of Scipio* that the dream has served its purpose, which is to inspire the narrator to continue his reading in hopes of achieving new answers; not only through reading, but through experiencing another dream vision. However, it is not clear if the narrator achieved an actual consolation through this, and suggests that he instead came to an understanding, much like the narrator in *The Book of the Duchess*. Nonetheless, the narrator is inspired to continue to turn to books of old. Perhaps it is this idea that Chaucer wished to imprint upon the reader, as a way of advocating for the rediscovery of ancient and Classical texts.
CHAPTER 4:

THE HOUSE OF FAME

David M. Bevington, in his article “The Obtuse Narrator in Chaucer’s House of Fame,” asserts “modern scholarship has found in Chaucer’s House of Fame a surprising breadth of human interest and range of intellectual curiosity” (288). Boitani calls this poem “the cradle of Chaucer’s myth,” arguing that Chaucer is continuing on from the imaginary world he first realized in The Book of the Duchess, beginning with the first reference in the poem being to the mythological god of sleep, Mercury. This also occurs at the beginning of The Book of the Duchess and gives the impression that The House of Fame is continuing where he had left off in the preceding poem (200). Regardless of the similarities to the poems that both precede and succeed this text, The House of Fame is famously known in the Chaucer canon for being unfinished. Boitani also asserts that this work “is an extremely complex creation, and not only because it is formally incomplete. Its construction has often given the impression of total disorder” (7). Whether or not Chaucer wrote his poem and intentionally did not finish it – which will be explored later in this chapter – its impact on scholarship has been quite profound.

It is in The House of Fame that Chaucer discusses many themes and colorings seen in the other two poems, such as Love, Nature, Fortune and Order, incorporating these themes through dialogue in narrative, language and poetry, giving the reader a plan for the Chaucerian “literature he will create in the futures and of the culture by which he is surrounded and with which he is imbued” (1). Boitani expands upon this by asserting
that Chaucer knew that a book on Fame would be no easy task, given the ancient aspect of it, and the place it held within Classical tradition (1). Although he has introduced the topic in *The Book of the Duchess*, it is here that he fleshes out the subject to its fullest extent.

In Book I of *The House of Fame*, the narrator, this time explicitly given the name of Geoffrey, invokes God for wisdom and sleep, which serves as the frame tale for the dream in which the poem takes place. In the dream, Geoffrey finds himself within a temple of glass with golden images, in which he encounters many figures of ancient history, primarily dwelling on the story of Dido and Aeneas. Upon leaving this house he finds a large field in which enters a large eagle with shining feathers, descending towards Geoffrey. Book II begins with Geoffrey swooped up by the eagle with golden feathers, who begins serving as the guide for Geoffrey and describing their destination, the House of Fame, where every person’s fate is determined in the afterlife – that is, if that person be remembered for eternity or erased with history – and that is where Geoffrey must go in order to seek his answers. Once Geoffrey is dropped off at the palace by the eagle, Book III begins, with an invocation to Apollo to guide Geoffrey through “[t]his lytel laste bok [...]” (1093). Upon entrance, Geoffrey observes many figures from history. Going forward in his journey, he describes great riches throughout Fame’s temple, with people calling out “Heryed be thou and thy name, / Goddesse of Renoun or of Fame!” (1405-06). After observing many other figures of authority, Geoffrey describes the scene that defines Fame herself; people are asking for the gift of fame and renown, and the goddess can either give or deny. Geoffrey himself is even asked as to the nature of his own visit,
to which he claims to be in want of “[s]omme newe tydynges for to lere, / Somme new
thinges, y not what,” declaring that he is there to learn in the temple. Afterwards
Geoffrey is led to a valley in front of the castle, taking in more strange sights and
happenings and staying near to the house. The sheer amount of people seems
overwhelming to Geoffrey who is trying to learn as much as he can. It is with a
cacophonous finale of people rushing to find out “[w]hat thing is that?” (2146) that the
poem ends abruptly – without a return to the frame tale – with the final lines describing
the “thing” to which everyone is rushing to see, as mysterious figure as “[a] man of gret
auctorite ...” (2158).

It is in this poem that Bernard H. Jefferson agrees that there are direct Boethian
influences at work, and asserts that “Chaucer’s conception of the goddess of Fame seems
to have been influenced by the Boethian conception of Fortune,” and that the dialogues
concerning fame mimic a ”similar discussion of Boethius” (140). Boethius wanted “to
prove the emptiness of fame, show[ing] that it can never spread far nor last long,” and
therefore “dwindles to nothingness and it is not worth striving for.” This subject,
Jefferson asserts, is what Chaucer is considering in The House of Fame (87).

