

Draftings In

Volume 8
Number 1 *Draftings In Chaucer's Troilus and
Criseyde*

Article 6

1995

Adaptation of Boethian Structure and Theme in *Troilus and Criseyde*

Frederick E. Walthour
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1995 by the Board of Student Publications, University of Northern Iowa

Recommended Citation

Walthour, Frederick E. (1995) "Adaptation of Boethian Structure and Theme in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Draftings In*: Vol. 8: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings/vol8/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Draftings In by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Adaptation of Boethian Structure and Theme in *Troilus and Criseyde*

Frederick E. Walthour

That Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is steeped in Boethian influence is unquestionable. The manner in which Chaucer employs this influence is less clear. John P. McCall suggests a structural similarity. Martin Camargo supports the notion of character parallels, and, in his book *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius*, Bernard L. Jefferson particularly emphasizes Chaucer's use of Boethian quotations. Several other scholars point to thematic similarities in the works, such as Chaucer's and Boethius' discussions of Lady Fortuna. Clearly much study has been given to the role of Boethian influence on Chaucer's *Troilus*. Unfortunately, most of these examinations focus on one particular element of influence separate from the others. I assert there is an interconnectedness of Boethian elements in *Troilus and Criseyde* which demonstrates a closer relationship between the two texts than the narrower studies indicate.

McCall's article is an important starting point for any discussion of Chaucer's adaptation of Boethian influence. McCall explores the way Chaucer imitated the five-book structure of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Indeed, Chaucer's adaptation of the five-book structure is the source for other similarities that exist. A clue to why Chaucer chose this format comes in Book I Prosa 1 of the *Consolation of Philosophy*:

In the nethereste hem or bordure of thise clothes, men redden ywoven in a Grekissch P (that signifieth the lif actif); and aboven that lettre, in the heieste bordure, a Grekyss T (that signifieth the lif contemplatif). And bytwixen thise two lettres ther were seyn degrees nobly ywrought in manere of laddres, by which degrees men myghten clymben fro the nethereste lettre to the upperest.

(1126-37)

Lady Philosophy's apparel becomes a structural metaphor for both writers. Both Boethius and Troilus progress in a step-by-step fashion through the five books of their respective works. Each book is a rung on the ladder each is climbing.

Structural similarity, supported textually, is our first evidence that these works are more closely related than might first be thought. Part of the problem in seeing a relationship between the two works is the seemingly antithetical nature of their subject matter. The sensuality of *Troilus and Criseyde* seems opposite the lofty, cerebral stance of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Unfortunately, this blinds some to the deeper, more meaningful, similarities that exist. Chaucer had to stay close to his model without merely translating it; he had already done that in his *Boece*.

Book I is in many ways the most important of each work. Camargo notes that "it is the opening book . . . that fixes the characters of Boethius and Philosophy and establishes the relationship between them. In dramatic terms, the rest of the *Consolation* is a playing out of what is already complete in Book I" (215). Arguably, this is also true of *Troilus*. In Book I the main characters are introduced and we are told of the crises they face. As McCall indicates, "Both works begin, then, with similar wording and tone, and with similar hints of their themes of Fortune" (297). Indeed, each book opens with a lamentation. The "wepyng" and "sorwful matere" with which the Roman philosopher Boethius opens his work are echoed by the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* who intends to tell of the "double sorwe of Troilus."

In respect to the ladder on Lady Philosophy's dress, the two protagonists may be said to exist near the bottom hem in their situations in life. Boethius, a man of the mind assumed to have transcended the "lif actif," is nonetheless firmly established in this life in Book I and is reminded of this by his imprisonment. The fact that he finds himself in this situation is the beginning of his awakening. Likewise, Troilus finds himself in a similar situation. Although not literally imprisoned, he becomes equally constrained by his emotions. Like Boethius, he finds it incomprehensible that he has fallen victim to what he has heretofore deemed impossible. Jefferson points out that "Troilus is conceived to be the kind of fatalist that Boethius was in the *Consolation* . . . the man who cries out against Fortune, who cannot reconcile to his misfortune the irrevocable decrees of destiny, in the grasp of which he feels bound" (123). Although also unaware of it, Troilus too is on the verge of insight. We have, then, characters who parallel one another in analogous situations. Although newly awakened, both are at a loss for what to do.

