

The Consolation of Philosophy

by
Anicius Manlius Severinus Boëthius

as translated by
Geoffrey Chaucer



and rendered into modern English by Tom Powers

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Introduction

Let me begin by saying that this is a work of love, rather than of scholarship. I am proficient in neither Latin, Greek, nor Middle English. I have not deeply studied the classics of the ancient Greeks, Romans, nor early Christians...so, I am decidedly an amateur! So, what has drawn me to the *Consolation of Philosophy*, its sixth century Roman creator, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boëthius, and its fourteenth century English interpreter, Geoffrey Chaucer?

From childhood, I have felt a keen revulsion for much of the life of superficial emotion that is on unashamed parade all around us. It seems to me that almost every influence on human life is aimed at stealing from us the desire and ability to experience life in a sober, meaningful way. I see people wallowing in grief and self-pity in response to imposed or imagined losses or dangers. I see people hysterically titillated by truly trivial events that have nothing to do with them. I see people trapped in blind rages or sullen, annoyed pouts at imagined slights or snubs. Then with extreme reluctance, I occasionally see myself doing all these things and being no better, no different than other people – except, perhaps, for a lingering wish to be other than I am...in fact, *to be*.

I was raised in an unusual household. My parents, having early on eschewed all attachment to organized religion as well as to theism, were deeply committed to struggles for social, economic, and racial justice. They fought to encourage young people to become progressive leaders in the hope of displacing the old and corrupt guard. My parents had no interest in accumulating wealth and spent what little they had on their various projects. They endured betrayal by colleagues, repeated failure, and even jail without becoming defeated by the bitterness or regret that felled so many of their comrades. Their strength was founded on an unshakable faith, not in God, but in the basic decency of mankind.

Observing such a serious family at close range, it was, perhaps not strange that at a young age, I found sympathetic vibrations in such works as *The Manual* by Epictetus, *The Holy Rule* by St. Benedict, *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, the transcendental poems of William Wordsworth, and *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton. Only much later in life was I introduced to the ideas of G. I. Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky¹ and joined the Gurdjieff Foundation of Illinois. It was from Gurdjieff that I began learning to see myself in the faces around me and to sense the compelling need to look inside myself for the energy to strip away layers of accreted falseness that had clung to my essence from years of survival in a world of deceit. It seems to me that having spent much of my life as an atheist enabled me to absorb philosophical and theosophical writings with something of a child's questioning naiveté, and without the automatic associations that can shut down or dim the perceptions of a person who has been steeped in religious dogma and doctrine. Gurdjieff wrote the shocking assertion that people who do not succeed in working on themselves have no being, do not exist as humans. Boethius wrote, "Perhaps it seems to some folks a fantastical thing to say that the wicked, who are the majority of men, are nothing—have no being; but nevertheless, it is true" (Book III, Prose 2).

I first read the *Consolation of Philosophy* during the summer after high school having been inspired by a quirky and brilliant teacher, Ms. Margaret Annan. Ms. Annan pointed out the sometimes gentle, sometimes bitter satire that underlie many of Chaucer's tales. She suggested that even though the object of the characters' pilgrimage was the shrine of Thomas à Becket, who had been martyred 200 years earlier for challenging the supremacy of the king over the rights and privileges of the Roman Catholic Church, that church was still powerful, still the official church of the land (until 1534), and that Chaucer may well have been taking considerable risk by scoffing at the flawed bearers of its message. Perhaps because of the annoying questions I continually fired at

¹ For those interested in exploring the ideas developed by Gurdjieff, I recommend reading *In Search of the Miraculous* by P.D. Ouspensky and *All and Everything* by G. I. Gurdjieff (consisting of three books: *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* or *An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, and *Life is Real Only Then When I am*).

her, she recommended that I read the one prosaic piece among the poetry of the *Canterbury Tales*: “The Parson’s Tale.” I was hooked! The parson’s stern, but gentle insistence on turning away from the frivolous, poisonous things in our lives in favor of the hard, realities that make life worth living spoke loudly to something within me. Then I began reading and re-reading the *Consolation*.

Background

In the year 524, a Roman gentleman named Anicius Manlius Severinus Boëthius languished in prison awaiting execution for treason against the king. Boethius' family had a long and noble history dating back hundreds of years to at least the early days of the Roman Empire, and including senators, consuls, emperors, and prefects, and culminating 65 years after Boethius' death with Pope Gregory the Great. The Anicii family had become fabulously wealthy, owning many large estates and gaining a reputation for *profitable generosity*. Some two hundred years before Boethius, Sextus Claudius Petronius Probus did much to enhance the family fortunes as recounted by the fourth century historian Ammianus Marcellinus who portrayed him as a vain and rapacious man who "owned estates in every part of the empire, but whether they were honestly come by or not is not for a man like me to say." Ammianus adds that Probus was one who was benevolent to his friends and a pernicious schemer against his enemies, servile to those more powerful than him and pitiless to those weaker, who craved office and exercised enormous influence through his wealth, always insecure and petty even at the height of his power.² I mention this because I find it striking in the context of Book II, Prose 5. One more interesting fact about Boethius' forebearers: it seems that they were among the first noble families to convert to Christianity during the reign of Constantine.

Although orphaned at an early age, Boethius was adopted into another prominent Roman family (his step-father later became his father-in-law) and enjoyed a privileged life and an education in science, mathematics, history, Greek, and philosophy that was becoming increasingly rare in an Italy that was no longer an empire but was occupied by foreign conquerors (in Boethius' time, the Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great). The trappings of Roman civil and political life including the Senate were tolerated, for a time, by the new rulers who were focused on enriching themselves and their followers at the expense of the Roman people. Roman dominance and society had long been in decline and its leaders were deeply corrupt and were willing to win favors from Theodoric's government in exchange for selling out their friends and associates. As a brilliant scholar and gentleman of leisure, Boethius might have lived out his life insulated from the increasing collapse of the civilization he cherished. But Boethius was lured into the civil service at Theodoric's court at Ravenna with hopes of combatting corruption and fighting for the rights of the people. This was an inevitable, but fatal decision.

Boethius' erudition (he translated from Greek to Latin significant works of Aristotle and Porphyry, wrote textbooks on logic and music, and composed theological treatises, would have an enormous influence on students of philosophy and divinity during the next thousand years. But none of Boethius' legacy had as strong an influence on the Middle Ages as his final work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. It was translated from the Latin for the benefit of the English people several times during the medieval period. First, into Anglo-Saxon (aka Old English) during the reign of King Alfred the Great who ruled from 870 to 899. Geoffrey Chaucer took his turn around 1385 turning it into the English of his day, now known as Middle English. Queen Elizabeth I translated it again in 1593. The appeal of *The Consolation* waned as western man experience a "renaissance" turning with ever-greater passion to the false gods of which Boethius so eloquently warned.

² Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, Book 27, ch.11; *The Later Roman Empire* selected and translated by Walter Hamilton (Penguin, 1986), p.345).

The Message of *The Consolation*

The plea within *The Consolation* that rang true for so many for 1500 years is in how to progress from an ordinary life of unhappy superficiality to a deep understanding of difficult concepts and values that can give our short lives purpose and joy.³ Rather than writing in esoteric philosophical terminology, Boethius creates a dialogue between himself and “his old nurse” Philosophy. She finds him in his prison cell weighted down with bitterness and regret for having lost everything that makes life worthwhile. By gentle steps, she restores him from alienation, to recognizing that he has lost nothing of true value and that he has not been abandoned by the immortal power of God. It is interesting that nowhere in *The Consolation* is there a mention of Christ or of the Judeo-Christian traditions. Boethius reaches back to Greek and Roman history, traditions and myths and to illustrations from nature and the agrarian life of the common people to illustrate his points.

Philosophy’s methodical, logical arguments, especially in Book III, Prose 10 and Prose 12 seem to require one significant leap of faith: the existence of an omnipotent, beneficent God. But just as I did not find Boethius’ reliance on Ptolomeic cosmology (the accepted science of his (and Chaucer’s) day in Book II, Prose 7 particularly jarring, I am not much put off by Boethius’ theocentric understanding (Book IV, Meter 1). I find inspiration in Philosophy’s entreaty (Book III, Meter 11): “Whoever seeks truth through deep thought and longs not to be deceived by missteps, let him turn and contemplate within himself the light of his inner sight.”

While the original Latin work consists of alternating sections of prose and poetry, and Chaucer was a certainly a magnificent poet, he chose to produce his translation entirely in prose. The reason becomes quickly apparent. Chaucer continually injects explanations or clarifications called “glosses” into the text. His mission was not to create art, but to transmit this vital message to the people.

I recommend reading John Marenbon’s excellent essay on Boethius and, especially on *The Consolation*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/boethius/>. but only after absorbing and considering *The Consolation* itself.

³ In the 17th century the English Puritan preacher, John Bunyan accomplished much the same thing with *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, a beautiful allegory of man’s efforts to achieve spiritual perfection written in simple language for the benefit of the masses. I think that he should be an inspiration to English teachers who wish to find or develop interesting and thought-provoking materials.

This “Rendering”

I have tried to stay as close to Chaucer’s translation as reasonable and consistent with clarity. To assist the reader with following this three-way comparison of my modern version to Chaucer’s Middle English and to Boethius’ Latin, I made some minor changes of punctuation and paragraphing to both of the original versions in order to synchronize them with the Modern English text.

Middle English did not make use of quotation marks; instead Chaucer introduces each change of voice with the words ‘quod I’ or ‘quod she.’ Sometimes Chaucer introduces the name or initial of the speaker first as in the script of a play (but still inserts the “quods” into the sentence that follows. Also, the modern version breaks up Chaucer’s run-on sentences and a few very long paragraphs.

Throughout Chaucer’s translation are his helpful hints and words of explanation. He usually introduces them with the words ‘that is to say’ or ‘as one might say.’ I have identified them in the modern translation as bracketed comments introduced by the words ‘Chaucer’s note’ as thus:

1. Go now, you mermaids who are sweet until the end comes, and let this man be cured and healed by my muses [Chaucer’s note: by beneficial sciences].

As I said earlier, although I have labored to make this rendering of Chaucer’s translation as close to his text as I could while ensuring the modern reader an undistracted experience, this is not a work of scholarship but love and gratitude. Errors of translation and clumsiness of expression are all mine. I hope that the torch which Boethius lit, and which Chaucer kept burning will continue to inspire the inner work of those who seek inner truth in our own day.

Acknowledgements

Chaucer's Boece texts:

1. **The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer**, Ed. R. N. Robinson, 2nd edition, 1957, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, MA
2. **Chaucer's translation of Boethius's "De consolazione philosophiæ,"** Ed. Richard Morris, Oxford University Press, 1868, online version: Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative 1999
3. **The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer**, Ed. Rev. Walter W. Skeat, (vol. 2: Boethius and Troilus), 1894, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, online version: Gutenberg Project (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/44833/44833-h/44833-h.htm>)

Boethius' Latin texts:

4. **The Consolation of Philosophy, with the English translation of "I. T." (1609)**, Revised by H. F. Stewart, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, William Heinemann, Ltd, London, 1968
5. **Boethius: Consolatio philosophiae, 3 vols**, Ed., James J. O'Donnell, Bryn Mawr Latin Commentaries, Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Thomas Library, Bryn Mawr College, 1990.

Other English translations:

6. **The Consolation of Philosophy**, translated with an introduction by V. E. Watts, 1969, Penguin Books, Ltd., Middlesex, UK
7. **The Consolation of Philosophy**, translated by W. V. Cooper, B.A., King's College, Cambridge, 1901 Published by the Ex-classics Project, 2009, <https://www.exclassics.com/consol/conintro.htm>. Public Domain
8. **The Consolation of Philosophy**, translated by H. R. James, Oxford, George Routledge & Sons, Ltd. London 1897

Commentary:

9. "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius", Marenbon, John, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/boethius/>

Glossary

10. **A Glossary for the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (in the Riverside Edition)**. Last modified: Nov 20, 2008 Copyright © The President and Fellows of Harvard College URL: <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/glossar.htm>.

The Consolation of Philosophy

Book I – Meter 1

Alas! Weeping, I am forced to begin verses on sorrowful matters, that at one time, during my flourishing years of study, I made into sweet songs. For lo! Rending muses of poets dictate to me things to be written, and dreary verses of wretchedness wet my face with true tears. At least no fear might overcome those Muses, keeping them from accompanying me on my way into exile. They who were the glory of my youth, when healthy and young, comfort me now in the sorrowful fate of my old age. For age has come unexpectedly on me, hastened by the harms done to me, and sorrow has stamped age upon me. White hairs are sprinkled untimely upon my head, and the slack skin trembles on my wasted body.

Death of men is welcomed not when it comes in the sweet years, but when, often called for, it comes to wretches. Alas, alas! with how deaf an ear cruel death turns away from wretches and neglects to close weeping eyes. While unfaithful Fortune favored me with gleaming gifts, the sorrowful hour of death had almost drowned my head. But now that cloudy Fortune has changed her deceitful manner toward me, my pathetic life persists in dragging on.

Oh, you my friends, why did you applaud my good fortune? For he who has fallen never stood on firm footing.

Book 1 – Prose 1

Meanwhile, as I still recorded these things for myself, and penned my tearful complaints, I saw, standing above the height of my head a woman, seemingly of great majesty, her eyes glowing and clear-sighted beyond the ordinary power of men. She had a lively color and such vigor and strength that it could not be diminished, despite the fact that she was of so great an age that no one would imagine that she was of our generation. Her height was uncertain, for sometimes she contracted and shrunk herself to the common measure of men; and sometimes it seemed that she touched the heavens with the top of her head, and when she raised her head higher, she pierced the very heavens, so it would be in vain for men to try to see her.

Her clothes were made of quite delicate threads and subtle craft, of strong material. She had woven these clothes with her own hands, as I found out later when she explained and demonstrated to me their beauty. The darkness of a forgotten and despised past had besmirched and dulled these clothes just as a picture may be darkened with smoke. In the lowest hem or border of her robe, one could read a woven Greek P signifying the active life; and above that letter in the highest border, a Greek T signifying the contemplative life.⁴ And between these two letters there were seen degrees, nobly wrought in the form of ladders, by which degrees men might climb from the lowest letter to the uppermost. Nevertheless, the hands of some men had carved that cloth by violence or by strength, and each one of them had carried away such pieces as he might get. And truly, this woman carried small books in her right hand, and in her left hand she bore a scepter.

And when she saw these poetical Muses clustered about my bed, and reciting words to my tears, she was a little aggravated and glowed with cruel eyes. “Who,” she cried, “has allowed these strumpets from the place men call the theatre to approach this sick man? They not only cannot assuage his sorrows with any remedies, but they would feed and nourish him with sweet venom. They are those who with thorns and goads of talents or affections which have nothing fruitful or profitable, destroy the plentiful crop of the fruits of reason. They hold the hearts of men in bondage, but cure no one from sickness.

⁴ Π or pi, for practical philosophy and θ or theta for theoretical philosophy.

“If you Muses had taken from me with your flatteries any dull and unprofitable man, as may be readily found in the population, I would doubtless suffer less grievously, because in such an unprofitable man, my purposes would not be thwarted. But you pull away this man who was nourished in the studies or schools of the Eliatics and Academics in Greece. Go now, you mermaids who are sweet until the end comes, and let this man be cured and healed by my muses (the beneficial sciences).”

And thus, this company of Muses, rebuked, angrily cast down their gazes to the earth, and showing by blushes their shame, they sorrowfully passed the threshold. And I was so affected by the sight that I was plunged into tears and gloom so that I could not recognize that woman of so imperial authority. I became all abashed and stunned, and cast my sight down to the earth, and remained still, waiting to see what she would do next. Then she came near and sat down upon the furthest corner of my bed and beholding that my face was bent to the earth, heavy and aggrieved with weeping, she used these words to grieve at the disquiet of my mind.

Book 1 – Meter 2

“Alas, how the mind of man, drowned with overflowing depression, dulls and abandons its own clarity, heading into foreign darkness whenever his troubles grow endlessly. It is driven to and fro by worldly winds. This man, that once was free, to whom the heavens were open and known, and was wont to go in heavenly paths and to observe the light of the red sun; and to see the stars of the cold moon, and which star in heaven followed wandering paths moved by diverse spheres – this conquered man, had comprehended all this by astronomical calculations. And beyond this he was wont to search the causes when the blowing winds move and trouble the smooth water of the sea; and what spirit turns the stable heaven; and why the star arises out of the red east, to fall into the western waters, and what tempers the lusty hours of the first summer season that awakens and dresses the earth with rosy flowers; and who makes that bountiful harvest in years of plenty flowing with heavy grapes. And also, this man was wont to explain the diverse causes of hidden nature. Alas! now he lies emptied of the light of his mind, and his neck is pressed with heavy chains, and bares his face downward for the great weight, and is forced to gaze on the foul earth!

Book I – Prose 2

“But now is the time,” said she, “for medicine rather than complaint.”

She studied me with all the force of her eyes and said, “Are you not he who once, nourished with my milk and fostered with my meats escaped and grew to have the heart of a real man? Certainly, I gave you such armor that if you yourself had not first thrown them away, they should have defended you in invincible health. Don’t you know me? Why are you still? Is it for shame or for astonishment? I would rather that it was for shame, but it seems to me that astonishment has oppressed you.”

And when she saw me not only still, but without power over my tongue and all dumb, she laid her hand softly upon my breast and said, “Here there is no peril, he is fallen into a lethargy which is a common sickness of deceived hearts. He has forgotten himself a little, but certainly he shall easily remember himself if it is so that he once knew me; and so that he may do so, I will wipe his eyes a little that have been darkened by the cloud of mortal things.”

With these words, she gathered the hem of her garment into a fold and dried my eyes that were full of the waters of my weeping.

Book I – Meter 3

Thus, when the night was dispersed and chased away, darkness left me, and my eyes were restored to their original strength. And just as when, by example, the sun is hidden when the stars are

covered with clouds by a swift wind called Chorus, and the firmament remains dark with wet stormy clouds; and the stars do not appear upon the heavens, so that night seems spread upon the earth, if then the wind called Boreas sent out of the cave in the country of Thrace, chases away this night and uncovers the hidden day, then Phoebus shines forth, trembling with sodden light, and smites with his beams marveling eyes.

Book I—Prose 3

And thus, the clouds of sorrow dissolved and faded away. I looked heavenward determined to know the face of my physician. So, setting my eyes on her and focusing my vision, I beheld my nurse Philosophy, in whose house I had conversed and spent time from my youth.

I addressed her thus, “Oh thou mistress of all virtues, descended from the royal throne, why have you come into this solitary place of my exile? Have you come because you have been found guilty along with me of false charges?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, “my child, should I forsake you now and should I not share with you by common labor the burden that you have assumed in defense of my name? Certainly, it would not be lawful nor suitable for Philosophy to abandon without companionship the path of him who is innocent. Should I then fear blame against me, and tremble as though some new thing had befallen? Don’t you know that Philosophy has been assailed before now by folks of wicked ways? Have I not struggled in great battles in olden times, before the age of my Plato, against the foolhardiness of folly? And also, in the lifetime of the same Plato, his master Socrates won the victory of wrongful death in my presence. The heritage of this Socrates, that is to say the doctrine of Socrates in his opinion of felicity, which I call happiness, when the people who followed the Epicureans and Stoics and many others strove to ravish, every man for his part drew on the words of Socrates in defense of his own opinion, they swarmed to attack me, crying and debating their arguments. Thus, they carved and tore my clothes that I had woven with my hands; and with the scraps that they tore from my clothes, they went away believing that I fully supported them. In as much as these Epicureans and Stoics seemed to display some traces or steps of my habit, the folly of men believing those Epicureans and Stoics to be my followers, waylaid some through the error of the wicked or through the ignorance of the multitude. So, because they seemed to be philosophers, they were pursued and slain.

“So, even if you hadn’t known of the exiling of Anaxagoras, nor the poisoning of Socrates, nor the torments of Zeno, for they were foreigners, yet you might have known the followers of Seneca, of Canius, and of Soranus whose renown is neither archaic nor uncelebrated. Only this caused the deaths of these men: they were informed of my ways and seemed most averse to the studies of wicked men.

“Therefore, you shouldn’t wonder that I, in the bitter sea of this life am driven by blowing tempests. Within these tempests, this is my chief purpose: to displease wicked men. Those criminals, although they are a great host, are to be despised for they are not governed by a leader (of reason). They pillage only by fleeting, foolish error; and if they sometimes mount a stronger attack against us, our leader gathers together his riches into his tower, and they are left to pick over worthless sacks or satchels. But we who are high above, safe from all tumult and mad noise, comfortably enclosed in such a palace which chattering or annoying folly may not penetrate, we scorn such plunderers and thieves of useless things.”

Book I – Meter 4

Whoever is of clear virtue, is sober, and leads a well-ordered life;

Who has crushed proud words and can look with composure on either fortune;

He may maintain his continence unruffled.

Neither the storm, nor the menacing sea, turbulently churning up from the bottom, shall ever move that man.

Neither the unstable mountain called Vesuvius that belches out smoky fire through its broken chimneys, nor the path of lightening that can strike high towers shall ever move that man.

Why then, oh wretches, do you fear mad, criminal tyrants who are powerless?

Hope for nothing; dread nothing; and so, you will disarm the rage of this unmighty tyrant.

But whoever, quaking, fears or desires anything that is not solidly his own, that man has cast away his shield, is removed from his place, and has bound himself with the chains by which he may be drawn.

Book I—Prose 4⁵

“Do you feel these things,” she asked, “and do they at all, penetrate your heart? Are you like an ass to the harp? Why do you weep; why spill tears? If you are waiting for your doctor’s help, it behooves you to discover your wound.”

Then I, having gathered strength in my heart, answered, “And must you rehash or admonish? And isn’t it evident that Fortune has insanely turned against me? And doesn’t the appearance or the nature of this place move you? Is this the library in my house where you chose to have your throne and where you often debated with me on the divine and human sciences? Was my appearance then as it is now? Was my face or my expression as it is now when I sought, with your aide, the secrets of nature; when you shaped my behavior and the purpose of my whole life to follow the example of the order of heaven? Is this the reward that you give me after my obedience to your way?”

“Certainly, you confirmed by the mouth of Plato this sentence: common properties or communities would be happy if they were governed by those who had fully studied wisdom, or if the governors of these communities studied to gain wisdom. You also said by the mouth of the same Plato that it was necessary for wise men to desire and to undertake the governance of communities, for if the governing of cities were left in the hands of criminally wicked citizens, nothing will result but pestilence and the destruction of good people. And therefore, I followed this authority, desiring to put into execution and into actions of communal administration, these things that I had learned from you during my leisure studies.

