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Fortune, Fate, and Free Will: Chaucer's Encounters with Providence

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ciara Jane Turula entitled "Fortune, Fate, and Free Will: Chaucer's Encounters with Providence." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Roy M. Liuzza, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Fortune, Fate, and Free Will: Chaucer's Encounters with Providence

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ciara Jane Turula

August 2023

Abstract

It's easy to assume that the world is innately unstable as Chaucer seems to do in the short poems "Truth", "Lak of Stedfastnesse", "The Forger Age" and "Gentilesse", and yet we are called to wonder with the Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess* how any divine authority could let this be the case. As Lady Philosophy informs readers in *Boece*, the world is not really Fortune's chaotic kingdom of unreliability. Instead, the Earth and all that happens within it has already been laid out in the plan of Providence, which unravels regardless of whether individuals are aware of it, as various approaches to Providence in *Troilus and Criseyde* prove. At Troilus' final ascension into Heaven after his death, Lady Philosophy's abstract reasoning becomes the reader's lived experience, as Chaucer transforms intellectual revelation into personal revelation through his supreme skill of narrative artistry.

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Introduction

Tracing Destiny through Chaucer's Texts

What is fate? Is it a wheel that spins? An unraveling thread? Is it a lady by the name of Fortune, who laughs with one eye and weeps with the other? Is she our advocate? Our greatest enemy? Does she torment us in our dreams, or pull us away from our wives? Perhaps she's not a "she" at all – nor any other tangible object – but rather exists as merely a peek through the blinds of destiny.

Moving through Chaucer's short poems to his early dream vision in *The Book of the Duchess*, his translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* entitled *Boece*, and finally to *Troilus and Criseyde*, we find that this thing called "fate" – or is it fortune? Providence? – is a difficult concept to pin down. It spins, it watches, it laughs at our sufferings and delights in our joys. Sometimes, it even sits down with us to play chess. Could we ever possibly win? There are two things we *can* know for sure about destiny: it is always present, and it can never be altered.

Drawn to the notion of fortune, many are keen to point out the ending of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. Here, the eager pilgrims draw lots to decide who gets to tell the first story. However, we are led to consider that more is going on than the narrator is leading us to believe, as by "aventure, or sort, or cas," it is the noble knight who gets first dibs in the storytelling game by drawing the longest straw ("The Canterbury Tales" 844). Those three words, "aventure" "sort" and "cas" seem to complicate the picture. Open a Middle English glossary and there you will find the same three words for each definition: "Fate, fortune, chance" ("Aventure"; "Sort n.(1)"; "Cas n.").

Why would Chaucer use three terms that have almost exactly the same definition to explain how the knight won this gamble? Many theories have attempted to reconcile this oddity by positing everything from claims of the host's interference with the game to the knight's inevitable selection as the highest-ranking pilgrim. All theories are worth exploring on their own, but they may be proven to be equally valid under yet another view – that destiny is always watching. This unknowable, untouchable force is on our pilgrimage alongside us, and has even brought our group of strangers together in the first place. Whether the game was rigged or if the knight was always destined to begin the *Tales* is irrelevant. Regardless of how it happened, it could only have been done under the sovereignty of Divine Providence.

I point to such odd and well-known line from the *Tales* as a means of getting across just how present the role of Providence is in Chaucer's works, even when it is not explicitly active in the story. This is an idea Chaucer felt compelled to make sense of, as it is the very thing that his characters so frequently find themselves pitted against. Man's struggle with his unseeable, unchangeable destiny is perhaps most lightly addressed in "Fortune", a poetic philosophical dialogue in the form of a court case between an unnamed plaintiff and Lady Fortune herself. Like many of Chaucer's short poems, "Fortune" approaches its subject delicately with a touch of humor. The plaintiff looks to Socrates, his "stidfast champioun" of stoicism, as a source of comfort in the face of that "reven, blind goddess", Fortune, who oppresses human beings with a constant whirling of ups and downs ("Fortune" 17, 50). The complaints this plaintiff makes against Fortune come back later in the voice of the Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess*, one of Chaucer's most well-known dream visions. What changes between these poems is Fortune's characteristics, as her witty, *gentile* persona in "Fortune" disappears altogether in *Duchess*. Instead, in this poem Fortune is only present through the Black Knight's disdainful references.

Many motifs, images, and ideas appear throughout *Duchess* that return in full force in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and yet they can only offer Providential insights once a certain contact with Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* has been made. Chaucer's translation of this text – *Boece* – expands on the individual's despair under the cruel dominion of Fortune with the unique help of Lady Philosophy's superior voice of reason. Unlike *Duchess* and *Troilus*, *Boece* does not employ a persona to voice Fortune; however, Lady Philosophy does challenge the condemnations Boece has made of Fortune to reveal the necessity of free will under God's Providence. In *Boece* one can see an intellectual deepening of humanity's defiance against destiny, as well as a higher level of reasoning concerning Fate's elusive nature made by a mediator between Providence and mankind.

If *Boece* and the Black Knight raise questions about man's futility in the face of his destiny, then Lady Philosophy meets that question head on with her reasonable, albeit mysterious answer. Still, there is only so much one can gain from reading a philosophical dialogue rather than living out its twists and turns directly. Therefore, in *Troilus*, Chaucer injects the reader directly into this argument by transforming it from a dialogue into a complete narrative; one that has an omniscient but veiled narrator and a protagonist whose emotional and spiritual transformation elicits a similar journey towards cathartic revelation in the reader. By exploring various forms of prediction, parallels between Troilus and the Black Knight, and the transcendence of time and space at the end of Book V, *Troilus and Criseyde* may prove to be Chaucer's most evolved depiction of man's struggle with God's predetermined plan.

God's Providence: The Binding Thread of Reality

In this thesis, Providence will be the term used to describe the predetermined set of events of all things; a universal plan that has been drafted by God (Aquinas, "Quaestio 22: De Providentia Dei / Question 22: The Providence of God"). We can think of Providence as a shared plan, a DNA-

like structure that encodes the essence of life. By accepting this understanding of Providence, we also accept the notion that Fate and Fortune can't exist without Providence. Thus, these are minor reflections of Providence that can be known and interpreted by humanity. If we are to ascribe a purpose to these words, then the purpose of Providence would be to order the world and everything that will ever take place within it.

On the other hand, the conception of this plan has not neglected the fact of man's free will. To account for this seeming contradiction in design and execution, there must be a way for humans to follow the exact plan of Providence *by their own choosing*. Therefore, it must be accepted that Providence is something humanity follows, but *cannot fully see or change*. This concept is one that will be explored more deeply, particularly when discussing the role of Providence in *Boece*, but for now we will move on with this reasoning as the basis for our understanding of Providence and man's interaction – or lack of interaction – with it.

Fate and Fortune in Relation to Providence

Fortunately, humans are not completely left in the dark when it comes to knowing what is to come. This is where Fate and Fortune step in. These terms are not entirely interchangeable; however, they have more in common with each other than they do with the Providence that determines them. Fate can be thought of as the various natural and supernatural signs of Providence. Fortune is similar in some ways to Fate, but more tangible, as Fortune appears as a personified advocate or some kind of seer, rather than as a change in the clouds or an enigmatic symbol in a dream. Because of this, Fortune often reveals less of a direct glimpse into Providence as Fate and is instead either an imagined scapegoat for good and bad outcomes or a means of rationalizing the seemingly unstable twists and turns in life.

To conclude on this triadic structure, I will assert that Fate and Fortune can't exist without Providence, but Providence is capable of existing without Fate or Fortune. However, as will be discovered by tracing Providence in Chaucer's texts, Fate and Fortune *must* exist if Providence is to coexist with man's free will. In literature, and particularly in Chaucerian text, portents of Fate – storms, obscured moons, prophetic dreams – have an accepted objective validity. In other words, these things are explored with the assumption that they are not simply part of an overactive imagination but are aspects of a mystical reality. Depending on the context, the same can be said of Fortune, especially when she is given an explicit presence and voice.

Fate: What is Written in the Stars

The term Fate throughout Chaucer's poems tends to reflect a sense of destiny; one that is part of Providence, but not necessarily Providence itself. In Greek (and European generally) mythology, the Fates are three divine beings who map out the plan of destiny (Howatson; West 379–86), much like the Christian understanding of God and Providence. Interestingly enough, the Fates' form of Providence also considers the free will of humanity. Therefore, originally Fate and Providence were much closer than they would eventually seem.

What makes Fate so useful is also what makes it alluring within a literary setting. It is the least human expression of Providence, therefore witnessing it is often not enough to understand it. Interpreting Fate is a science left to the astronomers and seers who have experience unraveling the patterns of dreams and shifting constellations in the sky. Chaucer has been careful not to simply neglect Fate, but instead leaves it as the mystery it is to be interpreted by the reader. In any of Chaucer's stories, one will frequently find descriptions of harsh thunderstorms, exciting clouds that bring about sunshine, different movements in the wind, ripening of fruit, etc. These depictions of changes in nature can easily be overlooked as mere plot devices, such as the storm in *Troilus*

that Pandarus treats as an excuse to keep Criseyde at his house. They can also be merely described as poetic embellishments that set the mood of the story, such as the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*. Both of these interpretations may be true and may even accept literary foreshadowing as an additional intent – or at least a pleasant side effect – of what Chaucer is doing by so frequently dwelling on nature. However, this still neglects the purpose such natural phenomena have for the characters of the stories themselves, who do not tend to pay much attention to them. In other words, what may seem to be a rainy plot device for the reader could also be a direct warning to Troilus and Criseyde of what is to come out of their love making.

Fortune: Providential Scapegoat

At times, people will attribute the notion of chance – a random outcome of an event – to Fortune. However, this usage of the term truly derives from the personification of Fortune as the Roman goddess Fortuna – or Lady Fortune, as she is sometimes called in English – who actively decides such outcomes based on her chaotic, unpredictable dispositions. Therefore, although “Fortune” is often seen as a stand-in for “chance” or “luck”, this is based on a shortened assumption that Fortune *determines* those seemingly indeterminable things. Essentially, while Chaucer frequently has Fortune described by his characters as a scapegoat for the negative outcome of events, there is also an underlying understanding that what may really be lamented is the problem of having free will in a world that was pre-determined by Providence. As one reads the Black Knight’s disparaging references to Lady Fortune in *Duchess*, they will find that her advocacy, much like her actual presence in the narrative, has disappeared. That underlying futility of humanity’s free will in the face of Providence seems to only grow stronger then, and in *Troilus* it has somehow come full circle: human beings, not the immortal Ladies Fortune and Philosophy, take on Fortune’s role themselves. To what end does this aid the mortal characters?

Chapter 1: The Minor Poems

1.1 Introducing Conceptions of Cosmic Order and Earthly Instability

To fully comprehend the confusing issues of free will under Divine Providence, one must first become grounded in the defining sense of instability that was prominent in the Medieval perspective. An idea often repeated throughout Chaucer's writing describes the experience of life as merely a pilgrimage through a world that cannot be possessed; one that merely allows humans the ability to pass through it. To view humanity in such a transient light implies a certain degree of powerlessness the individual has over their own environment. "Pilgrimage and travel form a potent idiom for expressing humanity's relationship with the world" writes Kathleen Palti, "a people explore the vast territory available to them, and they belong nowhere within it" highlighting the strange perceptions that emerge from a transitory relationship with Earth (Palti 31).

When referencing the cosmos, a sense of Providential order is often used, as though the same bonds that might fix each star in the sky have been knitted by the thread of destiny. Or, to use a slightly different metaphor, it is the same "makere of the wheel that bereth the sterres, whiche that art festnyd to thi perdurable chayer, and turnest the hevne with a ravyschyngwe sweighe" (Chaucer, "Boece" Book I:Metrum 5, lines 1–4). Clearly the heavens must be that shrine to which all Earthly pilgrims seek at the end of their life's journey. While it is easy to describe the perfect order of the cosmos, the Earth below has much less discernible characteristics.

"Earth" can encompass everything sublunar but at the same time conveys suffocating limitation. Here the globe, the soil, and the human individual all draw disturbingly close, and walking away is impossible. Earth is a realm to dwell in, an

origin and a destination, all our possessions, our own selves, and at once another agent who is potentially sentient and hostile. (Palti 32)

As Palti says, Earth is too vast to ever fully see, and yet at the same time affords an agency so limited that it often feels suffocating. Unlike the fixed stars, chaotic Earth is free to shift in any direction and at any time, and humanity by extension is limited to a constant struggle with the resulting sense of mutability.

At this point, a conflict appears to form: the human individual situated on Earth is endowed with some sense of its natural instability, while also subconsciously following a pre-ordained path belonging to the celestial bonds of Providence. How can a pilgrim whose connection to the Earth is purely transitory also be at the same time shaped by Earth's mutability? Does the individual possess any agency at all if the ever-turning Earth and ever-fixed stars have dominion over the direction of life? To Chaucer, "human nature is apprehended at once as something God-given and part of a divinely created universe and also as something that imperfectly fulfils its purposes in the divine scheme of things", therefore the paradoxical relationship between agency and destiny is not at odds with pilgrimage, but a fundamental outcome of its reality, as "the end of pilgrimage is satisfaction for sin, and it is carried out in the certain knowledge of a final reckoning by God for one's freely chosen acts" (Morgan 304, 306).

Regarding Chaucer's concern for the coexistence of two things that seem so inherently at odds with one another – Divine Providence and Earthly instability – Helen Cooper puts it best when she states:

Issues concerning providence and astrological determinism, predestination and free will, fortune as arbitrary and as following an inexorable pattern, the lack of poetic

(or any) justice in this world and a belief in God's ordering appear in poem after poem of Chaucer's, from *The Book of the Duchess* to the end of his career. (Cooper, "Unhap, Misadventure, Infortune" 15)

While this brief investigation of multiple texts attempts to explain how such ideas manifest through writing that seem to follow Chaucer "to the end of his career", we must first think about where they began. To do so, some of Chaucer's short poems will be examined, as they offer a more direct glimpse at a sense of Earthly instability from which Providential anxieties stem.

1.2 An Unreliable Earth in "Truth", "The Former Age", "Lak of Stedfastnesse", and "Gentilesse"

The poems to be investigated in this chapter have certain overlapping qualities in terms of genre, as they all tend to follow a common tradition of French courtly verse (Gross 631). Thematically, "Truth", "Lak of Stedfastnesse", "The Former Age" and "Gentilesse" reflect a similar perspective heavily informed by Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, and a conception of an Earth defined by instability runs through each one. However, to say that these lyrical compositions all belong to the same period of Chaucer's authorship – in fact, to lay claim to specific dates of composition at all – would be difficult, to say the least. Therefore, this chapter should be considered a means of acquainting ourselves with the base of a large, complex philosophical struggle regarding Providence, and not as an argument that Chaucer's own relationship with the subject necessarily begins at the time these texts were written.

