

**CHAUCER'S TRANSLATION OF
BOETHIUS'S "DE CONSOLATIONE
PHILOSOPHIAE". EARLY ENGLISH TEXT
SOCIETY, EXTRA SERIES, NO. V, 1868.
THE ROMANCE OF CHENELERE ASSIGNE**

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RICHARD MORRIS & GEOFFREY CHAUCER & HENRY H. GIBBS

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BY

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INTRODUCTION.

WHEN master hands like those of Gibbon and Hallam have sketched the life of *Boethius*, it is well that no meaner man should attempt to mar their pictures. They drew, perhaps, the most touching scene in Middle-age literary history,—the just man in prison, awaiting death, consoled by the Philosophy that had been his light in life, and handing down to posterity for their comfort and strength the presence of her whose silver rays had been his guide as well under the stars of Fortune as the mirk of Fate. With Milton in his dark days, Boece in prison could say,—

‘I argue not
Against Heaven’s hand or will, nor bate a jot
Of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer
Right onward. What supports me, dost thou ask?
The conscience, friend, to have lost them overplied
In liberty’s defence, my noble task,
Of which all Europe rings from side to side.’

For, indeed, the echoes of Boethius, Boethius, rang out loud from every corner of European Literature. An Alfred awoke them in England, a Chaucer, a Caxton would not let them die; an Elizabeth revived them among the glorious music of her reign.¹ To us, though far off, they come with a sweet sound. ‘The angelic’ Thomas Aquinas commented on him, and many others followed the saint’s steps. Dante read him, though, strange to say, he speaks of the

¹ Other translations are by John Walton of Osney, in verse, in 1410 (Reg. MS. 18, A 13), first printed at Tavistock in 1525, and to be edited some time or other for the E. E. T. S. An anonymous prose version in the Bodleian. George Colville, alias Coldewel, 1556; J. T. 1609; H. Conningesbye, 1664; Lord Preston, 1695, 1712; W. Causton, 1730; Redpath, 1785; R. Duncan, 1789; anon. 1792 (Lowndes).

Consolation as 'a book not known by many.'¹ Belgium had her translations—both Flemish² and French³; Germany hers,⁴ France hers,⁵ Italy hers.⁶ The Latin editors are too numerous to be catalogued here, and manuscripts abound in all our great libraries.

No philosopher was so bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of Middle-age writers as Boethius. Take up what writer you will, and you find not only the sentiments, but the very words of the distinguished old Roman. And surely we who read him in Chaucer's tongue, will not refuse to say that his full-circling meed of glory was other than deserved. Nor can we marvel that at the end of our great poet's life, he was glad that he had swelled the chorus of Boethius' praise; and 'of the translacioun of Boece de Consolacioun,' thanked 'oure Lord Ihesu Crist and his moder, and alle the scintes in heuen.'

The impression made by Boethius on Chaucer was evidently very deep. Not only did he translate him directly, as in the present work, but he read his beloved original over and over again, as witness the following list, incomplete of course, of passages from Chaucer's poems translated more or less literally from the *De Consolatione*:

I. LOVE.

Wost thou nat wel the olde clerkes sawe,
That who schal yeve a lover eny lawe,
Love is a grettere lawe, by my pan,
Then may be yeve to (of) eny erthly man?

(*Knights Tale, Aldine Series*, vol. ii. p. 36, 37.)

But what is he þat may zeue a lawe to loueres. loue is a grettere lawe and a strengere to hym self þan any lawe þat men may zeuen.

(*Chaucer's Prose Translation*, p. 108.)

Quis legem det amantibus?

Major lex amor est sibi.—(Boeth., lib. iii. met. 12.)

¹ Dante, in his *Convito*, says, "Misimi a legger quello non conosciuto da molti libro di Boezio, nel quale captivo e discacciato consolato s'avea."

² Printed at Ghent, 1485.

³ By Reynier de Seinct Trudon, printed at Bruges, 1477.

⁴ An old version of the 11th cent., printed by Graff, and a modern one printed at Nuremberg, 1473.

⁵ By Jean de Méung, printed at Paris, 1494.

⁶ By Varchi, printed at Florence, 1551; Parma, 1798.

II. A DRUNKEN MAN.

A dronke man wot wel he hath an hous,
But he not¹ which the righte wey is thider.

(*Knights Tale*, vol. ii. p. 39.)

Ryzt as a dronke man not nat² by whiche pape he may retourne home to hys house.—(Chaucer's *Trans.*, p. 67.)

Sed velut ebrius, domum quo tramite revertatur, ignorat.

(Boeth., lib. iii. pr. 2.)

III. THE CHAIN OF LOVE.

The firste moevere of the cause above,
Whan he first made the fayre cheyne of love,
Gret was theeffect, and heigh was his entente ;
Wel wist he why, and what therof he mente ;
*For with that faire cheyne of love he bond
The fyr, the watir, the eyr, and eek the lond
In certeyn boundes, that they may not flee.*

(*Knights Tale*, p. 92.)

That þe world with stable feith / varieth acordable chaungynges // þat the contraryos qualite of elementz holden amonge hem self aliaunce perdurable / þat phebus the sonne with his goldene chariet / bryngeth forth the rosene day / þat the mone hath commaundement ouer the nyhtes // whiche nyhtes hesperus the eue sterre hat[h] browt // þat þe se gredy to flowen constreyneth with a certeyn ende hise floodes / so þat it is nat l[e]ueful to stretche hise brode termes or bowndes vp-on the erthes // þat is to seyn to couere alle the erthe // Al this a-cordaunce of thinges is bownden with loue / þat gouerneth erthe and see / and [he] hath also commaundementz to the heuenes / and yif this loue alakede the brydelis / alle thinges þat now lonen hem to-gederes / wolden maken a batayle contynuely and stryuen to fordoon the fasoun of this worlde / the which they now leden in acordable feith by fayre moeuynge // this loue halt to-gideres poeples / ioyned with an hooly bond / and knytteth sacrament of maryages of chaste looues // And loue enditeth lawes to trewe felawes // O weleful weere mankynde / yif thilke loue þat gouerneth heuene governed yowre corages /—(*Chaucer's Boethius*, bk. ii. inct. 8.)

Quod mundus stabili fide
Concordes variat vices,
Quod pugnantia semina
Fœdus perpetuum tenent,
Quod Phœbus roseum diem
Curru provehit aureo,
Ut quas duxerit Hesperus

¹ The Harl. MS. reads *not nat*, to the confusion of the metre.

² = ne wot nat = knows not.