“You, and God, who puts you in the minds of wise folks, know that nothing brought me to power or dignity but the ordinary study of all goodness. And that is why between me and wicked folks there has been grievous discord that may not be resolved by prayers. For my liberty comes from freedom of conscience: I have always despised the wrath of more powerful folks in defense of the right.

“How often did I resist and withstand the man named Conigastus who always made assaults against the wealth of poor weak folks! How often, too, have I opposed or repelled Trigulla, provost of the king’s palace, both for the wrongs that he had begun to do and those fully performed! How often have I covered for and defended by putting my authority in peril for the wretched poor folk, who were always tormented with endless distress and pain by the covetousness of unpunished foreigners! No man has ever yet lured me from right to wrong.

⁵ In this Prose, Boethius bares his soul to Philosophy, laying out all of his complaints against Fortune, man, and God. This provides her with the data she needs to diagnose and to gradually cure his sickness.

“When I saw the fortunes and the wealth of the people of the provinces being harmed or diminished either by private pillaging or by public tributes or taxes⁶, I was as sorry as those who suffered the harm. [Chaucer’s note: *When Theodoric, king of the Goths, in a year of inflation, had his granaries full of corn, and commanded that no man should buy any corn until his corn was sold, and that at an exorbitantly high price, Boethius opposed that ordinance and overcame it, with the king’s full knowledge.*]

“During the terrible time of famine, there was established or declared a harmful and unreasonable coemption that men could easily see would greatly torment and damage the whole province of Campania. I took action against the Pretorian Provost for the common good, and under the king’s eyes, I overcame it, so that the coemption was not demanded and did not take effect. [Chaucer’s note: *Coemption is to say common buying, or buying together, that was imposed upon the people so that whoever bought a bushel of corn, he must give the king the fifth part.*]

“There was Paulinus, a counselor of Rome, whose riches the palace hounds, hoped in their covetousness to devour. Yet I drew him out of their gaping jaws.

“And so that the punishment for the wrongful accusations against Albinus, a counselor of Rome, should not suddenly be carried out, I imposed myself, between him and the hate and indignation of the accuser Cyprian. Is it not then clear that I have purchased great discord against me? But I ought to be all the more protected from these persons, since for the love of righteousness I never took measures to protect myself from the king’s court for safety’s sake. But through the accusations of the same accusers, I am condemned.

“Among these accusers, one Basilius who was once chased out of the king’s service, is now compelled by his need for foreign money to accuse me. Also, Opilion and Gaudencius have accused me, albeit the royal court had once sentenced them both to exile for their innumerable treacheries and frauds, but they then sought sanctuary in holy houses; and when this was reported to the king, he commanded that unless they removed themselves from the city of Ravenna by a certain day, they would be marked on the foreheads with a hot iron and chased out of the town. Now what can compare to this cruelty: For certainly on that same day, the accusation against me from these same accusers was received. What’s to be said? Have my studies and my cleverness deserved this? Or else, were those who condemned me righteous accusers or not? Wasn’t Fortune ashamed of this? Surely, even if Fortune was not ashamed at innocence being accused, she ought to have been ashamed at the filth of my accusers.

“But would you ask of what I am accused? They say that I wanted to save the institution of the Senate. And do you wish to hear in what manner? I am accused of having intercepted the accuser as he carried letters proving the senators guilty of crimes against the regal majesty of the king.

“Oh Mistress, what do you think of this? Should I disavow this guilt so as not to shame you? Certainly, I have willed the salvation of the senate, nor shall I ever quit willing it; and that I confess and acknowledge; but the accuser’s charge of having been intercepted should cease. For shall I call it then a felony or a sin that I have desired the preservation of the order of the Senate? Although, this same Senate has acted by their decrees and judgements as though it were a sin and a felony to wish for their salvation, but Folly who always lies to himself may not change the merit of things. No, I believe, by the judgement of Socrates, that it would be unlawful for me to hide the truth, or to assent to lying. But in any case, I leave it to your judgement and to that of wise folks.

⁶ Boethius does not use two terms for public taxation; Chaucer inserts the term “carriage” which is defined by F. N. Robinson as “feudal tolls imposed in place of service as carrier; hence taxes.” Glossary pg. 938 *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* 2nd Ed. 1961, Riverside Press Cambridge, MA

“Regarding all the circumstances and truth of this thing, in order that those who come after our days shall know of it, I have put my remembrances in writing. Concerning the forged letters of which I am accused of creating, and in which I am shown to wish for the freedom of Rome, what is the point of my talking about it? The truth of the fraud of these letters would have been clearly and powerfully shown if I had been permitted to use this evidence and to appear at the confession of my accusers. For of what other freedom may we hope? Surely, I wish that other freedoms might be hoped for! I would have answered in the words of Canius. For when he was accused by Gaius Caesar, Germanicus’ son, that he knew and consented to a conspiracy perpetrated against him, this Canius answered, ‘If I had known of it, you would not know it.’

“Sorrow has not so dulled my wits that I complain only that criminals plot felonies against virtue, but I am astonished that they are successful in carrying out their schemes, because the will to be wicked comes from our defects, but it is monstrous and a marvel that in the present sight of God, such things as every wicked man has conceived in his mind against innocence may be achieved and performed. In respect to this, one of your familiars asked not unskillfully, “If God is, whence comes evil; and if God is not, whence comes good?” But even if it were lawful that criminal folks who now desire the blood and the death of all good men, and also of the whole senate, had wished to destroy me who they had always seen battling for and defending good men and the senate, yet I had not deserved this from the senators that they should wish my destruction.

“You remember well, I suppose, that when did or said anything, I was always ruled by you. At the city of Verona, when the king, eager for mass slaughter, determined to use his royal power to transfer to the whole order of the senate the guilt for which Albinus was charged, how I, despite peril to myself, defended all the senate. You know well that I am speaking the truth, nor did I ever strut boastfully by praising myself. For always when anyone receives the gift of renown by boasting of his works, he diminishes his inner conscience.

“But now you can clearly see how I have ended up due to my innocence. I have received the pain of a false conviction as reward for my true virtue. And what open confession of felony ever had judges so unanimous in cruelty as at my trial that neither error of judgement, nor the condition of fortune that is uncertain to all mortals, caused any of them to waiver, that is to have pity or compassion? For even if I had been accused of planning to burn churches and to murder priests with wicked swords, or that I had plotted death to all good men, I would have had the sentence pronounced with me present, confessed or convicted. But now I am removed from the city of Rome almost five hundred thousand paces. I am defenseless, condemned to banishment and to death for the efforts and benevolence that I have done for the senate.

“But, oh, how worthy they are of merit! None of them have ever been convicted of such a crime as mine. My accusers saw clearly the dignity of my “crime” and in order to darken it by mixing in some felony, they bore witness against me and lied that I had polluted my conscience with sacrilege for covetousness of dignity. And certainly, you yourself who are planted in me, chased out of the seat of my heart all covetousness for mortal things, nor has sacrilege been allowed to have a place in me before your eyes. For you dropped into my ears and into my thoughts this commandment of Pythagoras, “men shall serve God and not gods.” Neither was it convenient nor necessary for me to seek help from the foulest spirits – I who you have prepared and shaped to such excellence that you made me close to God.

“And beyond this, the purity of the private chamber of my house (that is to say, my wife) and the company of my honest friends, and of my wife’s father who is both holy and worthy of reverence for his own deeds, defended me from all suspicion of such blame. But oh malice! For they who accuse me, accuse you, Philosophy of greatly misguided faith, for they believe that I have had dealings with malign

forces, or enchantments because I am replenished and fulfilled by your techniques and informed of your manners. And thus, not only is my reverence for you no protection to me, but you are blemished by my offence.

“But certainly, to the harms I have suffered, there is added this: that the speculations and the judgement of many people fail to examine the merits of things, but rather only the accident of fortune. They judge that only those things are blessed by God who are uplifted by temporal health. [Chaucer’s note: *As thus: that if a man is prosperous, he is a good man and worthy to have that prosperity; but whoever is misfortunate, he is a wicked man, and God has forsaken him, and he deserves to have that adversity.*] And that’s the source of that common opinion: above all, abandon the wretched!

“Certainly, it hurts me to think right now about the diverse things that people say about me. And so, I declare, that the final punishment from contrary fortune is this: when any accusation is made against a prisoner, men believe that he deserves his fate. And I who am separated from good people, stripped of my dignities, and have my good name besmirched by gossip, have suffered torment for my good deeds. I truly seem to see the gangs of criminal and wicked men reveling in joy and gladness. I see every crook fashioning new frauds to swindle to good folks. I see good men destroyed by their resistance to my peril, while every disgraceful tormentor dares to commit all felonies with impunity and is egged on to do so with gifts. Innocence has not only been robbed of security but of defense; and therefore, I must cry to God in this way:

Book I—Meter 5

Oh, you who built the wheel that holds the stars fastened to Your everlasting throne, and which turns the heavens with an overpowering force.

You cause the stars to abide by Your law: so that sometimes the moon shines with her full horns meeting, reflecting all the beams of the sun, her brother, and dimming the stars that would appear. Sometimes when the moon, pale with her dark horns approaches the sun, she loses her light. The evening star, Hesperus, in the earliest hours of the night comes forth with her cold arisings, then comes back again following her worn path and is pale by the morning sunrise, and is then called Lucifer⁷.

You shorten the day in the cold winter making the leaves fall. You divide the swift tides of the night during hot summer. Your strength tempers the various seasons of the year, so that Zephyrus, the gentle wind that brings, in the early summer, the leaves that the wind called Boreas had stolen away in autumn; and the seeds that the star called Arcturus saw, have grown to tall corn when warmed by the star called Sirius.

There is nothing that escapes Your ancient law, nor forgoes the work proper to its kind. Oh, You Governor, governing all things with set purpose, why do you only refuse to govern the works of man in like manner? Why do you allow slippery Fortune to so greatly upend the order of things so that grievous pain that should in due course punish wicked folks, instead punishes the innocent? People of evil intent sit on high thrones, and irksome people tread unrightfully on the necks of holy men. Virtue, naturally clear and shining, is hidden in deep darkness; and the righteous man bears the pain and the blame of the criminal. Why do neither perjury, nor fraud masked and combed with false color, punish scoundrels? And these rascals, when they choose to flex their muscles, they rejoice to crush under them sovereign kings who had ruled vast numbers of people with absolute authority. Oh You, whatsoever You are who knits together all bonds of things, look on this wretched earth. We men that are not a foul part, but a fair part of so great a work, are tormented in this sea of fortune. Oh,

⁷ Both the evening star, Hesperus, and the morning star, Lucifer is the planet Venus

Governor, withdraw and restrain the devastating flood, and fasten and secure this earth's stability with that bond by which You govern the vast heavens.

Book I—Prose 5

When I had, with continual sorrow, sobbed or choked out these things, she with a peaceful aspect and not ruffled by my complaints said thus, “When I saw you, sorrowful and weeping, I knew from the start that you were wretched and exiled; but I would never have known how far removed you are if your tale had not shown it to me. But certainly, although you are far from your country, you have not been exiled from it, but you have lost your way and gone astray. And if you'd rather believe that you have been put out of your country, then consider that you have exiled yourself rather than someone having done it to you. Only you, yourself, can ever do that to you. For if you can remember the country of your birth, it is not governed by emperors, nor by government of the multitude as were the countries of the people of Athens.

One Lord and one King who is God is lord of your country and he rejoices in the lives of his citizens and does not throw them into exile. And about this Lord, it is a sovereign freedom to be governed by His bridle and to obey His justice.

Have you forgotten the ancient law of your city where it is ordained and established, that any man who chooses to make his home there rather than elsewhere may never be exiled from that place? For he who is sheltered within the palace and the walls of this city need never fear being exiled. But he who loses the will to live there, he also forgoes the right to be a citizen of this city.

“So, I say that the face of this place does not move me so much as your own face. Nor do I long for the walls of your library, dressed and ornamented with ivory and glass, but rather the seat of your thought, in which I did not store books, but that which makes books precious, namely, the ideas in my books.

“And certainly, of your efforts on behalf of the common good you have spoken truly, though from among the multitude of your good works, you have listed only a few. And of the dishonesty or falsehood of the things for which you have been charged, you have recalled those that are known to all. And of the felonies and frauds of your accusers, it seems that you have touched on them honestly and briefly, although others who know the truth could have spoken of them better and more completely. You also greatly blamed and complained about the wrongful deeds done by the senate. And you have sorrowed for my reputation. And you have wept for the damage done to your slandered name. And in your final complaint, you railed against Fortune, and you complained that folks are not rewarded according to their merits. And at the end of your mad rant, you prayed that the peace that governs the heavens should govern the earth.

“Because so many emotional trials have assailed you, and sorrow, ire, and weeping have torn you in diverse directions, you are now mentally weakened. Stronger remedies would not yet be effective for you. Therefore, we will use some lighter medicines so that these passions that have swollen hard from the anxieties flowing into your mind might become, by gentle stages, eased and softened. Then you will respond to the strength of mightier and sharper medicine.”

Book I—Meter 6

When the heavy star of Cancer is warmed by the beams of Phoebus, the sun, whoever then plants his seeds in fields that refuse to receive them, let him go, stripped of the trust he had in his corn, to eat acorns of oaks.

If you would gather violets, don't go into the purple woods when the shuddering field is trembling with cold from the sharp wind called Aquilo.

If you desire or would use grapes, don't try with a gluttonous hand to strain and press the stalks of the vine at the beginning of summer, for Bacchus, the god of wine, has instead given his gifts to autumn.

God marks and assigns the times, enabling them to their proper functions, and never allowing the seasons which he himself has divided and separated to be mingled together. Therefore, he who violates certain laws of nature by rebellious ways, receives no happy conclusion or benefit for his work.

Book I—Prose 6

"First, will you let me touch and weigh the state of your mind through a few questions, so that I may understand how to cure you?"

"Ask me, what you will, and I shall answer."

Then she asked, "Do you believe that the world is governed by foolish happenstance and fortune, or that there be in it any government of reason?"

"Certainly," I said, "I do not at all believe that things of such certainty should be managed by foolish fortune, rather, I know well that God, creator and master, is governor of his work; nor has the day come that I have stopped believing the truth of this sentence."

"So it is, for the same thing you sang a little while ago. And you bewailed and bewept, that only man is set apart from the cure of God. For all other things, you had no doubt that they are governed by reason. But, Oh! I wonder greatly why you are sick since you maintain so wholesome a frame of mind. But let us search deeper; I conjecture that there is something (I know not what) lacking. Tell me this: since you do not doubt that this world is governed by God, with what governance do you take it to be governed?"

"Unless, I can grasp the meaning of your question, I cannot answer it."

"I was not deceived, that there is some weakness by which the malady of mental imbalance has crept into your mind leaving your palace breeched and open. But tell me this: do you remember what the end of things is and whither all life is headed?"

"I have heard it told sometime, but fatigue has dulled my memory."

"Surely, you well know from where all this comes and proceeds?"

"That I know well," said I, and I answered that God is the beginning of all.

"And how may this be, that since you know the beginning of things, you do not know the end of things? But such is the nature of mental illness and the power it has, that it may move a man from his own stability and perfect understanding. But certainly, it may not obliterate nor totally alienate him. But I would have you answer this: do you remember that you are a man?"

"Why should I not remember that?"

"Can you tell me then, what thing is a man?"

"Are you asking me, whether I am a reasonable mortal beast? I know well and confess: that is what I am."

"Do you not know that you were ever any other thing?"

"No," I said.

"Now I know, the other cause of your malady, and that a great one: you have ceased to know who and what you are. Through this, I have plainly found the cause of your sickness, or else the gateway to recover your health. You are confounded with forgetting of yourself; for you cry that you are exiled from your own possessions. And since you do not know what the end of things is, you believe that criminal and wicked men are strong and healthy. And because you have forgotten by what law the world is governed, you think that these mutations of fortune fly about without governor. These are great causes not only of illness, but of death. But I thank the Maker and Author of health that

nature has not totally abandoned you. I have a great treatment for your health, and that comes from your true understanding of the governance of the world since you believe it is not subject to chance folly but is ruled by God's reason. Therefore, have no fear; for from this little spark, the light of life shall shine.

"But it is not yet time for faster remedies, and the nature of deceived minds is this: that as often as they reject true opinions, they cloak themselves in falsehoods causing the darkness of mental illness to swell up, confounding true insight. Therefore, I shall endeavor to thin and weaken this darkness by light and moderate remedies, so that after the darkness of deceitful longings is dispersed, you may know the shining of true light."

Book I—Meter 7

The stars, covered with black clouds, may not shed any light.

If the troubled wind called Auster, turning and billowing the sea, stirs up the heat *boiling up from the bottom*, the waters that were clear as glass and akin to fair bright days, are blocked from men's sight by the filth and slime that is mixed into it.

And the flowing stream that rolls down aimlessly from high mountains is often arrested and resisted by encountering a stone that has broken away and fallen from some rock.

Therefore, if you would look and truly understand with clear eyes, and stay on the right path, abandon joy, drive away fear, dispel hope, and do not let sorrow approach. Let none of these four passions overcome you or blind you. For cloudy and dark and bound with bridles is the mind where these things reign.

Book II—Prose 1

After this, she held off a bit; and having gained my attention by her gentle stillness, she began to speak in this way, “If I have understood and utterly grasped the causes and habit of your sickness, you languish and are defeated due to desire and longing for your former fortune. Fortune has apparently altered herself, as you imagine, toward you. This has perverted the clearness and stability of your heart. I understand the many colors and deceits of this marvelous monster Fortune and how she uses abundant flattering familiarity on those whom she works to beguile until she confounds with unbearable sorrow those whom she has left abandoned in unrelieved despair. And if you clearly remember the type, the manner, and the works of this Fortune, you shall well know that in her, you never had, nor ever lost any fair thing. But I don’t suppose I will need to work hard to refresh your memory of these things. For you used to attack and despise her with manly words when she was by your side with blandishments, and you pursued her with sentences drawn from my sanctuary, that is, from my ideas. But no sudden mutation can occur without a kind of shifting of the heart. And so, it has befallen that you are a little removed from the peace of your mind.

“But now is the time for you to drink and taste some soft and pleasing things so that when they have been absorbed within you, they may permit stronger draughts of medicine. Come forth now, the persuasiveness of sweet rhetoric who follows the true path while she obeys my laws. And with Rhetoric, come forth Music, a damsel in our house who sings in turn lighter and heavier modes or rhythms.⁸”

“What ails you man? What is it that has cast you into mourning and weeping? I believe that you have seen some new and unknown thing. You assume that Fortune has changed herself to oppose you; but if you believe that, you are wrong. Those have always been her ways. She has instead shown toward you her own stability in the changing of herself. Just such was she when she flattered you and deceived you to become unlawfully attracted to false goods. You have now known and seen the changing or double face of the blind goddess Fortune. She who covers and veils⁹ herself before other folks, has shown you her true self. If you approve of her and think her good, then follow her ways and stop complaining; but if you are aggrieved by her false treachery, despise her, and cast away she who plays so hurtfully. For she, who is now the cause of such sorrow to you ought to be the source of peace and joy. She has truly forsaken you; there never may be a man so secure that she will not forsake him. Do you then maintain that this happiness that shall pass away, is precious to you? And do you now consider Fortune precious, since she is unfaithful, and when she departs, she leaves a man in sorrow? For as she may not be retained by a man’s will, she makes him wretched when she leaves him. What else is glittering Fortune, but a presentiment of wretchedness to come?

“No, it is not sufficient to only look on things that are right before a man’s eyes. Wisdom looks and measures the end of things. And the same changing from adversity into prosperity, means that the menaces of Fortune should not be dreaded, nor her flatteries desired. Thus, at the end, it behooves you to suffer with calm spirit, in patience, all that is done within the domain of worldly Fortune, since you chose to put your neck under her yoke. For if you would write a law of changing

⁸ I translated Chaucer’s term “prolacions” into “rhythms”. Prolations was Chaucer’s addition and its first known use is in the 14th century. The original Latin phrase is: “Musica laris nostri uernacula nunc leuiores nunc grauiores modos succinat.” (Let Music, a little slave belonging to our house chant sometimes lighter and sometimes sadder notes) Prolation, in medieval music is the relationship between the semibreve (whole note) and the minim (half note) in mensural notation.

⁹ Chaucer uses the word “wimpleth.” The word wimple is a medieval term for a lady’s headress that concealed the hair and neck. The Latin “Quae sese adhuc uelat aliis, tota tibi prorsus innotuit” (She who concealed herself from others is wholly known to you) is less poetic than Chaucer’s term.

and staying for Fortune who you have chosen freely to be your lady, are you not wrong in that, and shouldn't you make Fortune angry and bitter by your impatience? And still you may not change her.

"If you commit and betake your sails to the wind, you will be driven, not where you wish, but where the wind thrusts you. If you cast your seeds in the fields, you should have in mind that some years are bountiful and other years are barren. You have placed yourself under Fortune's governance, and therefore it behooves you to be obedient to your lady's ways. Would you try to arrest or hold back the swiftness and the rotation of her turning wheel? Oh, you fool of all mortal fools! If Fortune began to be stable, she would cease to be Fortune."

Book II—Meter 1

When Fortune with a proud right hand has turned her changing seasons, she acts like the boiling Euripus, that arm of the sea that ebbs and flows so that sometimes the stream is on one side and sometimes on the other. Cruel Fortune casts down once dreaded kings. And she, unreliable, raises up the humble condition of he who is miserable. She neither hears, nor cares for the weeping of wretches, and she is so hard that she laughs and scorns the cries of those who she reduced to tears by her free will.

Thus, she plays, and thus she proves her strength, and shows a great wonder to all her servants: that a man that is seen to be happy may be crushed in an hour.

Book II—Prose 2

"Certainly, I will plead with you for a few things using the words of Fortune. Listen carefully to critique whether she might ask you these things: 'Oh thou man, why do you assume to judge me guilty with your continual complaints? What wrong have I done you? What goods have I taken from you that were yours? Battle or plead with me before the judge of your choice for the possession of riches or of honors; and if you can show that any mortal man has ever received any of those things as his property, then I will freely grant that these things of which you complain were rightfully yours.

'When nature brought you forth from your mother's womb, I received you naked and needy of all things. I nourished you with my riches and was ready and attentive to sustain you with my favor – and that causes you now to be impatient with me.