In her introduction to the poems in *The Riverside Chaucer*, Laila Gross observes that "until quite recent years, Chaucer's short poems received little critical attention" as "they lack the lyric *cri de coeur* that early critics prized in this genre" (Gross 631). Or, as Piotr Gwiazda describes them:

Geoffrey Chaucer's so-called "Boethian" lyrics contain almost no original ideas or insights, each being a conventional piece derivative of classical and medieval commonplaces, each upholding Christian morality and perpetuating folk wisdom...Declarations that life used to be easier or that fortune is fickle, to mention just two instances [of Boethian ideas], sounded like truisms to people in Chaucer's time as they still do to us today. We cannot possibly separate the subject matter of these poems from the moral idea they communicate; they exist, as it were, for the sake of their ethical message. (Gwiazda 75)

While his take is somewhat dismissive of deeper nuances that may lie beneath the Boethian poems, it is undeniable that they tend to be more derivative than innovative in their treatment of the *Consolation*. Despite this, the poems offer a succinct and vivid view of the Medieval "fantasy of the former times", a poetic tradition of nostalgia for the mythical former golden age (Gwiazda 83). "Throughout the Middle Ages," Gwiazda writes, "people viewed their own historical period as the final stage of gradual degeneration of the world grown old under the burden of evil, sin, and corruption", and in contrast, the golden age was understood as a period in which "life was simple and peaceful and humankind virtuous and ingenuous" (Gwiazda 79).

It is from this place of dissatisfaction for the present that a yearning for the past springs forth, so what exactly is the issue with Chaucer's present day? A glimpse at some key lines from the Boethian poems reveals a world that is no longer bound by any sense of trust and has consequently grown wild. "The wrastling for this worlde axeth a fal" we are told in "Truth", "Her nis non hoom, her nis but wildernesse" ("Truth" 16–17). Chaucer again likens the world around him to a "wildnesse" in "The Former Age" which contrasts heavily with the humble landscape of

the past (“The Former Age” 34). In this wilderness, one can only expect “doublenesse, and tresoun and envye, / Poyoun, manslauhtre, and mordre in sondry wyse”, from their neighbor, whom Chaucer believes is more easily motivated by “covetyse” than “Humblesse and pees” (“The Former Age” 63–64, 55). In “Lak of Stedfastnesse”, Chaucer takes this even further, describing unpredictable fluctuations as the only true constant one can expect of the world:

Trouthe is put doun, resoun is holden fable;

Vertu hath now no dominacioun,

Pitee exyled, no man is merciabile.

Through covetyse is blent discrecioun;

The world hath mad a permutacioun

Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse,

That al is lost, for lak of stedfastnesse.

(“Lak of Stedfastnesse” 15–21)

Although the average person of the Chaucer’s current world “hath hate, and climbing tikelnesse” (“Truth” 3), it is still “the world” responsible for this “permutacioun”, rather than any one person or group. After all, when “trouthe is put doun” and “resoun is holden fable”, how can one be held accountable for acting on their “blent discrecioun”?

These poems inform their reader of a constantly shifting world in the present, a perspective that is made all the more bitter when origins are described as quite the opposite. “Som tyme this world was so stedfast and stable”, Chaucer writes, “That mannes word was obligacioun” (“Lak of

Stedfastnesse” 1–2). Again, it is specifically “the world” that is responsible for the presence of virtue in its inhabitants, just as it is the instrument of permutation. To understand what this past world and its inhabitants would look like, one need only turn to “The Former Age”, which provides a vision of a former people marked by blissful ignorance of vice; of a natural world not yet “wounded with the plough” (“The Former Age” 9). This was an innocent, “lambish” people,

...voyd of alle vyce,

Hadden no fantasye to debate,

But ech of hem wolde other wel cheryce;

No pryde, non envye, non avaryce,

No lord, no taylage by no tyrannye;

Humblesse and pees, good feith, the emperice,

Fulfilled erthe of olde curtesye.

(“The Former Age” 50–56)

Upon an initial view, their world bears very little resemblance to the present chaotic landscape. This golden age is not a force of change, as the people’s lack of “fantasye to debate”, of “envye” and “avaryce” reflects a certain satisfaction with what the world has naturally afforded them. Humble satisfaction is what has prevented the former people from covetousness; it is both a product of successfully living in the unaltered natural world as well as what “fulfilled erthe of olde curtesye”.

What Chaucer asks in “Lak of Stedfastnesse” – “What causeth this?” – is left only with “wilful wrecchednesse” as a possibility (“Lak of Stedfastnesse” 13). In “The Former Age”, however, Chaucer provides a much deeper answer. Technical innovations considered essential for building society, such as the discovery of “fyr out of the flint”, “tours heye, and walles rounde or square” for protection, “coyn” to establish trade, as well as the ships needed to facilitate it – all these inventions are here defined as instruments of covetousness that produce divisiveness among people (“The Former Age” 13, 24, 20, 21). The revelation in this poem “is technological and experiential, implicitly producing the various modern professions and estates as the consequences of invention and discovery”, therefore technology, education, and social estates are all linked together in a web of divisiveness (Galloway 537). Galloway’s sentiment follows Gwiazda’s notion that the Medieval reader’s interest in the past “not only constitutes an exact reversal of the modern idea of progress, but also parallels the view of human life as a gradual decline that ends in death” (Gwiazda 79). Such anxiety over mortality is implied in the following lines of “The Former Age” by another troubling outcome of progression: the establishment of warfare, or the “offence of egge or spere”, which had been previously unnecessary for the peaceful people of the past (“The Former Age” 19).

However destructive they may be, these violent weapons of war are not at the root of mankind’s downfall, which instead is discovered to be a desire to learn Earth’s hidden secrets:

But cursed was the tyme, I dar wel seye,
 That men first dide hir swety bysinesse
 To grobbe up metal, lurkinge in derknesse,
 And in the riveres first gemmes soghte.

Allas! than sprong up al the cursednesse

Of covetyse, that first our sorwe broghte!

(“The Former Age” 27–32)

It is by man’s initial decision to do “hir swety bysinesse” in the Earth’s darkness that he has been rendered vulnerable to suffering and privy to vice. At the same time, the natural resources that humanity seeks to “grobbe up” were always there, lying in wait to be discovered as the source of discord and end of universal harmony. Many scholars have noted that previous lines regarding the primitive people’s diet, consisting primarily of “mast, hawes, and swich pounage”, contain “a pervasive, self-indicting irony” by describing what Boethius had simply referred to as acorns and clear water as pig fodder (Galloway 538). Chaucer here “pokes fun at the classical ideal” of the golden age, “and almost sabotages it with a note of irony” that is indeed pervasive enough to imply that the “overall picture” of the past world and its *lambish peple* is “not one of idyllic happiness, but one of regressive ignorance” (Gwiazda 85–86). Lines that at first aligned the primitive world with an innocence not yet tainted by knowledge prove to reflect a stunted intelligence and blind ignorance when one considers how these people – as humble and perfect as they may have been – did at some point make a decision that “sprong up al the cursednesse”. In “The Former Age”, both the natural world and the people inhabiting it have hidden within their depths a source of vanity and disruption.

The Earthly realm is a source of instability, but it is still unclear what exactly is at the source of virtue. While “The Former Age” does provide — and perhaps challenge — a certain vision of the people who came before truth and steadfastness were abandoned by the world, it does not depict an origin of virtue, nor does it explain how this could possibly persist when most of the

world has become unreliable. “The narrator's expression of this viewpoint displays not just a fallen world but the habits of a fallen mind”, continues Galloway, as the narrator’s “heavy burden of technical and vocational knowledge” prevents him from enjoying the “parfit quiete” of the former people (Galloway 538; Chaucer, “The Former Age” 44). Still, his ability to appreciate the former people’s good qualities implies that virtue is not completely absent to the present individual.

In a different poem, “Gentilesse”, limitations in perspective become somewhat absent, despite creating a similar look at the past as the other poems (“Gentilesse”). Here, Chaucer aligns mankind’s natural blood origins with moral character by describing a shared human ancestor, “the firste stok”, primarily as “fader of gentilesse” (“Gentilesse” 1).¹ Unlike those of the present who are made blind to right and wrong by the world, this “firste stok” is “ful of rightwisenesse, / Trewe of his word, sobre, pitous, and free” (“Gentilesse” 8–9). The language used to describe the origin of virtue in this poem is that of biological heredity, as “stok” meaning “trunk” was often used to describe familial ancestry. “Fader” and “heir” (“Gentilesse” 12), too, create a sense of blood lineage that somewhat contrasts with the very notion of virtue that is being portrayed. Chaucer points to this himself, as while it is the “firste stok” that allows for “what man that claymeth gentil for to be” in the first place, there also may be “no man, as men may wel see, / [who can] Bequethe his heir his vertuous noblesse”, as this is an inheritance that can only be achieved if one strives to follow the father of gentilesse’s “trace” and “love vertu, as dide he” (“Gentilesse” 3, 12).

What must have come naturally to “the lambish peple” is no longer so easy for “the prees” of Chaucer’s time to achieve, and yet the poem “Truth” reveals that this is still possible (“Truth”).

¹ Criticism on “Gentilesse” frequently attempts to pin down “the firste stok” as an actual figure, such as Christ or Adam (Barney, “Gentilesse: Explanatory Notes”). While it would be fitting here to make the link between Christ and this ancestral figure in “Gentilesse” in order to further the notion that humanity has inherited a proclivity towards virtue, making the case for this argument lies beyond the scope of my intentions.

Unlike “Lak of Stedfastnesse”, which fixates on the problems of the present people, as well as “The Former Age” and “Gentilesse”, which are more interested in the past, “Truth” simply provides counsel to its reader. The latter poem also appears to take inspiration more directly from Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, as the second stanza’s opening has much in common with a passage in *Boece* in which Lady Philosophy tells a disgruntled Boethius, “Tempeste the nat thus with al thy fortune, syn thow hast yit thy beste thynges” (“Boece” II:Prosa 4, 68–69). It appears after a lengthy discussion of Fortune, whom Lady Philosophy initially describes as fickle, sadistic, and random; an illustration that will eventually be challenged and reversed. At this point, Lady Philosophy is speaking of “fortune” with a lowercase “f”, implying a general sense of wealth. “Tempeste the nat”, she says, encouraging Boethius to appreciate what he already possesses instead of worrying about what he no longer has. Chaucer takes this same piece of advice and offers it to the reader directly in “Truth”, only here he appears to switch the meaning of “fortune” from a reference to vast wealth into its more Providential meaning: “Tempest thee noight al croked to redresse, / In trust of hir that turneth as a bal” (“Truth” 8–9). In this case, the reader is discouraged from dwelling on attempts to correct every wrong in trust of “hir that turneth” constantly, as Fortune is known to do. The second line also takes after *Boece*, only this quote appears much earlier during Lady Philosophy’s description of Fortune:

I pley continuely. I torne the whirlynge wheel with the turnyng sercle; I am glad to chaungen the loweste to the heyeste, and the heyeste to the loweste. Worth up yif thow wolt, so it be by this lawe, that thow ne holden at that I do the wrong, though thow descende adown whan the resoun of my pley axeth it. (“Boece” II:Prosa 2, 51–57)

If the issue in “Truth” is that the world encourages blind discretion and dangerous, unpredictable, and unreliable impulses in its crowds, then Chaucer’s advice points specifically to Fortune as just the opposite. Here in *Boece*, just as Chaucer has shown in his other minor poems, the world appears to be chaotic and lacking in steadfastness, as does the individual who allows himself to be driven by worldly pursuits. In turn, as Fortune’s ever-turning wheel is defined by constant change, it would be illogical for an individual to assume they will stay at its top forever, that Fortune will only bring misery to “al croked” people, and that one’s present state of despair will last forever. Ultimately, it is not Divine Providence or Fortune who is to blame for the disastrous events in one’s life, as the former remains unperceivable, and the latter is merely a means of lamenting that fact.

1.3 Conclusion

Whether the world really does lack any ordered stability is not explicitly clear in the poems explored in this chapter. The perspective Chaucer applies to the world around him in these lyrics does not seem to be all that concerned with Providential schemes that may lie beneath the Earth’s swiftly shifting surface. Within these poems’ lines can be discovered a sentiment of dismay for the current world around their poet, as well as an escapist use of the past as relief from current suffering. However, upon closer inspection, the past may not be quite so stable as it initially seems, and occasionally ironies hint at a more complex view of the movements in life.

Chapter 2: The Book of the Duchess

2.1 “Chek her!”: Drawing Providence across the Board in *Duchess*

The Book of the Duchess is a dream vision in memorial of the deceased Lady Blanche of Lancaster, written for her husband, John of Gaunt (Wilcockson 329). Death and the symptoms of mourning – most notably including insomnia – are scattered throughout *Duchess*, shaping its opening and offering a sense of purpose in its closing lines. Although the dreamer narrates this story, it is truly the Black Knight who dominates the dream portion of *Duchess*. In function, the Black Knight appears to memorialize the act of mourning, which is symbolically aligned with his character just as vividly and poignantly as the woman he is grieving. At the same time, it is not his lady he first expresses sadness over losing to the dreamer, but his “fers”, or “counselor” — an important chess piece that would later be replaced by the more powerful queen (Bolens and Taylor 330) — which is taken by his opponent, Fortune (“The Book of the Duchess” 655).

Chaucer’s decision to have the Black Knight lament the loss of his “lady bryght” in his opening song, only to then reveal the lady to be a chess piece, creates a nuanced view of fate according to the grieving mind. Regardless of whether this is merely an innocuous trick, a statement on the odd logic of dreams, or an attempt to realistically portray someone trying to forget his grief, Chaucer’s alignment of the chess piece with a deceased wife provides a level of insight into the Black Knight that the character himself does not seem capable of knowing. This insight relates to his accountability in making decisions as a human with free will, even with the knowledge that the events that unfold – in both life and a game of chess – ultimately belong to Providence. This explains why he spends so much time disparaging Fortune, which may truly be

a form of commentary on the free-willed human's desperation in grappling with the inevitability of Providence.

Fueled by a sense of loss, the Black Knight's depiction of Fortune in *The Book of the Duchess* carves a predatory face out of Providence. "I lykne hyr to the scorioun", he tells the dreamer, "That ys a fals, flaterynge beste" describing Fortune as a deceitful and poisonous creature ("The Book of the Duchess" 636–637). Like the scorpion, the Black Knight says, she "wol styng / And envenyme" anyone who happens to be charmed by her false flattery (640–641). While her wheel brings good times, the inevitability of ensuing sorrow is enough to remove a sense of stability and authenticity from the joys of life:

She ys th'envyouse charite

That ys ay fals and semeth wel;

So turneth she hyr false whel

Aboute, for hyt ys nothyng stable –

Now by the fire, now at the table;

For many oon hath she thus yblent. (642–647)

In every description of Fortune, the Black Knight develops a sense of instability by placing contrasting terms beside one another, resulting in a picture more defined by its contradictions than anything else. Fortune is not simply cruel or unkind, she is "th'envyouse charite", and even the way the Black Knight says she blinds people – or "many one" as he puts it – does more to complicate than clarify this picture. If anything, one can gather from the Black Knight's lengthy diatribe that he understands this chaotic persona through and through.