After dwelling on the story of Dido and Aeneas in Book I, it is within book II that
Boethian aspects fully come into being. An Eagle with golden feather, who acts as
Geoffrey’s guide to the House of Fame, preaches of love and natural order, and one can
quickly see the Eagle as acting within the role of Dame Philosophy, with Geoffrey in the
Boethian role. As a nod to The Consolation of Philosophy, there is a discussion of the
Great Chain of Love, leading to the Eagle and Geoffrey arriving at Fame’s true palace –
The House of Fame – which is full of ancient philosophers; a journey which invokes Geoffrey to quote Boethius:

He gan alway upper to sore,
And gladded me ay more and more,
So feythfully to me spak he.

[.................................]

And thoo thoughte y upon Boece,
That write, “A thoughte may flee so hye
Wyth fetheres of Philosophye,
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. (961-78)

Geoffrey is literally flying on the wings of Philosophy – the Eagle himself – which makes this quote even more poignant. Jefferson points out that the narrator Geoffrey’s flight in Book II of The House of Fame is also described in similar fashion in the poem found in the first section of Book IV of The Consolation of Philosophy, in which Dame Philosophy proclaims her ability to soar (140):

‘For I have swift and speedy wings
With which to mount the lofty skies,
And when the mind has put them on
The earth below it will despise:
It mounts the air sublunary
And far behind the clouds it leaves;
It passes through the sphere of fire
Which from the ether heat receives,
Until it rises to the stars [...] (Boethius 86).

For both Boethius and Geoffrey it is important in both works for the men to rise above
their present states of mind in order to achieve a better understanding of things. By using
the allegory of flight, both able to accomplish this on a metaphorical level.

Book III elevates history and is overtly elaborate with Apollo as the third guide,
whom Geoffrey has invoked to continue in the last book. Many more were in this larger
House of Fame than he could imagine, and the landscape was almost indescribable,
almost as if he was in a heaven. He knew all by name because of their renown, but these
were happy and did not have tragic tales that must be relived. Many of these were artists,
poets, etc., and thus made their Fame from telling the tales of others. As Geoffrey the
narrator describes this scene, this becomes apparent:

What shuld y more telle of this?
The halle was al ful, ywys,
Of hem that writen olde gestes
As ben on treës rokes nestes;
But hit a ful confus matere
Were alle the gestes for to here
That they of write, or how they highte. (1513-19)
Thus, Chaucer is elevating the art of story telling, be it fiction or historical, to the loftiest level deserving of Fame.

However, not every one has Fame, and those who do not are begging for Fame to grant the gift. Such lines as "[...] ‘Graunte us, lady shene, / Ech of us of thy grace a bone!'" emphasizes the desperation that some must feel in her presence (1536-37). She denies Fame on the basis of the fact that good deeds alone will not allow for “good fame,” and that there must be more substance before Fame is to allow anyone to be granted good and virtuous Fame, in order to allow them to be remembered in a good way (1609). Her speech is both condescending and truthful, exposing the possible hypocrisy of those who receive the gift of renown:

“As thryve I,” quod she, “ye shal faylle!

Good werkes shal yow noght availle

To have of me good fame as now.

But wite ye what? Y graunte yow

That y shal have a shrewed fame,

And wikkyd los, and worse name,

Through ye good los have wel deserved. (1615-21)

Similar sentiments are described by Dame Philosophy in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, proclaiming:

‘Fame, in fact, is a shameful thing, and so often deceptive. […]

Many, indeed, are the men who have wrongly acquired fame through
the false opinions of the people. There is nothing more conceivably
shameful than that (Boethius 58).

By shaming those who come by fame falsely, Boethius and Chaucer are both decrying
the desire of fame for deception.

In this hall of writers and historians Fame is also depicted as the only way for a
writer's works to carry on. Dame Philosophy emphasizes this point in *The Consolation
of Philosophy* by describing how mortal lives can either be preserved or wiped out of
existence:

‘Many men have been famous in their time but their memory has
perished because there were no historians to write about them.
And yet the very histories are of little use when like their authors they
become lost in the depths of time which makes all things obscure.
When you think of your future fame you think you are creating for
yourself a kind of immortality (Boethius 42).

Without Fame and the renown she gives, then the works die, as if they never even
existed. However, unlike many others within the House of Fame, the fourth band who
approaches Fame asks for her to deny them fame altogether:

And ryght with this y gan aspye,

Ther come the ferthe companye –

But certeyn they were wonder fewe –

And gunne stonden in a rewe,

And seyden, “Certes, lady bright,
We han don wel with al our myght,
But we ne kepen have no fame.
Hyde our werkes and our name,
For Goddys love; for certes we
Han certeyn doon hyt for bounte,
And for not maner other thing.”

