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## Decision Against Possibility: A Boethian Reading of “The Knight’s Tale”

"He who influences the thoughts of his times, influences all the times that follow. He has made his impress on eternity."

--Anonymous, ThinkExist.com

Choice Verses Chance: A Boethian Reading of *The Knight's Tale*

For centuries, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* has entertained audiences worldwide with its eclectic and eccentric gathering of medieval characters. Part of the allure of *The Canterbury Tales* lies in Chaucer's ability to provide an authentic narrative of a pilgrimage, a skill that enables the *Tales* to transverse time and relate to the audience using realism. Larry D. Benson, General Editor of *The Riverside Chaucer*, asserts that "*The Canterbury Tales* has the air of actuality because it is based on actuality," and that "the journey to Canterbury gains much of its realistic tone from the fact that it was modeled on life" (4). True to life and much like the art of storytelling, Chaucer employs genuine elements in his stories by borrowing ideas and tales from previous philosophers and poets. The first tale, "The Knight's Tale", is an adaptation of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Teseida* combined with components of Euripides's *Hippolytus*, both of which influence the story line of "The Knight's Tale" (Benson 6).

In addition to borrowing ideas from various other storytellers for plot purposes, Chaucer's main influence for the underlying theme of "The Knight's Tale" comes from Boethius, an orphic philosopher from the sixth century. In his *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius presents his theories on providence and fate using the concepts of philosophy and fortune as an anthropomorphism. Boethius presents God as the ultimate answer to man's quizzical perceptions of fortune, and introduces the core concept of

Christian free will. In "The Knight's Tale", Chaucer draws heavily upon Boethius's notions of chance and choice, presenting a similar explanation for the ups and downs of human existence.

From the beginning, "The Knight's Tale" establishes a Boethian notion of Fortune to establish the thematic struggle between man's free will and the probabilities of chance. Three widows approach Theseus for help after the Theban War, and the oldest woman relates to the Duke, "Lord, to whom Fortune hath given /Victorie" (Line 915). The word "Fortune" as a proper noun, coupled with the idea of that proper noun having the power to bestow "victory" upon Theseus,

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implies that Fortune is a manifestation, a commonality with Boethius's presentation of Fortune in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius takes the early Christian assumption of Fortune as a "figure of fate" and "transform[s] the pagan goddess into a fictional figure embodying man's limited hopes of temporal prosperity and his fears of adversity" (Green xvii). Throughout his work, Boethius refers to Fortune using feminine pronouns and, through *Philosophy*, establishes Fortune as an entity, and Chaucer draws upon this Boethian literary technique to provide a structural basis for his thematic development of choice versus chance.

Throughout "The Knight's Tale", Chaucer's physical images of Fortune can also be traced to Boethius's concept of Fortune and her "deceitful ways." Boethius's *Philosophy* contends that "When Fortune turns her wheel with her proud right hand, she is as unpredictable as the flooding Euripus: She neither hears nor cares about the tears of those in misery" (23). Boethius asserts that "if you possess yourself, you have something you will never want to give up and something which Fortune cannot take from you," implying that by asserting free will, man can obliterate the whims of Fortune and take control of his own destiny. Chaucer uses this sentiment in "The Knight's Tale" through his imagery of Fortune. In her plea to Theseus, the oldest widow asserts, "Thanked be Fortune and hire false wheel, /That noon estaat assureth to be weel" (925-6). The character relates her predicament to the heedless judgement of Fortune, and the term "false" alludes to Boethius's assumed fallacy of the idea that man has no control over his own destiny.

To further align himself with the ideology of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Chaucer portrays the whimsical nature of Fortune by illustrating a juxtaposition of fate between Palamon and Arcite. After being released from prison, Arcite laments his freedom because he can no longer see Emelye. He becomes envious of Palamon and bewails, "Wel hath Fortune yturned thee the dys, /That hast the sighte of hire, and I th'absence" (1238-9). He continues that "For possible is, syn thou hast hire presence, /And art a knyght, a worthy and an able, /That by som cas, syn Fortune is chaungeable" (1240-2). Here Arcite leaves his destiny in the hands of Fortune, and since she has "turned the dys" in favor of Palamon, Arcite has no recourse but an elegiac soliloquy. Conversely, Palamon sits "with al the wo that prison may me yive," reminiscent of Boethius's elegiac opening to *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Line 1296). Palamon bemoans his fate of imprisonment because he imagines that Arcite will "have hire to lady and to wyf," and he condemns the "cruel goddes that governe /This world with byndyng of youre word eterne" (1289, 1302-4). By presenting the opposing fates of the two knights, Chaucer relays the ignorance of each man leaving his destiny to the Gods instead of executing free will. Chaucer applies this comparison to illustrate the true character of Fortune and to dispel the idea of life as a game of chance.