Why, then, does the Black Knight allow himself to be in a position to play chess with Fortune, who surely never plays fair, or at least uses moves that are difficult to predict? The Black Knight never clarifies how this game to be, or the degree to which he may have been coerced into accepting it. However, the Black Knight is quick to assert that he should have won: “I shulde have pleyd the bet at ches / And kept my fers the bet thereby” (“The Book of the Duchess” 627–628). Indeed, this is something a Medieval chess player at practically any level would know, as treating the fers carelessly means leaving the king vulnerable to attack, rendering a defeat. Because “the protector of the fers is not a piece in the game but the player who directs pieces”, and its loss “is not the end of the game, but a factor contributing to the loss of the king which does end the game”, it is difficult to not see the Black Knight as responsible for his own defeat (Bolens and Taylor 328). A few lines later, the Black Knight offers a concession to Fortune:

And eke she ys the lasse to blame;

Myself I wolde have do the same,

Before God, hadde I ben as she;

She oghte the more excused be.

(Chaucer, “The Book of the Duchess” 675–678)

This information goes against what the Black Knight had said of her before, as it offers proof of her integrity in making decisions, even when the possibility of losing to a mere mortal is on the table. Additionally, this passage more directly reveals how truly the Black Knight is accountable for the misfortune that befalls him in this game. This is strengthened by admitting he would make the same mistake again if given the chance:

Had I be God and myghte have do

My wille whan she my fers kaughte,

I wolde have drawe the same draughte. (681–683)

Furthermore, the Black Knight understands that Fortune has some kind of direct contact with Providence, as he is able to describe how she turns “hyr false whel”, and yet remains ignorant of the possibility that Fortune might be able to predict all his moves in chess before he makes them. If this the case, then agreeing to a game of chess with Fortune is likely no different than agreeing to lose, as the outcome will always be in her favor, which is perhaps why Bolens and Taylor describe the Black Knight in this exchange as “lamenting the means and not the end of his combat with Fortune” (Bolens and Taylor 328). Considering this along with the recklessness in which the Black Knight affords his supposedly beloved “fers”, it appears that the Black Knight does have a considerable degree of awareness of his own responsibility over the outcome of his decisions.

2.2 White and Fortune: The Coin’s Flipped Faces

As a means of memorializing Lady Blanche, Chaucer allows the Black Knight to expand at length on her idealistic qualities when describing “White...that was [his] lady name ryght” (“The Book of the Duchess” 948–949). Among many other things, White is “fairer, clerer, and hath more lyght / Than any other planete in heven” (822–823), “So goodly speke and so frendly” (852), with eyes that are “Debonaire, goode, glade, and sadde” (860). Everything from the distance between White’s eyes to the manner of her speech is described as perfectly balanced and owes to her “stedfast countenance” (833). Even the hairs on White’s head are described as though flawlessly set between blonde and brown (855–859).

As the Black Knight goes on to say, it seems this is a being that must have been molded by a goddess, the “dame Nature”, as White seems to transcend all others in her beauty as well as her character (871).

Therwith hir lyste so wel to lyve,

That dulnesse was of her adrad.

She nas to sobre ne to glad;

In alle thynges more mesure

Had never, I trowe, creature. (878–882)

Like many other passages that define her attributes, this excerpt places White perfectly in the middle of two extremes. Here, she is set appropriately distant from the two opposing poles of solemnity and cheerfulness and has obtained a perfect balance “in alle thynges”. Essentially, if any human could successfully take the middle path in every decision, it would be Blanche, at least according to the Black Knight.

Just by glancing at two lines from the prologue of *The Legend of Good Women* – “for vertu is the mene, / As Etik seith; in swich maner I mene” (“The Legend of Good Women” F165-166) – it appears that Chaucer was fairly well acquainted with Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, or at least Book II, which is primarily concerned with virtues, i.e., certain “dispositions engendered in us through practice or habituation” (Crisp xv; Aristotle II). If not encountered directly, the ideas from *Nicomachean Ethics* would have been known to the average Medieval reader through various theological works, most notably St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Sententia libri Ethicorum* (Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum [Editio Leonina] / Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*). Aquinas’

commentary “exercised a considerable influence in the later Middle Ages” and “delivers a thorough analysis of the structure of Aristotle’s text...[and elucidates] its meaning (the *intentio auctoris*) as clearly as possible” (Müller 148–49). In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines virtue as a mean between deficiency and excess²:

...a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason – the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it...in respect of its essence and the definition of its substance, virtue is a mean, while with regard to what is best and good it is an extreme. (Aristotle II:6 1107a)

One who has obtained this mean – and will therefore “accept the right things, and in the right way, and likewise reject them” regardless of whether they are in private or public; if they are interacting with family or a complete stranger – ultimately is and does things that are virtuous (Aristotle IV:6 1126b). Aristotle expresses difficulty in giving this state of being a proper name, “but it seems most like friendship; for the person corresponding to the mean state is the sort we mean when we talk of a good friend” (IV:6 1126b). Although White is the object of the Black Knight’s romantic desires, she is often described as possessing a similarly universal friendliness that is grounded in virtue,

So frendly, and so wel ygrounded,

Up al resoun so wel yfounded,

² Aquinas is even more direct: “Moral virtue, therefore, is a kind of middle course and aims at the mean.” (Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum [Editio Leonina] / Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* L6 [317]).

And so tretable to alle goode...

...ther was never yet through hir tonge

Man ne woman gretly harmed;

As for her, was al harm hyd –

Ne lasse flaterynge in hir word,

That purely hir symple record

Was founde as trewe as any bond

Or trouthe of any mannes hond;

Ne chide she koude never a del;

That knoweth al the world ful wel.

(“The Book of the Duchess” 921–923, 930–938)

Initially, one might conclude that the qualities mentioned here are confined to the public as they define social exchanges, rather than the internal decision-making processes that might result in them. If instead one considers Chaucer’s construction of White as influenced by *Nicomachean Ethics*, the benevolence of White’s tongue is no superficial act that could be achieved by just anyone. It is because White is innately “so wel yfounded, / And so tretable to alle goode” in the first place that she is capable of treating others without any harm or deception. If White is truly molded by the goddess Nature as the Black Knight says and as “hir chef patron of beaute, / And chef ensample of al hir werk” could not possibly contain a single “wikked synge” in her face, then her public demeanor and social interactions function as the proof as well as the source of such

ideals. With a “symple record” that is always achieved, White’s promises are as good as made the moment they are said. Likewise, her moral character is the perfect mean that her physical beauty represents – and vice versa.

White is more clearly directly depicted than any other character in this story, and yet she is never actually present. Similarly, Fortune is given almost as much description, despite her lack of presence as well. Fortune is a catalyst: she is what leads the Black Knight to his lady (“The Book of the Duchess” 811), as well as the one who takes away his “fers”, causing the grief he describes at the beginning of his conversation with the dreamer (654).

Like a shadow giving depth to an object bathed in light, Fortune presents an inversion of White’s qualities that adds dimension to the Black Knight’s grief. If White’s qualities embody the perfect mean, then Fortune is undoubtedly shaped by an opposite:

The trayteresse fals and ful of gyle,

That al behoteth and nothing halt,

She goth upright and yet she halt,

That baggeth foule and loketh faire,

The dispitouse debonaire

That skorneth many a creature!

An ydole of fals portrayture (620–626)

In these first lines describing Fortune, the Black Knight creates a contrast to White’s manner and demeanor, relying on polar opposites to generate a sense of imbalance and reversal in place of a

perfect mean. A clear opposition is achieved between the two, and yet Fortune's descriptions never seem to take on a fully symmetrical counterbalance to White's. The Black Knight claims that Nature has made White's eyes "opene by mesure / And close" which would provide an even contradiction with how Fortune "baggeth foule", but the Black Knight prevents such evenness within that same line by adding that Fortune "loketh faire" (872–873). Additionally, Fortune may, unlike White, be a "dispitouse" debonaire, but she is still a debonaire in the first place, which is a word frequently used to describe White. With phrases like "al behoteth and nothing halt" and "goth upright and yet she halt", Fortune is defined by a structure that mirrors itself; its fragmented reflections reject the possibility of maintaining the kind of balance present in White's perfectly molded face. Thus, Fortune is not made to be simply an opposite to White, but instead rejects the reality of White's form by evading even a potential for reaching the golden mean altogether.

If the mean of virtue is achieved by avoiding a certain deficiency and excess, then denying any notion of the mean implies removing its potential to be reached. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes:

But not every action or feeling admits of a mean. For some have names immediately connected with depravity, such as spite, shamelessness, envy, and, among actions, adultery, theft, homicide. All these, and others like them, are so called because they themselves, and not their excesses or deficiencies, are bad. In their case, then, one can never hit the mark, but always misses... However they are done, one misses the mark, because, generally speaking, there is neither a mean of excess or deficiency, nor an excess or deficiency of a mean. (Aristotle II:6 1107a)

The Black Knight remains trapped in the fragmented reflections of Fortune, perceiving many vastly different figures in her place. Therefore, if the Black Knight could add Fortune to that list of names immediately connected with depravity, he would feel quite justified in doing so. After all, she lives beyond the scope of “feyth, lawe, or mesure”, untethered by any religious, legal, or even natural kind of order (“The Book of the Duchess” 632). To the Black Knight, when faced by such a “false thef” who “seemeth oon and ys not soo”, the prospect of having to compete against her in a game of chess would surely cause him to miss the mark – as Aristotle says – as this view of Fortune denies a mark to be reached in the first place (650, 649).

If ever there was a perfect mark, it would undoubtedly be found in White’s stare. Although every part of White’s body is endowed with a certain perfection, it is her eyes that give her power. “No maner counseyl but at hir lok,” the Black Knight says,

and at myn herte; for-why hir eyen

So gladly, I trow, myn herte seyden

That purely tho myn owne thoght

Seyde hit were beter serve hir for noght

Than with another to be wel. (840, 841–845)

In this passage, White’s gaze is described as though it could see directly into the Black Knight’s heart. Her sharp stare has the miraculous ability to humble the object of its vision and causes the Black Knight to submit to this lady’s service even if it means sacrificing more convenient comforts he might have with another person. Unlike when discussing the chess game with Fortune, the

Black Knight demonstrates a certain willingness to ascribe accountability to himself when faced with White, otherwise it would seem strange to describe the submission enforced by White's stare as though freely chosen out of "myn owne thocht".

On closer inspection, White's powerful stare contains a curious overlap with Fortune, despite their supposed inability to complement one another. White's stare seems to be capable of cleansing away sins of the past and generating submission in the hearts of anyone who happens to be caught in its path:

"But ever, me thocht, hir eyen seyde,

'Be God, my wrathe ys al foryive!' ...

But many oon with hire lok she herte,

And that sat hyr ful lyte at herte,

For she knew nothyng of hir thocht" (876–877, 883–885)

According to the Black Knight, White is somehow unaware of her eyes' power, which helps to further his notion that her glance does not simply enforce submission in the beholder, but instead compels a freely made choice to submit. If the eyes of "many oon" struck by White's powerful stare are opened, then Fortune does just the opposite when "many oon hath she thus yblent / She ys pley of enchauntement" (647). In both lines, the Black Knight evokes paradoxical language with the phrase "many oon" and describes both Fortune's and White's mysterious powers with terms of physical wounding: "yblent" and "herte". Why then must Fortune be "pley of enchauntement", but not White?

The Black Knight describes White's initial look into his eyes as an act of transformation from ignorance to understanding of goodness; transcendence from encountering a human embodiment of virtue, but this awakening also brings about a blindness of the self. "For certes she was, that swete wif," the Black Knight tells the dreamer,

My suffisaunce, my lust, my lyf,

Myn hap, myn hele, and al my blesse,

My worldes welfare, and my goddesse,

And I hooly hires, and everydel. (1037, 1038–1041)

By describing White as everything from his "hap" to "hele", as a "goddesse" dictating his "worldes welfare" to whom he "hooly" belongs, "everydel", the Black Knight endows her with a power and authority over his life to rival Fortune's. When describing the new trend of female deification in the courtly love literature of this time, Austrian writer Emil Lucka offers a clear explanation of what has happened to White:

The position of woman had changed; she was no longer the medium for the satisfaction of the male impulse, or the rearing of children, as in antiquity...transcending humanity, she had been exalted to the heavens and had become a goddess. She was loved and adored with a devotion not of this earth, a devotion which was the sole source of all things lofty and good; she had become the savior of humanity and queen of the universe. (Lucka 130)

Surely, then, Chaucer is tapping into a rich literary tradition of approaching the feminine love interest with spiritual devotion, and yet, it is difficult to leave aside troubling implications that emerge here. As Lucka states of the new idyllic woman, White has been transformed into a "savior

of humanity” – at least for the Black Knight – therefore responsible all the events or “hap” that befall the universe. In other words, White is both the supreme authority over the events in the Black Knight’s life as well as his main life support. At the same time, she is still in reality only a mortal just as capable of altering Providence as the Black Knight. If she is so precious to the Black Knight, that must warrant her protection and safety; however, the Black Knight is blind to any external realities – including risk of danger – that fall beyond his White-focused purview.

Although one is treated with disgust and the other with adoration, White and Fortune are just different sides of the same coin formed out of the Black Knight’s ignorance. To both, the Black Knight endows a sense of complete dominion over life, and at the same time insists on controlling the outcomes supposedly dictated solely by each woman. As the following chapter will examine, this is the same mistake Boece makes by insisting that the petty, fluctuating interests of Fortune have total control over the events of life, to which Lady Philosophy replies,

Yif thou wilt writen a lawe of wendynge and of duellynge to Fortune, whiche that thou hast chosen frely to ben thi lady, artow nat wrongful in that, and makest Fortune wroth and aspre by thyn inpacience? And yit thou mayst nat chaungen hir. (“Boece” II:Prosa 1, 95–101)

Maybe if Lady Philosophy could have given this same response to the Black Knight, he would not devote himself to his fers while remaining ignorant to what happens on the other squares of the chess board. This is not to imply that White’s death must have been the Black Knight’s fault, but instead it may be argued that the deification of the courtly love interest holds the same consequences as does blaming Fortune for all difficulties in life. As Bolens and Taylor write, “the Black Knight describes his wife White as his fers in a game against female Fortune, though that

same Fortune first brought him into White's presence and, therefore, into loving her", which highlights the dual endowment of Providential control divided between both women (Bolens and Taylor 327). The Black Knight sees White as the source of all benefits and Fortune as responsible for miseries, and by doing so ignores his role as an agent with free will, just as he fails to realize that by not "protecting his fers, his fers cannot protect him from being mated...lamenting the means and not the end of his combat with Fortune" without accepting that the lamented means are his own responsibility (328).