In their state of bewilderment, Boethius and Troilus are approached by individuals who wish to offer aid. Boethius is assisted by Lady Philosophy who finds him “al abayssched and astoned” on his bed. When she asks him why he reacts to her presence this way, he is unable to answer her and she remarks compassionately, “Here nys no peril . . . he is fallen into litargye, which that is comune seknesse to hertes that been desceyved” (Boethius, Prosa 2.18-21). Troilus, likewise, is found by his friend Pandarus sorrowfully bedridden. After offering Troilus counsel and seeing that it is having little effect, Pandarus echoes Lady Philosophy, “. . . Awake! ful wonderlich and sharpe; / What! Slomberstow as in a litargie?” (Benson I.729-30). When their attempts to get through to their “norys” appear futile, Lady Philosophy and Pandarus both resort to shaming tactics. Chaucer quotes directly from *Boece*. Lady Philosophy and Pandarus ask their pupils, “Artow like an asses to the harpe?” (Boethius, I Prosa 4.2-3; Benson I.1731).

Boethius and Troilus complain to their mentors that Lady Fortuna is to blame for their woes. Boethius cries, “. . . scheweth it nat ynoghe . . . the scharpenesse of Fortune, that waxeth wood ayens me?” (Boethius, I Prosa 4.10-12). Camargo notes that “When Boethius complains that Fortune is his enemy, Philosophy reproaches him for putting himself in Fortune’s power and deluding himself into thinking that he would always retain her gifts” (224). Troilus, in turn, points his finger in the same direction, “For wel fynde I that Fortune is my fo; / Ne al the men that riden konne or go / May of hire cruel whiel the harm withstonde; / For as hire list she pleyeth with free and bonde” (Benson I.837-40.) To this Pandarus repeats Philosophy’s words. Lady Philosophy and Pandarus tell their wards that Fortune is acting according to her nature and that to assume she can act otherwise is to misunderstand her.

In Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer continues to employ Boethian material to fit his needs. As Jefferson observes, Chaucer “did not use the Boethian material haphazardly for the interest that might be attached to particular lines in themselves, but . . . he brings its considerations of the fundamental questions of human existence to bear in a large way in the lives of his characters” (120). In the early parts of both Book II’s, the “physicians” administer their “lyghte and meneliche remedies.” Lady Philosophy focuses on Boethius’ immediate perception of his situation. She emphasizes “. . . that he still has the best of earthly gifts—the love of his real friends—and that he has lost only partial and transitory goods” (McCall 299). It is important to recognize that she quite willingly remains grounded in things temporal. Boethius is not yet awakened sufficiently to contemplate the loss of all earthly goods, including his own life.

Troilus is also subjected to lighter remedies by Pandarus. In Book II Pandarus works to make Criseyde aware of Troilus. When he accomplishes this and Troilus and Criseyde become friends, Pandarus must remind Troilus how things have improved for him:

For thus ferforth I have thi werk bigonne
Fro day to day, til this day by the morwe
Hire love of friendship have I to the wonne,
And thereto hath she leyd hire feyth to borwe.
Algate a foot is hameled of thi sorwe!

(II.960-64)

The next step Pandarus takes is to deliver a letter to Troilus written by Criseyde. Once again Troilus has retreated to his bed in desperation, and once more Pandarus comes through for him:

"... , Who is in his bed so soone
Iburied thus?" "It am I, frend," quod he.
"Who, Troilus? Nay, help me so the moone,"
Quod Pandarus, "thou shalt arise and see
A charme that was sent right now to the,
The which kan helen the of thyn accesse,
If thow do forthwith al thi bisynesse."

(BENSON II.1310-16)

The "strengere medicynes" that Pandarus begins to use on Troilus are reminiscent of those Lady Philosophy begins to employ in Prosa 5 of Book II.

Thus Book II allows the two mentors to begin working their cures. Although still moving slowly, so as not to lose their proteges in a whirlwind (of ideas in Boethius' case, and of sensuality in Troilus'), Philosophy and Pandarus step up their instruction. Book II serves as a prelude to the key events that occur in Book III of each work. The stamina of Boethius and Troilus is increased in order that they might better handle the "strengere remedies."

Book III provides difficulties for one wishing to show the parallels that exist between *Troilus* and *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The most obvious problem is reconciling the "blisse" that Boethius speaks of and that sought by Troilus. The narrowness that causes critics to make a distinction between these two forms of bliss is the very problem Boethius speaks of in Book III when he says, "... whoso that evere seketh to geten the toon of thise, and nat the tothir, he ne geteth nat that he desireth" (Boethius III, Prosa 9.119-21). The parallel that

Chaucer intends here is not the literal one he chose in Book I. Rather, he grounds the loftiness of Boethius' musing in the realm of everyday/everyman's existence. If he were to provide something imitative or predictable, "he cesseded thanne to ben" Chaucer.

The theme of Book III of the *Consolation* is the mistake that lies in considering a singular and transitory "good" a greater good than a universal and eternal one. The "suffisaunce of blis" of which Lady Philosophy lectures Boethius is "... o thyng withouten any devysioun" (III Prosa 9.17). The error men and women make, she explains, is to "... departeth and divideth it, and mysledeth it and transporteth from verray and parfit good to godes that ben false and inparfit" (Boethius III, Prosa 9.18-22). That "parfit good" or "verray blisfulnesse" is God. Lady Philosophy leads Boethius to see that the pursuit of the Divine is the path he should have maintained and that, despite the seeming nobility of his life's work, it was all vicissitude. Indeed, it has brought him to jail where he awaits execution.