'I surrounded you with all the abundance and glitter of the goods that are rightfully mine. Now it pleases me to withdraw my hand. You have been graced with alien goods. You have no right to complain as though you had lost all your own things. Why do you complain? I have done you no wrong. Riches, honors, and other such things are rightfully mine. My servants know me for their lady. They come with me and depart when I leave. I firmly declare that if those things that you complain of losing had been yours, you would not have lost them. Shall I then be forbidden to exercise my rights?

'Certainly, it is lawful for the heavens to make clear days and then to cover the same days with dark nights. The year is also allowed to clothe the earth, now with flowers, then with fruit, and to blast them sometimes with rain and cold. The sea has also his right to be sometimes calm and gentle with smooth water, and sometimes to be horrible with waves and with tempests. But the covetousness of man that may not be staunch – shall it bind me to be steadfast, since such steadfastness is foreign to my nature?

'Such is my strength, and this is the game that I continually play. I turn the whirling wheel in its changing circle. I delight in changing the lowest to the highest, and the highest to the lowest. Be raised up if you wish, just so it be by this law, and don't hold it against me that you fall down when the rules of my game require it.

‘Don’t you know about Croesus, king of the Lydians¹⁰, who had shortly before been a bitter enemy of Cyrus? This ruler Croesus was captured by Cyrus and led to the fire to be burned; but a rain descended from heaven and rescued him. And have you forgotten how Paulus, consul of Rome¹¹ when he had captured the king of Persia, wept piteously over the captivity of that king. What else do tragedies cry about but the deeds of Fortune that unexpectedly overturn the realms of great nobles. [Chaucer’s note: *‘Tragedy’ is to say a poem of a time of prosperity that ends in wretchedness.*]

‘Didn’t you learn in Greek when you were young that in the entry or in the cellar there sit two barrels: the one full of good, and the other is full of harm? What right have you to complain if you have partaken more plenteously from the good side (that is of my riches and prosperity)? And also, what if I have not entirely abandoned you? What if my mutability gives you rightful cause to hope for better things? In any case, don’t be dismayed; and you who exist in the world of men should stop wishing to live by your own rules.’”

Book II—Meter 2

Although Plenty, the goddess of riches, scatters down from a full horn, without holding back her hand as many riches as the sea turns up sands when it is moved with stormy blasts, or else as many riches as bright stars shine in heaven on starry nights, yet for all that, mankind would not cease to weep with wretched complaints.

And all be it that God gladly receives their prayers and lavishes them with gold, and drapes covetous folks with noble or shining honors, yet it seems to them that they have received nothing. For they are always cruelly ravenous, devouring all they have gotten, gaping wide and desiring after yet more riches.

What bridle might restrain to any extent the wild covetousness of men, when the more they are overflowing with large gifts, the more they burn with the thirst of having? Certainly, he who quakes and dreads believing himself needy is not a rich man.

Book II—Prose 3

“If Fortune spoke for herself in this manner, truly you would have no answers to make. But if you have anything whereby you may defend your complaints it behooves you to speak of it and I will give you space to do so.”

“Certainly,” I said, “these have been fair things and anointed with the honeyed sweetness of Rhetoric and Music; but only while heard are they delicious. To wretches, it brings a deeper feeling of harm. This is to say, that wretches feel that they suffer too grievously to be assuaged by words of cheer or comfort. So, when these things fade from ears, the implanted sorrow distresses the mind.”

“Just so,” she said, “for these things are not remedies for your illness but are a kind of nourishment for your sorrow that yet rebels against your cure. At the right time, I shall manipulate such things as will pierce deeply. But nevertheless, since you will not cease to consider yourself wretched, have you forgotten the amount and ways of your happiness?”

“I won’t dwell on how the ruling men of the city took you under their care and custody when you were orphaned of father and mother. You were chosen to be close to the princes of the city; and you became beloved and dear to them rather than just a neighbor. This is the most precious of any relationship or alliance that may be. Who could say that you were unhappy with such a noble father-

¹⁰ **Croesus** (595 BC – c. 546 BC) was the king of Lydia who, according to Herodotus, reigned for 14 years: from 560 BC until his defeat by the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 546 or 547 BC. *source:* <https://www.britannica.com>

¹¹ **Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus** (c. 229 BC – 160 BC) was a two-time consul of the Roman Republic and a noted general who conquered Macedon. *source:* <https://www.Britannica.com>

in-law, with the chastity of your wife, and with the opportunity and nobility of your sons? And above all – I choose to pass over common things – how you had in your youth honors that were denied to older men.

“Now I am pleased to come to the singular pinnacle of your happiness. If any fruit of mortal things may have any weight or value of happiness, can you ever forget, despite any shock of harm that has befallen, that day when you saw your two sons made consuls, and led together from your house surrounded by so great an assemblage of senators, and basking in the joy of the people? And remember when you saw them seated in the court on their thrones of honor? You as speaker or orator, of kings’ praises, demonstrated that you deserved the glory for your wit and eloquence when, sitting between your two consul sons, in the Circus Maximus, you satisfied the wishes of the multitude of people with such great praising and lauds as men sing in victories.

“You paid off Fortune with shiny words, and so deceived her when she soothed and nourished you as her own delight. You took from Fortune a gift as she had never given to a private man. Will you therefore demand a reckoning from Fortune? She has now gleamed for the first time with a wicked eye. If you were to weigh the number and the manner of your blisses and of your sorrows, you wouldn’t relinquish your happiness. For if you consider yourself unhappy because the things you deem joyful have passed, there is no reason that you should judge yourself wretched since the things that seem sorrowful will also pass.

“Are you newly come into the shadow or tabernacle of this life? Or do you think that there is any permanence in man’s things, when often a swift hour dissolves the same man (as when the soul departs from the body)? For although one can seldom have any faith in the permanence of the things of Fortune, yet nevertheless, the last day of a man’s life is a kind of death for Fortune including the fortunate things that had remained. Therefore, what’s the difference between you abandoning her by dying, and she, in fleeing from you?”

Book II—Meter 3

When Phoebus, the sun, begins to spread his brightness with rosy chariots, then the dimmed star, pales her white light by the flames of the sun that overcomes starlight.

When the woods become ruddy with red flowers in the beginning of summer through the breath of the warm wind called Zephyrus, if the cloudy wind Auster blows fiercely, then gone are the fair flowers leaving thorns.

Often the sea is clear and calm without churning floods, and then often the horrible wind called Aquilon causes boiling tempests and overwhelms the sea.

If the form of this world is so seldom stable, and if it turns by so many exchanges, will you then trust in the tumbling fortunes of men? Will you trust in fleeting goods? It is certain and established by enduring law, that nothing that is born is either steadfast nor stable.

Book II—Prose 4

Then I said, “Oh teacher of all virtues, you have spoken the truth; nor may I forsake the remarkably swift and early course of my prosperity; but this is a thing that greatly pains me to recall. For in all adversities of fortune, the unhappiest kind of contrary fortune is to have had happiness.”

“Because,” said she, “you suffer from the torment of your false opinions, you may not rightfully blame or impute it to things of which you still have plenty. Since the idle condition of accidental happiness motivates you now, it is lawful that you should reckon with me how many great things you still possess. And therefore, if the things you hold most precious from among all the riches of

Fortune are still held by you, by the grace of God, clean and unbefouled, may you then rightfully complain of Fortune's mischief since you yet have your best things?

"Certainly, Symmachus¹², your wife's father (this precious honor of mankind, created of all wisdom and virtue), still lives in good health and whose life you would gladly purchase with your own. He bewails the wrongs that men do to you and not for himself since he lives secure from any sentences against him.

"And there still lives your wife, who has a pleasant temperament and surpasses other women in pure chastity. And since I would speak only briefly of her bounties, I will say that she is like her father. I tell you truly that she lives; but hates her life and keeps alive only for your sake. She is all worn and overcome by weeping and sorrow in her longing for you; in this thing only, I grant that your happiness has been dimmed.

"What shall I say also of your two consular sons, who even as children sparkled with the reflected wit of their father and grandfather?

"And since the highest aim of all mortal men is to save their own lives, oh, how happy you would be if you knew your goods! For there are still things in your possession that no one can doubt are more precious to you than your own life. And therefore, dry your tears, for not every face of Fortune is hateful toward you. Nor has an overwhelming tempest yet fallen upon you, as long as your anchors hold fast letting you maintain the comfort of this present time and having hope of better times to come."

"And I pray," said I, "that fast may they hold; for, while they hold, however things be, I shall glide forth and escape; but surely you see how many great accessories and garments have been stripped away from me."

"I have somewhat improved and furthered you," she said, "if you are not whining and obsessing about all your fortune since you have yet the best things. But I will not put up with your delicacy that complains so, weeping and anguishing because some things are lacking for your happiness.

"What man is so satisfied or enjoys such true happiness that he does not strive for, or complain on some account against the quality of his existence? That is why man's condition is so miserable; for either he doesn't get enough, or else it doesn't last forever.

"For one man may have great riches but is ashamed of his lowly birth.

"Another man is from a renowned noble family but is caged by such great need of things that he would rather be unknown.

"Another man has both wealth and noble name, but bewails his chaste life, for he has no wife.

"Another man is well and happily married, but he has no children, and builds his wealth for the heirs of strangers.

¹² **Quintus Aurelius Memmius Symmachus** (died 526) was a 6th-century Roman aristocrat, a historian and a supporter of Nicene Orthodoxy. He was a patron of secular learning and became consul for the year 485. He supported Pope Symmachus in the schism over the Popes' election. Symmachus adopted Boethius, and then became his father-in-law when Boethius married one of Symmachus' daughters, Rusticana. Symmachus mostly maintained good relationships with the new rulers of Italy, however, after Symmachus contradicted the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, he was condemned to death for treason in 526, one year after the execution of Boethius. Source: <https://www.britannica.com>

“Another man is blessed with children, but he weeps sorrowfully over the trespass of his son or daughter.

“So, no man is reconciled to the condition of his fortune; for always to every man there is missing some unknown thing...or else he dreads losing what he has attained.

“And add this also: that every well-off man has a delicate constitution; so that, unless everything goes according to his will, he is impatient, for he is not used to adversity. Right away, he is thrown by every little thing; and those are the ones that rob the most fortunate man of perfect happiness.

“How many men do you think would count themselves almost in heaven if they could attain the least part of the remnant of your fortune? This same place that you call exile is homeland to those who live here. Therefore, nothing is wretched but when you believe it so by coddling your feelings. And again, all fortune is blissful to a man who bears it agreeably or with equanimity.

“What man is so happy, that he would not want to change his conditions when he has lost patience? The sweetness of man’s happiness is sprinkled with much bitterness; this happiness though it seems sweet and joyful to him who has it, yet it may not be retained when it chooses to depart. Thus, one may see clearly how wretched is the happiness of mortal things that neither last forever for him who receives enough of every good fortune, nor can they delight him who is anxious.

“Oh, you mortals, why do you seek happiness outside of yourself, when it has been put inside you? Error and folly will confound you. I shall soon show you the pinnacle of sovereign happiness. Is there anything more precious to you than yourself? You will say, ‘no.’

“If it is true that the tranquility of your soul makes you mighty over yourself, then you have something in your power that you can never lose, and that Fortune cannot snatch from you. And so that you may know that happiness may not exist in things that are chancy and temporal, now understand and focus on this: if happiness is the highest of nature’s gifts that exists by reason, anything which may be taken away, is not a sovereign good (for truly worthy and honorable things may not be taken away), Thus, it is clearly shown that the instability of Fortune cannot bestow true happiness.

Furthermore, consider the man who is led by this flip-flopping fortune: either he knows that it is changeable or else he doesn’t know it. If he doesn’t know it, what happiness is there in the blindness of ignorance? And if he knows that it is changeable, he always lives in fear of losing that which he knows he must lose, So, his continual dread does not allow him to be happy, and when he does lose it, he judges himself to be despised and abandoned. Certainly, also, a good whose loss can be born with equanimity is a trifling good because men place no greater value on losing it than on having it. And as you yourself are the one to whom it has been shown and proven by many demonstrations, as I certainly know, that the souls of men cannot die, and since it is clear and certain that temporal happiness ends with the death of the body, then, without doubt, if death can take away happiness, then all kinds of mortal things could descend into wretchedness at the moment of death. But since we know well that many a man has sought the fruit of happiness not only in death but even in pain and torment, how might this present life make men happy, since when this same life ends, it does not leave them wretched?”

Book II—Meter 4

The kind of man, stable and aware, who would build himself a lasting home that would not be struck down by the loud blasts of the wind called Eurus, and who would scorn the menace of the sea’s floods, let him avoid building on the top of the mountain or in the moist sands; for the fierce

wind Auster torments the mountain top with all its strength, and the loose sands refuse to bear heavy weight.

Therefore, if you would escape the perilous adventure of the world, certainly make plans to fasten your house to a happy site on a low stone. For although the wind stirs up the sea into storms, you who are kept safe and sound by the strength of your palace shall enjoy an old age, scorning the madness and the rage of the air.

Book II—Prose 5

“As the sustenance of my reasoning is being absorbed by you, I think it is time to use somewhat stronger medicine. Now understand this: even if it were true that Fortune’s gifts were neither brittle nor transitory, what is there in them that could ever belong to you or is other than foul if considered and looked at clearly?

“Are riches precious by their own nature, or by your nature? What riches are the most valuable? Is it gold, or the power of accumulated money? Certainly, this gold and this money shines and gives better renown to those who spend it than to those who hoard it; for avarice always brings hatred to misers while largesse brings folks noble renown. Since a thing that is transferred from one man to another may not remain with the first man, certainly then, this money is precious when it is conveyed to other folks and ceases to be held by him who gave it. If all the money in the world were gathered up by one man, it would leave all other men needy. It is true that a loud, robust voice fills the hearing of many folks. But certainly, your wealth may not be spread to many people without being diminished; and when they have been passed around, they impoverish the giver of those riches. Oh, I call these riches thin and poor since many people may not have it all, nor may one man collect it all without impoverishing everyone else.

“And shining gems or precious stones, don’t they draw the eyes of men toward them for their beauty? For surely, if there was beauty or bounty in the shining of stones, this glitter belongs to the stones themselves and not to men; wherefore I greatly wonder that men marvel at such things. For what kind of thing is it that lacking movement or the joining of soul and body could seem a fair creature to him who has a reasoning soul? For even though gems hold within them a little of the lowest beauty of the world through the intent of their creator and through their own quality, since they rank below your own excellence, they absolutely do not deserve your admiration.

“And the beauty of fields, do they not bring you delight?”

Boethius: “Why shouldn’t it delight us, since they are a right fair part of the right fair work of this world? And just so, we are sometimes made glad by the sight of the sea when it is calm; and also, we marvel at the stars, and at the sun, and at the moon.”

Philosophy: “Do any of these things apply to you? How dare you glory in the glistening of any such things? Are you distinguished and embellished by the springing up of flowers at the beginning of summer, or enhanced by the fall harvest? Why are you swept away by idle joys? Why do you embrace alien goods as if they were yours? Fortune can never grant you things that are naturally alien to your nature.

“It’s true, without doubt, that the fruits of the earth are made to be food for beasts; but if you will fill yourself beyond nature’s requirements, that is the indulgence of Fortune. For with only a few things, and with a little amount, nature is satisfied. But if you will choke yourself with excess, certainly these things that you will thrust by force into your body will be unpleasing or harmful to you.

“Also, do you think that it is a fine thing to shine with varied clothing? If the beauty of such clothing is agreeable to the eye, I will marvel at the fabric, or else at the workmen that created them.

“But also, does having a large retinue of servants make a man blissful? If those servants are of a vicious character, it is a great burden and detriment to the house and a great enemy of the master himself; and if they are good men, how shall outside or foreign goodness be numbered among your riches? So, by all these above-mentioned points, it is clearly shown that never did one of the things that you considered to be your possessions belong to you.

“Among these things, if there is no desirable beauty, why should you be sorry to lose them; or why should you rejoice if you hold them? For if they are attractive in and of themselves, how does that pertain to you? They would continue to be attractive by themselves whether or not they had been collected among your possessions. It was because they seemed attractive and precious that you wished to collect them.

“But what do you want from Fortune with such noise and fanfare? I think that you seek to drive away neediness with an abundance of things. But instead, you are twisted around backwards, because you certainly require many helpers to maintain the diversity of your possessions. And it is a fact that those who have many things, need much help; while, on the other hand, little help is needed by those who accumulate possessions according to the needs of nature, and not from outrageous covetousness. Is it true then that you men have no good of your own, implanted in you, so that you must search for good outside of yourself in foreign and lower things? So then, are conditions turned so up-side-down that man, a divine beast by virtue of his reason, thinks himself neither fair nor noble unless he possesses soulless ornaments?

“Certainly, all other creatures are contented with their own beauty, but you men who are similar to God by having reasonable thought, desire to adorn your excellent selves with the lowest things, nor do you understand how greatly you wrong your Creator. For He wills that mankind should be the most worthy and noble of all earthly things; but you throw down your dignity beneath that of the lowest things. If the good of a thing is more precious than that thing’s goods, then since you deem that the foulest things are your goods, you debase yourself and put yourself beneath the foulest things by your own estimation. And certainly, this did not happen without your participation.

“Truly, such is the condition of all mankind, that only when it has self-knowledge does it surpass all other things in nobility; and when it ceases to know itself, then it is ranked below all beasts. This is because all other living beasts by nature lack self-knowledge, but when man loses the knowledge of himself it is from vice. The error and folly of you men is clearly evident, in that you believe that anything may be clothed with a stranger’s clothing; but truly, that may not be done! If a man glitters with things that he has put on, certainly these things may be commended and praised, but the thing that is covered and wrapped up under them lives in his filth!

“And I deny that a thing can be good which sickens the one who has it. Do I speak foolishly? You won’t disagree with me. Certainly, riches have often plagued their owners, since every evil scoundrel, due to his wickedness craves other folks’ wealth wherever stored, and whether gold or precious stones, and believes that only he is worthy of having them. You then, who now so anxiously dreads the sword and the spear, if you had entered onto the path of this life an empty wayfarer, then you would sing before the thief. [*Chaucer’s note: A poor man who carries no riches on him as he travels may boldly sing before thieves, for he has nothing which may be robbed.*] Oh, precious and bright is the happiness of mortal wealth that, when you have it, strips you of your security!”

Book II—Meter 5

Happy was the first age of men. They were content with the food that the faithful fields brought forth. They neither destroyed nor deceived themselves with extravagance. They would easily slacken their hunger by supping on the acorns of oaks.

They knew not how to mix the gift of Bacchus with clear honey (*spiced sweetened wine or claret*¹³), nor could they mingle the bright fleece of the country of China with the venom of Tyrie (purple dyed silk).

They slept a wholesome sleep upon the grass, and drank from running waters, and lay under the shadow of high pine trees.

Nor had any foreigner or stranger yet carved the great sea with oars or with ships. Nor had they yet visited new shores to transport merchandise to various countries.

Back then, the war trumpets were hushed and still. Blood shed by intense hate had not yet dyed armor. For what reason or what madness of enmity would first move arms to inflict cruel wounds when there was no reward to be gained from spilled blood? I wish that our times could turn back to the old ways! But the aching love of having burns in folks more cruelly than the fires of ever-smoldering Mount Aetna. Alas! Who was it that first dug up nuggets or chunks of gold buried under the earth and the precious stones that would rather have stayed hidden? He dug up precious perils.

Book II—Prose 6

“But what shall I say of dignities and power, which you men who know neither true dignity, nor true power, elevate to high heaven? These dignities and powers, if they are given to any wicked man, do as much damage and destruction as do the flaming Mount Aetna when its fires well up; nor can any flood do as much cruel harm. Certainly, you recall, I believe, that this dignity that men call the authority of the consuls, which was once the origin of freedom, your forefathers desired to do away with due to the pride of the consuls. And just for the same pride, your earlier forefathers had expunged from the city of Rome the king’s name, that is, they no longer would have a king.

“But now, if it so happens that dignities and powers are given to good men, which rarely happens, what benefits are in those dignities or powers other than the goodness of the folks that use them? Thus, honor does not come to virtue through dignity, but the other way around: honor comes to dignity on account of virtue.

“But what is this precious power that is so bright and desirable? Oh, you earthly beasts, don’t you realize what it is that you think you rule? Now if you saw a mouse that took it upon himself to have rights and powers over all other mice, how great would be your scorn! [Chaucer’s note: *So it goes with people; the body only has power over the body*]. For if you look closely upon the body of a man, what could you find that is feebler than mankind who may often be slain by the bite of small flies or else by creeping worms invading the private parts of his body? But where shall one find any man that may exercise or enforce any right upon another man other than on his body, or else upon things that are lower than the body, which I call Fortune’s possessions? Can you ever have any command over a free heart? Can you alienate from his place of rest a man who is unified within himself by steadfast reason?

“Once a tyrant tried to crush a courageous free man and tried to force him by torture to reveal and accuse those who knew of a conspiracy or confederacy that was planned against this tyrant. But this free man bit off his own tongue and cast it into the face of this mad tyrant. Thus, the torments that this tyrant would have cruelly inflicted, were turned by this wise man into a matter of virtue.

“But what could a man do to another man that may not be done to him by other folk? I have heard the tale of Busiris¹⁴ who was wont to slay guests who lodged in his house and was himself

¹³ In the 14th century, claree or claret was a wine from Bordeaux which was “clear” or paler than today’s claret and was heated and then poured over a bag of spices.

¹⁴ **Busiris**, in Greek mythology, Egyptian king, son of Poseidon (the god of the sea) and Lysianassa. After Egypt had been afflicted for nine years with famine, Phrasius, a seer of Cyprus, arrived in Egypt and announced that the famine would not end until an

slain by Hercules who was his guest. Regulus¹⁵ had taken in battle many men from Africa and put them in fetters, but soon afterward he had to present his hands to be bound with the chains of those he had once overcome. Do you believe then that he who has no power to prevent others from doing to him what he has done to them is mighty?

“And furthermore, if these dignities or powers had any intrinsic or natural goodness in themselves, they could never adorn scoundrels because contrary things are not inclined to be bound together. Nature refuses to join opposite things. And so, since I know that truly wicked folks often have dignities and powers, then evidently dignities and powers are not intrinsically good for they can adhere to scoundrels. It is right to judge all the gifts of Fortune in the same way: they come most abundantly to scoundrels.