2.3 Conclusion

While the Black Knight's view of Fortune renders himself as powerless as the pawn offered up as sacrifice in a game of chess, this is merely the result of his futility and despair after experiencing great loss. Going over passages from *Duchess*, one should consider the grandmaster's approach to defeat in a chess game, which begins with his own mistakes and not a condemnation of the opponent. Far from being a grandmaster, the Black Knight makes a rookie mistake by forgetting everything else except his queen when making decisions. Like those who put their whole strategy on the shoulders of the queen, the Black Knight refuses to understand that the game can still go on once she has been lost. In the end, we are speaking of a woman, not a small object to be manipulated in a board game, and yet the Black Knight seems to have a hard time keeping track of which is which. To him, the world is just as checkered with blacks and whites as the chess board: life is viewed with a white lens when with his lady and darkened when Fortune arrives. However, these are just different approaches to the same world, whose joys and sorrows under the grand plan of Providence can never stay fixed forever.

Chapter 3: Boece

3.1 Introduction

Oftentimes, it seems we are likely to make the same mistake as the Black Knight when we choose to attribute great benefit or success to some higher being or fate, while the negatives are purely the fault of bad luck. Accepting either that good and bad situations are equally bound to some Providential plan beyond our control or that they are primarily owed to our own choices and actions would not seem implausible in comparison. However, accepting that both are equally true would perhaps seem too illogical an approach to life. How can one truly be responsible for anything that happens when it was already preordained? This question is one that lies under the surface of the Black Knight's confused state of peril; it is clearly one Chaucer must have felt strongly about, but he is by no means the first to do so.

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius enjoyed many luxuries atop Fortune's wheel as a successful consul of the Roman Empire, a fact that only seemed to make his sudden fall from joy all the more bitter after imprisonment over defending the Senate's rights against the ruler of Rome (Hanna and Lawler 395). Awaiting his execution, Boethius produced several treatises on theological and philosophical works, among which the *Consolation of Philosophy* proved to be greatly influential after his death (Boethius). In this text, the imprisoned Boethius has a dialogue with a constructed personification of philosophy, "who argues that despite all appearances to the contrary, God does in fact exercise control over the world through providential ordering" (Cooper, "Unhap, Misadventure, Infortune" 16).

3.2 Bringing Boethius into the English Language: Chaucer's Translation

Roughly eight centuries later, during Chaucer's time, Boethius had become so well established as a staple of philosophical writing "that we might be tempted to paraphrase Whitehead's famous dictum and declare mediaeval philosophy to consist in a series of glosses on Boethius" (King 23). With this in mind, it is no surprise that Chaucer incorporates Boethian ideas into his own writing. However, Chaucer's decision to translate the *Consolation* in its entirety into Middle English demonstrates an unusual level of interest in Boethius' work. Samuel Johnson once wrote in *The Idler* in 1759:

Chaucer, who is generally considered as the father of our poetry, has left a version of Boethius on the Comforts of Philosophy, the book which seems to have been the favourite of the middle ages, which had been translated into Saxon by King Alfred, and illustrated with a copious comment ascribed to Aquinas. It may be supposed that Chaucer would apply more than common attention to an author of so much celebrity, yet he has attempted nothing higher than a version strictly literal, and has degraded the poetical parts to prose, that the constraint of versification might not obstruct his zeal for fidelity. (Johnson)

Indeed, Chaucer's translation of the *Consolation*, entitled *Boece*, is notably literal in its approach compared to his translations of other texts, and yet Chaucer's own views may not be quite as absent as Johnson has assumed. *Boece* is not only a literal translation that has "degraded the poetical parts to prose" but a spectacular linguistic endeavor of the English language.

In the *Consolation*, vocabulary is constantly situated within the context of Providence, with ideas related to fortune and chance finding conflict in the agency afforded by free will. Chaucer seeks "not merely to translate Boethius accurately, but to fuse with it, in an effort to provide a

definitive guide to the work, both Jean de Meun's French translation and the Latin commentary tradition" (Hanna and Lawler 396). Applying a rigorous scrutiny to the contemporary French vocabulary of Jean de Meun's translation while also seeking "to render the Latin sense faithfully", Chaucer's final product yields a useful linguistic framework for the language of fate (Hanna and Lawler 397). For instance, Helen Cooper observes that

'Fortune' is the term of Chaucer's that is least naturalized. It entered the language around 1300, so it was not new, but most of his usages of the word carry a strong sense of personification, of the goddess Fortuna: she is an active agent, not a signifier for a random event... The great majority of those usages occur in just two texts – the *Boece*, where it has some claim to be the principal subject, and the 'Monk's Tale'...(Cooper, "Unhap, Misadventure, Infortune" 19)

As the following examination of passages from *Boece* related to Fortune and Providence will reveal, the same strange figure who ravages the Earth with chaotic instability according to the Black Knight is present in Boece's dialogue with Lady Philosophy.³ In fact, the same Providential issues that have surfaced in *Duchess* are what come to light in *Boece*. However, Lady Philosophy's rebuttal to Boece's Black Knight-esque slandering of Fortune confronts readers with a reality the Black Knight could not quite seem to grasp in his own story.

3.3 Fortune and Providence, According to Boece

Boece brings Providence directly into the picture, using God's perfect governance of the heavens as a point of contrast to Earth, which is instead ruled by the fickle whims of Fortune. In

³ I use unitalicized Boece to refer to the main character of Chaucer's *Boece*, and not to the historical Boethius.

Book I, Metrum 5, Boece offers a view of how the world works that reflects struggle of interpreting Providence in a life of free will:

O thou, what so evere thou be that knytttest alle boondes of thynges, loke on this wrecchide erthes. We men, that ben nought a foul partie, but a fair partie of so greet a werk, we ben turmented in this see of fortune. Thou governour, withdraughe and restreyne the ravyschyng flodes, and fasten and ferme this erthes stable with thilke boond by which thou governest the hevne that is so large. (Chaucer, “Boece” I:Metrum 5, 49–58)

Firstly, Boece establishes a glorious and praiseworthy picture of God, or at least “what so evere” could be powerful enough to create Divine Providence, the knitted bonds of all things. This is held in direct contrast to the Earth, which, despite also supposedly being created by God, is a “wrecchide” place. Boece defines humanity not as the cause for this place’s wretchedness, but instead as the “fair” victims of it; all in all, this is Fortune’s wrongdoing. However, this view of the world does not entirely make sense, which is why Boece finds himself questioning how a God so good and powerful could let Earth remain so chaotic at the hands of Fortune.

To Boece, Fortune is a punishing force that lacks any sense of discrimination. She is “that anyous peyne, that scholde duweliche punysche felons, punyssheth innocentz; and of wiklide maneres sitten in heie chayeres” (“Boece” I:Metrum 5, 35–38). If this is true, then it would naturally follow that Boece resents Fortune as the source of his own imprisonment. While being a victim of Fortune on one of her bad days seems painful enough, it is the distinct notion of unfairness that torments Boece the most. “I se that goode men [lien] overthrowen for drede of my peril,” Boece says, “and every luxurious turmentour dar doon alle felonye unpunysschyd, and ben excited therto by yiftes” (I:Prosa 4, 310–313). Surely, as Boece is quick to point out, this must be

the work of Fortune, so why does God allow “that slydyng Fortune turneth so grete enterchaungynges of thynges” (I:Metrum 5, 34–35)?

Chaucer senses a logic of cruelty and injustice in the random events of life, such as that which Boece laments when describing illogical and unjust movements of Fortune’s wheel. “But certes, to the harmes that I have,” Boece tells Lady Philosophy,

ther bytideth yit this encrees of harm, that the gessynge and the jugement of moche folk ne loken nothyng to the desertes of thynges, but oonly to the aventure of fortune; and jugen that oonly swiche thynges ben purveyed of God, whiche that temporel welefulnesse commendeth. (“Boece” I:Prosa 4, 281–288)

As part of a lengthy description of injustices Boece has recently become tormented by, this passage touches on a few key ideas, seemingly without Boece even realizing it. According to Cooper, the “mismatch between desert and outcome”, or what Boece calls the “aventure of fortune” that is prioritized over “the desertes of thynges”, allows for an emphasis of “the chance element of the concept [of Fortune] in moral terms” (Cooper, “Unhap, Misadventure, Infortune” 20). Chaucer’s use of “aventure” reflects a connection between harm and randomness that is by no means isolated to *Boece*, as discovered by Cooper’s overview of the term throughout all of Chaucer’s texts. According to her, “aventure”

can be specified as positive (‘good aventure’), but it frequently connotes something more threatening. ‘In aventure’ means ‘in jeopardy’, and jeopardy implies a bad outcome. Its accompanying adjectives include perilous, ‘unsely’ and cruel. It often collocates with hap, destiny or Fortune, with all the ill omen so often implied by those. (Cooper, “Unhap, Misadventure, Infortune” 22)

Therefore, Boece appears to be ascribing a threatening nature to the random fluctuations of life, casting an illogical conception of justice to fortune in turn. At the same time, Boece does “nothing to remove the sense of inevitability, that those who are at the top of the wheel, or who count themselves happy, are bound to suffer”, even going as far as to hint a Providential order at play regarding that which “temporel wefulnessse commendeth” (Cooper, “Unhap, Misadventure, Infortune” 20).

Ultimately, Fortune – according to Boece – lives under the threads of Divine Providence that have been woven together by God, and yet she is still considered the supreme authority of Earthly events. Her decisions contradict a natural logic of justice, as the wicked are often rewarded while the fair ones are punished. The ever-mutable Fortune contradicts the steadfastness of God, despite supposedly existing under his reign, and because of this God, too, has perhaps contradicted His own moral logic by allowing Fortune to deny Earth the same stability as Heaven. Indeed, as Boece asks God, “why suffrestow that slydyng Fortune turneth so grete enterchaungynges of thynges?” (Chaucer, “Boece” I:Metrum 5, 34–35).

3.4 Lady Philosophy’s Revelation

Lady Philosophy has an answer, but it’s not the one Boece probably wanted to hear. Boece’s anxieties may be “shared with everyone who has ever felt a sense of unfairness at what is happening to them”, but Lady Philosophy’s status as “a personification rather than a person,” allows her the level of “objectivity and authority” to act as a powerful counterpoint to such anxieties (Cooper, “Unhap, Misadventure, Infortune” 16). As Lady Philosophy is quick to point out, Boece can easily recall God as “the bygynning of al”, and yet when asked what the end of all things is, Boece simply can’t remember (Chaucer, “Boece” I:Prosa 6, 45). “Thow hast foryeten by whiche governmentz the werld is governed,” she tells Boece, “forthy weenestow that thise

mutaciouns of fortunes fleten withouten governour” (I:Prosa 6, 79–83). Fortune, that “merveylous monster” whose wheel turns unpredictably in every direction in Boece’s eyes (II:Prosa 1, 16), is suddenly revealed to have a definite stability:

Thou wenest that Fortune be chaunged ayeys the; but thow wenest wrong (yif thou that wene): alway tho ben hir maneres. Sche hath rather kept, as to the-ward, hir propre stableness in the chaungynge of hirself. (“Boece” II:Prosa 1, 50–55)

According to what Lady Philosophy is describing here, Fortune’s source of change is also a source of stability, and this paradoxical movement has always “ben hir maneres”, perhaps tracing back to God as the beginning of all things. The contradictory identity the Black Knight had described of Fortune in *Duchess* – “she goth upryght and yet she halt” – is echoed here by Lady Philosophy; however, the events she brings about are no longer random fluctuations (“The Book of the Duchess” 621).

Instead, Fortune is proven by Lady Philosophy to truly reflect Providence, and her changes are no longer mere outcomes of chance. “What other thyng is flyttynge Fortune but a maner schewynge of wrecchidnesse that is to comen?” Lady Philosophy asks Boece (“Boece” II:Prosa 1, 81–83), and harkens back to that previously unanswered question – what is the end of all things? – when she goes on to say,

Wisdom loketh and mesureth the ende of thynges. And the same chaungynge from oon into another (that is to seyn, fro adversite into prosperite) maketh that the manaces of Fortune ne ben nat for to dreden, nor the flaterynges of hir to ben desired. (II:Prosa 1, 85–91)

Mankind is limited to looking at the present world before his eyes, while wisdom observes the full picture, from beginning to end. If Fortune is a manner of showing the “wrecchidnesse that is to

comen”, and wisdom also measures what is to come, then these two forces must be aligned. Unlike Boece, who is clouded by his current state of misfortune, Lady Philosophy is able to see how Fortune functions in the big picture. After all, what is life, if not a series of shifts from adversity to prosperity and vice versa? By only seeing what is “byforn the eighen of a man”, Boece is restricted to only finding in Fortune something to dread or desire.

Most importantly, as Lady Philosophy frequently points out, in doing so Boece becomes “confounded with foryeting of” himself as a human being with free will (I:Prosa 6, 74). Earlier, Lady Philosophy tells Boece “no sodeyn mutacioun ne bytideth noight withouten a manere chaungynge of corages”, a curious phrase that becomes clearer when considering what has now been established about Fortune (II:Prosa 1, 32–34). Fortune’s mutations at this point have been not rejected, but redefined as a stable organization of fluctuations, and when viewing them with wisdom that allows one to see beyond the present, such transmutations are part of a larger framework that serves the end of all things. Therefore, as Lady Philosophy is hinting, these changes are not really “sodeyn”, but must have been set in place by a “manere chaungynge of corages”. Lady Philosophy later tells Boece that blaming Fortune for wretched situations and praising her for joyful ones – seeing only what is before him – is a freely made choice and not an inevitable view of the truth.