The parallel that can be found with *Troilus and Criseyde* is Troilus' increasing shortsightedness in regard to Criseyde. By Book III his devotion has been diverted to a lesser "good," that of human love. This shift in allegiance is heard when he says, "Now fele I than myn herte is moot a-two, / For how sholde I my lif an houre save, / Syn that with you is al the lif ich have" (Benson III.1475-77). In several places throughout Book III Chaucer makes clear the despair Troilus suffers in pursuit of "bliss." Troilus endeavors in a number of ways to win the affections of Criseyde. Some might claim that his actions are farcical and that his pursuit is base and unsuited to comparison with Boethius' plight. Yet if examined more closely, Chaucer's genius is more clearly seen. Everyone can relate to the trials that face Troilus. By revealing that different travails cause similar results, Chaucer is showing the unity, indeed universality, of human experience. Once again, he is bringing the philosophical complexity of Boethius into real life situations. Or, perhaps he is infusing real life into high-brow intellectualism. When Chaucer remarks in *Troilus and Criseyde* that:

O, sooth is seyde, that heled for to be
As of a fevre or other gret siknesse,
Men moste drynke, as men may ofte se,
Ful bittre drynke; and for to han gladnesse
Men drynken ofte peyne and gret distresse—
I mene it here, as for this aventure,
That thorough a peyne hath founden al his cure.

(III.1212-18)

he is echoing Boethius who says, “. . . whanne thow has fully byhoolden thilke false goodes and torned thin eighen to the tother syde, thow mowe knowe the cleernesse of verray blisfulnesse” (III Prosa l.47-51). Both Boethius and Troilus must learn through their mistakes the path to “parfyt blis.”

Book IV also causes problems for some in respect to the parallels between Lady Philosophy and Pandarus. Once again, one must read deeper than just the words on the page. McCall remarks that Boethius “is led, step by step, to comprehend the essence of the true and perfect Good, while Troilus is led by stages to the fulfillment of a partial and transitory good” (302). He forgets, however, that it was Lady Philosophy who led Boethius down the narrow path prior to his imprisonment. It is not until after the fact that she tells him he has erred. Similarly, Pandarus warns Troilus before the end of Book III to “Bridle alwey wel thi speche and thi desir, / For worldly joie halt noght but by a wir” (Benson III.l635-36). McCall, furthermore, is mistaken in his claim that the joys which Troilus seeks “are deceptive and beguiling and that they blind only foolish men” (302). The intellectual idealism that compels Boethius is no less foolish than the emotional response Troilus experiences. As Camargo comments, “it is precisely Pandarus’ ‘humaness’ that makes him appealing and Philosophy’s lack thereof that makes her . . . distant” (226). Perhaps Book III of the *Consolation* might be termed the lesson, and Book III of *Troilus and Criseyde* the enactment of its teachings.

Books IV and V of *Troilus and Criseyde* are perhaps less analogous to the *Consolation of Philosophy* than the preceding three, but they are, in many ways, second only in significance to Book I in their debt to Boethius. Books IV and V of both works are complementary. The argument taken up in Book IV is continued and resolved in Book V, though I will examine each separately. By the last two books, both Boethius and Troilus are beginning to make their ascents from the “lif actif” to the “lif contemplatif” as portrayed on Lady Philosophy’s robe.

In Book IV of *Troilus and Criseyde*, rather than infuse Boethian philosophy throughout, Chaucer stays close to the story of Troilus. When he chooses to include Boethius, he does so boldly. This had led several critics to censure Chaucer. The Boethian material Chaucer incorporates into Book IV deals with the question of predestination. Chaucer develops a long soliloquy for Troilus with material clearly taken from Prosa 6 of Book IV of the *Consolation*. As Howard Rollin Patch explains, “It is often pointed out that . . . Chaucer merely versified parts of Boethius, which he already knew in the original and had himself translated” (369). Chaucer, apparently, felt no need to shroud his intent.

Troilus' speech clearly stands apart from the rest of the poem. Indeed Patch believes this speech:

is an intrusion of the worst kind It utterly interferes with the movement of the story. It is tacked to [the story] by the flimsiest of fastenings. It is lacking in some [Chaucerian] manuscripts, though unfortunately not the best ones. Still, its absence from these [manuscripts] makes it reasonable to suppose that its addition was an afterthought. (366-67)

What could Chaucer's motivation have been for having so forthrightly included a monologue of this length in a manner that seems entirely out of place? Patch asserts that Chaucer may indeed have had a motive: "Interested in a certain conception of philosophy, he may have seized an occasion to preach" (368). If we look to the end of the poem, in which Chaucer implores young lovers to avoid the perils encountered by Troilus and Criseyde, it is easier to imagine that he wanted his readers to be sure to get his message. Controversy exists over the nature of that message in Book IV, but as we will see, it is not nearly as complicated as some make it out to be.