“Here are those gifts that I believe should really be considered as such: no man doubts that he in whom strength is seen is strong; and one in whom swiftness is seen, truly he is swift; also, music makes musicians; and physic makes physicians; and rhetoric, rhetoricians. Thus, the nature of each thing is to have its own property, nor is it intermingled with action of contrary things since it will repel things that are contrary to it.

“But certainly, wealth may not restrain unbridled avarice; nor can power make a man mighty over himself whose vicious lusts hold him constrained with chains that may not be broken. And dignities, given to wicked folk not only don’t make them dignified, but they reveal quite clearly that they are unworthy and dishonorable. And why is this?

Certainly, you take joy in calling things with false names that are the opposite of their natures. Such names are often disproved by the action of the same things. This kind of wealth ought not be called wealth; nor such kind of power ought not be called power; nor such dignities ought not be called dignity. And finally, I may reach the same conclusion of all the gifts of Fortune, in which there is nothing desirable. Nor have they in themselves any natural bounty, as may be clearly seen. For neither do they always adhere to good men, nor always make good those to whom they are joined.”

Book II—Meter 6

We have well known how many great harms and destructions were done by Emperor Nero.¹⁶

He let the city of Rome burn, and slew the senators. Once he cruelly slew his brother, and he was made moist with the blood of his mother [Chaucer’s note: *He killed and slit open the body of his mother to see where he had been conceived*]; and he looked upon every part of her cold, dead body, nor did a tear wet his face, but he was so hardhearted that he could be a critic or judge of her dead beauty.

But nevertheless, this Nero governed by scepter all the peoples that Phoebus, the sun may see coming from its furthest arising till it hides its beams under the waves [Chaucer’s note: *He governed by imperial scepter all the peoples under the sun as it goes from east to west*]. And also, this Nero

annual sacrifice of a foreigner to Zeus was instituted. Later Heracles, who had arrived in Egypt from Libya, was seized and brought to the altar. Heracles, however, burst his bonds and slew Busiris. Source: <https://www.britannica.com>

¹⁵ The Roman consul **Regulus** served in the Punic war, defeating the Carthaginians in 256 B.C. His demands for an unconditional surrender, however, so angered the Carthaginians that they continued their battle and in 255 soundly defeated the Romans. As a Carthaginian prisoner, Regulus was sent back to Rome to negotiate a peace treaty. Against the protests of his fellow citizens, he returned to Carthage to fulfill the terms of his captivity; according to legend, he was then tortured to death. Source: www.getty.edu

¹⁶ The Latin does not name Nero until the end of the verse. The Meter begins, “*Nouimus quantas dederit ruinas Vrbe flammata patribusque caesis*” (We know what destruction he caused, burning the city and killing the Fathers.)

governed by scepter all the people under the cold stars called Septem Triones¹⁷ [Chaucer's note: *This is to say he governed all the people of northern lands*] and also Nero governed all the peoples that the violent wind Notus scorches and bakes in the burning sands with his dry heat [Chaucer's note: *That is to say, all the people in the south*].

But yet, all his might could not turn around the madness of this wicked Nero. Alas! It is a grievous fortune whenever a wicked sword is joined to cruel venom.

Book II—Prose 7

Then I said, "You well know that the craving for mortal things never had lordship over me. Rather, I have strongly desired to actively do things [Chaucer's note: *I desired to work on governance over communities*], for one should not age with unexercised virtue [Chaucer's note: *Before he grows old, his virtue that now lays dormant should not perish, unexercised in governance of communities for which men might speak or write of his good leadership*]."

Philosophy: "Truly, that is a thing that may draw to politics such hearts as are naturally worthy and noble but, nevertheless, it cannot attract or lure those who have been elevated to the full perfection of virtue. That is, it attracts those longing for glory and fame for having administered the country well or done good deeds for the profit of the community. For see now and consider how little and how void of all value is this glory.

"It is certain, as you have learned by the demonstrations of astronomy, that the whole circumference of the earth is nothing more than a pinprick when compared to the greatness of heaven; for if one were to compare the earth to the greatness of heaven, one would have to say that the earth was just nothing. Of the little surface of this world, the fourth part is inhabited with living beasts that we know of, as you yourself have learned from Ptolemy¹⁸ who proved it. And if you were to step back and subtract in your mind from this fourth part the areas overspread with oceans and marshes and the spaces overspread with sands and deserts there would be hardly any space left for the habitation of mankind. And you then who are trapped and enclosed in the smallest pinpoint of this pinpoint, do you think that you can make manifest or publish your renown and have your name broadcast? But your glory, so narrow and limited, so tightly squeezed within such little space, how might it encompass grandeur and great achievement?

"Also, add this: many a nation of diverse tongues and customs, and also of their ways of living inhabit the confines of this little place; and for these nations, due to difficulty of travel, and diversity of language, and due to lack of intermingling and of commerce, not only the names of individual men may not stretch far, but also the fame of cities may not be extended. As to the last point, certainly in the time of Cicero¹⁹, as he himself wrote in his book, the renown of the city of Rome had not yet passed nor climbed over the mountains called Caucasus and yet at this time Rome was well grown and greatly feared by the Parthians,²⁰ and by other folk inhabiting other lands. Can't you see then how narrow and compressed is this glory that you labor so to show off and multiply? Could the glory

¹⁷ The Big Dipper: [ad. L. *septentrio*, sing. of *septentriōnēs*, orig. *septem triōnēs*, the seven stars of the constellation of the Great Bear, f. *septem* seven + *triōnes*, pl. of *trio* plough-ox. Cf. F. *septentrion*.] (Oxford English Dictionary)

¹⁸ **Claudius Ptolemaeus**, (born c. 100 CE —died c. 170 CE), Egyptian astronomer, mathematician, astrologer, and geographer of Greek descent who flourished in Alexandria during the 2nd century CE. In several fields his writings represent the culminating achievement of Greco-Roman science, particularly his geocentric model of the universe now known as the Ptolemaic system. Source: <https://www.britannica.com>

¹⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero (106BC – 43BC), Roman politician, lawyer, and scholarly writer.

²⁰ The **Parthian Empire** (247 BC – 224 AD), also known as the **Arsacid Empire**, was a major Iranian political and cultural power in ancient Iran and Iraq. Source: <https://www.britannica.com>

of an individual Roman stretch beyond the reach of the fame of Rome's name itself? Also, can't you see that the customs and laws of various folks breed discord among them so that what some men judge worthy of praise, others judge worthy of punishment? And so, although a man delights in receiving praise for his renown, he can never broadcast, nor spread around his name among many peoples. And therefore, every kind of man ought to be content with his glory being published among his own neighbors, and this noble renown being confined within the bounds of one type of people.

"How many men, greatly esteemed in their time, have been put out of mind and done away with due to the lapse of wretched and inept writers? Even if they are recorded, those writings will do them little good when long, dark ages have passed and done away with both them and their authors! But you men seem to imagine for yourselves an immortality when you think that in times to come your fame shall last. Nevertheless, if you will compare your life with the endless spaces of eternity, what do you have to rejoice about in the long continuance of your name? For if one compares the length of a moment to ten thousand years, in as much as both timeframes are ended, the moment is a part of it, though very small. But this same number of years even multiplied over cannot be compared to the perdurability that is endless; for things that have endings may be compared, but things that are endless may not be compared to things that end. If renown of as long a time as you care to imagine, were compared to eternity that is unending and infinite, it should not only seem little, but plainly nothing.

"You men certainly can never do anything worthwhile unless it is for an audience and for idle rumors; and you forsake the great prize of conscience and of virtue, instead seeking your reward in the chatter of strangers.

Now hear and understand in the light of such pride and vainglory how a man wittily and humorously scorned such vanity. Once there was a man that had attacked with critical words another man, who, not because of true virtue, but for proud vainglory, had falsely assumed the name of philosopher. This first man of whom I speak thought that he would test whether he really was speaking to a philosopher, that is to say, whether he could bear lightly and with patience the wrongs that were done to him. This feigned philosopher was patient for a little while; and when he had received words of insult, he, struggling and rejoicing within himself said at last, 'Now don't you understand that I am a philosopher?' The other man quipped back biting saying, 'I would have clearly understood it if you had held your tongue!'

"But what is it about these noble, worthy men (for they certainly are that) who seek glory with virtue? What fame do such folk attain when, at last, the body is dissolved by death? For if it is true that men die in all (*body and soul*), which our reason forbids us to believe, then there would be no glory whatever, for what kind of glory would it be when he to whom glory is attributed has absolutely no existence. And if the soul, which contains the knowledge of good works, is unbound from the prison of the earth to travel freely to heaven, wouldn't it then despise all earthly occupation, and being in heaven, rejoice that it is exempt from all earthly things? [*Chaucer's note: Then the soul would care about no other things, including renown from this world.*"]"

Book II—Meter 7

He who rashly thinks he can pursue the glory of fame, believing that it is a sovereign good, let him gaze upon the wide-open countries of heaven, and upon the narrow land of this earth, and he shall be ashamed of the broadcasting of his name that may not fill space beyond the little expanse of the earth.

Oh, what propels proud folks to futilely raise their necks inside the deadly yoke of this world? For even if such fame were spread to foreign peoples, passed on in various tongues; and although

great houses or families shine with clear titles of honor; yet nevertheless death despises all high, glorious fame. Death binds together the high heads and the low. It equalizes and evens out everyone: the mightiest and the humblest.

Where now are the bones of faithful Fabricius? What now is Brutus or stern Cato? The tenuous fame of just their empty names is marked with a few letters. But even if we had known the fair words of their fame, it is not given to us to know those people who are dead and gone.

Remain still then, all utterly unknowable, nor will fame make you known. And if you believe that you will live longer because your mortal name is blown about when one cruel day shall destroy you, then a second death awaits you. [Chaucer's note: *The first death he calls the separation of the body and the soul; and the second death he calls the fading away from memory of fame.*]

Book II—Prose 8

“But just so that you do not believe”, said she, “that I bear an implacable grudge against Fortune, it so happens that sometimes, deceitful as she is, she deserves men’s real thanks. And that is when she opens up and reveals herself, her true face and her manners. Perhaps you will not understand what I will say. It is something wonderful that I wish to explain. And therefore, with difficulty I will unfold my ideas with words. For I judge that cantankerous Fortune is more profitable to men than charming Fortune.

“Always when Fortune seems kindly, she lies. She falsely promises to deliver happiness. But truly rough Fortune is always honest when she reveals herself to be unstable by her vagaries. The friendly Fortune deceives folks; the contrary Fortune teaches. The friendly Fortune binds with the beauty of false goods the hearts of those who use them; contrary Fortune unbinds them with the knowledge of frail happiness. The friendly Fortune you may see always twisting and flowing and ever unknowing of herself; the contrary Fortune is temperate and restrained and wise through the exercise of her adversity. Finally, friendly Fortune with her flattery draws straying men from sovereign good; contrary Fortune often leads folks back again to true good and hauls them in as with a hook.

“Do you judge this a small thing: that you ought to realize that this rough and horrible Fortune has revealed to you the thoughts of your true friends? Because this same Fortune has separated and uncovered for you both the honest faces and the dishonest faces of your associates. When she departed from you, she took away her friends and left you your friends. When you were rich and happy, or so it seemed, how much would you have paid for the full knowledge of your true friends? Now, stop complaining about your lost wealth, since you have found the most precious kind of riches, namely, your true friends.”

Book II—Meter 8

That the world with stable faith harmonizes discordant changes;
That the contesting qualities of elements keep themselves together in lasting alliance;
That Phoebus, the sun, with his golden chariot brings forth the rosy day;
That the moon commands the night, which night Hesperus, the evening star, has delivered;
That the sea eager to flow, constrains to a certain extent his floods, so that it is not lawful for him to stretch his boundaries to cover all the earth;

All this harmony of things is bound with Love that governs earth and sea, and also commands the heavens.

And if this Love were to slacken the bridles, all things that are now joined together in love would make continuous battle and would strive to break the bonds of this world which they now lead in harmonious faith by smooth movements.

This Love joins together people with a holy bond and knits them together in the sacrament of the marriage of chaste love; and Love writes the laws binding true friends. Oh, happy would be mankind if this Love that governs heaven, governed your hearts.

Book III—Prose 1

With this she ended her song, and the sweetness of her ditty had penetrated me so that I longed to hear more and was silently straining my ears to better listen to what she would say. Soon I said to her, “Oh, sovereign comfort to tortured hearts, you have stood me back up and nourished me with the weight of your arguments and with your delightful singing so that now I know that I am equal to the strokes of Fortune I now dare to suffer all the assaults of Fortune and am well protected against her. And those remedies to which you previously referred as being sharp, now I’m not only unafraid of them, but I beg you to let me hear them.”

Then she said, “That, I clearly felt when you quietly and attentively absorbed my words. So, I waited until you had developed such alertness as you have now, or rather until I had developed in you such alertness, which is closer to the truth. And certainly, the balance of what I have to say is such that when men first taste these remedies, they are bitter, but when they have been taken into a man, then they are sweet. But since you say that you are so desirous of hearing them, with how great a flame would you glow, if you knew where I would lead you!”

“Where is that?”

“To that true happiness, of which your heart dreams. But while your sight is diverted and disturbed by imagination of earthly things, you may not yet see this happiness.”

“Show me without tarrying, what this true happiness is, I pray you.”

“That will I gladly do for your sake. But first I will draw you a word picture and attempt to teach you about this false happiness with which you are more familiar, so that when you have fully beheld these false goods, and turned your eyes to the other side, you may know the brightness of true happiness.”

Book III—Meter 1

“Whoever would sow a bountiful field, let him first clear it of thorns, and carve away with his hook the bushes and the ferns so that the corn may come up with heavy ears and grains.

“Honey is sweeter if mouths have first tasted flavors that are bitter.

“The stars shine more agreeably when the wind Notus ceases his soggy blasts; and after Lucifer, the day star, has chased away the dark night, the fair day leads its rosy horse, the sun.

“And just so, if after beholding false goods, you begin to withdraw your neck from the yoke of earthly affections, true goods shall fill your heart.”

Book III—Prose 2

Then she fixed the gaze of her eyes a little inward and withdrawing into the closed space of her mind began to speak:

“All the remedies that mortal folks diligently labor to find by many different paths have but one goal: to achieve happiness. And happiness is such a good that he who attains it may want for nothing more; and this thing is the sovereign good which contains within it all manner of goods. But if any good fails in any way, it cannot be the sovereign good, for then there would be some sovereign good still to be desired.

“Now it is clear that happiness is a perfect state formed by the combination of all goods, and this happiness is the aim toward which all mortal folks strive by various paths. That’s why the longing for true good is naturally implanted in the hearts of men; but misguided error leads them to pursue false goods--

“Some of these men hold that sovereign good is to live without lacking anything, and so, they labor to have an abundance of riches.

“Others believe that sovereign good is to have the dignity of being revered; they impose themselves on their neighbors to be revered for the honors they have received.

“Some folks hold that mighty power is the sovereign good, and so they either strive to take control, or else they ally themselves to those in power.

“For others, having great fame is the sovereign good, and they hasten to make a glorious name for themselves by the arts of war or peace.

“Many people calculate and determine that the sovereign good is joy and gladness, and they determine that diving into voluptuous delights is the best thing to do.

“And there are folks who intermingle the causes and the ends of these aforesaid goods such as those who desire wealth so that they may have power and pleasure; or else they desire power to have money or to become renowned. To these and other similar things are men’s attention, labors, and desires turned as thus: nobility and the admiration of people which seems to give men a kind of clear renown; or wife and children who men desire for delight and merriment. But truly, friends should not be reckoned among Fortune’s gifts, but rather of virtue’s, for that is truly a holy thing.

All these other things have their origins in power or pleasure. Now I can certainly add the goods of the body to these above-mentioned things; for it seems that strength and a hearty body yields power and worthiness, and that beauty and swiftness brings nobleness and fame; and health of body seems to give delight.

“In all these things it seems that only happiness is desired. That’s why what each man desires most, he considers to be the sovereign good. But I have defined that happiness is the sovereign good, therefore happiness is the state that each man desires above all things.

“Now you have before your eyes almost all the proposed forms of happiness of mankind: riches, honors, power, glory, and pleasures. Pleasures only were considered by Epicurus²¹ and judged by him as the sovereign good since all other things, so he thought, steal away joy and mirth from the heart.

“But I return to the efforts of men, whose hearts always come back to the search for sovereign good, although with a darkened memory not knowing which path to follow, just like a drunken man who doesn’t know by which path he may return home to his house.

“Could it be then that people who struggle to lack nothing are foolish and in error? Certainly nothing else brings happiness so well as a state of possessing all goods so that nothing is lacking and so a man has sufficiency unto himself.

“And are such folks foolish who believe that a thing that is truly good is also worthy of honor and respect? Surely not. For that thing is neither foul nor despicable that nearly all people labor to attain.

“And shouldn’t power also be reckoned a good? Why not? Doesn’t it stand to reason that a thing that is most worthy above all things shouldn’t be feeble and without strength?

“And shining fame: ought it to be despised? None could deny that anything truly excellent and noble is also clearly renown.

“Doesn’t it certainly go without saying that happiness is not a torment, nor dreary, nor subject to grief or sorrow; since in little things folks try to own and to use what may delight them?

²¹ Epicurus (B.C. 342-270) founded the Epicurean school of philosophy. His school had a large following of Romans under the Empire. His own teaching was more detailed than “pleasures only were considered.”
source: <https://www.britannica.com>

“Surely, these are things that men wish for and desire to have. To this end they desire riches, respect, kingdoms, glory, and pleasures; for thereby they figure on having sufficiency, honor, power, fame, and gladness. Then it is good that men seek these things by so many diverse studies. In their search, may clearly be seen the great strength of nature. For even though men have diverse understandings and discord, nevertheless men are as one in loving the goal of good.”

Book III—Meter 2

“I wish to show by a nimble song accompanied with slow and sweet sounds of strings how mighty Nature governs and alters the governance of things. I will also show the laws by which she maintains wise control, tending to the great world; and how, holding the reins, she restrains all things with bonds that may not be unbound.

“Although the lions of the Punic country²² carry their bright chains and take their meats from the hands of folks who feed them, and dread their sturdy masters from whom they receive beatings, if ever their horrible mouths were bloodied from devoured beasts, their former courage that had been idle and passive, would reappear once again, and with terrifying roars, remembering their nature, they would shrug off their chains, freeing their necks. Then their master, would be the first to be torn with bloody tooth, victim of their mad wrath.

“And the chattering bird that sings on the high branches of the woods and afterward is enclosed in a narrow cage, men playfully busy themselves giving it honied drinks and large bits of meat with sweet attention, yet nevertheless, if this bird, skipping out of her little cage spies the agreeable shadows of the woods, she despoils the scattered meats with her feet and seeks mournfully only the woods and twitters longingly for the woods with her sweet voice.

“The crown of a tree that is held down by mighty strength readily bows its branches down, but if the hand of he who held it down is removed, at once the crown looks upright to heaven.

“The sun, Phoebus, that falls at evening into the western waters returns soon again in his chariot, to rise by a secret path.

“All things seek to return to their own path, and all things rejoice in coming back to their nature. The only law over things is that the ending should be joined to the beginning making the course proper to its kind stable.”

Book III—Prose 3

“Certainly, you men who are also earthly beasts, dream always of your beginning, although it is with a clouded imagination. With a kind of unclear and imperfect thought, you look from afar at this true end of happiness. And therefore, while natural inclination leads you to this true good, many kinds of error may turn you away from it. Consider now if by these things which a man believes he may use to attain happiness, he can achieve that goal set into him by nature. If money, or honors, or these other mentioned things bring men to such a state that nothing good is lacking or seems amiss, certainly then I will grant that they have been made happy by these things. But if it turns out that these things may not perform as promised, and that they’re missing many goods, wouldn’t it clearly demonstrate that the false beauty of happiness is revealed in these things? First and foremost, you yourself who had abundant riches not long ago, I ask if amidst this abundance you were never anxious, nor sorrowful in your heart for any wrong or grievance that assaulted you?”

²² Chaucer uses the term “Pene” for Punic which referred to Carthage. The people of Carthage were descended from the Phoenicians (hence Punic) whose empire established a colony in north Africa. Carthage became its own empire from the 7th to 3rd centuries BCE. In the Punic Wars during the 1st century BCE, Carthage was conquered by Rome. *Source:* <https://www.britannica.com>

“Certainly,” I said, “I don’t remember ever being so free in my mind that I wasn’t always in some pain.”

“And wasn’t that because you lacked something that you wanted, or else that you had something you didn’t want?”

“It is just so.”

“Then you desired the presence of the one and the absence of the other?”

“Absolutely.”

“Indeed, then is there something that each man desires?”

“Yes, there is.”

“So, he who lacks or needs anything is not entirely self-sufficient?”

“No.”

“And in all the profusion of your wealth, you had this lack of satisfaction?”

“Undeniably.”

“Then riches may not make a man less needy, nor let him be sufficient unto himself; and yet it seems that that was their promise. And, I certainly know this to be true: money does not have the power to prevent itself from being taken away from him who has it, despite his efforts.”

“I know this well.”

“Why shouldn’t you know it,” she asked, “when every day, the strong take from the weak, despite their efforts? All these law suits or quarrels originate from men trying to regain their money that was snatched away from them by either force or guile despite their efforts.”

“It is just so.”

“Then, does a man require outside help to guard his money?”

“Who could deny it?”

“Certainly,” and she asked, “And he who has no money to lose, needs no help?”

“Doubtless.”

“Then this thing is turned upside down,” said she; “for riches that men believe will make them self-sufficient, actually leave them in need of outside help. How then may riches drive away need? May rich folks have neither hunger nor thirst? May they feel no cold in their limbs in winter? But you will answer that rich men have the wherewithal to staunch their hunger, slake their thirst, and do away with cold. In this way, need may be comforted by riches, but certainly not be utterly vanquished; for though this need that is always gaping and greedy, is stuffed with riches, and be given anything, yet there remains a need that still demands fulfillment. I will hold my peace and not discuss how with little things, nature is satisfied; but certainly, avarice is never satisfied. For since wealth cannot totally do away with need, but actually creates need, how can it be that you believe that riches could give you self-sufficiency?”

Book III—Meter 3

“Even if a rich, covetous man had a river flowing with gold, yet it would never staunch his covetousness. And though his neck were loaded with precious stones from the Red Sea, and though he plows his large fields with a hundred oxen, never shall his biting anxiety release him while he lives, nor will transitory riches keep him company when he is dead.”