“I graunte yow alle your askyeng,”

Quod she; “let your werkes be ded.” (1689-1701)

Such generosity and selflessness, as a modern reader might interpret this passage to show, would have logically lead to Fame giving renown because of these qualities. Yet, Fame does as Fame finds most just and right, even if it means denying fame to some who ask, and granting the wish of anonymity and oblivion to others.

There is the sense that Geoffrey, after observing many things during his time in the House of Fame, would relate more of this dream to the reader, and that Chaucer would return to the frame of the tale with Geoffrey waking up, just as the narrators in The Book of the Duchess and The Parliament of Fowls did. However, the poem ends somewhat abruptly during a chaotic cacophony:

Atte laste y saugh a man,
Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan;
But he semed for to be
A man of great auctoritie … (2155-58)
This seems to show that Chaucer never completed his poem, and whether or not he did so intentionally is the subject of great debate in scholarly works elsewhere. However, Chaucer mentions *The House of Fame* in the “Retracciouns” of the *Canterbury Tales*, along with other works that he recants:

> and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees,
> the which I revoke in my retracciouns:

> as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV.
> Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne; (1084-85)

Later on in the same passage, Chaucer lists his works that he does not wish to recant:

> But for the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere bookes of legends of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun

(1087)

Nonetheless, if Chaucer had truly left *The House of Fame* incomplete, there would be no mention of it at all in his other works. This insertion into the end of *The Canterbury Tales* serves as a sign that all of these books were considered part of Chaucer’s canon, and thus accessible to readers in general. There would no reason for Chaucer to explicitly mention a work that he had left incomplete without an intention to publish.

What this does convey, however, is that Geoffrey the narrator, by not coming back to the frame tale, does not reach an understanding and can still be searching for answers. There is no consolation to be found here, not even in regards to the unnamed
mysterious figure towards the end. One choice is Boethius as the mysterious figure. By stating that this mysterious figure is of great wisdom – and through the Boethian coloring that is found throughout the poem – the figure must be one of Classical philosophy.

However, there is also the fact that poem just ends abruptly, and the mysterious figure could have been another person entering the House of Fame and perhaps someone of little importance overall. This cannot be known for sure, leading to speculation among many readers and scholars. Regardless of the true identity of the mysterious figure, Chaucer’s inconclusiveness does not detract from the value *The House of Fame* overall, or the Boethian colorings explored there.
CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSIONS

The integration of classical philosophy – in particular, Boethian philosophy – into the medieval poetic tradition is perhaps one of the hallmarks of Chaucer’s texts and one of the greater contributions that Chaucer made to English literature. This integration, along with other literary and linguistic contributions, has advanced the claim that Chaucer began the English poetic tradition. However, “began” may not be the best term to describe what Chaucer actually accomplished through his writings, particularly the earlier poems explored here. Glenn A. Steinberg, in his article “Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production: Humanism, Dante, and the House of Fame,” questions what Chaucer is writing about if The House of Fame – and by extension, The Book of the Duchess and The Parliament of Fowls – is indeed a poem about poetic tradition and its elements (183). By composing poems with the subject of poetic tradition subverted by the allegory of the dream vision, Chaucer is reinterpreting the classical poetic tradition that Boethius’s text follows. It is important to note that this poetic tradition is also seen in French models, such as Jean de Meun’s Roman de la Rose, and thus cannot be completely attributed to Boethius only. By using the convention of the dream vision, Chaucer is not only using Boethius – who also used a dream vision in The Consolation of Philosophy – he is diffusing Boethian coloring through the convention of the dream vision.

The in-depth analysis and examination of these three earlier poems, which rarely receive the literary scholarship that Chaucer’s later works, such as the Canterbury Tales
and *Troilus & Criseyde*, commonly receive, have revealed much more than previously thought as to Chaucer’s approach to literature in the Middle Ages as a whole. Not only is there a picture of a developing poetic style emerging, but also there are numerous Boethian colorings, showing that passages in the later poetry also exhibit these same colorings. Thus, these later poems have a background in Chaucer’s earlier poetry. This both exhibits the influence of Boethian philosophy at an early stage in his career, and demonstrates that Chaucer carried his literary influences throughout his whole career.

The logical question that comes about from these studies, then, is why is the Boethian coloring so profound in *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *The House of Fame*?