For yif thow wilt written a lawe of wendynge and of duellynge to Fortune, whiche that thow hast chosen frely to ben thi lady, artow nat wrongful in that, and makest Fortune wroth and aspre by thyn inpacience? And yit those mayst nat chaungen hir. (II:Prosa 1, 95–101)

As Lady Philosophy has here described, Boece's understanding of Fortune is only a means of forgetting his responsibility as a free-willed creature over the changing of his "corage". By ignoring this, Boece has "chosen frely" to give Fortune and not himself the power to dictate the course of life. Boece's desire to both be ruled by Fortune and restrict her to a peaceful stability is perhaps a reflection of the deeper struggle to make sense of free will in a life dictated by Providence. However, just as the world would no longer be subject to a divine authority if led by free will alone, "Yif Fortune bygan to duelle stable, she cessed thane to ben Fortune" (II:Prosa 1, 113–114). Cooper perhaps puts this most succinctly when she writes:

Divine knowledge does not exclude the possibility of an individual's exercise of free will; true happiness can never be found within the instability of this world; and Fortune is no more than an imperfect intermediary between God and humankind, imperfect not least because mere mortals cannot see past it to the just and righteous workings of the divine order. (Cooper, "Unhap, Misadventure, Infortune" 16)

3.5 Between the Glosses: Tracing Chaucer's Position Behind the *Consolation*

There is much to say regarding free will in *Boece*'s passages on Fortune, but before getting deeper into that topic, Providence's role in this relationship between humanity and Fortune must be established. When Lady Philosophy reverses our understanding of Fortune's movements from instability to a measured stability, she does so with language that Chaucer has tied to Providence in his glosses. Chaucer directly interjects himself into the conversation a little earlier in one of his glosses to say this concerning God's purveyance:

Glose. As thus: that yif a wyght have prosperite, he is a good man and worthy to han that prosperite; and whoso hath adversite, he is a wikkid man, and God hath forsake hym, and

he is worthy to han that adversite. This is the opinyoun of some folk. (“Boece” I:Prosa 4, 288–294)

According to common belief, the events that befall people are a direct reflection of their moral character; in other words, the good and bad things that happen to a person are all a part of God’s justice. This is a view Boece too subscribes to, as his prayer to God in Book I, Metrum 5 beseeches Him to punish the wicked and reward the righteous, and his condemnation of Fortune aligns chance with a threatening lack of justice as the previous section has observed. By holding this concept alongside the idea that humanity lives according to the arbitrary whims of Fortune, Boece is allowing himself to be “confunded”, believing in a world that defies its own basic principles.

In Medieval literature, glossing is a frequent technique of translating terms and concepts likely unfamiliar to the reader into a form that is easier to grasp. For instance, in Book II, Prosa 2, Chaucer glosses the term “*tragedye*”, as “*a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchidnesse*” (70–72). As there is no known record of the term “tragedy” being used in the English language before Chaucer (“Tragedi(e n.”), it is reasonable to assume that his audience would have needed a definition of it, and the one given is useful in providing just that. Like the gloss from Book 1, this gloss of tragedy echoes the sentiment that life can be understood on a macro level as beset by either prosperity or adversity. However, this is not a product of the daily fluctuations in Fortune’s mood, but a *dite*, a dramatic text whose events are limited to words on the page. A written text that contains a narrative is much like Providence in that it can only be experienced from a perspective limited by whatever sentence lays in front of the reader’s eye, and yet the unfolding of its story is by no means accidental or unpredictable.

Returning to the glossing in Book I, Prosa 4, three important things can be deduced from its final sentence: “*This is the opinyoun of some folk*” (“Boece” I:Prosa 4, 293–294). First, this concept of life events acting as reflections of one’s moral character must have been a widely held belief for those of Chaucer’s time, otherwise this glossing would have been inappropriate for its purpose. Second, Chaucer does not believe the line of reasoning he is describing, and in fact appears to distance himself from it. Most glosses are put forward without sources, but this one in particular is given an unusually vague one, “some folk”. Therefore, Chaucer acknowledges that this is a widespread belief without including himself as one of its advocates. Lastly, Chaucer seems to intentionally point to the possibility that this idea is a misconception by explicitly defining it as an “opinyoun”, which is a personal or common belief (“Opinioun”). While what one believes is not necessarily untrue, to describe this glossing as an opinion of a vague *some folk* is hardly painting it as the truth.

Why would Chaucer question the common belief that situations of prosperity and adversity are decided by God as outcomes of moral character? We can’t know for sure, just as we can’t know what made Chaucer want to translate the *Consolation of Philosophy* in the first place. What we do know is that Chaucer read *Consolation*, and cared for it deeply enough to take up the task of translating it into Middle English. We can assume that humans are inclined to believe the way the world should work according to this common belief, even if the world is at the same time rendered unreliable by Fortune’s dominion. However, beyond this page we discover just as Boece discovers from Lady Philosophy that neither of these two conflicting realities is true. Both a belief in some form of Divine Justice on Earth as well as blaming Fortune, rather than the individual or God, as responsible for Earthly disasters are ways of attempting to cope with the futility of being a free-willed individual made to follow the uncontrollable and unknowable map of Divine Providence.

If it were truly the case that the fluctuations between adversity and prosperity are a matter of punishment and reward by God for vices and virtues, then – as Boece is quick to point out in his prayer in Book I, Metrum 5 – the wicked people of the world would not at times undergo prosperity, just as the fair would not be made to suffer. Lady Philosophy tells Boece in Book II, Prosa 1, “Yif thou comittest and betakes thi seyles to the wynd, thow schalt ben shoven, nat thider that thow woldest, but whider that the wynd schouveth the” (“Boece” II:Prosa 1, 101–104). Choosing to commit one’s sails to the wind is a matter of free will, just as choosing to believe the wind will move the way you desire is a choice one is free to make. However, the latter is incorrect, not because it is wrongful, but because it seeks to deny the reality of nature and mankind’s inability to control it. In this case, one could blame Fortune for the wind’s movement, and yet it is not Fortune who made one believe nature will fit one’s plans. When Lady Philosophy describes “chaungynge of corages” as a sign of life changes to come, it is not a question of moral character she is referring to, but really one of belief. Like the person who expects nature to conform to their desire, one who chooses to deny the reality of Providence in the world will feel life’s changes without ever understanding and growing from them. This is why navigating free will under Providence is not a matter of simply knowing right from wrong, but of committing the heart to “the rightful cause of hope to han yit bettere thynges” (II:Prosa 2, 82–83).

Just as Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* intends to “take the narrator beyond the sorrowful and the emotional to the rational,” so too does *Boece*, and by doing so allows us to move “beyond the personal to an understanding of man's place in God's creation” (Reiss, 40). What Chaucer set out to translate is a journey rooted in a poetic experience of suffering from tragic circumstances. It is not any particular art of the Muses that allows for a cathartic relief, but instead the consoling power of reason from an objective mind. Alongside this movement from ignorance

to enlightenment, another arc takes shape in the form of Chaucer's own position at the *Consolation's* margins, wherein anxieties over Earthly instability and mourning over one's futile position under Fortune's dominion are dispelled by Lady Philosophy's intellectual arguments. This is not where Chaucer's journey ends. An investigation of the Providential struggle and the closure afforded by an acceptance of free will allow us to understand how a generic transformation from Platonic dialogue to romantic tragedy can cause readers to fully experience movement beyond the personal and into understanding.

3.6 Conclusion

The insights Lady Philosophy offers Boece regarding his role in a world that has been shaped by Providence appear again and again throughout Chaucer's writing, as many parts of this thesis show. Therefore, this close reading of some crucial passages from *Boece* on the matter yields a useful framework for exploring the way characters in other texts fall short of accepting their own accountability as a free-willing agent in the world, even if that world's events have been thoroughly predetermined. What Lady Philosophy ultimately brings Boece and readers to understand is that the individual who cannot change destiny can still change his attitude and approach to life. Many Boethian scholars describe this conclusion as an implicit call to Christian devotion, which as Megan Murton claims, allows for hope from the "possibility...that God might answer human prayers about particular earthly concerns, or indeed that the things of heaven could intersect with earthly experience in any way" (Murton 318). Although this chapter is more concerned with what *Boece* reasons in terms of Providence and free will, such an implication will be deepened during an examination of *Boece's* presence in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Chapter 4: Troilus and Criseyde

4.1. Introducing *Troilus and Criseyde*: A Brief Overview of Genre and Composition

During the 1380s, Chaucer is thought to have composed three of his most significant works: *Boece*, *The Knight's Tale*, and *Troilus and Criseyde* (Barney, "Introduction: Troilus and Criseyde" 471). This period signals a shift in focus from French to Italian, as Chaucer would have traveled to Italy twice during the previous decade (Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales* 61). All three works are translations, although the degree to which Chaucer takes liberties with the source materials varies from text to text. Most influential for the latter two was the Italian author Boccaccio, whose epic poem, the *Teseida*, had a fundamental role in shaping *The Knight's Tale*, as well as passages in "Anelida and Arcite, the *Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Franklin's Tale*, and possibly the *House of Fame*" (Pratt 598).

The *Teseida* certainly shaped key parts of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's tragic courtly romance set in ancient Troy, but this poem's main source is another work by Boccaccio, *Il Filostrato*. *Filostrato* is "a typical courtly love document", an "essentially sensuous production" that treats love as a "great spiritual force above and beyond the senses" (Kirby 93, 101). The growth of this tradition can be aligned in the Middle Ages with "the spread of the chivalric spirit", as "the chivalric warrior of the twelfth century was not only a brave and worthy knight but a polished gentleman and lover par excellence as well" (Kirby 15). In courtly love poetry, romantic passion is fused with spiritual devotion to create a sense of love as "the source of all virtues and benefits", and typical generic characteristics include "Beauty as the cause of love; the restlessness of the lover; his sighing, fainting, and sleeplessness; his joy at the sight of the lady and his sorrow when they are separated" (Kirby 19–18).

By the fourteenth century, a new interest in historical narratives added complexity to the style of courtly love, with the story of the Trojan War featuring prominently as a setting for romantic narratives. At the time, Boccaccio “stimulated a new tradition” of “taking a small episode or group of episodes from the great chronicles and treating them in elaborate detail”, which would allow him to more deeply “explore nuances of human relations” and “develop moral and philosophical themes” (Barney, “Introduction: Troilus and Criseyde” 471). However, to say that Boccaccio was keenly interested in the history of Troy would be quite an overstatement, as *Filostrato* “deals almost entirely with the amorous doings of the courtly world” (Patterson 207). Contrastingly, Chaucer’s take on the story demonstrates the opposite as his retelling of the *Filostrato* is “extraordinarily diligent in both maintaining the consistency of his classical context and in reminding us of the historical significance of his narrative” (Patterson 206).

For the sake of this chapter, a painfully brief overview of *Troilus and Criseyde* must be made as follows. *Troilus*, a Middle English retelling of an Italian of a twelfth century French courtly love poem by Benoît de Sainte-Maure – *Le Roman de Troie* (de Sainte-Maure) – manages to fuse various poetic and historical sources together, while at the same time imbibing them with a uniquely Boethian outlook. The story of *Troilus* is presented to its reader as a mere retelling of the historical narrative of the Trojan War, “yet the fictions surrounding the representation of translation in *Troilus* complicate attempts to get back to authentic historical knowledge” (Gaston 260). The language and tropes of courtly love have an undeniable presence here, but to simply describe *Troilus* as a courtly romance would deny the significance of its highly philosophical approach to tragedy informed by *Boece*. As Kara Gaston writes,

The poem's representation of love reflects its contact with other sources and its attempts to represent ancient perspectives, producing an unstable, shifting term at the poem's conceptual center. (Gaston 283)

Such contact with a wide variety of different voices across time and space, as Gaston points out, makes *Troilus* a confusing work to pin down, and yet it is because of this fusion that Chaucer can make the scattered perceptions of others fully his own. With the additional influence of the *Consolation*, Chaucer can transcend the literary confines of his predecessors and transform Troilus' pitiful love and loss of Criseyde into a powerful spiritual awakening for his reader in its final passages.

4.2 The Role of Providence in *Troilus and Criseyde*

The story of *Troilus*' authorship holds a significant parallel to the larger struggle of accepting free will under Providence. In "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*", Morton Bloomfield writes,

As God cannot violate His own rationality, Chaucer cannot violate his data. Bound by his self-imposed task of historian, he both implies and says he cannot do other than report his tale...A final shift of depth and distance, however, takes place at the end...Here free will and predestination, human dignity and human pettiness, joy and sorrow, in short all human and terrestrial contradictions, are reconciled in the pattern of all reconciliation. (Bloomfield 15, 26)

Troilus and Criseyde is a story constantly framed by the human struggle with Providence that can only be relieved by a widening of perspective. As Bloomfield mentions, everything from the narrator's statement of purpose "t'endite / thise woful verse, that wepen as I write" in the poem's

first lines to a description of God as “Uncircumscrip, and al maist circumscribe” in its closing acknowledges its predetermined path. Especially in situations in which *Troilus*’ narrator speaks directly to the reader, one can perceive a connection between following the set course of a narrative as its reader and living out the ever-unfolding plan of Providence as a human being. Just as Boece comes to understand cycles of adversity and prosperity as inevitable movements of the life experience, the narrator of *Troilus* must come to terms with such unchangeable tragedy in the story he writes.

This arc of transformation from ignorance to revelation can be traced within the narrative of *Troilus* in various ways. In the following sections, an attempt will be made to examine various interactions between the characters of *Troilus* and Providence. First, the role of prediction in three different forms will be explored to understand the unique ways characters follow a course that has been already laid out in the cosmos. Afterwards, a parallel between Troilus and the Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess* will be established in order to understand how Boethian concerns with Providence at play in *Duchess* come to the surface in *Troilus*. Finally, a deep examination of Troilus’ ascension at the end of Book V, and the critical confusion surrounding it, will be addressed. A brief look at the poem “Fortune” in light of Troilus’ ascension will then reveal the Providential thread that Chaucer has spun across all the narratives explored in this dissertation.

4.3. *Troilus and Criseyde*: Prediction in Three Forms

Prediction is a recurring concept of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and yet the prophecies voiced throughout are rarely heeded. In Book I, for instance, Troilus unknowingly delivers his own prophecy when scolding lovers to his companions. There are three kinds of predictions in *Troilus*:

1. Narratorial foreshadowing,

2. Self-fulfilling prophecy, and

3. Supernatural portents.

All three ultimately belong to the master plan set forth by Divine Providence, and yet the way each form of prediction does so is unique. With each type of prophecy also can be established a particular level of interpretation. Narratorial predictions and their interpretation belong solely to the narrator and reader, whereas the self-fulfilled prophecy includes the story's actual characters as well. The final form of prediction, the supernatural, is the most ambiguous. It is present to be interpreted by the narrator, reader, and even the characters, but correct interpretation is never explicitly made clear; not, at least, until it is too late to benefit from knowing what plot of Providence the prophecy reveals.

4.3.1 Narratorial Foreshadowing

The narrator's warnings are the least ambiguous. In the beginning of Book IV, he writes

[Fortune] caste [Troilus] clene out of his lady grace,

And on hire whiel she sette up Diomedede...

...For how Criseyde Troilus forsook –

Or at the leeste, how that she was unkynde –

Moot hennesforth ben matere of my book,

As written folk thorough which it is in mynde.

(Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde" IV, 10–11, 15–18)

At this point, there has not even been a conversation about the possibility of releasing Criseyde to the Greek camp in exchange for Antenor, let alone an introduction to Diomedes, and yet the narrator is already preparing the reader for these events. Although he holds the pen, the narrator –

at least according to what he says – cannot determine what happens to Troilus, as that is apparently Fortune’s job. Even if the narrator’s heart “gynneth blede”; even if his pen “quaketh for drede of that [he must] endite”, there is still no question of this: “I *moste* endite” (I, 12, 15). Just as the story of a person’s life may be understood as written by God in the grand scheme of Divine Providence, this painful tale belongs to those “folk” who have already determined its narrative. If the original tale being retold by the narrator is, therefore, analogous to Providence, then the narrator’s thorough understanding of future events means that his foreshadowing is much more than a framing device or shift in mood. Ultimately, this is an authentic prophecy about characters who can never hear it, for an audience that can do nothing to change it.