Book III—Prose 4

“But,” I said, “When dignities adorn a person, do they not make the recipient honorable and revered? Haven’t they such power as to put virtue into the hearts of those who use their grace, or else to expunge their vices?”

“Certainly not, but rather, they expose wickedness; and that is why I have great disdain for such dignities as are often given to wicked men. Thus, it was that Catullus labeled a consul of Rome named Nonius a ‘pustule or cancer’ [Chaucer’s note: *He called him a collection of vices, as a pustule is full of corruption*], despite the fact that this Nonius occupied the seat of dignity.²³

“Can’t you see what great villainy is done to wicked men by dignities? The unworthiness of bad men would be less conspicuous if they were not decorated with any honors. Surely you yourself who has suffered so many perils could not be induced to share the office of magistrate with Decoratus [Chaucer’s note: *That is to say, despite the peril that has befallen you for offending King Theodoric, you would not share governance with Decoratus.*], when you saw that he had the wicked heart of an evil crook and a snitch.”

“No, I cannot judge one worthy of reverence for the honors he holds if I deem him unworthy of those same honors.”

“Now, if you met a man full of wisdom, would you deem him to be unworthy of honor or of the wisdom with which he is filled?”

“No.”

“Certainly, honors that properly belong to virtue are attached to that man to whom virtue is bound. And as popular honors may not make folks worthy of honor, it is clearly seen that they do not contain within themselves the beauty of dignity. People should pay more attention to this. For if a wicked man is so foul and outcast that he is despised by most folk, then just as honors may not make such a villain worthy of respect, then positions of honor make scoundrels so much more despised since the positions make the rogues visible to many folks; and truly not unpunished [Chaucer’s note: *Rogues get their revenge upon the offices of dignity.*], for they repay dignity with a like reward when they besmirch and befoul dignities with their villainy.

“And just as you have learned that true reverence cannot come from these shadowy, transitory dignities, now understand this: If a man had used and possessed many consular honors and happened to be in a foreign nation, should his title make him revered among strange folk? If human honors were a natural gift, they would never cease anywhere for anyone who donned the office; just as fire, in any country never stops warming or being hot. But in the case of being considered honorable or revered, it does not come to people from the strength of its own nature but only from the false opinion of people who believe that dignities make folks worthy of honor, and therefore, when they come among folks who know nothing of their dignities, their honors vanish away at once.

“You may say, that is among foreigners; but do their honors last forever amongst their own people? Certainly, the honor of the praetorship²⁴ of Rome was once a great power; now it is nothing, but an idle name paid for by the senate at great expense. And if a man once had the office to account for the peoples’ necessities like corn and other things, he was held to be a great man; but what could be more outcast now than this praetorship? And as I said a little while ago, this thing that has no beauty in and of itself, receives value and worth and sometimes loses it according to common opinion.

“Now if honors don’t have the power to make folks worthy of reverence, and if dignities can become foul by the corruption of rogues, and if dignities lose their radiance by the passage of time, and if they become foul by the estimation of the people, what beauty is it that they have in

²³ Catullus (c. 84 BCE—c. 54 BCE) was a poet of the period of the Roman Republic, famous for writing scathing poems about his politically powerful contemporaries. *Source:* <https://www.britannica.com>

²⁴ Office of magistrate in the Roman Republic (just below Consul).

themselves that ought to be desired? [Chaucer's note: *Meaning 'none.'*] So, they are unable to transfer the beauty of dignity to anyone."

Book III—Meter 4

"Although proud Nero, with all his mad luxury, adorned and appareled himself with fine purples from Tyre and with white pearls, nevertheless he was hated by all the people and once gave to the revered senators the unworshipful seats of honor. [Chaucer's note: *'Unworshipful seats' so called, because it was wicked Nero who gave those seats.*] Who would then reasonably believe that happiness is contained in such honors as are given by vicious scoundrels?"

Book III—Prose 5

"Are kings and their subordinates made mighty by their positions? How else when their bliss is perpetual? But certainly, stories of olden times, and of our present day are full of examples of kings' lives changing to wretchedness from happiness. Oh, a noble and shining thing is power that has not the power to maintain itself! And if that regal power that is the author and creator of happiness is lacking to any degree, doesn't it diminish happiness and bring on wretchedness?"

"Also, even though the kingdoms of mankind stretch wide, yet there must necessarily be many people over whom a king has no lordship or command. And certainly, to the degree that power makes men happy, that widespread lack of power must make them wretched. By this reasoning, kings must have a greater share of unhappiness than of happiness.

"A tyrant who was king of Sicily and who had experienced perils to his kingdom, demonstrated by analogy the dangers to kingdom by the threat of a sword hung over the head of his advisor.²⁵

"What kind of thing is this power that cannot assuage the torment of anxiety, nor avoid the prickings of dread? Although they wish to live securely, they may not; and yet they glory in their power. Do you call a man mighty who cannot do what he wants? And do you consider him mighty when he must surround himself with men-at-arms or servants because he fears those whom he threatens more than they fear him, and he puts himself under the control of his servants so that he may seem powerful?"

"But what about the advisors or servants of kings? What can I tell you since I have shown you that the rulers themselves are greatly enfeebled? The royal power of kings whether in their strongest condition or in their weakened state has often crushed them down. Nero forced Seneca, his advisor and teacher to choose the manner of his death. Antonys²⁶ commanded his knights to slay with their swords Papinian, his aide who had long been a powerful functionary at court. And yet certainly they would both have renounced their power. Seneca even attempted to give Nero his wealth and to go into solitary exile. But when the great weight of a lord's power or fortune pulled down those destined to fall, neither could do what he would.

"What kind of thing then, is this power that when men have it, they live in fear; it can't make those who wish to have it safer; and if one would give it up, he can't? But do such men who are counseled by Fortune and not by virtue have friends in their hour of need? Certainly, the friends of happy fortune, become enemies in contrary fortune. And what pestilence is a greater harm to a man, than a close enemy?"

²⁵ Dionysius of Syracuse who had a sword suspended by a single hair over the head of Damocles to illustrate the terror of a king's condition.

²⁶ Roman Emperor: Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Augustus (nicknamed Caracalla): born 4 April 188 – assassinated 8 April 217

Book III—Meter 5

Whoever would be mighty, must suppress his cruel heart, and not put his bowed neck under the foul reins of lechery. For even though your kingdom stretches so far that the country of India quakes at your commands or laws; and that the furthest island in the sea called Thule²⁷ is subject to you, yet if you cannot suppress your foul, dark desires and drive away your wretched sorrows, certainly you are powerless.

Book III—Prose 6

“How often is glory deceitful and foul! Listen to a skillful tragedian who cried out thus: ‘O glory, glory, you are nothing more to thousands of folks but a great sweller of ears!’²⁸

“For many have achieved wide renown due to the false opinion of the people; but what could be considered fouler than such praise? Those who have received false praise should be ashamed of this praise. And if people have received thanks or praise due to their efforts, what value is added thereby to the conscience of wise men who measure their worth, not by the gossip of the people, but by the truthfulness of their conscience?

“And if it seems a fair thing for a man to have his name amplified and blown around, then it follows that the opposite is a foul thing. But, as I said a little while ago, since there necessarily must be many folks who are never touched by a man’s renown, it follows that a man who you judge to be glorious and renowned, must, in the next part of the earth, be without glory or fame. And certainly, I don’t believe that the praise or the favor of the people is worth remembering, nor comes from wise judgement, nor is long lasting.

“Now about this title of nobility, who could not readily see what a vain and fleeting thing that is? For if a noble title refers to the fame and brightness of one’s lineage, then a noble name is but a foreign thing [Chaucer’s note: *for those who glory in their lineage*]. For it seems that titles of nobility are a way of praising the achievements of ancestors; and if praising creates nobility, then they who are praised must be noble. So, it follows that if you lack nobility in yourself, from your achievements, then another’s nobility does not make you noble. But really, if there is any value in titles of nobility, I believe that it is only in this: that it seems to impose an obligation on gentlemen not to outrage or depart from the virtues of their noble family.”

Book III—Meter 6

All the generations of men that have been on earth are of similar birth. One alone is the Father of things. One alone administers all things.

He gave to the sun his beams. He gave to the moon her horns. He gave men to the earth. He gave the stars to the heavens. He encloses with bodies the souls that come from his high throne.

Thus, all mortal folk come from noble seed. Why do you sound off or boast about your ancestors? For if you look to your beginning and God, your author and your maker, no man is degenerate or ignoble unless he nourishes his heart with vice and forgets his proper origin.

Book III—Prose 7

²⁷ Latin: “ultima Thyle.” To the Romans, Thulé or Tile represented the extreme northern limit of the known world.

²⁸ Euripides: *Andromache* line 319. Boethius quotes, without translation, the Greek:

ὦ δόξα δόξα, μυρίοισι δὴ βρωτῶν
οὐδὲν γεγῶσι βίοτον ὠγκωσας μέγαν.

“What shall I say of bodily delights, the longing for which is full of anguish; and their fulfillment is full of penance? What great sickness and great, unbearable sorrow, just like a diseased fruit, do these delights bring to those who partake of them!

“I don’t know what joy may be had from their titillations, but this I know well: whoever remembers his lusts, he shall well understand that the outcome of such delights is miserable and sorry. And if these delights may make folks happy, then by the same argument, beasts may be called blessed, for these beasts apply all their attention to the fulfillment of bodily pleasure.

“The gladness for wife and children is an honest thing, but it has been said that too often, children become unnatural tormentors to their fathers. I don’t know how many such children there are, but how biting is every such case! There is no need to tell you who has, before now, experienced it, and are even now in anguish. In this, I agree with the statement of my disciple Euripedis who said that he who has no children is happy by misfortune.”²⁹

Book III—Meter 7

“Every delight has this: it causes stabbing anguish to those who use it. It resembles those hovering flies that we call bees; who after the bee has shed his agreeable honey, he flies away, and stings with enduring pain the hearts of those who have been struck.”

Book III—Prose 8

“Now, without doubt these ways do not lead to happiness. Nor do they lead folks where they promise to lead them. But I will soon show you with what harm these ways are imbued.

“If you drive yourself to accumulate money, you must wrench it away from he who has it.

“If you will shine with dignities, you must grovel and entreat those who award those honors.

“If you covet to be honored above others, you shall debase yourself by humbly begging.

“If you desire power, you must be wary of your subjects lest you be overthrown by many perils.

“Do you seek glory? You will be so distracted by bitter things that you will forgo safety.”

“And if you will lead a life of pleasure, every man will despise and forsake you for being a slave to that thing that is so foul and brutal [Chaucer’s note: *a servant to your body*].

“Now it is clearly shown what little and how brittle are the possessions they covet who put the goods of the body above their own reason. Can you surmount the elephant in size or weight of body? Are you stronger than the bull? Could you be faster than the tiger? Behold the spaces and the stability and the swift course of the heavens,³⁰ and stop focusing on foul things. These heavens are less to be wondered at than the reason by which they are governed.

The shining of your physical beauty: how swiftly it passes, how transitory! Certainly, it is more fleeting than the mutability of flowers in the summer. For as Aristotle said, if men had the eyes of a

²⁹ *ibid.* line 420. Here Boethius translates Euripedis into Latin: “qui carentem liberis infortunio dixit esse felicem.”

³⁰ This sentence must be understood in terms of the Ptolemaic explanation of the universe which was generally accepted from the second century A.D. until the time of Copernicus. According to this theory the universe was geocentric. The earth was surrounded by a series of concentric transparent spheres in each of which was fixed one of the “seven planets,” viz. the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. (Uranus, Neptune and Pluto were not discovered until after the seventeenth century.) Beyond the sphere of Saturn lay the sphere of the fixed stars, and beyond that the Primum Mobile, which is caused by God to rotate on its own axis once every twenty-four hours, the speed of the rotation being very high on account of the vast size of the sphere. As it rotates the Primum Mobile communicates its motion to the sphere lying contiguous to it, which is thus moved in the same direction, but at a slower speed; the motion of the sphere of the fixed stars is communicated in turn to the sphere of Saturn, and so it progresses through the other six spheres. In this way the observable motions of the heavenly bodies were accounted for, though the Aristotelian account, with which Boethius was acquainted, and the full details of the Ptolemaic account are much more complex....from footnote in the V. E. Watts translation (Penguin Classics, 1969) p.92

beast called the lynx,³¹ so that their sight could penetrate through things that are opaque, were they to look into the entrails of the body of Alcibiades³², who was quite fair on the outside, he should seem right foul. Therefore, if you appear fair to yourself, it is not that your nature is so, but that your weak eyes are deceived. Praise your fine body if you will, but know that no matter how valued it is on which you marvel, it may be destroyed or dissolved by the heat of a three-day fever.

“I can sum up all these things I have said thus: these worldly goods cannot give what they promise because they are not perfected by the union of all their various good qualities; therefore, they are not ways or paths that bring men to happiness, nor make men blissful.”

Book III—Meter 8

“Alas! What folly and ignorance mislead wandering wretches from the path of true good!

“Obviously you do not seek gold in green trees, nor gather precious stones in vines, nor do you hide your traps on high mountains to gather the fish upon whom you would richly feast. And if you wish to hunt deer, you don’t go to the Tuscan Sea. And furthermore, men know where in the creeks and the caverns of the sea, though hidden under the waves, to find white pearls; and in which water is stocked most plentifully red purple [Chaucer’s note: *a kind of shellfish from which men obtain purple dye*]; and know which shores are filled with tender fish or the sharp fish called urchins.

“But folks let themselves be so blind-sighted that they don’t reckon where are hidden the goods they covet. Instead, they dig into the earth and seek there the riches that are higher than the heaven that bears the stars. What prayer may I make that is suitable for the foolish minds of men? But let them covet riches and honors so that when they have obtained those false goods with great labor, they may come to know true good.”

Book III—Prose 9

“It is enough that I have shown you hitherto the forms of false happiness, so that if you now look clearly, my intention will be to henceforth show you true happiness.”

“In truth,” I answered, “I see clearly now that sufficiency may not come from riches, power from ruling, respect from dignities, honor from glory, nor joy from pleasures.”

“And have you clearly understood the causes why it is so?”

“Certainly, it seems to me that I see them as if peering through a little cleft, but I wish to know them more fully from you.”

“Of course,” said she, “the reason is clear. For this thing that is simply one thing without any divisions is separated and divided by the error and folly of mankind. Men confuse, divide, mislead and transport it from true and perfect good to goods that are false and imperfect. But tell me this, do you believe that he who has need of power, lacks nothing?”

“No.”

“Of course, you see clearly; for if there is anything that in any part is weaker of power, certainly it needs outside help.”

“Just so.”

“Sufficiency and power are then one of a kind?”

“It would seem so.”

³¹ A misreading by Chaucer (perhaps due to reliance on the translation of Jean de Meun). Boethius does not refer to the animal Lynx but to Lynceus, an Argonaut with amazingly sharp eyes. Boethius’ Latin: Quod si, ut Aristoteles ait, Lynceis oculis homines uterentur, ut eorum uisus obstantia penetraret....

³² Alcibiades was an ancient Greek politician and general who was distinguished for his physical beauty, personal immorality, and penchant for switching sides during wars. Source: <https://www.britannica.com>

“And do you judge that a thing that is satisfied and mighty ought to be despised, or else that it is worthy of reverence above all things?”

“Surely there can be no doubt that it is worthy to be revered.”

“Let us then add reverence to sufficiency and power; so that we have determined that these three things are one thing.”

“Yes, let us add it, if we are to speak the truth.”

“Do you consider, then,” she said, “that it is an unclean thing and not noble that is self-sufficient, worthy of reverence, and mighty; or else that it is right noble and shines with the light of renown? Consider then, as we have earlier agreed, that he who needs nothing, and is most powerful, and most dignified by honors, then if he lacks any brightness of renown which he cannot grant to himself, so that for lack of this renown, he might seem the weaker or more outcast in any way.” [Chaucer’s note: *‘No,’ for whoever is self-sufficient, mighty, and revered, shining renown must follow these other things. He has it sufficiently already.*]

“I can’t deny it; I must grant that this thing is truly celebrated with clear renown and nobility.”

“Then it follows that we must add brightness of renown to the three aforesaid things so that here is no difference among them.”

“This is a consequence,” I said.

“This thing then that has no need of outside help, and that may accomplish anything by its strength, and that is noble and honorable, is it not a merry and joyful thing?”

“How any sorrow might come to this thing, so constituted, I cannot imagine.”

“Then we may agree, if these other things are true, that this thing is full of gladness. And certainly, we may also grant that sufficiency, power, nobility, veneration, and happiness are only diverse in name, but that in substance there is no difference.”

“It must necessarily be so.”

“Then this thing that is one and simple in its nature, only man’s wickedness separates and divides; and when they strive to get part of a thing that has no parts, they get neither this non-existent part, nor the whole thing which they do not want.”

“How do they do this?” I asked.

“Any man who seeks riches to escape poverty, he doesn’t labor to attain power, for he would rather be obscure and low; and also, he withholds from himself many natural delights for he fears losing the money that he has gathered. But certainly, in this manner he never achieves self-sufficiency; he forgoes power; troubles afflict him; his filthy ways make him an outcast; and obscurity hides him.

“And certainly, he who desires only power, wastes and scatters riches, despises pleasures, and also a kind of honor that is powerless, nor does he value glory. As you can see, he has given up many necessities and is bitten by much anguish; and when he cannot purge those lacks, he foregoes being mighty and that is the thing he most desires.

“In the same way, I may make similar arguments about honors and glory and pleasures, for as each of these are the same as the other things (that is to say, all one thing), whoever tries to get one of these things and not the others, gets nothing that he desires.”

“What do you say about a man who wishes to get all of these things together?”

“Certainly, I would say that he has found true bliss. But he will not find it in those things which, as I have shown, cannot deliver the things they promise.”

“Of course not.”

“Then shouldn’t men cease to seek happiness in such things that they know cannot give it to them rather than in the one thing above all else that men seek?”

"I grant you that, and no truer thing may be said."

"Now you have the form and the causes of false happiness. Now turn and direct the eyes of your mind to where you shall soon see this true happiness that I have promised you."

"It would be clear to a blind man, and you showed me quite well a little while ago when you labored to illustrate the causes of false happiness. For, unless I am fooled, this is the very same true happiness that makes a man perfectly self-sufficient, strong, honorable, noble, and full of gladness. And so that you should clearly know that I fully grasp these things within my heart, I know well that this happiness that may give one of these things, since they are all one, is without doubt, true happiness.

"Oh, my pupil, by this opinion I see that you will be blissful if you add to it what I will say."

"What is that?"

"Do you believe that there is anything in these earthly, mortal, tumbling things that may bring you to this state?"

"Certainly not, and you have shown me that beyond this good, there is nothing more to be desired."

"These things then, (earthly sufficiency, power, and such things) they only mirror true good and give to mortal folk types of goods that are imperfect. But they cannot give this true and perfect good."

"I fully agree.

"Then, as you have known what this true happiness is, and also what are these things that deceptively have the appearance of true goods, but which comprise false happiness, now it behooves you to know where you must seek this true happiness."

"That is my great desire and I have waited a long time to hear it."

"But just as it pleased my disciple Plato, in his book *Timaeus*, that even in small things men should beseech the help of God, what do you suppose ought to be done now so that we may deserve to find the origin of this sovereign good?"

"Certainly, I think that we should call upon the Father of all good things, for without him nothing good commences."

"You speak truly," said she, and began at once to sing thus:

Book III—Meter 9

Oh Father, creator of heaven and earth, who governs this world by eternal reason; who has commanded time to move since epochs began; you who remains always steadfast and stable, and yet cause all other things to move, nor have external forces ever caused you to manufacture quavering matter, but only the existence of sovereign good that is set within you, without envy, that freely drives you; you who are the highest good, bearing the fair world in your mind, has formed this world in the close likeness of that fair world of which you conceive.

You design all things from your regal pattern, and command that this world, perfectly made, has freely and absolutely, its perfect parts.

You bind the elements by proportionate numbers so that cold things may be balanced with hot things, and the dry things with the moist; that fire, that is purest, flair not over-high, nor that heaviness does not draw down too low the earth that it be plunged into the waters.

You knit together the mean of the soul of tri-part existence between body and mind, moving all things and dividing it by parts accordingly. And when it is thus divided and has formed a movement of two circles, it then turns against itself, and encircles a truly deep mind and turns the heavens with just such an image.

You, by even-handed ways, enhance the souls and lesser lives; and enabling them to rise by light carriages or carts, you sow them into heaven and earth. And when they have been converted to you by your gentle law, you cause them to return to you by the ever-drawing fire.

Oh, Father, turn your thoughts to raising them up to your rarified throne and grant that they will dwell in the wellspring of good; and find the light to fix the clear sight of their hearts on you. Scatter and break up the weights and clouds of earthly heaviness and shine forth your brightness, for you are clarity; you are peaceful rest to the meek; you yourself are beginning, conductor, leader, path, and destination. To look upon you, that is our end.

Book III—Prose 10

“As you have now seen the forms of imperfect and perfect good, I believe it would be good to show where this perfection of happiness resides. In this regard, I believe that we should first try to learn if the kind of sovereign good that you just defined may be found in the nature of things, so that vain imagination may not deceive us, and divert us from the truth of this thing that is submitted for our consideration. But it can’t be denied that this good exists, and that it is the fountain of all goods. For all things that are called imperfect are proved imperfect by their lack of perfection or by comparison with a perfect thing. And so, it happens that, in general, when men recognize anything as imperfect, there must exist something that is perfect. For if perfection was eliminated, men would not be able to think or to say from where this thing that they call imperfect comes. For it is natural for the origin of things not to come from diminished or imperfect things but from things that are all whole and absolute, and then to descend into lower things that are empty and without fruit. So, as I have already demonstrated, if there is a happiness that is frail, vain, and imperfect, no one could deny that there must be some happiness that is serious, steadfast, and perfect.”

“This is the consequence,” I said, “firmly and truly.”

“But also consider,” said she, “in whom this happiness resides. The common agreement and belief in men’s hearts proves and grants that God, prince of all things, is good. For since nothing may be imagined to be better than God, He is undoubtedly better than anything else. Certainly, reason shows that God is so good, that it is proven by true force of reason that perfect good is in Him. For if God were not perfection, He could not be the prince of all things; because certainly something else possessing, perfect good would be worthier than God. Then this thing would be primary and more ancient than God. For we have clearly shown that all things that are perfect occur before things that are imperfect. And therefore, so that my reasoning or mental process should not end without a conclusion, we must grant that the Lord God is entirely filled with supreme, perfect good. And we have established that sovereign good is true happiness. Then it must follow that true happiness is fixed in Lord God.”