Critics of Chaucer's use of the argument regarding predestination observe that, whereas Boethius goes on to exhibit the existence of free will, Troilus reasons himself into denying the concept. This is not wholly correct. Boethius does not, in Book IV, come to the conclusion that free will exists; it is only in Book V that he reaches this position. Similarly, Chaucer focuses his discussion on predestination in Book IV and engages the question of free will in Book V. While he may have been preaching, Chaucer was also maintaining a closer parallel to Boethius than is immediately obvious. Although the story line has by this point become more obviously divergent, the intent of the material has not. Boethius has begun to consider the higher reality that lies behind appearances in his world. Specifics have become less significant than generalities. What takes place is less important than why it takes place. Likewise, Troilus begins to mull over his situation and begins to understand its limitations. Both search for answers to their dilemmas and both look beyond that which is within their power.

However, many critics believe that, "Compared with Boethius, Troilus overstates his case against free choice" (Huber 122). Many have asserted that Boethius does not search for an excuse for his predicament and that he does not deny personal responsibility. This seems an odd assertion when as late as Book IV Boethius still questions Lady Philosophy about the good who suffer and the evil who prosper. His agenda is still grounded in the "unfairness" of his

situation. While Troilus more obviously searches for a justification for the woes that have befallen him, Boethius does the same less openly.

Book V of each work operates in tandem with Book IV. It is here that Boethius and Chaucer engage the idea of free will. Boethius comes to see that free will, as far as human reason is concerned, does indeed exist: "thilke thing that is futur, whan it is referred to the devyne knowynge, than is it necessarie; but certis when it is undirstonden in his owne kynde, men seen it outrely fre and absolut fro alle necessite" (V Prosa 6.172-76). Thus, free will is exercised by human beings for human beings. In his article "The Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*," Gerald Morgan comments, "[Troilus'] dilemma results from the attempt to bind God to the temporal limitations of man. But whereas man exists within time, God is beyond time" (268). Boethius' point is that destiny and Divine Providence are constant and not subject to the apparent freedoms humans are allowed.

The notion of free will is approached from a different slant in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Because Troilus is blind to the truth until after he dies, his story is a tragedy. Boethius comes to his enlightenment while he is still alive; his work, therefore, offers the affirmation of a comedy. This difference, however, does not negate the similarities described above. McCall remarks that:

Desiring to broaden the scope and the philosophical import of the tragedy which Boccaccio had restricted to a limited, personal significance, Chaucer found that he could best accomplish this end by shaping the tragedy according to the thematic and structural unity of Boethius' *comedia*. To create systematic parallels, he imitated the five-book structure and inverted the dramatic movement. (307)

Consistently intent on conveying Boethian philosophy, Chaucer adapted this material in unique and startling ways—as I hope I have demonstrated.

One final similarity is the two works' endings. Just as both began in like manner with a lament, the two end on a positive note. In each the recommendation is made that the reader focus on things spiritual as superior to things temporal. Not only does Chaucer, as an advising narrator, echo Lady Philosophy, but he makes the message visual through his depiction of Troilus' ascent to the sphere of the moon. While there, Troilus gazes heavenward from whence comes beautiful music, and afterward he turns toward earth and looks upon the folly of that existence. As Morgan indicates, there is "a higher order of reality and of nobler values" (266). The message Chaucer wanted to distill from Boethius is epitomized in this scene: that it is indeed possible to "clymben fro the nethereste lettre, the Grekissch P, to the uppereste, the Grekyssh T."

WORKS CITED

- BENSON, LARRY D., ED. *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed.
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- BOETHIUS, ANICIUS MANLIUS SERVERINUS.
The Consolation of Philosophy. Trans. V. E. Watts.
Harmandsworth, Eng. : Penguin, 1969.
- CAMARGO, MARTIN. "The Consolation of Pandarus."
The Chaucer Review 25 (1991): 214-27.
- JEFFERSON, BERNARD L.
Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius.
New York: Haskell House, 1965.
- MCCALL, JOHN P. "Five-Book Structure in Chaucer's *Troilus*."
Modern Language Quarterly 23 (1962): 297-308.
- MORGAN, GERALD. "The Ending of *Troilus and Crisedye*."
Modern Language Review 77 (1982): 257-71.
- PATCH, HOWARD R. "Troilus on Predestination."
Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism.
Ed. Edward Wegenknecht. London: Oxford UP, 1959. 366-84.