The answer is found through the close readings and analyses of these texts. Essentially, these three earlier poems are three retellings of elements within Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*, to be read as a trilogy building upon itself, although, as seen in this text, this conclusion can be seen even when it is read out of chronological order. This – the writing of these three texts – is Chaucer testing out his Boethian knowledge and philosophy before he writes his formal translation, *Boece*. In addition, Chaucer is reflecting Boethian rhetorical and literary techniques through his adaptations for his poems and poetic interests. Chaucer wrote these poems in order to flesh out his ideas and to see how he could reinterpret the lessons found within *Consolation*, which ended up being three similarly structured frame tales with dream visions, with each poem exploring Boethian philosophy through a Boethian narrator and various guides. In this same vein, the “Boethian lyrics” – which were written after *Boece* – act as a way of
showing off his expertise of the *Consolation*. Machan seems to support this idea by asserting that the writing of *Boece* and its place in the Chaucerian canon "makes the most sense when Chaucer’s text is approached not on a reading-by-reading basis […]– as is most common in traditional textual criticism – but in terms of the complete textual tradition from which the text arose" (40). This correlates with the history of the translation of Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in that it is reinterpreted and reinvigorated with each translation throughout literary history. It is even possible to suggest that Chaucer’s entirety of literary accomplishments would not even be possible without Boethius’s seminal work to inspire him. Chaucer was continuing a tradition when he decided to bring a classical work into his contemporary world.

Yet, unlike Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Chaucer does not ever come to an actual consolation – or a series of consolations – in these earlier poems. Instead, the narrator in *The Book of the Duchess* has an understanding of how things are. The narrator of *The Parliament of Fowls* proclaims that he will continue to seek wisdom through the old books, perhaps as an allusion to Chaucer’s seeking of wisdom from the text of Boethius. Geoffrey, the narrator in *The House of Fame* does not even come to an understanding, for the poem cuts off before he can convey any of the understandings that he has experienced while observing in and around the House of Fame, leaving the reader to question who Geoffrey sees as a man of great authority. Is it because Chaucer himself was still learning Boethius’s text as he wrote these poems, or would a consolation only be reserved for his *Boece*? Instead, Chaucer may have felt that the Boethian coloring would have been too overt and the poems would not have had enough originality, particularly if
the narrators, upon returning to their frame tales, were to each have a definite consolation. Therefore, by not prescribing true consolations to any of his narrator, Chaucer is intentionally creating a distance between his texts and Boethius.

Where does this leave Chaucer scholarship and modern interpretations of Chaucer, particularly since he was writing through a classical poetic tradition? Wayne Shumaker, in his article “Alisoun in Wander-Land: A Study in Chaucer’s Mind and Literary Method,” asserts that in a book pertaining to Chaucer, John Livingston Lowes had described Chaucer’s texts as having a “fidelity, a life-likeness, a vividness, a touch, which are extraordinary and new,” continuing with, “[and] in certain qualities which we dub modern, Chaucer was as modern as the moderns, six centuries before their birth” (77). He then goes on to name several other authors who also believed in this characterization of Chaucer’s modern literature, quoting R.K. Root as stating that Chaucer was “the first modern man of England, with the virtues and faults of our modern world,” and that Percy Shelly – not the English Romantic poet – cited the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde as literature that “represent[s] an art that is modern rather than medieval” (77). In short, several authors have seen Chaucer as a modern, which is only fitting when one considers what Chaucer was trying to accomplish through his writings in the first place, using dream visions to include Boethian philosophy.

Shumaker expands upon his theory, asserting that by being so ahead of his time, Chaucer’s poetry exhibits “patterns of thinking [that] have a close resemblance to those current in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (78). This allows for great accessibility
to readers – just as the poems did for the general English public – leading to Chaucer’s universal appeal. Shumaker attributes this charm to Chaucer’s “habit […] to work from discrete human situations toward something broader” in order reach a “universal” (89). Not only is this seen in Chaucer’s earlier poetry, but also in all of his poetry throughout his writing career, which contributes to the assertion that Chaucer’s poetry is the beginning of the aforementioned English poetic tradition. However, instead of having a “dated” context within the literature, Chaucer’s texts are quite contemporary and can be seen as relevant to students today.

By having this relevance, could it be possible that 21st century students could learn about Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy* through the accessibility of Chaucer’s earlier poetry? It is possible, through close analysis and attention to the Boethian coloring that is presented through the dream vision, in addition to an exploration of the English poetic tradition and what contributed to it. To do this, students should pay attention to Chaucer’s earlier poetry – *The Book of the Duchess, The Parliament of Fowls and The House of Fame* – rather than writing it off as background noise in comparison to works such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus & Criseyde*. 
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