“I grasp this well, nor may I in the least refute it.”

“But I pray you,” said she, “see how you may now prove wholly and without corruption what I have just said: that the Lord God is filled with sovereign good.”

“In what way?” I asked.

“Do you suppose that this Father of all things has obtained this sovereign good from anywhere outside Himself? We have proven that He is filled with sovereign good. So, since you think that God embodies happiness, is this happiness that is in Him dispersed in substance? For if you believe that God has received this good from outside of Himself, you must believe that he who gave this good to God is worthier than God. But I acknowledge and confess right properly, that God is worthy above all things.

“And If it is true that this good is naturally in Him, but that it is separate from Him by conjecturing reason, since we speak of ‘God, Prince of all Things’ – if one wishes to conjecture – who was it that joined these diverse parts together?”

“Finally, know that a thing that is separate from anything, is not the same thing from which it is understood to be separate. Then it would follow that this thing that by its nature is separate from sovereign good, is, therefore, not sovereign good. But certainly, that would be a criminal cursedness to think of He who is worthier than all else. For always, with all things, their nature may not be better than their origins. And so, I may conclude by right reason that this which is the beginning of all things, is sovereign good in its substance.”

“You have spoken truly,” I said.

“But we have determined that the sovereign good is happiness.”

“That is true.”

“Then mustn’t we necessarily acknowledge and confess that this same sovereign good is God?”

“Certainly, I cannot deny or oppose the proposed reasons; and I see clearly that it follows by the strength of the premises.”

“Focus to see if this is yet more firmly proven: that there cannot be two sovereign goods that differ between themselves. For certainly, if there are goods that differ between them, one being different than the other; then neither of them can be perfect as each one lacks what the other has. But since that is not perfection, men may clearly see that it is not sovereign. The things, then, that are sovereignly good can in no way be divers. But I have proven that happiness and God are the sovereign good; therefore, it must follow that sovereign happiness is sovereign divinity.”

“Nothing is truer than this, I said, nor more established by reason. There could not be a worthier thing than God”

“Added to these things then,” she said, “just as these geometricians when they have shown their propositions, are wont to bring in things that they call porisms or declarations of foresaid things, just so will I give you here a corollary or gift of a garland:³³ Since by getting happiness, men are made happy, and happiness is divine, then it is manifest and clear that by obtaining divinity, men become happy, just by the getting of justice,³⁴ and by getting insight they are made wise, so by the same reasoning, having achieved divinity, they are made gods. Then is every happy man, God. But certainly, there is naturally only one God. However, by the participation of divinity, nothing prevents there from being many gods.”

“This is a fair and precious thing,” I said, “call it what you will, whether corollary, porism, or gift of a garland, or declarations.”

“Certainly,” she said, “nothing could be finer than that thing which may be reasonably added to these other things.”

“What thing?” I asked.

“As it seems that happiness contains many things, it’s for us to learn whether all these things make up or join together as a kind of ‘body of happiness’ with separate parts or members, or else if any of these things are such that it accomplishes by itself the substance of happiness so that all other things are referred or brought to happiness as to the chief of them.”

“I wish,” said I, “to have you clarify for me what you are saying and remind me of what you previously said.”

³³ The Latin is "Super haec, inquit, igitur ueluti geometrae solent demonstrare propositis aliquid inferre quae porismata ipsi uocant, ita ego quoque tibi ueluti corollarium dabo." Chaucer's addition of "meede of coroune" (gift of a garland) seems to come from Jean de Meun's "loier de coroune."

³⁴ The Latin phrase is "sed uti iustitiae adeptione iusti" (but as men become just by obtaining justice)

“Have I not proven that happiness is good?”

“Surely, and sovereign good at that.”

“Then add happiness to all these previous goods. For this same good that is deemed to be sovereign sufficiency, this is also sovereign power, sovereign honor, sovereign fame or nobility, and sovereign pleasure. What do you say, then, about all of these things, that is to say, sufficiency, power, and these other things – are they then members of happiness, or are they referred and brought to sovereign good just as all things that are brought to the chief of them?”

Boethius: “I understand well, what you are asking, but I desire to hear you explain it to me.”

Philosophy: “Now consider the solution to this problem, if all these things are parts of happiness, then they would be separate, one from the other. Such is the nature of parts or members, that various members compose a body.”

“Certainly,” I said, “it has been well shown here before that all these things are all one thing.”

“Then they are not members,” she said, “for that would mean that happiness was joined together from one member alone, but that is a thing that may not be.”

“Undoubtedly, but I am waiting to hear the balance of the question.”

“It is plain and clear that all other things are referenced by and brought to good. Therefore, sufficiency is required, for it is deemed to be good; and power is required for men believe that is also good; and this same thing might we think about and desire for reverence, nobility, and delight. Then sovereign good is the sum and the cause of all that ought to be desired.

“However, that which contains no good within itself, nor even the semblance of good will never be desired or craved. And on the other hand, although some things by their nature are not good, nevertheless, if men judge them to be good, then they will be desired as if they were truly good.

“So, men ought to understand that by right, it is that reward that is the sovereign end and the cause of all the things that are necessary. The goal for which men are driven to require anything, it seems, is this same thing that is most desirable. Just so: if a man would ride for the sake of his health, he desires less the movement of riding than the effect on his health. Since all things are wanted for the benefit they give, they are not desired by people more for themselves than for that same good. But we have granted that happiness is the very thing for which all these other things are desired. Then, certainly, only happiness is required and desired. Thus, it is proven that good and happiness are all of one and the same substance.”

“I can’t see how men could argue with this.”

“And we have shown that God and true happiness is one thing.”

“That is true.”

“Then we might safely conclude that the substance of God is set in this same good and nowhere else.”

Book III—Meter 10

Come together now, you who are caught and bound with wicked chains of delight in the fickle, earthly things inhabiting your minds! Here find rest for your labors; here is the steady haven in peaceful quiet. This alone is the open refuge for wretches. [Chaucer’s note: *You who are encumbered and deceived with worldly affections, come now to this sovereign good that is God, who is refuge for those who will come to him.*]

All the things that the River Tagus³⁵ gives you with its golden gravel, or else, all the things that the River Hermus³⁶ gives with its red banks, or that the Indus gives, which flows through the hot part of the world, and mingles green stones with white, cannot brighten your mind's eye. Instead they blind your deluded heart with their darkness.

All that you like here, and which excites and moves your thoughts, the earth has nourished in its deep caves. But see the brightness by which the heavens are governed, and whence it receives its strength. Then reject this dark domination over your soul. Whoever knows this light of happiness, he shall clearly see that even the bright beams of the sun are not so clear.

Book III—Prose 11

Boethius: "I concur for all these things are bound with firm reason."

"How much would you value it to know what this good is?"

"I will value it infinitely, if it shall also happen that I will know God who is good."

"Certainly, I shall do that for you by pure reason, if those things that I proved a little while ago remain with you since you first granted them."

"They remain granted due to your foresaid conclusions."

"Haven't I shown you that the things that many folks require are neither true nor perfect goods; for they are scattered one from the other? And since each lacks the other, they have no power to achieve a good that is full and absolute. But they may be true good, when they are gathered together all into one form and into one operation. So that what is self-sufficient, also has power, reverence, nobility, and pleasure. And in truth, unless all of these things are one and the same thing, they do not have the power to put themselves into the number of things that ought to be required or desired."

"It is so shown, and nobody could doubt it."

"These things that are not good when they are separate, but which become good when they begin to be one thing, isn't it the achievement of unity that makes them good?"

"So it seems."

"Do you agree that all things that are good are so by the participation of good, or not?"

"I agree."

"Then you must agree by similar reason that unity and good both are the same thing; for things that are not naturally separated must be substantially one thing."

"I cannot deny it."

"Haven't you understood that everything that exists, continues its existence and its substance as long as it is one? But when it foregoes being one, it necessarily must die and become corrupted?"

"In what way?"

"Just as with beasts, when the body and the soul are united and exist together, it is called a beast; but when the unity is destroyed by severing the one from the other, then it is clearly a dead thing, and is no longer a beast. And the body of a man, as long as it continues in one form by the conjunction of its parts, it is obviously a figure of mankind; but if the parts of the body are so divided and detached, the one from the other, that unity is destroyed, the body ceases to be what it previously was. And if one were to run through all things in the same way, he would see, without

³⁵ The **Tagus** (Spanish: *Tajo*, Portuguese: *Tejo*) is the longest river in the Iberian Peninsula. It flows along the border between Portugal and Spain and into Portugal, where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean near Lisbon. In ancient times it was famous for its gold-bearing sands. *source:https://www.britannica.com*

³⁶ **Hermus** is the ancient name for the **Gediz River**, the second-largest river in the Turkish region of Anatolia flowing into the Aegean Sea.

doubt, everything has its substance as long as it has unity, and when it gives up being one, it dies and perishes.”

I responded, “when I consider many things, I can’t see it being otherwise.”

She asked, “is there anything that having lived naturally, gives up the desire or appetite for its being, and desires to come to death and corruption?”

“If I consider those beasts that have any ability to make decisions (for or against), I can think of no beast, unless it is forcibly constrained, that gives up or despises the intention to go on living and to endure; or that willingly hastens his death. For every beast labors to defend and preserve his life and shuns death and destruction. But certainly, I have my doubts about plants and trees, that have no feeling souls nor natural mechanisms serving their appetites as animals have, whether they have the will to live and to endure.”

“Certainly, in this too, there can be no doubt. Now look at these plants and these trees. They grow first in such places as are convenient for them, where they will not soon die or dehydrate, as long as nature provides for them. For some of them thrive in fields, and some on mountains, and others grow in marshes, and others cling to rocks, and some breed in sands; and if any man were to transplant them elsewhere, they would wither. For nature gives to everything that which is convenient to it; and labors to keep it from dying so long as it has the energy to abide and stay alive. What will you say to this: that they draw all their nourishment by their roots, just as if they had mouths pressed into the earth, and they spread their marrow through their wood and their bark? And what will you say of this, that this thing that is all soft, like marrow³⁷, is always hidden in the innermost heart, protected all around it by the steadfast wood; and that the outer bark stands as a sentinel against the raging storms of the heavens to prevent harm? And surely you can see how great nature’s diligence is; for all things renew and spread themselves by multiplying their seed, and thus it is clear that they are the example and edifice of durability, not only for a time, but to endure permanently through generations.

“The things that men believe lack souls, don’t they desire, each of them, by apparent reason, to keep what is theirs [Chaucer’s note: *because it is in their nature to conserve their being and to endure*]? For why else does the flame rise up lightly, and the weight presses the earth down, but because these places and movements are convenient to each of them? And truly everything keeps what is necessary and proper for it, just as things that are contrary and full of animus corrupt them.³⁸ And further, the hard things, like stones, adhere and hold their parts together, strongly and hardily, and protect themselves by withstanding efforts to easily splinter them. And the things that are soft and flowing, such as water and air, they move lightly and give way to things that block or divide them; but nevertheless, they return soon again to the same course from which they were diverted; but fire flies away and refuses to be diverted.

“I do not discuss here willful movements of the intelligent soul, but of the natural intention of things, as thus: just as we swallow the meat that we receive without thinking about it, and as we unconsciously draw our breath while sleeping, certainly among beasts, the love of life and of their being does not derive from the conscious soul, but from fundamental nature.

“Certainly, due to compelling reasons, the will may desire and embrace that death that nature dreads. [Chaucer’s note: *a man may be compelled by some cause so that he desires and achieves the death that nature hates and sorely dreads*]. And just as contrary, sometimes a man’s will disrupts

³⁷ pith

³⁸ “Porro autem quod cuique consentaneum est, id unumquodque conservat, sicuti ea quae sunt inimica corrumpunt.” And that which is agreeable to everything conserves it, just as that which is opposite causes corruption.

and constrains what nature desires and always requires, that is to say the work of generation, by which the long duration and maintenance of mortal things is sustained.

“Thus, this charity and love that every being has for itself does not come from the activity of the soul, but from the intention of nature. For the power of God has given to things created by him a truly great cause to live and endure so that they naturally desire their lives for as long as they might. So, you should not have any doubt that all things in existence wish for the stability of long existence and eschew their destruction.”

I said, “Now I readily confess that I clearly see, without doubt, the things that once seemed uncertain to me.”

“But,” she said, “this thing that desires to exist forever, it wishes to be one. If that unity were destroyed in men, certainly their being would cease to exist.”

“That is true.”

Then she said, “All things desire to be one.”

“I agree.”

“And I have shown that this same unity is that which is good.”

“Yes, truly.”

“And all things require good; therefore, good is that which everyone desires.”

“No one could imagine a truer thing,” I responded, “for either all things descend and amount to nothing, and flutter about without governor, deprived of unity as of their own head; or else, if there is anything toward which all things tend and are drawn to, that thing must be the sovereign good above all goods.”

Then said she thus: “Oh, my pupil, I feel great happiness for you. For you have caught in your heart the central truth, that is to say, the bull’s eye. But this thing that you have discovered, you said that you didn’t understand a little while ago.”

“What was that?”

“That you didn’t know what the end of things was. And certainly, that is the thing that every man desires, and as we have concluded and understood that good is this thing that is desired by all, then we must confess that good is the end of all things.”

Book III—Meter 11

“Whoever seeks truth through deep thought and longs not to be deceived by missteps, let him turn and contemplate within himself the light of his inner sight. Let him struggle, bending into a circle, the straying movements of his thoughts; and let him teach his heart which he has engaged and hidden among his treasures, all that he has attempted to search for outside of himself. And then, this thing that had been covered by the black cloud of error shall glow more clearly than Phoebus himself shines.” [Chaucer’s note: “*He who would seek the deep ground of truth within his mind and would not be deceived by false propositions that steer him away from the truth, let him turn to closely examine within himself the nature and properties of the thing. Let him again examine his thoughts and turn them over by good deliberation before he judges and let him teach his soul that it has, according to natural principles, innately hidden within itself, all the truths which he imagines exist outside himself. Then, all the darkness of his ignorance shall more clearly appear to his inner vision than the sun appears to his outer sight.*”]³⁹

³⁹ According to F. N. Robinson, the “re-translation” in the gloss is derived from the Commentaries of Nicholas Trivet. Robinson, F. N. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., 1957 The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Explanatory notes p. 805.

“For surely, the body bearing the weight of forgetting; has not expunged from your mind all the clarity of your knowing; certainly, the seed of truth is held and sticks to your heart and it is awakened and enlivened by the winds and blasts of doctrine. Where else do you think, your own will resides, when you are asked, but from the nourishing reason living deep within your heart?”
[Chaucer’s note: “*How should men deem the truth of anything asked of them if there was not a root of truth hidden in the natural principles living within the depths of their thought?*”]

“And if it is true what the Muse and the doctrine of Plato sing, all that every man learns, is only recalling the things that he has forgotten.”⁴⁰

Book III—Prose 12

Then I said, “I am fully in accord with Plato, for you bring back to my memory these things for the second time; that is to say, first when I had lost my memory due to the diseased conjunction of the body with the soul, and soon afterward when I lost it due to the weight and burden of my sorrow.”

She replied, “If you consider first the things that you have already granted, it won’t be long before you remember this thing that you said you don’t know.”

“What thing?”

“By what governance,” said she, “this world is ruled.”

“I remember that well, and I freely confess that I didn’t know it. But although I now distantly see what you propose, nevertheless I wish to hear it from you more plainly.”

“You didn’t doubt a little while ago, that this world is governed by God.”

“Nor do I doubt it now. It was never in question that God governs this world. And I will briefly explain to you by what reasons I have arrived at this:

“This world that is made up of so many diverse and conflicting parts, could never have been assembled into one form without the One who could unite these diverse things.

“This same diversity in their natures that causes such discord among them, would have ripped apart and uncoupled the things that had been joined, if not for the One who kept together the things that he had joined and bound.

“The exact order of nature could not display such precise movement of place, time, action, space, or of quality without that One who always steadfastly monitors and controls these various movements.

“And this thing, whatever it is, by which all things are created and led, I call “God” which is the word that people most often use.”

Then she said, “Since you feel these things, I have little left to do so that you, healthy, whole, and sound, might soon see your homeland. But let’s reexamine the things we previously proposed. Haven’t I reckoned and explained that self-sufficiency is in happiness? And haven’t we agreed that God is this same happiness?”

“Yes, truly.”

“And that to govern this world, He has no need of any outside help? – for otherwise, if he needed any help, He could not be self-sufficient”

“Yes, that must be so.”

“Then He alone, by Himself, controls all things?”

⁴⁰ “In two dialogues Plato shows that learning is not just the simple process of being instructed by a teacher, but of being helped to ‘bring up from within’ knowledge which the soul has learned before birth and has then forgotten...”(see Plato, *Protogagras and Meno...*). Source: *The Consolation of Philosophy* translated by V. E. Watts, Penguin Classics, 1969, pg 109, fn 14

“That can’t be denied.”

“And I have shown that God is this same good?”

“I remember it well.”

“Then He rules all things by this good since He who we agreed is good, governs all things by himself, and He is a key and a rudder by which the edifice of the world is kept stable and without corruption?”⁴¹

“I fully agree, and I guessed (though by a thin suspicion) a little while ago that you would say this.”

“I know it well,” she said, “for as I see it, you are focusing your eyes more attentively now to see true good. But nevertheless, what I am going to tell you should be no less visible.”

“What is that?”

“Just as men rightfully believe that God governs all things by the key⁴² of his goodness, and all these same things, as I have taught you, are drawn in by natural attraction toward goodness, so nobody can doubt that they are governed voluntarily, and that they only substitute their own will with that of their ruler after the manner of one who is in agreement with, and devoted to their governor and king.”

“It must be so,” I said, “for the kingdom would not seem happy if there were a yoke forcibly pulling us every which way; rather than the salvation of the obedient.”

“Then is there nothing that may retain its nature while struggling against God?” she asked.

“No.”

“And if someone attempted to resist God, could he prevail against Him who we have agreed is all powerful with the strength of happiness?”

“Certainly, he would utterly fail.”

“Then there is nothing,” said she, “that could or might withstand this sovereign good?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Then is this the sovereign good that governs all things strongly and manages them gently?”

Then I said, “I am delighted, not only by the theorems and sum of reasons that you have concluded and proven, but even more by the words you have chosen. So that, finally, fools who shred great things ought to be ashamed of themselves!” [Chaucer’s note: “*We fools who wickedly rebuke God’s governance, ought to be ashamed of ourselves, including I, who said that God refuses only to concern Himself with meddling in the works of men.*”]

⁴¹ the Latin, “clauus atque gubernaculum” could be translated as tiller and rudder. Chaucer mistook clauus for clavis (key). Personally, I think that Chaucer’s mistake is a happy one; if we consider the universe as a giant automaton, with God holding the key. An interesting commentary by Skeats gives us perspective on the challenges faced by a 14th century translator, “*When we come to consider the style and manner in which Chaucer has executed his self-imposed task, we must first of all make some allowance for the difference between the scholarship of his age and of our own. One great difference is obvious, though constantly lost sight of, viz. that the teaching in those days was almost entirely oral, and that the student had to depend upon his memory to an extent which would now be regarded by many as extremely inconvenient. Suppose that, in reading Boethius, Chaucer comes across the phrase ‘ueluti quidam clauus atque gubernaculum’ (Bk. iii. pr. 12, note to l. 55), and does not remember the sense of clauus; what is to be done? It is quite certain, though this again is frequently lost sight of, that he had no access to a convenient and well-arranged Latin Dictionary, but only to such imperfect glossaries as were then in use. Almost the only resource, unless he had at hand a friend more learned than himself, was to guess. He guesses accordingly; and, taking clauus to mean much the same thing as clavis, puts down in his translation: ‘and he is as a keye and a stere,’* The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Boethius and Troilus), Rev. Walter W. Skeat, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1894, Introduction pp xxi – xxii.

⁴² again, clavis for clauus.

“You may clearly recall the fables of the poets,” she said, “how the giants assailed the heavenly gods⁴³, but truly the gentle force of God disposed of them righteously [*Chaucer’s note: destroyed the giants, as was right*]. But are you willing that we merge these same reasons, so that, perhaps, such conjunction may ignite a bright spark of truth?”

“Proceed as you wish.”

“Don’t you know that God is almighty? – no one could doubt it.”

“No man would doubt it, if he were in his right mind.”

“And he who is all powerful, there is nothing that he can’t do?”

“That is true.”

“May God do evil?”

“No, truly,” I replied.

“Then evil is nothing since he who can do anything cannot do evil.”

“Are you mocking or scorning me?” I asked. “that you have so woven for me with your reasonings the house of Daedalus⁴⁴, so convoluted that it is impossible to untangle – you who sometimes enter from the exit, or exit from the entrance? Are you folding together your arguments by repeating words in a wonderous circle or by wrapping them around the divine simplicity?”

“For surely,” I continued, “a little while ago when you began to discuss happiness, you said that sovereign good is set in Lord God; and you said that God, Himself is sovereign good; and that good is complete happiness. And then, you gave me as a corollary, that no man is happy unless he is good. You also said that good is the substance of God and of happiness. Also, that this unity is this same good that all things need and desire. And you proved with arguments that God governs everything in the world by the government of beneficence; that all things desire to obey Him; and that evil has no substance. You didn’t show these things with external reasonings, but by circular proofs and simple illustrations. These proofs expound on their truth by building one upon the other.”

“Now,” she responded, “I do not scorn or mock or deceive you. But I have shown you the thing that is greatest over all other things, by the gift of God to whom we have prayed. For this is the form of the divine substance that doesn’t modify itself into external, foreign things, nor take in any outside influences but just as Parmenides⁴⁵ said in Greece, this divine substance that turns the world and the movable circle of things, is itself stationary.” [*Chaucer’s note: “It does not move, and yet it moves all other things.”*]

“But nevertheless, if I have stirred up reasonings that are outside of the parameters of the things on which we are working, but reasons that are relevant, you shouldn’t marvel since you have learned from Plato that words are cousins of the things to which they refer.”

Book III—Meter 12

Happy is the man who may see the clear fountain of good!

Happy is he who may free himself from the oppression of the heavy earth!

⁴³ probably means “against the gods” though that phrase is not in the Latin.

⁴⁴ the Latin phrase is “inextricabilem labyrinthum” and doesn’t name Daedalus who, in Greek mythology, constructed the labyrinth to hold the Minotaur.

