

# Chaucer and Boethius

MS Hunter 374 (V.1.11) fol. 4r



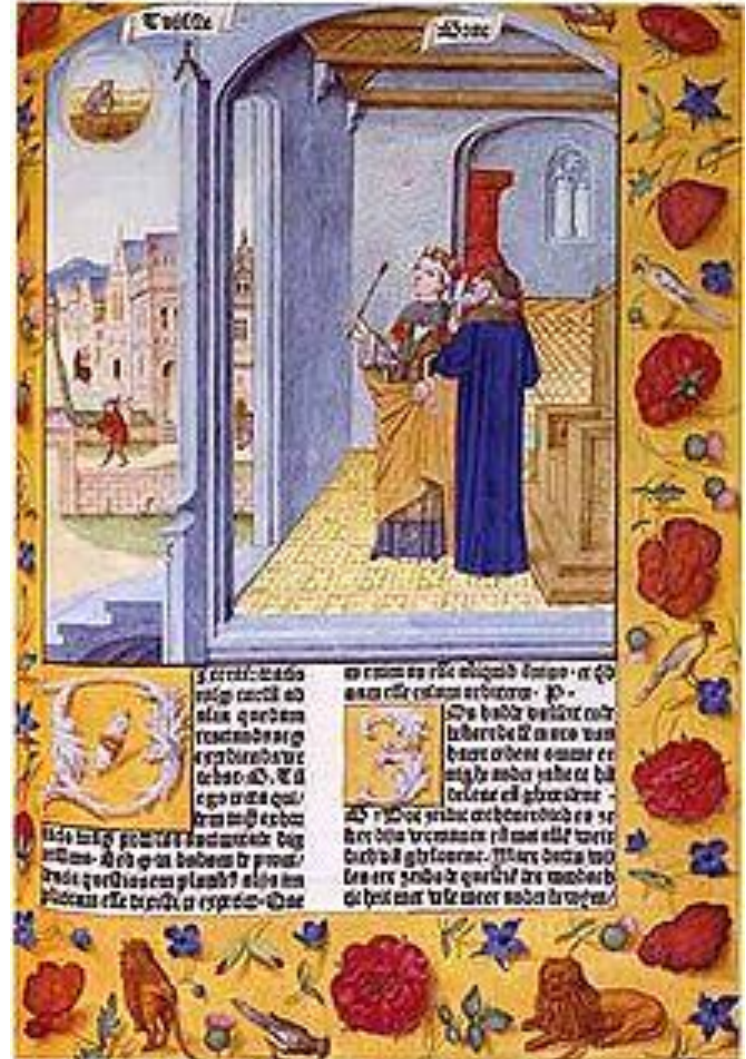
# Who was Boethius?

- Boethius (c.480-524) was an important government official for the Ostrogoth king Theodoric in Rome.
- Scholar who wrote major works on music, arithmetic, Aristotle, and philosophy.
- He was accused of treason in 522 for defending the rights of the Senate too strenuously (and possibly for conspiring with enemies of the king) & was imprisoned.
- He was executed by Theodoric in 524.



# What is the *Consolatio*?

- He wrote the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* while in custody.
- The allegorical figure Philosophia (Lady Philosophy) converses with Boethius, leading him from self pity to an enlightened, rational view of the human condition.
- The *Consolation of Philosophy* was the most important and influential philosophical treatise of the Middle Ages.



# Where does Chaucer come in?



- translated the work in his *Boece*
- Associated with works of 1380s
  - Knight's Tale
  - Troilus
  - Tale of Melibee
  - Some of the short poems

# What are the major points of the *Consolatio*?

- Menippean satire: dialogue that alternates between prose and metered verse
- Stresses detachment from things & events of this world—ignore the “prison of this world”
- Puts higher goods over worldly goods
- Emphasizes the need to plan for salvation
- Challenges emotional reactions to adversity
- Probably invented the image of the wheel of fortune



# Message of the *Consolatio*:

Humans have their freedom of judgment intact. And since their wills are freed from all binding necessity, laws do not set rewards or punishments unjustly. God is ever the constant foreknowing overseer, and the ever-present eternity of His sight moves in harmony with the future nature of our actions, as it dispenses rewards to the good, and punishments to the bad. Hopes are not vainly put in God, nor prayers in vain offered: if these are right, they cannot but be answered. Turn therefore from vice: follow virtue. Raise your soul to upright hopes: send up on high your prayers from this earth. If you would be honest, great is the necessity enjoined upon your goodness, since all you do is done before the eyes of an all-seeing Judge.

# Boethian themes in Chaucer

- Fortune and mutability
- Predestination vs free will
- Gentilesse being innate, not class-based
- Making virtue of necessity

Often the themes are echoed even when there isn't a close verbal parallel



# Boethius in the Knight's Tale



- Arcite's complaint about why he can't understand God's purveiaunce
- Palamon's speech blaming the gods for letting men suffer
- Theseus' "First Mover" speech (although Theseus seems to misunderstand some big points)