4.3.2. *Self-fulfilling Prophecy*

While one may assume the narrator’s prophecies are innately self-fulfilling, this is only true insofar as he puts those words onto the page. In terms of the actual narrative, however, the narrator has no actual role in the story and is incapable of directly intervening. Therefore, the group of predictions classified as self-fulfilling are only the generalizations, predictions, and plots made by *Troilus*’ characters that – knowingly or unknowingly – eventually become true of the characters themselves.⁴ Book I contains examples of both the actively realized as well as the unwittingly pursued prophecies in the predictions of Calchas and Troilus. In the former’s case, the prophecy relates to the city of Troy, rather than the story of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Calchas’ direct intervention in the Trojan War is neither explicitly stated nor able to be pieced together until much

⁴ I do not mean prophecies that cause themselves to be fulfilled, but rather the ones that are fulfilled in those who announce them.

later in the book. In Troilus' case, the scathing comments he makes regarding lovers is so immediately applied to himself that his lack of awareness becomes almost comical.

4.3.2.1 Self-fulfilling Prophecy: Active

Unlike the Calchas in older accounts of the Trojan War narrative, the Calchas present in this Medieval retelling is established as a traitor to his people. Originally, Calchas was a Greek – the son of Thestor – but in later sources Calchas is changed to a Trojan. For example, an 8th century text from Dares Phrygius claims that Calchas is present at Delphi to consult the oracle of Apollo on behalf of his people, the Phrygians. To this, Apollo responds by urging him to abandon Troy as the Trojans will be unsuccessful (Iscanus Book 4, lines 265–273). In *Troilus*, Calchas is again described as “dwellynge” in the city of Troy only here he does not appear to leave in order to learn the future from Apollo, relying on his own “calkulynge” rather than an intermediary in the form of an oracle (Chaucer, “Troilus and Criseyde” I, 65, 71). Although the knowledge Calchas receives is explicitly given by Apollo, the actual nature of his vision is considerably vague:

So whan this Calkas knew by calkulynge,
 And ek by answer of this Appollo,
 That Grekes sholden swich a peple brynge,
 Thorough which that Troie moste ben fordo,
 He caste anon out of the town to go;
 For wel wiste he by sort that Troye sholde
 Destroyed ben, ye, wolde whoso nolde. (I, 71–77)

Although the reader is told that Calchas has been contacted by Apollo “by sort” – drawing lots of some kind – and learns that Troy “moste ben fordo”, nothing is said of how exactly Troy’s

destruction will come to be. The last line emphasizes how Troy's destruction is to occur regardless of whoever wants or doesn't want it to, and while this adds to the validity of Calchas' prophecy, it does so in a rather unusual way. Troy's fate is already undeniably clear without saying "wolde whoso nolde", and as it would be rather illogical to assume a prediction from a deity himself could be changeable, it therefore seems somewhat self-evident that "Troye sholde / Destroyed ben, ye, wolde whoso nolde". On the other hand, the phrase works quite effectively as a rationalization for abandoning one's people without even informing them of their approaching end.

This is not to say those few words can definitely be ascribed to Calchas' thought process at the moment of his betrayal, however it does bring attention to the notion that Calchas could have actively advanced Troy's fate by sharing nothing of his prophecy with a single person in the city. In the following lines, Calchas' responsibility is further established:

Gret rumour gan, whan it was first aspied
 Thorough al the town, and generaly was spoken,
 That Calkas traitour fled was and allied
 With hem of Grece, and casten to be wroken
 On hym that falsly hadde his feith so broken...
 ...Now hadde Calkas left in this meschaunce,
 Al unwist of this false and wikkid dede,
 His doughter. (I, 85–89, 92–94)

From these lines, two points are made clear. First, the people of Troy suspect Calchas' treachery, but have only rumors to rely on as proof. It is likely then that the Trojans are led by Calchas' lack of explanation to be both unaware of the important details of his prophecy and to also believe that

it must be based in some falsehood, rather than divine insight from Apollo. Because of this, Calchas' treachery might be more than a hasty decision in light of a prediction that will come true "wolde whoso nolde", as it inspires mistrust of information that Calchas knows is true. Second, not even his own daughter, Criseyde, has any idea of what Apollo has shown Calchas. Perhaps it is reasonable to assume the same degree of oversight causing Calchas to forget bringing his daughter with him to the Greeks – and away from harm at the hands of Troy – may have also caused him to overlook sharing even vague details of his crucial information with her.

In Book IV, Calchas addresses the Greek lords negotiating with Troy by offering up the revered and wise counselor, Antenor, in exchange for Criseyde. According to Calchas here, he had "tolde wel" of Troy's oncoming destruction before running away (IV, 75). Additionally, Calchas states, "On peril of my lif, I shal nat lye; / Appollo hath me told it faithfully" regarding his prophecy (IV, 113–114). As the aforementioned lines from Book I hint, it is unlikely the people of Troy would be willing at this point to suddenly believe what they had previously deemed a false reason to doubt Troy's success. At the same time, detailing the perils foreseen to befall the city housing his daughter justify the emotional desire to "hire have right soone", since this prediction has made the exchange a matter of "now or never" (IV, 102, 101). By keeping the focus on Criseyde and his urgent desire to save her from potential destruction – even if the Trojans don't believe the prediction – Antenor's selection is overlooked. Chaucer hints at how Antenor eventually commits an act of betrayal to Troy upon his return, as he "brought hem to meschaunce / For he was after traitour to the town", (IV, 203–204). Calchas' prophecy ultimately will be made true, but not without his own involvement in the matter.

4.3.2.2 Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Blind

Regarding the second kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, one that is made with a complete lack of awareness, one can return to Book I for a closer examination of Troilus' first direct lines of dialogue. Here, Troilus manages to accurately lay out the conditions of his own tragic fate, and by doing so also sets it in motion. After describing the widowed and abandoned Criseyde, the reader is finally introduced to Troilus, who is leading "his yonge knyghtes" around the city (I, 184). Troilus preaches to his young knights in disdain of love:

I have herd told, pardieux, of your lyvyng,

Ye lovers, and youre lewed observaunces,

And which a labour folk han in wynnyng

Of love, and in the keypyng which doutances;

And whan youre prey is lost, woo and penaunces.

O veray fooles, nyce and blynde be ye!

Ther nys nat oon kan war by other be. (I, 197–203)

The last line in particular, which asserts a sense of doubt over one's ability to learn from the mistakes or misfortunes of another, seems to fashion out of its own irony a trap for Troilus that renders him "nyce and blynde" to the danger that awaits him in just a few more lines. It seems that his process of leading young knights around to be disparaged at any signs of romantic attraction to passing ladies is something Troilus is "wont" to do, and yet, as the last line states, he himself considers this lesson futile in avoiding love's snare (I, 183). Therefore, it seems Troilus knows he

puts himself in danger by looking out for women that “lete his eighen baiten”, and considers himself safe from falling in love with them because he understands what will happen if he does, but also clearly believes that this form of protection is actually useless (I, 192). While Troilus is not seemingly aware that he is ascribing a prophecy of love and loss to himself, that is exactly what he is doing. When Troilus then foolishly turns to his men to say “Loo! Is that naught wisely spoken?”, it is no surprise that his ignorant confidence is loud enough to irritate the God of Love into shooting his arrow in response (I, 205).

In particular, the prophecy’s condition that its agents enact its plan unknowingly is what ensures Troilus’ struggle will consistently reflect a greater feud between free will and Providence. Interestingly enough, it is Pandarus who first hints at this struggle in Book I during an exchange with a Fortune-scorning Troilus that is highly reminiscent of Lady Philosophy’s dialogue with Boece:

Woost thow nat wel that Fortune is commune
 To everi manere wight in som degree?
 And yet thow hast this comfort, lo, parde,
 That, as hire joies moten overgon,
 So mote hire sorwes passen everechon.
 For if hire whiel stynte any thyng to torne,
 Than cessed she Fortune anon soon to be. (I, 841–849)

Pandarus here is consoling Troilus in a similar way as Lady Philosophy had done with Boece in Book II of *Boece*, reminding us that the fluctuations from adversity to prosperity and vice versa are a fact of life. Where Pandarus departs from Lady Philosophy is in the case of responsibility.

These same ideas in *Boece* bring the melancholic prisoner out of self-pity and into a state of hope and accountability as a being gifted with free will, even in a world defined by Providence. In this passage, however, Pandarus is using Lady Philosophy's arguments to galvanize Troilus out of his melancholy not with personal accountability, but instead by making Pandarus the one accountable for what happens. "And therefore wostow what I biseche?" Pandarus asks Troilus after his Boethian moment, "Let be thy wo and tornyng to the grounde...By my wil she sholde al be thyn to-morwe" ("Troilus and Criseyde" I, 855, 856, 861).

In Book III, Pandarus again returns to Lady Philosophy's arguments, this time echoing Chaucer's definition of tragedy in *Boece* alongside a clear allusion to Divine Providence. While in Book I, Pandarus' *Boece*-like speech is triggered by Troilus lamenting his current state, this similarly Boethian passage in Book III seems to be inspired by quite the opposite. Troilus thanks Pandarus for bringing himself and Criseyde together when he says "For thorough thyn help I lyve, / Or ells ded hadde I ben many a day" (Book III, 1613-1614). Pandarus' response to such gratitude is not mere acknowledgement, and in fact makes a somewhat unexpected shift from celebration to warning:

...be war of this meschief,
 That, there as thow now brought art in thy blisse,
 That thow thiself ne cause it nat to misse.
 For of fortunes sharpe adversitee
 The worste kynde of infortune is this,
 A man to han ben in prosperitee,
 And it remembren whan it passed is. (III, 1622–1628)

Just as Pandarus had previously encouraged Troilus to find hope in Fortune from a place of despair, he now beseeches Troilus again to look ahead, only from this position of prosperity there is hardly much to hope for. Pandarus aligns that cycle of joy and sorrow he had established as “commune / to everi manere wight” in Book I with the dramatic genre of tragedy, which produces a similar sense of helplessness against Providence as Chaucer had when using his glossing of the term to frame Boece and Lady Philosophy’s conversation. As Pandarus then goes on to cryptically refer to the “wir” that binds “worldly joie”, Providence’s role in shaping the narrative is all the more explicit, and Pandarus’ pieces of advice to Troilus are perhaps an attempt to reverse his previous neglect of the importance of free will (III, 1636).

As Troilus must fulfill his prophecy and do so unwittingly, this advice is proven to fall on deaf ears through Troilus’ subsequent song. Here, Troilus too echoes some of the sentiments and language of *Boece*, replacing Boccaccio’s song with metrum 8 from Book II:⁵

Love, that knetteth lawe of compaignie,
 And couples doth in vertu for to dwelle
 Bynd this acord, that I have told and telle.
 That, that the world with feith which that is stable
 Diverseth so his stowndes concordynge,
 That elementz that ben so discordable
 Holden a bond perpetuely durynge,
 That Phebus mote his rosy day forth brynge,
 And that the mone hath lordship over the nyghtes:

⁵ Not all manuscripts of *Troilus* contain this revision of Troilus’ song. However, a significant number of *Troilus* fragments that have surfaced over the years include the Canticus, either in excerpts or in its entirety (Quinn).

Al this doth Love, ay heried be his myghtes! (III, 1748-1757)

In these lines from Troilus' Canticus in Book III, Troilus picks up on a similar logic to Pandarus when describing Providence: the world, inclined towards chaos at an elemental level, remains steadfast and reliable by a single thread. For Pandarus and Troilus, everything – even the movements of the sun and moon – hangs by a “wir”, echoing Boece's understanding of God as “governour, governynge alle thynges by certein ende...what so evere though be that knytttest alle boondes of thynges” (“Boece” I:Metrum 5, 31–32, 50–51). Thus, Pandarus and Troilus both describe the extent of what Boece also knows of Providence in Book I, Prosa 6 of *Boece*, that “God is bygynnyng of al” (45).

As to the end of all things, however, Troilus may have been too “confounded with foryetyng” of himself to remember, as Lady Philosophy puts it (I:Prosa 6, 74). When describing Providence to Troilus, Pandarus makes his intent clear: “as thow now brought art in thy blisse, / That thiself ne cause it nat to misse” (“Troilus and Criseyde” III, 1623–1624). In his song, Troilus appears to neglect this warning, as his takeaway from the exchange finds the God of Love – rather than himself – to be solely responsible for keeping the fragile balance between harmony and discord:

That, that the se, that gredy is to flowen,
 Constreyneth to a certeyn ende so
 His flodes that so fiersly they ne growen
 To drenchen erthe and al for evere mo;
 And if that Love aught lete his bridel go,
 Al that now loveth asondre sholde lepe,

And lost were al that Love halt now to-hepe. (III, 1758–1764)

According to Troilus, life's fluctuations are bound to the same end as the natural world. Just as Pandarus describes the "wir" binding worldly joy as "brest al day so ofte", Troilus describes a fragile line between adversity and prosperity, (III, 1637). What is absent from Troilus' song is the idea that such fragility warrants a certain level of self-awareness, or a need "to werken with it softe", as Pandarus puts it (III, 1638). Instead, free will – and the responsibility over one's own outcomes that comes with it – appears to be not only unknown to Troilus, but unknowable: "[Love] cerclen hertes alle and faste bynde, / That from his bond no wight the wey out wiste" (III, 1767-1768). Because of this, Troilus is making the same mistake as Boece does in Book II of *Boece* as both assume that not being able to fully see Providence necessarily implies life's events as completely out of the individual's hands, dictated by the whims of Fortune or the God of Love instead. For Troilus, this misunderstanding causes him to "put [his] nekke undir the yok" of Fortune, and as Lady Philosophy asks, "what other thing is flyttynge Fortune but a maner schewyng of wrecchidnesse that is to comen?" ("Boece" II:Prosa 1, 81–83).

4.3.3 *Supernatural Portents of Fate*

Throughout *Troilus*, there are many supernatural portents of fate. These predictions are not given any clear voice, and therefore can often pass unnoticed. When they are noticed, these signs are a source of disturbance for their witnesses, who are incapable of fully understanding their meaning without some kind of interpreter. One such interpreter is the aforementioned Calchas, whose skill in "calkulynge" celestial movements is considered to be a source of foreknowing ("Troilus and Criseyde" I, 71). Jennifer Goodman, has established a useful definition of Nature as an aspect of Providence which is as follows:

Nature remains a power for good in Chaucer's universe, an agent of God representing the force of generation and the order of creation. Nature supplies the innate characteristics with which we are born, our distinctive selves, while fortune provides us with the external trappings of success or failure. . . . Nature unites Troilus and Criseyde in love, for a time, until a change of fortune forces them apart. Nature binds, fortune divides. Both are aspects of divine providence. (Goodman 418)

Therefore, climate, weather changes, the movements of stars, and the biological factors that define human perception can all be taken as certain Providential reflections in Chaucer's writing. However, this necessitates an understanding and interpretation of them that is not necessarily natural both for the reader and the characters of *Troilus*. Supernatural portents rely on more than just the fundamental existence of what is doing the signifying in the story; these natural objects and actions, when given meaning by some sense of Providential intuition ascribed to them, are elevated to the supernatural by momentarily reflecting the divine.