⁴⁵ Parmenides of Elea (6th – 5th century BCE) was a Presocratic Greek philosopher. As the first philosopher to inquire into the nature of existence itself, he is credited as the “Father of Metaphysics.” As the first to employ deductive, *a priori* arguments to justify his claims, he competes with Aristotle for the title “Father of Logic.” He is also commonly thought of as the founder of the “Eleatic School” of thought—a philosophical label ascribed to Presocratics who purportedly argued that reality is in some sense a unified and unchanging singular entity. *Source: Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

The poet of Thrace, Orpheus, deeply felt sorrow at the death of his wife. After he had made the trees run, had caused the rivers to hold still, had prompted the deer to fearlessly join with the cruel lions to listen to his song, and had made the hare unafraid of the hound, so pleased were they by his song.

When the ardent love for his wife burned in his breast, and the songs that had overcome all things could not assuage the grief of their master Orpheus, he lamented to the heavenly gods for their cruelty to him.

He travelled to the houses of hell, and there he intoned his soothing songs with resonating strings, and tearfully spoke and sang with all the skill he had received and absorbed from the noble lessons of his mother, the goddess Caliope.

And he sang with as much force as he could despite weeping, and with such love, though it doubled his sorrow, that shaped and informed his singing.

And he moved hell to pity with his pleas and prayers to the lords of the souls in hell for release of his wife.

Cerberus⁴⁶, the porter of hell, with his three heads was captivated and abashed by the new song.

And the three goddesses⁴⁷: furies and avengers of felonies who torment and terrify souls for punishment, became sorrowful and sad, and wept tears of pity.

Then, the head of Ixion⁴⁸ ceased to be tormented by the twisting wheel.

And Tantalus⁴⁹, who was destroyed and driven mad by long thirst, forgot his need for water.

The bird called vulture who eats the stomach or liver of Tityus,⁵⁰ is so filled with song that he ceases to rip and eat.

Finally, the lord and judge of souls was moved to his heart's mercy and cried, 'We are conquered! We give to Orpheus his wife to keep him company; he has indeed purchased her with his fine singing and words. But we impose a law and covenant to this gift: until he leaves hell, if he looks behind him, his wife shall be returned to us.'

⁴⁶ Cerberus was the gigantic, three-headed hound of Hades which guarded the gates of the underworld and prevented the escape of the shades of the dead. Cerberus was depicted as a three-headed dog with a serpent's tail, mane of snakes, and a lion's claws. *source: <http://www.theoi.com>*

⁴⁷ The Erinyes (Furies) were three goddesses of vengeance and retribution who punished men for crimes against the natural order. They were particularly concerned with homicide, unfilial conduct, offenses against the gods, and perjury. A victim seeking justice could call down the curse of the Erinyes upon the criminal. The most powerful of these was the curse of the parent upon the child--for the Erinyes were born of just such a crime, being sprung from the blood of Uranus, when he was castrated by his son Kronos. *source: <http://www.theoi.com>*

⁴⁸ Ixion was shunned for having killed his father-in-law. Zeus had pity on Ixion and brought him to Olympus and introduced him at the table of the gods. Instead of being grateful, Ixion grew lustful for Hera, Zeus's wife. Zeus found out about his intentions expelled Ixion from Olympus ordered Hermes to bind Ixion to a winged fiery wheel that was always spinning. *Source: <http://www.britannica.com>*

⁴⁹ Tantalus was punished by the gods for several crimes including to mortals the secrets he had learned in heaven. In Hades, Tantalus stood up to his neck in water, which flowed from him when he tried to drink it, and over his head hung fruits that the wind wafted away whenever he tried to grasp them (hence the word 'tantalize'). *Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica*

⁵⁰ Tityus was a giant who assaulted the goddess Leto as she travelled to the shrine of Delphi. Her son Apollon quickly intervened and slew the giant with a volley of arrows and the blade of his golden sword. As further punishment for his crime, Tityus was staked to the ground in the underworld where two vultures were set to feed on his ever-regenerating liver. *Source: www.theoi.com*

But who can impose a law on lovers? Love is a greater and stronger law in itself than any man-made law. Alas! When Orpheus and his wife were almost at the terminus of night [Chaucer's note: *at the last boundary of hell*], Orpheus looked backward on Eurydice, his wife, and lost her and she was dead.

This fable applies to all of you who desire or seek to lead your thoughts into the brightness of the good of sovereign. For whoever is so overcome that he fixes his eyes on the pit of hell, (who sets his thoughts upon earthly things), all that he had ever taken from the noble, celestial good, he will lose by focusing on the low things of the earth.

Book IV—Prose 1

When Philosophy had sung these things softly and delicately while maintaining her dignified demeanor and her serious intent, I who had not utterly forgotten the weeping and sorrow that was embedded in my heart, interrupted the course of her further speech:

“Oh, you who are the guide to true light, what you have said are so clear and so revealing by their divine presence and by your reasoning that they may not be challenged.

“And these things that you told me, although I had forgotten them due to grief from the wrongs done to me, nevertheless, they were not entirely new to me. But this is still a great cause of sorrow: since the governor of all things is good, how can evil possibly be, or else how can evil succeed without punishment? We must wonder at this thing. Surely you have considered it. But to this there is joined a further wonderment: crime is a bejeweled empress; while virtue is not only unrewarded but is thrown aside and trampled under the feet of criminals, receiving the torments that are rightly owed to the wicked.

“And everyone should be amazed that such things happen under the reign of God who is all knowing and all powerful, and who wills that only good things should happen.”

“Certainly,” she said, “it would be a great marvel and an endless wonder more horrible than any monster, if it were as you think: namely that in the well-ordered house of so great a father and the lord of the household, that filthy and vile vessels should be honored and praised, and that precious vessels should be befouled and vilified. But this is not so. For if the things I concluded a little while ago remain whole and undeleted, you shall firmly know by the authority of God of whose kingdom I speak, that certainly good people are always strong, and criminals are always outcast and feeble. Vices are forever paid with pain, and virtues are never unrewarded. Happiness always comes to good folks; and misfortune is always visited upon the wicked.

“When you come to understand many things of this kind, you will cease complaining and become strengthened with sober steadfastness. And as I have shown you the nature of true happiness, and shown you in whom happiness is grounded — all the things that I know are needed, now I will show you the way for you to return to your house; and I shall attach to your mind wings that will let it fly up, so you will leave all tribulation behind you. With my guidance, by my path, and on my sleigh, you shall return safe and sound to your country.”

Book IV—Meter 1

“I have swift wings that soar above heaven’s height. When your eager mind outfits itself with those wings, it will despise the hateful earth and rise above the sphere of the atmosphere. It will see the clouds behind it as it soars beyond the region of fire, heated by the swift movement of the firmament, until it arrives at the domain that bears the stars. There it will join its path with that of the sun, Phoebus, and accompany the path of old, cold Saturn, and be made a knight of the clear star [Chaucer’s note: *when thought becomes God’s knight by seeking shining truth in order to come to the true knowledge of God*] – and this soul speeds by the sphere of the stars in all of the places where they paint the shining, cloudless night; [Chaucer’s note: *for then it seems that the heavens are painted with many starry images*]. And when the mind has lingered there long enough, it shall leave the last heaven; it shall press on upon the back of the swift firmament and shall be purified by the worshipful light of God.

There the Lord of Kings holds the scepter of his power and guides the governance of the world. And he, the supreme judge of things, himself unchanging, holds the reins of the swift chariot, the sun.

“And if this way brings you back to where you started, then you will see that you have found the country you seek which you had forgotten and you will say, ‘Now I remember well; here is where I was born; here I will dwell.’

“But if you choose then to look upon the dark earth that you have left behind, then you will see that these criminal tyrants, who the wretched people now dread, are exiled from this fair country.”⁵¹

Book IV—Prose 2

“Wow!” I said. “I’m amazed by the great things you have promised me. Nor do I doubt that you can do all that you promise. I only pray this: don’t delay explaining these things that you have raised.”

She answered, “First, you need to know that good people are always strong and mighty, and the wicked are feeble, barren, and stripped of all strength. And these characteristics are made clear by comparison of each of them with the other.

“Since good and evil are opposites, then if good is steadfast, the weakness of evil is clearly seen. And if you know the weakness of evil, the steadfastness of good is known.

“But in order that the truth of my argument shall become firmer and more abundant, I will proceed to compare the one and the other and will prove the arguments from both sides.

“There are two things that stand out among all the deeds of mankind: will and power. If one of these two fails, nothing can be done. If a man lacks will, he will not undertake to do anything; if he lacks power, he cannot accomplish what he wishes to do. So, if you see a man trying in vain to do something, you can be sure that it is power that fails him.”

“This is sparkling clear, and no one could deny it.”

“And if you see a man accomplishing what he intended to do, you wouldn’t doubt that he had the power to do it?”

“No.”

“And to the extent that a man may ‘do,’ then men consider him mighty [Chaucer’s note: *So, if a man has the power to do a thing, to that extent, men call him mighty, and if he can’t do something, he is deemed feeble.*]”

“I do see that.”

“Do you remember that I have already assembled examples and demonstrated for you the reasons why all the intentions of mankind lead toward the achievement of happiness?”

“I clearly remember that you have shown it.”

“And has it stayed with you that happiness is this same good that man demands...so that when happiness is desired, good is also required and desired?”

“It hasn’t left me. I have it firmly fixed in my memory”

“Then everyone, good and bad, pushes themselves to achieve good?”

“That is a true consequence.”

“And it is certain, that by achieving good, men become good?”

“Of course.”

“Then good men get what they desire?”

⁵¹ See also the first footnote to Book III, Prose 8. Boethius here intermingles two concepts: the geocentric view of the universe, in which earth is seen as the center of existence with spheres of varying speeds holding the atmosphere, moon, planets, sun, and stars revolving around earth at increasing distance; and the theocentric view in which God is the perfect center and everything including the souls of man descend from God, becoming less perfect and more corrupt. Earth is at the furthest, darkest distance from God. But God grants to the soul the possibility of ascending by returning to the domain of His perfection.

"It would seem so."

"But if wicked folk actually got the good that they desire, they would no longer be wicked."

"True."

"Then, since both groups desire good, and good folks get good, but not wicked folks, can we have any doubt that good people are mighty, and that the wicked are feeble?"

"Anyone who doubts it is ignoring the nature of things or the consequence of reason."

"Furthermore, imagine two people who naturally had one objective. One of them pursued and reached his goal by regular means. The other who refused to use natural ways followed a path that is contrary to nature and tried, unsuccessfully, to get the result of the first person, which of these two do you judge the mightiest?"

"I could conjecture what you will say, but I would like to hear the answer more plainly from you."

"You won't deny, that the ability to move is a natural function of men?"

"No, truly."

"Nor do you doubt that the feet provide the natural function for moving?"

"I don't doubt it."

"Then, if one man is strong and goes about on his feet, while another lacks the natural function of his feet and is forced to go creeping upon his hands, which of these, by right should be considered stronger?"

"Knit together the remnant of this argument, for no one can doubt that one who has the natural use of his feet is mightier than one who has not."

"The sovereign good that is equally available to good folks and bad is sought by good people using their natural virtues, while bad people try to attain it by coveting various earthly things that are unnatural paths to this same sovereign good. Am I wrong?"

"No, for the consequences are open and revealed for things I have already agreed to that show that good folks are mighty, and the wicked are weak and feeble."

"You're running along with me; and this is my judgement of you, just as doctors often have hope for sick people when they see nature battling and standing up to the malady. Since I see you already grasping for this understanding, I shall show you deeper and more permanent arguments."

"Now see how clearly is shown the weakness and infirmity of evil people who cannot achieve what they naturally intend to do, and, indeed which nature almost compels them to do. And what do you suppose would happen to the wicked folks if nature deprived them of their compelling drive...which is always pushing them on? Consider then what a great vacuum of power and what great weakness resides in bad people. [Chaucer's note: *The more that a thing is impotently coveted, the more clearly may be seen the weakness of he who covets it. So, Philosophy focuses on sovereign good.*]

Nor are they small rewards or simple gains that these wicked people pursue without hope of achievement, but they fail at the very summit of sovereign good. These wretches never achieve sovereign good though they struggle night and day to get it.

"It is in the getting of sovereign good that we may see the strength of good people. For just as you might judge one strong on his feet who can go all the way to the end of the course, you must judge a man mighty who goes after and attains the end of all things to be desired, beyond which there is nothing else.

Seeing this power of good people, we may conclude that the wicked are barren and stripped of all strength. For why do they forego virtue and follow vice? Is it because they don't know what good is? But then what could be feebler and more enslaved than the blindness of

ignorance? Are they fully aware of the path they ought to follow, but are too misguided by lechery and greed? Certainly, a life of excess so weakens men that they cannot fight against vice. Don't they know that they are willfully giving up good for vice? In this way they not only throw away their strength, but even their being. For they who eschew the common end of all things give up their right to exist.

"Perhaps it seems to some folks a fantastical thing to say that the wicked, who are the majority of men, are nothing – have no being; but nevertheless, it is true.

"That's how things stand. I do not deny that the wicked are wicked. But I declare clearly and simply that they have no being. For just as you might call the body of a dead man, a corpse, but not a man, so I truly grant that vicious people are wicked, but I absolutely deny that they 'are.' For this thing that maintains order and keeps nature has being. But anyone who fails in that [Chaucer's note: *that abandons natural order*], loses that being that has been set in his nature.

"You will say that evil men have power. I don't deny it. But their power does not descend from strength, but from weakness. For they may do evil, which they could not do if they existed in the form and in the soul of good folks. This power shows clearly that they do not have strength. For as I demonstrated and proved a little while ago, evil is nothing. And so, as evil people can only do evil, it is evident that evil people are powerless. In order that you might understand the nature of evil people's power, I showed that nothing is as mighty as sovereign good."

"That is true," I said.

"And this same sovereign good can do no evil?"

"Certainly not."

"Could anyone believe that men can do all things?"

"No one, unless he was insane."

"But certainly, the wicked may do evil?"

"Yes, would God that they could not!"

"Then he who has the power to do only good things, may do all things and they who are strong in evil may not do all things. It is an open and shut case that evil doers have less power. And to further prove this conclusion, I am helped by my earlier demonstration that all power is to be numbered among the things that men need, and I showed that all things that ought to be desired are related to good just as to the best part of their nature. But the ability to do evil and crime is not related to good. Thus, evil is not among the things that ought to be desired. But all power ought to be desired and required. So, clearly the power and the ability of the wicked is powerless. And from all these things it is well shown that good folks are certainly mighty and evil people are doubtless weak. And it is glaringly clear that this statement of Plato⁵² is right and true: Only wise men may do what they desire, and the wicked may try as much as they want to come to sovereign good, but are powerless to accomplish it. For the wicked do what they delight in doing in order to come to the good that they desire; but they get nothing; they attain nothing, for vice does not lead to happiness."

Book IV—Meter 2

Whoever might strip the coverings of vain apparel from these proud kings that you see sitting high on their thrones, glittering in shining purple, surrounded by grim armaments, threatening with cruel words, blowing off steam from a heart full of madness, he should then see that these lords bear within their hearts truly strong chains.

⁵² from *Gorgias*, a Socratic dialogue written by Plato around 380 BC.

On one side, their minds are tormented by lechery with greedy poisons, and on the other side, painful anger arises in them with floods of troubles; or sorrow holds them weary and captive; or else sliding and deceiving hope torments them. Therefore, as you now see, one tyrant's head bears so many tyrannies that he cannot do as he wishes since he is ruled over by many lords [Chaucer's note: *by so many vices that have such wicked lordship over him*].

Book IV—Prose 3

"Can't you see then in what a filthy mess these wretches are ensnared, and with what clear goodness these good folks shine? It is so obvious that good people never lack their reward, nor mean people their punishment. For every action seems to have its own desserts. Consider this: if a man runs in the stadium for the crown, then the reward is in the crown for which he runs. As I have shown that happiness is the good for which all things are done, then this same good is the reward to mankind for performing good works. This reward may not be taken away from good people.

"No man, to the extent that he lacks goodness, may be called good. Thus, people who behave well, never lose their reward. For no matter that wicked people act as ferociously as they will against good folks, yet nevertheless, the "crown" of wise men shall not fall or wilt; for external wickedness cannot steal away from the hearts of good people their honor.

"However, if any man takes pride another's goodness, then he who gave him that goodness, or another man might take it back. But if one's own good actions give him his reward, then only he may give up that reward by ceasing to be good.

"Lastly, since all rewards are desired because men judge that they are good, who would believe that one who is filled with goodness has not received his reward? And what kind of reward shall he receive? Certainly, a precious and unparalleled one.

"Remember the noble corollary that I gave you a little while ago? It went like this: just as God himself is happiness, then clearly all good folks are made happy for they are good; and accordingly, they are made gods. Thus, the reward for good folks (to be made gods) is so great that it will never be impaired; no wickedness may darken it, nor man's power diminish it. And since good men never lose their reward, certainly no wise man may doubt the everlasting pain of scoundrels.

"Since good and evil, and pain and reward are opposites, it must be that as reward follows good, so the pain of evil is visited upon scoundrels. As abundance and excellence are granted to good folks, so wickedness itself torments scoundrels. Therefore, if those who are infected or befouled with evil could see themselves, how could they not know that they are being horribly punished? Can they have any doubt that it is with evil that they are imbued or racked since they are touched by wicked ways which are the deepest and worst kind of evil, not only attaching to and befouling them, but also greatly infecting and poisoning them?

"Observe scoundrels who are the opposite of good men. What great pain adheres to and follows them! For you learned a little while ago that everything that exists and has being is one, and that this same unity is good. So, this must reasonably follow: all that is, and has being is good. since being and goodness and unity are all one. Consequently, anything that fails to be good, loses its existence and no longer has any being. Wherefore, the wicked cease to be what they were. But their physical body shows that these wretches once were men. But when they were perverted and turned toward malice, they surely lost the essence of mankind. As only excellence and strength may mark a man as being superior to other men, it must be that scoundrels whose wickedness has

cast them out from the family of man, sink beneath the quality and merit of men. Thus, if you see a fellow who is transformed by vice you shall not judge him to be a man:

If he is ardent in his avarice, and is a plunderer by violence of others' wealth, you will say that he is like a wolf.

If he is tirelessly larcenous, with an ever-quarreling tongue, you will compare him to a hound.

If he is sneaky and hides in wait to pounce on his victim, you will say he is foxy.

If he is full of rage and trembling with ire, men will say that he has the disposition of a lion.

If he is cowardly, fearful, and dreads things that ought not to be dreaded, we say he is like a deer.

If he is slow, stupid, and lazy, he lives like an ass.

If he is frivolous, flighty of heart, and always changing his mind, he is like the birds.

And if he is steeped in foul and unclean lechery, he is trapped in the disgusting delights of the dirty pig.

He who forgoes bounty and strength, loses his manhood. Since he cannot be lifted to the condition of God, he is turned into a beast."

Book IV—Meter 3

Eurus,⁵³ blew the sails of the wandering ships of Ulysses, duke of the country of Narice⁵⁴ to be stranded on the Isle of Circes, the fair goddess and daughter of the Sun. She mixed her new guests drinks that had been tainted with enchantment by her skill with herbs. So, she changed the sailors into various forms: one's face became that of a boar; another, his nails and teeth growing, was changed into an African lion; another was transformed into a wolf, howling when he tried to cry; another walked daintily through the house as an Indian tiger.

The godly Mercury, known as the Bird of Arcadia,⁵⁵ showed mercy toward Duke Ulysses, besieged with so many troubles, and freed him from the evil of his hostess. But the rowers and mariners had drunk her evil brews. Those who were turned into swine instead of eating bread, were now eating acorns from oaks. None of their human limbs remained.

But only their bodies and voices had been changed; their minds remained unaffected and they wept and bewailed the monstrous change that had befallen them. Oh, over-light hand! [Chaucer's note: *Oh, feeble and weak is the hand of Circes, the enchantress, who changes folks' bodies into beasts when compared to the mutation that is caused by vice!*]

No, the herbs of Circes were not so powerful. Although they could change men's limbs, they could not change the hearts. For hidden within is the strength of reason and vigor of men in the secret tower of their hearts. But the venom of vice rips apart a man more powerfully than the poisons of Circes. For vices cruelly pierce and pass through the inner heart. And though they don't disrupt the body, yet vices destroy men by wounding the mind.

Book IV—Prose 4

Then I said, "I readily acknowledge that wicked men may be turned into beasts by the quality of their souls even though their bodies keep their human form. But I would only wish that

⁵³ the east wind

⁵⁴ Ithaca (Mt. Niritto is the tallest mountain on the island). In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus (called Ulysses by the Romans) is King of Ithaca.

⁵⁵ Mercury (the Roman equivalent of the Greek Hermes) was the messenger of the gods and was depicted wearing a winged helmet and winged sandals. He was said to have been born in Arcadia.

bad men were prevented from always carrying out their evil plans of destruction against good men.”

“Certainly, they are not permitted to do so as I will show you at a convenient moment. But nevertheless, if it were true as people believe, that bad men can do this, and if such power were taken away from them, so that they couldn’t annoy or harm good people, surely a great part of the pain suffered by wicked people would be assuaged and relieved. For even though this may seem incredible to some, it is true that when bad folks get away with their misdeeds, they become more miserable and unhappier than they would be if they were stopped. For if it is so that wishing to do evil makes one miserable, then it must be that actually doing evil makes people more wretched. Without this power, their despicable desires would languish impotently. Then, since each of these things has its own wretchedness [Chaucer’s note: *the will to do evil, and the power to do evil*], it must be that bad people are weighted down by three sorts of unhappiness: the desire, the ability, and the performance of criminal and evil acts.”

“I agree with you, but I greatly desire that scoundrels should soon lose this unhappiness, namely that they would be stripped of their ability to do wicked things.”

“This shall be done sooner, perhaps, than you would imagine; or sooner than they themselves would believe that they could lose their power to do evil. For nothing lasts so long in the short bounds of this life that it seems long to an immortal heart. The great hopes and schemes of bad people can be dashed by sudden death before they know it. That puts an end to their wickedness. For if wicked acts are what makes a man wretched, then he who lives the longest as a scoundrel must be the most wretched. I would figure that bad men would be the most unhappy and enslaved if their wickedness did not end with their death; for if my conclusions about the unhappiness of wickedness are true, then it is true that this wretchedness would be without end: it would be everlasting.”