Chaucer also relays Boethius's presentation of Fortune as a rapprochement of good and bad as a means of explaining the existence of God. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius

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contends that Fortune is "changeable" and "at one moment she fiercely tears down mighty kings, at the next the hypocrite exalts the humbled captive" (21-3). Boethius illustrates Fortune as a harmonization of good and bad because of her "two-faced nature," and "no man can ever be secure until he has been forsaken by Fortune" (22). Both Boethius and Chaucer present Fortune as an entity not concerned with judgement, but rather a force whose very nature requires a balance of good and evil. Essentially, the portrait of Fortune shifts from a whimsical goddess to a balanced force simply following its own natural law. After this transition, Boethius asserts that "the wise man, fortune is a specious identification of fate; the course of events which affect his life may seem random and capricious, and most of them are indeed beyond his control; but if his intelligence leads him to acknowledge the existence of a divine power which governs the universe," (Green xvii-xviii). From this notion, Boethius presents the concept of God's ultimate power over fate and thus instituting man's freedom to choose God using his intelligence, and Chaucer follows not only Boethius's presentation of plot, but the allegoric messages underneath.

Theseus's speech to Palamon and Emelye in "The Knight's Tale" provides a summation of Boethius's nature of God and free will in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and provides the culmination of Chaucer's thematic development throughout the tale. Boethius first asserts that all living creatures must expire and that "one thing is certain, fixed by eternal law; nothing that is born can last" (27). Death not only proclaims God as the only eternal being, but implies the presence of the soul, the only immortal part of man. Boethius also claims that "God assigns to every season its proper office; and He does not permit the condition He has set to be altered. Every violent effort to upset His established order will fail in the end" (17). Here Boethius relates that man's destiny, if left to fortune, is disordered, but when fate exists as part of God's will, no other force or entity can reign over man's life. Lady Philosophy, on behalf of Boethius, asserts that "there is free will and no rational nature can exist which does not have it. For any being must also have the power of judgement by which it can make decisions" (103). Through the existence of one God, Boethius lends credence to freedom of choice and takes destiny out of the hands of Fortune and into the hands of man.

Through Theseus's speech, Chaucer emulates Boethius's image of God as ordered and stable, and sustains the sentiment of choice over chance. Theseus begins by proclaiming, "The Firste Moevere of the cause above," relating the rest of his wisdom to God (2987). He proclaims that "thanne may men by this ordre wel discerne/ that thilke Moevere stable is and eterne" (3003-4). Theseus goes on to say that "of his wise purveiaunce, /He hath so wel biset his ordinaunce," echoing Boethius's portrayal of God as unwavering and ordered (3111-12). Theseus then relays the Boethian notion that everything living must come to an end and proclaims God as the cause for everything in life and death (3017-3038). As a final ode to *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Theseus ends his speech in "The Knight's Tale" by suggesting Palamon and Emelye exhibit free will to achieve happiness. He proclaims, "I rede that we make of sorwes two /O parfit joye, lastynge everemo. /And looketh now, where moost sorwe is herinne, /Ther wol we first amenden and bigynne" (3071-3074). Theseus implies that by choosing to marry each other and not grieve for Arcite, Palamon and Emelye choose happiness, thus choosing God's will.

Chaucer threads Boethian concepts throughout "The Knight's Tale" in a thematic development that brings his own readers of past and present to God. By first illustrating Fortune as a

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harmonization of good and evil, and then showing the fallaciousness of Fortune as an entity, Chaucer models literary techniques of "The Knight's Tale" after *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius attempts to "justify the ways of God to men, to explore philosophically the mysteries of the divine will as it is manifested in the order, and apparent disorder, of temporal events," and Chaucer emulates this philosopher's theories of God and Fortune (Green xviii). By using Boethian's influence, Chaucer provides a similar underlying doctrine of choice over chance, revealing to his audience that only by choice can man be close to divinity.

#### Works Cited

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