At times, these portents carry an obvious meaning to the reader, as is the case in Book I, in which the story is set in motion during the month of April "whan clothed is the mede, / With newe grene, of lusty Veer the pryme" (I, 157). This is hardly unusual for a Medieval romantic tale, as the beginning of the Spring season would have been strongly aligned with tropes of growth, abundance, and fertility (Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales* 33). The notion that the beginning of Spring could signify a heightened state of romantic attraction was by no means limited to the Middle Ages, and it is likely that Chaucer's audience would have believed the ancient Greeks and

Trojans understood this as well.⁶ Therefore, this portent may appear to be little more than a cliché, and yet it still functions within the story as a clear indicator that Troilus is putting himself at risk of falling under the same state of attraction that he is speaking against.

There are many descriptions of seasonal changes and celestial movements both by the narrator and characters in *Troilus*, but perhaps most notable of all is the joining of Saturn and Jupiter in the seventh house of Cancer ascendent, which precedes Troilus and Criseyde's scene of love making in Book III. The joining of Jupiter and Saturn, or a Great Conjunction as it is often called, is an occurrence that takes place roughly every 20 years. This is considered in astrology to be an exceptionally powerful event, and has additionally volatile implications when happening as Cancer is ascendent. Both during and long before Chaucer's time, it would have been somewhat widely accepted that Great Conjunctions in the seventh house held vast implications as portents. At various times, certain astrologers have argued that one such Great Conjunction may have been what was biblically described as the Star of Bethlehem. More dangerous predictions about this specific type of conjunction would also be drawn, particularly regarding destructive floods, to such a degree that a Papal Bull against divinations would eventually be triggered in response to the public hysteria (Barney, "Troilus and Criseyde: Explanatory Notes" 1039).

For the characters in *Troilus*, such interpretations are far from unthinkable, especially in consideration of Troilus' own stated belief in the significance of astrological signs. Troilus describes this only a few stanzas after the great conjunction is first mentioned:

Ye, blisful Venus, this nyght thow me enspire...

⁶ In fact, Spring fertility festivals are prominent not only in Ancient Greece (Anthesteria) and Western Christianity (Carnival), but also in Mesopotamia (Akitu), India (Holi), and East Asia (Lunar New Year) – ("Lunar New Year"; Johnson; Zirpolo; Bidmead; "Anthesteria").

...And if ich hadde, O Venus ful of myrthe,

Apectes badde of Mars or of Saturne,

Or thow combust or let were in my birthe,

Thy fader prey al thilke harm disturne (III, 713, 715–718)

In these few lines, Troilus' hasty prayer to the gods reveals a tangled network of inauspicious astrological possibilities, such as harmful "aspectes badde" and the prevention of Venus' benign influences at the time of his birth. Pandarus is quick to call Troilus "Thow wrecched mouses herte" for a desperate attempt to incur divine sympathy at a moment of panic (III, 736). "To Pandarus, Troilus' sudden celestial concerns are merely a reflection of his fear that Criseyde will reject him, but even after forcing Troilus to forget this and accompany him to Criseyde's room does the bad weather persist. For a brief moment between Pandarus and Troilus' departure from the closet and their arrival at Criseyde's room, the reader is left alone with the storm: "The sterne wynd so loude gan to route / That no wight other noise myghte heere" (III, 743–744). Although subtle, such moments remind the reader of a separate reality that exists beyond the story's surface.

While there are many ways in which Providence features, is perceived, and even at times reacted to in *Troilus*, at no point is the reader given any sign that the fate of *Troilus*' hero can be changed. Even when stating belief in a divine universal plan, Troilus fails to comprehend its inevitability. Instead, he either dismisses his own prophetic revelation or puts his faith in the hope that a desperate prayer might somehow change what has been already established at the moment of his birth. As Chaucer hints through every character living out their role in the story, knowingly or not, fate exists regardless of how it's seen and approached; attempts to negotiate with Providence, much like the attempts to pin its outcome on cruel Fortune, are little more than a means of hiding from one's true identity as a free-willing agent.

4.4 *The Book of the Duchess in Conversation with Troilus and Criseyde*

As has been established, the Trojan War was a useful setting for narratives in the Middle Ages, but the reason for this is not just its popularity among readers. In Medieval literature, Troy's downfall carries the weight of Adam's fall from grace, while the city's eventual rebuilding under a new authority resonates deeply with those in England longing for a stronger sense of foundation (Nakley 369). The romantic subplots of Troy's story – such as the doomed romance between Troilus and Criseyde – constructed by Dictys of Crete and Dares Phrygius that had leaked into many influential French and Italian romance tales became of particular interest. Suffering from the weight of desire for the unattainable love interest of his life, Boccaccio approaches the story of Troilus from a deeply personal perspective. Contrastingly, Chaucer's attraction to the setting of Troy appears more layered.

“Troynovant” — “New Troy” — was more than just a Roman name for what would eventually become London. For a swiftly changing population, New Troy meant new hope for unification (Ingledeu). The historical chronicles of England from trusted authors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon, place Troy at the heart of the country's foundation with the legend of the “Latin Brutus”, a Roman refugee of the Trojan War and descendent of Aeneas who supposedly became the founder of England (MacColl). By anchoring England's foundations in the distant land of Troy, Medieval historians could reveal a hidden connection to the Holy Roman Empire, and by extension, God Himself. The New Troy is therefore only a new revelation of an ancient connection between England and Providence; surely, this was a land chosen by God.

Like the historian who uncovers God's plan by tracing Trojan roots in the past, Chaucer too leaves his readers a Trojan link to Providence throughout his works. Aside from *Troilus*, Chaucer names Troy at least 24 times in several tales of *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Legend of*

Good Women, and *The House of Fame* (Litwhiler). For Chaucer, *Troilus* is not just a matter of chronicling history; juxtaposing the joys of a budding romance against a crumbling city carries much-needed tragic potency. Additionally, the popularity of the Trojan War affords convenience in establishing metaphorical themes without needing to completely spell them out. Troy also has a presence in *The Book of the Duchess* that is easy to overlook, and yet upon further examination, these references to the Trojan War in *Duchess* seem to inevitably bring us back to *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the links between both poems all circle back to the ultimate question of Providence. This is not to say that Chaucer had consciously left traces of *Troilus* in *Duchess* or vice versa — especially when considering the difficulties involved in ascertaining a definite chronology — instead, the Trojan connection between both fictional works of literature yields a greater understanding of how pervasive the role of Providence is in Chaucer’s writing.

4.5 The Black Knight as Proto-Troilus

It is important to note that both the Black Knight and Troilus have seen their respective love interests before being seen – thereby rendered completely subject to Love’s arrow – by them. This is only briefly touched on in *Duchess*, but is still the case when the Black Knight describes how his eye moves across the other women in the room before landing on White:

Hit happed that I cam on a day

Into a place ther that I say

Trewely the fayrest companye

Of ladyes that evere man with yë

Had seen togedres in oo place...

...Among these ladyes thus echon,

Soth to seyen, y sawgh oon

That was lyk noon of the route

(Chaucer, “The Book of the Duchess” 805–809, 817–819)

When describing this place, the Black Knight does not find it important to explain what he was doing there, or what kind of place it even is. What he instead emphasizes is an urgency from the rare gathering of so many beautiful women “in oo place” that would motivate anyone’s eye to take in as much as possible, which is exactly what he is doing when he first sees White. In *Troilus*, it is a feast “ful wel arrayed,” with young women, “both meeste, mene, and leste” where Troilus first sees Criseyde, quite unlike where the Black Knight first encounters White (166). This feast for the protective Trojan icon of Pallas – the Palladion – takes places in “Aperil, whan clothed is the mede / With newe grene, of lusty Veer the pryme”, when the many “lusty knight” and “lady fressh” are dressed “bothe for the seson and the feste” (“Troilus and Criseyde” I, 156–157, 165, 166, 168). Because of this, Criseyde, who is “in widewes habit blak” contrasts strongly enough with the rest of the crowd to easily draw attention, in addition to how “hire goodly lokyng gladed al the prees” (I, 170, 173). This may be why it is Criseyde whom Troilus quickly finds his eyes fixed onto once stricken with Love’s arrow.

The narrator in *Troilus* reveals that the exchange of glances first from the knight to his love interest and then vice versa is a kind of two-pronged strike orchestrated by Love and executed by the woman in question. The narrator states that “Love is he that alle thing may bynde, / For may no man fordon the lawe of kynde”, which is certainly true for Troilus the moment Criseyde looks

into his eyes for the first time (I, 237–238, 313–315). This does not happen before Troilus’ heart is first made susceptible to Criseyde’s striking look, however:

His eye percede, and so depe it wente,

Til on Criseyde it smot, and ther it stente.

And sodeynly he wax therwith astoned

And gan hir biholde in thrifty wise...

...Therwith his herte gan to sprede and rise,

And softe sighed lest men myghte hym here,

And caught ayeyn his firste pleyng chere. (I, 272–275, 278–280)

During this initial view of Criseyde, Troilus is suddenly “astoned”: stupefied by what he has seen, and can’t seem to stop himself from looking more – much less walk away – even despite his fear that others might catch on to what’s happening. The description of his heart as “sprede and rise” also conveys a new sense vulnerability, as this vital organ appears to have moved to the surface, widened, and laid out, now an easy target for the “subtile stremes” of Criseyde’s eyes (I, 305). Although less is said about the Black Knight’s experience before pierced by White’s eyes, he does describe her features upon his first view of her as “so wel beseye” that he is trapped and helpless: “As helpe me God, so was ykaught!” (“The Book of the Duchess” 829, 838).

Both Troilus and the Black Knight are then transformed by each love interest’s gaze, but the difference in perspective between both stories creates a sharp contrast. The uplifting and

spreading movement of Troilus' heart upon first seeing Criseyde is met with a directionally opposing action the moment she sets her gaze on him:

And of hire look in him ther gan to quyken
 So gret desir and such affeccoun,
 That in his herte botme gan to stiken
 Of hir his fixe and depe impressioun. (I, 295–298)

The narrator forms an unusually violent depiction of love, as the trajectory of Criseyde's eyesight stabs through Troilus' heart like a spear. Troilus is forever marked by Criseyde with a "depe impressioun" of herself that compels him to serve her. The Black Knight is similarly primed for White's compelling stare when "ykaught" by her beauty, but her look is much more comforting than combative:

No maner counseyl but at hir lok
 And at myn herte; for-why hir eyen
 So gladly, I trow, myn herte seyen
 That purely tho myn owne thocht,
 Seyde hit were beter serve hir for noght
 Than with another to be wel.
 ("The Book of the Duchess" 840–845)

In this look from White, the Black Knight is perhaps just as subjugated by Love as Troilus, only here the heart appears to be empowered, rather than wounded, by the revelation of a new path in life. While Troilus is left “thorough-shoten and thorough-darted” by Criseyde’s eyes, the Black Knight considers himself “warished of al [his] sorwe / Of al day after” (“Troilus and Criseyde” I, 325; “The Book of the Duchess” 1104). When Troilus is finally alone in his room after seeing Criseyde for the first time, his inner thoughts about the experience are fully revealed in the first *Canticus* of several in the story. “If no love is, O God, what fele I so?” he asks, “...If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?” (I, 400, 402). The Black Knight also gives the dreamer his own “firste song”, wherein he “wisse to God hit might so bee” that White would return his love by becoming his “...lady, that is so fair and bright!” (1178, 1180). The optimism and adoration present in this significantly shorter song conveys a completely different atmosphere from Troilus’ sad and fearful *Canticus*.

Perhaps it is not that the Black Knight and Troilus underwent completely different kinds of love-conversions, nor that they had different responses or comprehension of what had just happened to them. After all, the Black Knight does describe the lead up to his first interaction with White as full of woe and sorrow, and “thoghte [his] herte braste atweyne!” (1193). As the Black Knight’s story is told only briefly in retrospective and solely from his limited perspective, there are significant gaps in its details that may be filled by Troilus’ direct speech and internal thoughts.

After Criseyde has departed from Troilus in Book V, Troilus “rewen on himself so pitously / That wonder was to here his fantasie” (V, 260–261). Not everything Troilus goes through is left for the reader to “ful wel devyne,” as the narrator does describe Troilus as having a “swollen herte” the moment he descends from his horse and returns to his palace (V, 201). Troilus’ thoughts are

detailed at some length here, as he questions the role of Fate – “Who seyth yow now, my righte lode-sterre?” – and dreads to endure the long ten days without Criseyde that supposedly await him (V232, 239–240). Additionally, Troilus’ sleep is shown to encounter new disturbances with “dremen of the dredefulleste thynges” that cause “a tremour fele aboute his herte / That of the fere his body should quake” (V, 248, 255–256). Ultimately, it is Troilus’ fear that plagues him in sleep and causes him to lose faith in his plan with Criseyde, but the actual nature of his “pleynt, his languor, and his pyne,” is “swich a wo [the narrator’s] wit kan nat diffyne” (V, 268, 271). It is these undescribed things that are obvious enough to Pandarus for him to know well enough “withoute book”, and yet the reader is still not given a clear enough picture of Troilus’ grief at this point to have a clear idea of what Pandarus sees when he first enters Troilus’ room (V, 291).

Similarly, in *The Book of the Duchess*, the extent of the Black Knight’s suffering is undeniable, but the history of his mourning over White is left as unclear as the nature of her death. The primarily external view of the Black Knight as the narrator of his own story contrasts greatly with the intimate portrayal of Troilus made by his somewhat omniscient narrator, who is able to record the songs Troilus sings only “whan he was from every mannes syghte” and say exactly what goes on in his heart and mind (V, 635). Despite this difference in the narrator’s knowledge of each character’s inner lives, a clear intersection is present between them that may allow the reader to understand how Troilus would have looked and acted like to Pandarus, as well as offer a glimpse of the inner strife the Black Knight has faced after the death of his beloved.

4.6 Troilus’ Ascent: The Final Stage of Chaucer’s Providential Metamorphosis

For a moment, let us return to Chaucer’s minor poetry, only the poem discussed here has not yet been examined. “Fortune”, composed some time between the late 1380s and early 1390s

(Gross 635), presents us with a plaintiff arguing against Fortune, whose description may seem a little bit familiar:

This wrecched worldes transmutacioun,
 As wele or wo, now povre and now honour,
 Withouten ordre or wys discrecioun
 Governed is by Fortunes error.

