# Chaucer's Works, Volume 2 — Boethius and Troilus

Geoffrey Chaucer

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*Geoffrey Chaucer*

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Transcriber's note: Text enclosed by underscores is in italics (_italics_).

[=a] signifies "a with macron"; [)a] "a with breve"; and so forth. [gh] represents yogh, [*e] the schwa. A carat character is used to denote superscription: a single character following the carat is superscripted (example: 4^o).

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_Frontispiece**_]

# THE COMPLETE WORKS

OF

# GEOFFREY CHAUCER

# _EDITED, FROM NUMEROUS MANUSCRIPTS_

# BY THE

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* *

# BOETHIUS AND TROILUS

'Adam scriveyn, if ever it thee befalle
Boece or Troilus to wryten newe,
Under thy lokkes thou most have the scalle,
But after my making thou wryte trewe.'
_Chaucers Wordes unto Adam._

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## INTRODUCTION TO BOETHIUS.

## § 1. DATE OF THE WORK.

In my introductory remarks to the Legend of Good Women, I refer to the close connection that is easily seen to subsist between Chaucer's translation of Boethius and his Troilus and Criseyde. All critics seem now to agree in placing these two works in close conjunction, and in making the prose work somewhat the earlier of the two; though it is not at all unlikely that, for a short time, both works were in hand together. It is also clear that they were completed before the author commenced the House of Fame, the date of which is, almost certainly, about 1383-4. Dr. Koch, in his Essay on the Chronology of Chaucer's Writings, proposes to date 'Boethius' about 1377-8, and 'Troilus' about 1380-1. It is sufficient to be able to infer, as we can with tolerable certainty, that these two works belong to the period between 1377 and 1383. And we may also feel sure that the well-known lines to Adam, beginning--

'Adam scriveyn, if ever it thee befalle _Boece_ or _Troilus_ to wryten newe'--

were composed at the time when the fair copy of Troilus had just been finished, and may be dated, without fear of mistake, in 1381-3. It is not likely that we shall be able to determine these dates within closer limits; nor is it at all necessary that we should be able to do so. A few further remarks upon this subject are given below.

## § 2. BOETHIUS.

Before proceeding to remark upon Chaucer's translation of Boethius, or (as he calls him) Boece, it is necessary to say a few words as to the

original work, and its author.

Anicius Manlius Torquatus Severinus Boethius, the most learned philosopher of his time, was born at Rome about A. D. 480, and was put to death A. D. 524. In his youth, he had the advantage of a liberal training, and enjoyed the rare privilege of being able to read the Greek philosophers in their own tongue. In the particular treatise which here most concerns us, his Greek quotations are mostly taken from Plato, and there are a few references to Aristotle, Homer, and to the _Andromache_ of Euripides. His extant works shew that he was well acquainted with geometry, mechanics, astronomy, and music, as well as with logic and theology; and it is an interesting fact that an illustration of the way in which waves of sound are propagated through the air, introduced by Chaucer into his House of Fame, ll. 788-822, is almost certainly derived from the treatise of Boethius _De Musica_, as pointed out in the note upon that passage. At any rate, there is an unequivocal reference to 'the felinge' of Boece 'in musik' in the Nonnes Preestes Tale, B 4484.

§ 3. The most important part of his political life was passed in the service of the celebrated Theodoric the Goth, who, after the defeat and death of Odoacer, A. D. 493, had made himself undisputed master of Italy, and had fixed the seat of his government in Ravenna. The usual account, that Boethius was twice married, is now discredited, there being no clear evidence with respect to Elpis, the name assigned to his supposed first wife; but it is certain that he married Rusticiana, the daughter of the patrician Symmachus, a man of great influence and probity, and much respected, who had been consul under Odoacer in 485. Boethius had the singular felicity of seeing his two sons, Boethius and Symmachus, raised to the consular

dignity on the same day, in 522. After many years spent in indefatigable study and great public usefulness, he fell under the suspicion of Theodoric; and, notwithstanding an indignant denial of his supposed crimes, was hurried away to Pavia, where he was imprisoned in a tower, and denied the means of justifying his conduct. The rest must be told in the eloquent words of Gibbon[1].

'While Boethius, oppressed with fetters, expected each moment the sentence or the stroke of death, he composed in the tower of Pavia the "Consolation of Philosophy"; a golden volume, not unworthy of the leisure of Plato or Tully, but which claims incomparable merit from the barbarism of the times and the situation of the author. The celestial guide[2], whom he had so long invoked at Rome and at Athens, now condescended to illumine his dungeon, to revive his courage, and to pour into his wounds her salutary balm. She taught him to compare his long prosperity and his recent distress, and to conceive new hopes from the inconstancy of fortune[3]. Reason had informed him of the precarious condition of her gifts; experience had satisfied him of their real value[4]; he had enjoyed them without guilt; he might resign them without a sigh, and calmly disdain the impotent malice of his enemies, who had left him happiness, since they had left him virtue[5]. From the earth, Boethius ascended to heaven in search of the SUPREME GOOD[6], explored the metaphysical labyrinth of chance and destiny[7], of prescience and freewill, of time and eternity, and generously attempted to reconcile the perfect attributes of the Deity with the apparent disorders of his moral and physical government[8]. Such topics of consolation, so obvious, so vague, or so abstruse, are ineffectual to subdue the feelings of human nature. Yet the sense of misfortune may be

diverted by the labour of thought; and the sage who could artfully combine, in the same work, the various riches of philosophy, poetry, and eloquence, must already have possessed the intrepid calmness which he affected to seek. Suspense, the worst of evils, was at length determined by the ministers of death, who executed, and perhaps exceeded, the inhuman mandate of Theodoric. A strong cord was fastened round the head of Boethius, and forcibly tightened till his eyes almost started from their sockets; and some mercy may be discovered in the milder torture of beating him with clubs till he expired. But his genius survived to diffuse a ray of knowledge over the darkest ages of the Latin world; the writings of the philosopher were translated by the most glorious of the English Kings, and the third emperor of the name of Otho removed to a more honourable tomb the bones of a catholic saint, who, from his Arian persecutors, had acquired the honours of martyrdom and the fame of miracles. In the last hours of Boethius, he derived some comfort from the safety of his two sons, of his wife, and of his father-in-law, the venerable Symmachus. But the grief of Symmachus was indiscreet, and perhaps disrespectful; he had presumed to lament, he might dare to revenge, the death of an injured friend. He was dragged in chains from Rome to the palace of Ravenna; and the suspicions of Theodoric could only be appeased by the blood of an innocent and aged senator.'

This deed of injustice brought small profit to its perpetrator; for we read that Theodoric's own death took place shortly afterwards; and that, on his death-bed, 'he expressed in broken murmurs to his physician Elpidius, his deep repentance for the murders of Boethius and Symmachus.'

§ 4. For further details, I beg leave to refer the reader to the essay on

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