(Chaucer, “Fortune” 1–4)

This is the Black Knight’s lament; it is both what Boece complains of in his prayer to God and what lurks under the surface of the Canticus Troili in *Troilus*’ Book III. Only 79 lines in length — 1334 lines make up all of *Duchess* in comparison — “Fortune” quickly gets to the heart of the Black Knight’s issues with Fortune, even echoing the paradoxical type of language employed in *Duchess*. Like Boece, the plaintiff of “Fortune” is dismayed to find that Earth has been left to Fortune’s governance, and with the same scathing tone of the Black Knight, he says,

Thou knewe wel the deceit of hir colour,
 And that hir moste worship is to lye...
 ...Thy lore I dampne; it is adversitee.
 My frend maystow nat reven, blind goddesse;
 That I thy frendes knowe, I thanke it thee.
 Tak hem agayn, lat hem go lye on presse.

The negardye in keping hir richesse

Prenostik is thou wolt hir tour assayle;

Wikke appetyt comth ay before syknesse.

In general, this reule may nat fayle. (21–22, 49–56)

We are reminded that Fortune’s “moste worshippe and hir flour ys / To lyen, for that ys hyr nature” as the Black Knight had said in *Duchess*, and when the plaintiff tells Fortune she may “nat reven” his friend, we are called to remember how Boece’s imprisonment had separated him from the company of senators he had previously belonged to (“The Book of the Duchess” 630–31).

4.7 Making Sense of Troilus’ Ascent

What is presented by the plaintiff here is a futile condemnation of what Troilus finally sees upon his ascent to the eighth sphere at the end of Book V. Sitting among the “erratik sterres” that once were little more than a vague portent of destiny, Troilus is finally free from the torment of earthly instability (V, 1812). From the perspective of Heaven, Troilus looks down at

This litel spot of erthe that with the se

Embraced is, and fully gan despise

This wrecched world, and held al vanite

To respect of the pleyn felicite

That is in hevene above; and at the laste,

Ther he was slayn his loking down he caste,

And in hymself he lough right at the wo

Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,

And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so...(V, 1814–1823)

As these lines reveal, Troilus' death has allowed him to transcend earthly limitation and see the full picture of the "wrecched worldes transmutacioun" that was described by the plaintiff, the Black Knight, and Boece. Laughing at the despair of chaotic instability, fluctuations from wellness to woe are not discovered by Troilus to be the works of Fortune, that cruel "executrice of wierdes" (III, 617). Instead, a contrast between "al vanite" of the Earth and "pleyn felicite" of Heaven is what Troilus is made aware.

A frequent argument among scholars regarding these final lines asserts that while Troilus successfully becomes a "Boethian thinker" by the time of his death, he is still excluded "from this higher plane — the world of Christian religion and philosophical truth" (Murton 319; Wenzel 547). Murton argues that Troilus' pagan status "ensures that his philosophical and spiritual journey within the poem cannot culminate in Christian love" even though Troilus still attains complete knowledge of Lady Philosophy's rational arguments (Murton 319). This echoes Bloomfield's argument, similarly describing Troilus as incapable of making a final leap from the consolation of philosophy to "the consolation of Christianity" (Bloomfield 26). Overall, general consensus among scholarship seems to agree that:

What Troilus attains in his final vision...is precisely what the rational arguments that comprise most of the *Consolation* aim to provide: an awareness of the futility of earthly life and pleasure, and a focus on the true goods of heaven. (Murton 318)

Glancing at this moment of ascension, it is difficult to deny how Troilus has been able to overcome the limitations of his former perspective and triumph over despair by transforming the pain of

tragedy into a comedic source of joy. Surely, Lady Philosophy herself would approve of the way Troilus refrains from blaming Fortune for what he sees on Earth, as he instead chooses to pin the endless cycle of prosperity and adversity on humanity. Even we appear to be condemned when Troilus “dampned al oure werk that foloweth” his death, just as the plaintiff had “dampned” Fortune’s “lore”. Clearly, Troilus has ascended beyond even us enlightened critics, or has at least flown high enough to be let into a cosmic joke featuring us as its punchline.

While Troilus gains Boethian insight, he is still surpassed by the narrator in terms of salvation. Although Troilus now rests among the celestial bonds of Providence, they do not appear to interest him, as he is fixated on looking at the Earth instead. When the narrator comes in immediately following Troilus’ departure from the narrative, he beseeches readers to

Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,
 And of youre herte casteth the visage
 To thilke God that after his ymage
 Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire,
 This world that passeth soone as floures faire.
 And loveth hym the which that right for love
 Upon a crois, oure soules for to beye,
 First starf, and roos, and sit in hevne above (V, 1837–1844)

In these lines, the narrator implies that by witnessing Troilus’ story, readers can obtain within their lifetime what Troilus is only capable of possessing after death: a relief from the “worldly vanyte”

that defines “This world that passeth soone as floures faire”. Unlike Troilus, readers do not have to endure devotion to and loss of love in order to comprehend what Troilus “saugh with ful avysement” from “the holughnesse of the eighthe sphere”, because Christ’s salvific revelation has been fully revealed (V, 1811, 1809). Thus, Troilus “is glimpsing realities to which only Chaucer’s audience is finally given full access” in the final lines of the poem (Murton 319).

However incredible the narrator’s final transformation of *Troilus* may be, it is still a jarringly abrupt transition from Troilus’ perspective, seemingly cutting off his personal and spiritual development just before its completion. Many authors have noted the odd feeling of dissatisfaction caused at the moment of Troilus’ departure from his own story, even going as far as to place this feeling at the heart of their decision to write on *Troilus*:

As a culmination of his long process of philosophical and spiritual growth throughout the poem, Troilus’s rational dismissal of worldly life has proven deeply unsatisfying to most readers. This sense of disappointment has made the poem’s ending a major critical crux, and has given rise to numerous attempts either to reconcile it with the rest of the work or to make sense of their disjunction. (Murton 318)

Many reconcile the disappointment by asserting that it is not only intentional on Chaucer’s part, but even the main point of his argument. For instance, Jennifer Goodman attempts to dispel “the modern humanist critique” that these final stanzas spoil “the entire tragedy” by claiming that this narrative interruption is “altogether in harmony with the poem as a whole...and in harmony with Chaucer’s practice [of] leading by example from the universe of his fiction to that of reality” (Goodman 423).

4.8 Facing the Beginning at the End of *Troilus*: A Response to Criticism

As Frank Grady writes, “Troilus looks down, while we should look up; at the entirely overdetermined moment of transition between Trojan past and English present, even the poem’s syntax registers the mixture of hope and anxiety that characterizes that move from textuality to eschatology” and while this may certainly be the case, Troilus is still observing more than just the transition from pagan past to Christian present (Grady 246). In the lines directly preceding the narrator’s sudden take over, we are told just what Troilus is inspecting from afar:

Swich fyn hath, lo, this Troilus for love!

Swich fyn hath al his grete worthynesse!

Swich fyn hath his estat real above!

Swich fyn his lust, swich fyn hath his noblesse!

Swych fyn hath false brotelnesse!

And thus bigan his lovyng of Criseyde,

As I have told, and in this wise he deyde. (V, 1828–1834)

What makes this passage strange is the way it treats time and space. Opening with Troilus’ present heavenly perspective over the Earth, it seems we are to look over his life starting at its end, but instead we find the lines: “And thus bigan his lovyng of Criseyde”, as though completely starting over. Each preceding line appears to further subvert the reader’s sense of order, as it begins with “fyn”, or “ending, end, conclusion, finish” (“Fin n.(2)”). It is difficult to shake the feeling that Chaucer is always a step ahead of his reader, but here we are surprised to find him waiting for us at the beginning. Like that often-repeated joke about what happens when one plays a country song

backwards, an absurd inversion of misery-inducing events and not simply the fact of their existence might be the true source of Troilus' laughter.

Closure is applied line-by-line to each aspect of Troilus' former life to show him overcoming earthly attachments one at a time, beginning with love, then honor, royal rank, pleasure, social status, and finally "false brotelnesse". No longer bound by earthly vanity, Troilus is free from the torments of love, the expectations of his rank and the constraints of societal expectation. Additionally, as Troilus can now fully comprehend earthly instability, it would make sense to include overcoming it to this list, and yet it is not simply "brotelnesse" — "brittleness", "insecurity", or "mutability" ("Brotelnesse") — for which Troilus has "swich fyn", but *false* brotelnesse. With just one word, Chaucer is able to demonstrate Troilus' awareness that the world's chaotic fluctuations are really little more than a limited, human perception of Providence. After realizing the true stability of Providence that rests behind the illusion of instability, Troilus is then fully able to locate himself at the center of events in his life. As "thus bigan his lovyng of Criseyde" at the very end of the poem, Troilus is no longer confined to any structure of time and space, now existing on a vaster Providential plane.

If Troilus does indeed realize the full extent of Providential truth, then can we truly claim he is only "glimpsing realities to which only Chaucer's audience is finally given full access" (Murton 319)? While it is hard to deny the theological difficulties of allowing a pagan to enjoy the fullness of Heaven, it is just as hard to definitely say that Troilus does not. In a similar vein to Murton, Bloomfield claims that "Chaucer the narrator escapes from Troilus to where the pagan cannot follow him" to a place wherein "free will and predestination, human dignity and human pettiness, joy and sorrow, in short all human and terrestrial contradictions" ultimately find closure

through the heavenly power of the Trinity (Bloomfield 26). Again, this may be true, but if so, then why would Chaucer still choose to include the “Swich fyn” stanza at all, rather than ending Troilus’ perspective just one stanza earlier, wherein we are left with a vague notion of afterlife: “And forth [Troilus] wente, shortly for to telle, / Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle” (V, 1826–1827)?

4.9 *Troilus*: A Final Evolution of the Providential Struggle

At this final stretch of our journey, let us return to “Fortune”, whose character, the plaintiff, was previously understood to voice both the Black Knight and Boece’s sentiments related to Fortune. Until this point, a crucial deviation in “Fortune” from every other text examined in this brief work has been left unestablished. To put it simply: “Fortune” is the only text in which Fortune has an actual presence. In *Boece*, *Duchess*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*, Fortune is always alluded to, but is never directly encountered. Here, Fortune is her own advocate against the plaintiff’s complaints. “Thou pinchest at my mutabilitee”, she says, “For I thee lente a drope of my richesse, / And now me lyketh to withdrawe me” taking the same arguments Lady Philosophy had made to Boece and making them her own (Chaucer, “Fortune” 57–59).

Lo th’execucion of the majestee

That al purveyeth of his rightwysnesse,

That same thing “Fortune” clepen ye,

Ye blinde bestes ful of lewednesse. (65–68)

As the Black Knight had struggled to comprehend and Lady Philosophy was compelled to spell out to Boece, “Fortune” is little more than a way of explaining the human inability to escape the plans of life plotted out by Providence. If one is to assume the world is chaotic and unstable, and

the individual in turn must be little more than a helpless victim of its tragic fluctuations, they will then be confined to an identity and worldview that is entirely dependent on present emotion. This is true of both the Black Knight and Boece, whose identities are reduced to only their current state of loss: in *Boece*'s very first lines, Boece describes himself as "wepyng...constreyned to bygynnen vers of sorwful matere" ("Boece" I:Metrum 1, 1-2), and the Black Knight is first described in *Duchess* in terms of his mourning, as he is "clothed al in blak", and causes the dreamer to think it a wonder that someone could "have such sorwe and be not ded" ("The Book of the Duchess" 457, 469).

A formula at this point may be uncovered, one by which Chaucer would attempt to most clearly convey the Providential struggle. In *Duchess*, Fortune is described, but not actually present, and the Black Knight cannot move past a limited conception of her. In *Boece*, Fortune is still only present in reference, and Boece's understanding is still just as limited as the Black Knight's; however, Lady Philosophy's vastly superior vision allows us to see the full picture beyond the suffering mortal's limited scope. Perhaps, then, "Fortune" is yet another iteration of this approach to presenting Providence, another attempt now to fuse both the pre- and post-enlightened approaches to the role of free will under Providence.

It is true that "Chaucer seems always to be searching for a way to dissolve the knot of unrelieved suffering" as says Paul Ruggiers in "Notes towards a Theory of Tragedy in Chaucer", and his use of Fortune as a legitimate means of doing so should certainly not be dismissed (Ruggiers 95). As he goes on to say:

Chaucer does more than merely mitigate the fortunal explanation of human experience. He does not shirk that extreme pole of the tragic mode, the pole of an inescapable destiny; he

accepts that possibility, but he also admits that other equally tempting possibility: human responsibility is a factor in that destiny. In his mature work the two views are held in a delicate equilibrium in much the same way that fate and human defect are delicately balanced in the finest Greek tragedies. (96)

“Fortune”, *Duchess*, and *Boece* all experiment in giving Fortune different degrees of characterization and explanation, but only in *Troilus and Criseyde* does Chaucer take his reader through every stage, from the full blindness of human ignorance to a complete state of awakening in the afterlife. As do the “finest Greek tragedies”, *Troilus* allows its readers to undergo catharsis at the sight of Troilus’ suffering and death, and by bringing us directly into Troilus’ ascent beyond the mortal plane does Chaucer give his audience the unique opportunity to emotionally experience what Lady Philosophy and Fortune can only give an intellectual description.

Conclusion

In the previous chapters, we have traced sketched out an understanding of Providence and free will that begins with worldly confusion in the minor poems, shifts to a place of personal grief and despair in *The Book of the Duchess*, learns of closure in *Boece*, but does not directly experience it until the final passages of *Troilus and Criseyde*. During a brief look at some of Chaucer's short poems, the world was found to be unstable, defined by a lack of reliability and steadfastness that even an attempt at escapism through nostalgia cannot entirely dispel. After exploring Chaucer's vision of the world's instability, the individual's struggle with accepting both free will and Providence has been addressed. It is easy to assume that accepting Providence means rejecting the ability to have any real control over one's own life, and it is this frustrating implication that first brings hopelessness to the Black Knight, Boece, and Troilus. In *The Book of the Duchess*, the Black Knight prefers to surrender agency to White when living with her, and to Fortune after White's death, as to do otherwise by embracing free will would require acknowledging the burden of personal accountability over his approach to life situations and decision making. Because of this, he is condemned to suffer a view of the world that is tainted by black and white lenses. Boece risks the same fate as the Black Knight, but Lady Philosophy intervenes with a compelling intellectual dialogue that causes him to eventually choose the truth of free will over the agony of powerlessness. Finally, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the reader is similarly brought out of ignorance and into enlightenment, only this revelation transforms the Providential consolation that Lady Philosophy could merely describe into an act of personal and spiritual awakening; one that is fully experienced once Troilus ascends to the eighth sphere of Heaven. For this reason, *Troilus and*

Criseyde is Chaucer's fullest immersion into the philosophical and emotional complexity of the human struggle to accept free will under Providence.

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