“Granting this conclusion is hard and astonishing, but I know that it is in harmony with the things to which I have already agreed.”

“You have sized it up rightly. But whoever finds it hard to accept a conclusion has the responsibility to show the failure in the underlying premises, or how the construction of propositions does not lead to a necessary conclusion. If he can’t do that, he shouldn’t blame the argument. What I’m going to tell you now shall not seem less startling, but it follows necessarily from the earlier propositions that have been accepted.”

“What is that?”

“That these bad men become happier, or less wretched, when they suffer the torments that they deserve, than if no just punishments were inflicted on them. I’m not saying this in the way most people might think:

- that the behaviors of wicked people may be corrected and disciplined by chastisement,
- that they are set on the right path by fear of punishment, and
- that they serve as an example to help other folks escape from vice.

“My understanding is different: bad men become unhappier when they go unpunished even when there has been no law broken or instructive example made.”

“What kind of thing could that be, other than the ways that you previously explained?”

“Have we not established that good folks are happy, and that bad folks are wretched?”

“Yes.”

“Then if any good were added to the wretchedness of a man, wouldn’t he be happier than one who has no blending of good with his purely wretched existence?”

“So it seems.”

“What would you say about a wretch who lacks all good so that no good is blended with his wretchedness, so that added to his wickedness which makes him wretched, there is compounded and added to him more evil – shouldn’t men judge him unhappier than another wretch whose unhappiness is relieved by the participation of some good?”

“Why not?”

“Then surely, when bad men are punished, something good has been annexed to their wretchedness and that is the pain they suffer which is good by reason of the administration of justice. When these same bad men escape righteous pain, don’t they then receive an evil over-and-above the evil they have done, I mean for not receiving pain which you have agreed is the just dessert of crime?”

“I can’t deny it.”

“Far unhappier are bad men when they are wrongfully delivered from pain than when they are punished by righteous vengeance. This is an open and shut case: It is right that bad men are punished; and it is wicked and wrong if they escape unpunished.”

“Who could deny it?”

“But may any man deny that all that is right is good, and conversely, that all that is wrong is wicked?”

“Certainly, these things are clear enough, and we proved them a little while ago. But I pray you to tell me: do you believe that torment continues to the soul after the death of the body? [Chaucer’s note: *Is it your understanding that souls suffer torment after the body’s death?*]”

“Surely yes, and greatly. Some souls, I trust, are tormented by harsh pain; others are cleansed by a gentle purgatory. But it is not now the purpose of my counsel to delve into these kinds of pains.

“I have labored to explain to you the strength of bad men which, since it is unworthy, is no power at all. And also, you complained about the wicked not being punished; you would see to it that they are never without the torment brought on by their wickedness. Regarding the license to do evil, you prayed that it might soon end and not long endure. But bad men are unhappier if their wickedness continues, and most unhappy if it endures forever. I also showed you that bad men are unhappier when they escape their rightful pain, than when they are punished by righteous vengeance. And from this proposition, it follows that scoundrels suffer the most grievous torment when men believe that they have dodged punishment.”

I said, “When I consider your reasons, I can’t imagine anything truer. But when I consider the workings of men’s minds, who could be found to not only grant these arguments, but even embrace them?”

“Certainly, that is so. But men are so accustomed to the darkness of earthly things that they are unable to perceive the light of clear truth. They are like those birds who see sharply in the night but are blinded by daylight. Those who do not see the proper order of things, but only their lusts and passions believe that either the will or the power to do evil, or else to escape punishment are happy things.

“But consider the judgement of eternal law. For if you incline your heart to the best things, you don’t need a judge to award the prize or honor. You have joined yourself to perfection.

“If you have turned your attention to wicked things, don’t try to blame anyone other than yourself for the damage inflicted upon you since you have focused in turn on the foul earth, the high heavens, and all other external things [Chaucer’s note: *Neither in heaven, nor on earth will you*

find answers]. Then it would seem to you by reason of your search that you were now in the stars, now in the earth.

“But people don’t consider in this way. So what? Shall we try to communicate with those people who I have shown to be like beasts? And what will you say of this: If a man had totally lost his eyesight and forgotten that he ever could see, and believed that he lacked none of the perfection of mankind, then wouldn’t we who can see know that he is blind?”

“Similarly, it is useless to argue with people about that which is grounded on as strong a foundation of reason, namely that they who do wrong are unhappier than those who suffer the wrong.”

“I wish to hear these reasons.”

“Do you deny that all bad men deserve punishment?”

“No.”

“And I am certain for many reasons that scoundrels are unhappy.”

“Agreed.”

“Then can you doubt that those who deserve punishment are wretched?”

“That makes sense.”

“Suppose you were made a judge or a sage, what would you advise: that punishment should be meted out to those who do wrong, or to those who have suffered wrong?”

“I don’t doubt that I would give satisfaction to the victim by inflicting pain on the perpetrator.”

“Then does it seem that the doer of wrong is more wretched than the victim of wrong?”

“That’s surely the consequence.”

“Then, by these and other causes that are imposed by the same root cause, since moral filth or sin is what makes men miserable, it has been clearly shown that evil deeds do not bring wretchedness to the victim of wrong, but to the perpetrator of wrong. However, these orators or court advocates do just the opposite when they struggle to move judges to have pity on those who have suffered grievous and bitter harm. Instead, men should more properly have pity on those who do the damage and the wrongs. It would be more appropriate if these orators or advocates treated scoundrels, not with anger but with pity and gently as they lead them to judgement, just as we lead sick folks to a doctor, so that the malady of sin may be treated by punishment. By this arrangement, either the position of defense attorney would disappear entirely, or if that office defense attorney should continue to benefit society, it should be converted to that of prosecutor. [Chaucer’s note: *They should accuse bad men, not excuse them*]. If the scoundrels themselves could have a peek at the virtue that they had abandoned, and if they understood that they could discard their filthy vices by the torment of punishment, whereby they might receive as compensation the reward and power of their lost virtue, then they might consider it no punishment at all, and also, they would refuse the services of their lawyers, and deliver themselves to their judges and accusers.

“That’s why it is said by wise folk that there is no place given to hate [Chaucer’s note: *Hate has no place among wise people*]. Only a total fool hates good men; and hating scoundrels is contrary to reason. For just as wasting away is a sickness of the body, so are vice and sin sicknesses of the heart. And just as we wouldn’t think of hating those who have bodily illness but would pity them, even more worthy of pity rather than hatred are those whose thoughts are ensnared by criminal wickedness which is more cruel than any disease of the body.”

Why do you delight in exciting such great passions of hatred, and to hasten and precipitate the fatal disposition of your death by your own hands [Chaucer's note: *by battles or strife*]?

For if you seek death, it hastens to you by its own accord, nor does death let his swift horse tarry.

The men that the serpent, the lion, the tiger, the bear, and the boar seek to slay with their teeth, are likely to fall prey to other men's swords.

Just because other men's customs are different and jarring, men unjustly raise armies and cruelly battle and are willing to perish in exchanges of missiles! There is no justification for such cruelty.

Do you wish to give man a suitable prize worthy of him? Sincerely love good people; and have pity on the wicked.

Book IV—Prose 5

I said, "I clearly see what happiness or what misery is bestowed on good men and bad men. But in this same fortune of people, I see some measure of good and evil. No wise man would wish to be exiled, become poor, needy and unknown, rather than dwell in his own city, be blessed by wealth, and be strong in honors and power.

"Thus, in this way, the work of wise men is more clearly and publicly displayed when the happiness and the power of rulers is spread among his neighbors and his subjects who see prison, sentences, and these other torments of lawful punishments being paid to criminals for whom these punishments are established rather than to good people.

"Then I greatly marvel how things are so topsy-turvy that criminal punishments are inflicted upon, and confound good folks, while villains, reaping the rewards of virtue, and are honored and enjoy great wealth. I wish you would teach me the reason for such an awful confusion.

"I would certainly be less mystified if I could believe that all these things were mixed up by chance Fortune. But now, my astonishment is heaped up and increased. God, governor of things, often gives to good men goods and pleasures; and to the wicked, evils and bitter things. But then again, he sends good folks hard times, and lets scoundrels have their way and whatever they desire. What difference then may there be between the actions of God and of chance Fortune if men cannot see different outcomes?"

"No," she said, "it is no marvel, although men think that there is something foolish and confusing when they don't know the reasons for this order. But even though you don't grasp the cause of so great a consequence, nevertheless, since God, the good ruler, controls and governs the world, do not doubt that all things are done in the right way."

Book IV—Meter 5

Whoever is ignorant that the stars of Arcturus revolve near the sovereign center or highest pole of the firmament and doesn't understand why the constellation Boötes passes or gathers his wagons and douses his flames in the sea, only to quickly rise again, that man shall wonder at the celestial laws.⁵⁶

Also, he doesn't know why the horns of the full moon become pale and darkened by bounds of the dark night and how the darkened and confused moon reveals the stars that had been covered by her bright face. Common error moves such folks to beat upon their brass basins

⁵⁶ Arcturus is a star in the constellation Boötes which, appearing near the north pole seems to slowly set vertically and then to rise quickly again horizontally.

with fast strokes. [Chaucer's note: *There is a group of people called Corybantes who believe that when the moon is eclipsed that it is enchanted and, therefore, to rescue the moon they rapidly beat their basins*].⁵⁷

No one wonders when the blasts of the wind Chorus beat the waves of the sea into stormy floods, nor does anyone wonder when the heavy snow, hardened by the cold is melted by the burning heat of Phoebus, the sun, for in these things, men readily see the causes. But the causes hidden by heaven trouble men's hearts. These excitable people are stunned by things that happen rarely and appear suddenly. If the troublesome error of our ignorance left us so that we could know why such things happen, certainly they would cease to seem wonderous.

Book IV—Prose 6

"This is true," I said. "But since you have promised to uncover for me the hidden causes of things, and to reveal their now-clouded reasons, please advise and counsel me in this matter that I might be brought to a state of understanding. For this miracle or wonder greatly troubles me."

Then with a slight smile, she said, "You call on me to explain the greatest of all questions, and this question can be scarcely resolved [Chaucer's note: *There is hardly any way to sufficiently answer your question*]. For the heart of it is such that when one doubt is identified and cut away, there grows numberless other doubts, just as the heads of Hydra, the serpent killed by Hercules, grew. Nor would there be any end to it unless one were to conquer these doubts with a lively and quick mind. For in this matter men are likely to raise questions about the singularity of God's power, of the design of destiny, of sudden accident, of divine knowledge, of predestination, and of the liberty of free will.

"You, yourself, clearly see what weighty things these are. Since knowing them is part of your medicine, I will make the effort to explain some of it to you even though I am pressed for time.⁵⁸ Although you enjoy the nourishing delights of musical verses, you must suffer patiently a little while before this delight while I weave for you the reasons in the order in which they are knit together."

"Please do as you wish."

Then, as if beginning anew, she began to speak, "The engendering of all things and all the stages of mutable nature, and everything that has any movement, derives its cause, its order and its form from the immutability of divine thought. And this divine thought exists and resides in the high tower of the unity established by God for the multitude of kinds of things that happen. This construct when considered within the purity of divine intelligence is called Providence; but when it refers to things that are moved and controlled by it, it is what the ancients called destiny. He who ponders well about these things, considering each of them, will readily see that these two things are different. For Providence is the divine reason that resides in the sovereign Prince of things. While this Providence regulates everything; certainly, destiny clings to temporal things with the force and organization that knits together all things according to their kind.

"Providence embraces all things together: those that are diverse and those that are infinite. Destiny separates and controls all things individually that are different in movement, place, form, and time. Consider it this way: let the unfolding of temporal order brought together and united be called Providence; and this same assemblage and union, divided and unfolded by time, let that be

⁵⁷ Boethius simply attributes to ignorance the practice of beating pots and pans to scare away the malign forces darkening the moon:" Commouet geites publicus error Lassantque crebris pulsibus aera." Chaucer introduces, out of context, the Corybantes from Greek mythology whose rowdy, warlike dances included pounding their swords noisily on their shields.

⁵⁸ Could this be Boethius' recognition of his impending execution?

called destiny. Although these things are different, yet nevertheless one depends upon the other. Wherefore, destiny's rule proceeds from the unity of Providence.

"Just as a craftsman sees in his mind the form of the thing that he will make, and then labors to create his work in the temporal realm, shaping it as he had first seen it in his mind's eye, so God decides in his singular and unchanging Providence, the things that are to be done. But then he accomplishes in many ways and at various times, through destiny, those things that he has decided to do.

"Whether destiny is exercised by some divine spirit serving divine Providence, by some mortal soul, by natural forces serving God, by the celestial movements of stars, by the virtue of angels, or by the various subtleties of devils, or by any or all of them, the law of destiny is woven and accomplished. Clearly, Providence is a stable and simple plan of things to be done, while the changing bonds and temporal control of things which the divine simplicity of Providence has ordered carried out, is the work of destiny.

"So, all things that are subordinate to destiny are certainly subject to Providence which, itself, rules destiny. However, there are some things that are above the law of destiny and instead, are directly controlled by Providence. They are firmly affixed close to the primary godhead. Their stability places them above the rule of destiny.

"Consider circles that revolve around a central point; the innermost circle is most connected to the simplicity of the point, and that circle seems to be a stationary point to the other circles turning about it. The outermost circle, spread furthest from the simplicity of the point, must travel through a large circuit. If there is any way for it to tie or join itself to this middle point, it is constrained into immovable simplicity, and it ceases to be scattered and to fly randomly.

"In just this way, a thing that strays farthest from the primary attention of God is stretched out and must submit more to the bonds of destiny. To the extent that a thing has greater freedom and is loosed from destiny, it seeks and holds itself nearer to the center of things [Chaucer's note: *to God*]; and if it cleaves to the steadfastness of the mind of God and does not stray, certainly it shall escape the force of destiny. So just as we can compare knowledge to understanding, a thing that is engendered to a thing that *is*, time to eternity, and a circle to the center; so is the law of mobile destiny to the stability of simple Providence. This law regulates the heavens and the stars, and blends the elements together, transforming them by interchangeable mutation. And this same law renews all things that grow and die by various processes of seeds, and of male and female sex. This same law regulates the fortunes and the deeds of men by an unbreakable bond of causation. These causes of destiny, as they progress from their origin in the immovable Providence are also necessarily immutable. Thus, good government is maintained since the unity residing in the divine mind sets the direction for the unbendable law of causation.

"And this law constrains, by its own stability, movable things so that they don't fly about foolishly. That's why everything seems to us to be confused and troubled for we are unable to comprehend this law. Nevertheless, the proper order of all things, inclining themselves toward good, guides everything, for nothing can be done for the cause of evil. Things done by wicked folks are not done for evil, since these scoundrels as I have very often shown, seek good, but are turned around by wicked error. The order originating from the point of sovereign good is not weakened from its beginning.

"But you may say, 'What could be a worse confusion than good men sometimes having adversity and sometimes prosperity; and that bad men too sometimes have things they desire and then things that they hate?' Can it be that men now exist in such wholeness of thought [Chaucer's note: *are such wise men*] that they can rightly judge who is good or bad? No one can agree on this

matter. Men who are deemed by some as worthy of reward are deemed by others worthy of punishment. Let's suppose that some man exists who can accurately distinguish the good people from the bad. Would he then be able to know and see the innermost mixture of spirits as one might be able to do with bodies? [Chaucer's note: *May a man speak of and determine the coloration of the heart, as men might judge and talk about the complexions and coloration of bodies?*] No, it seems to be a miracle to those who lack understanding why sweet things are useful to some bodies that are healthy, and to other bodies bitter things are better; and why some sick folks are helped by gentle medicines while others need sharp remedies. But nevertheless, the physician who knows the ways and temperament of health and sickness is not at all surprised. But what seems more indicative of a healthy spirit than bounty and power? And what else seems to point to sickness of spirit than vice? Who is the guardian of good or the dispeller of evil but God, governor and physician of minds?

"This God, when he watches from the high tower of his Providence, knows the proper treatment for each man, and administers to each what he knows is best.

"Behold, here comes and is accomplished this noble miracle through the law of destiny when God, all knowing, does that which astonishes simple folk. But let us constrain [Chaucer's note: *in order to comprehend and to tell*] a few things about the divine wisdom in a way that man's reason can grasp. A man that you judge to be just and equitable, is judged the opposite by the divine mind that knows all. And as Lucan, my confidant, said, 'the victorious cause was favored by the gods, and the lost cause was favored by Cato.'⁵⁹

"Then whatever you see done in this world that seems unexpected or that you misunderstand, know that it is certainly the right order of things; it is only your wicked opinion that is confused. I suppose that there may be someone so strong that both the divine judgement and the judgement of mankind are in accord regarding him. Yet he will be of such unsteady heart that any adversity will rob him of his innocence so that he loses his fortune. Then the wise dispensation of God spares him from spiritual peril, for God will not subject a man to struggle if that struggle would not be beneficial. Another man is perfect in all virtues, and is a holy man, and is close to God, so that God's foresight determines that it would be a crime to touch him with adversity. God will not allow that such a man be afflicted with any bodily injury. But as a Greek philosopher made greater by me said, 'Virtues have built up the body of the holy man.'

"It often happens that the entirety of things to be done are directed to the governance of good people so that the abundant malice of scoundrels should be abated. God gives and takes away wealth and adversity mixed in proportions according to the needs of folks' hearts; and he afflicts some with adversity so that they should not become proud from too long-lasting abundance. And he allows others to labor under hardship so that they may confirm the virtues of the spirit by practicing and exercising patience. Other folks dread more than they ought things that they have the strength to bear. God leads these people to self-knowledge through experiencing bitter and sorrowful things. Many others have bought honorable renown in this world at the price of a glorious death. Some men who may not be swept away by torment, have served as an example to others that virtue may not be overcome by adversity. Of all these things, there is no doubt that they are done rightfully and properly, for the profit of those who are seen to receive them.

"Certainly, adversity sometimes comes to rogues, while sometimes they get what they want, these all come from the same causes. And when bad things happen to bad people, no one

⁵⁹ *Pharsalia*, I. 128 by Lucan. Cato (95 – 46 B.C.E.) joined Pompey in the civil war against Cæsar and committed suicide rather than suffer capture after Cæsar's victory in the battle of Thapsus. from V. E. Watts op. cit. p 138 fn.

wonders at that; for everyone judges that they got what they deserved because their wickedness merited it. Regarding these rogues, their punishment sometimes discourages others from committing crimes, and sometimes it reforms those who suffer punishment. The prosperity granted to scoundrels provides a great lesson to good people: how little they should regard such richness that they often see showered on the wicked. I believe that in this way, God's justice is dispensed. For perhaps the nature of one man is so captured by evil, and so incorrigible, that visiting great poverty on his household might egg him on to commit crimes. So, to address his sickness, God prescribes riches for him. Another man observes that his conscience is soiled with sin. He sizes up his fortune and himself and, perhaps, beginning to fear the sorrow of losing his cherished pleasures, he gives up his wickedness. Other folks are given riches undeservedly and are justly destroyed by them. Some men receive the power to punish so that it will serve to protect and enhance good people and bring torment to rascals.

"Just as there can be no alliance between good people and bad, so bad people are unable to find accord among themselves. And why not? For their vices cause discord within each of them, tearing apart their consciences and often leading them to do things that they later regret. This is how sovereign Providence has often brought forth the fair miracle of causing rascals to turn other wicked men into good people. When some bad men see that they have suffered wrongs at the hands of other bad men, they are enflamed with hatred at those who have hurt them and return to the fruit of virtue in order to be unlike those whom they hate. Certainly, this is divine power at work: turning evil into good by using evil as medicine to bring about a good result. [Chaucer's note: *Evil is good only in the hands of God; for God has the power to use this evil for good.*]

"One order embraces all things so that a man who strays from the law to which he has been assigned must slide under the control of another law, so that nothing is left to chance in the kingdom of divine Providence [Chaucer's note: *Nothing is lawless in the kingdom of divine Providence*], since omnipotent God governs all things in this world.

"It is not given to man's wit to comprehend, nor to expound upon all the subtle laws and disposition of the divine mind. It ought to be enough to see that God, creator of all nature, orders and prepares all things for good. While he strives to maintain the things that he has made to remain in his image [Chaucer's note: *to keep things good, because he, himself is good*], he chases all evil from the boundaries of his community through the necessary laws of destiny. Consequently, if you observe the workings of Providence including the things that you judge to be abundant on the earth you won't find anything evil.

"But I see now that you are burdened with the weight of the discussion, and weary from the length of my reasoning, and that you yearn for the sweetness of song. Now, take this draft, and when you are well refreshed and have reflected, you will be ready to ascend to higher questions."

Book IV—Meter 6

"If you will consider in your pure mind the rights or laws of the High Thunderer, God, then look upon and behold the heights of the sovereign heaven where, the stars in proper alliance with all things maintain their long-held peace; the sun moved by its reddish fire, doesn't disturb the cold revolution of the moon; the star called The Bear that turns its sweeping course about the highest part of the sky, nor the same star (also called Ursa) that never sinks into the deep western sea, nor desires to put out its flames in the ocean, though it sees other stars plunge into the waters;

and the star Hesperus foreshadows the late night,
 while the star Lucifer brings on the bright day.
 Thus, Love conveys interchanging and lasting courses,
 keeping warring discord out of the country of the stars.
 This accord also calms by similar action the behavior of the elements:
 moist things don't struggle with dry things in due course;
 faith joins cold things to hot things;
 light fire rises into the heights;
 and the weight of heavy earth causes it to sink down.
 By the same causes: flowers yield sweet smells when warmed by early summer;
 then summer heat dries the grain;
 autumn comes heavy with apples and pouring rain wets down the winter.
 This balance nourishes and brings forth all things that breathe life in this world.
 This same balance destroys, hides, filches, and drowns unto death all things that are born.
 Sitting among these things is the High Creator, king, and lord;
 fountain and origin; law and wise judge,
 who grants justice and governs, and holds the bridles of things.
 And those movable or wandering things that he has stirred into motion,
 he holds back, arrests, and fixes into place.
 If he didn't summon them back into the right direction,
 and if he didn't often constrain them to follow their proper orbits,
 these things that now follow the stable law would leave their way of origin and fail
 [Chaucer's note: *be torn to shreds*].
 This is the communal love for all things.
 All things desire to be under the rule of good.
 For if they didn't often return, by love, to the origin that gave them existence [Chaucer's
 note: *to God*] they would not endure."

Book IV—Prose 7

"Can't you see what follows upon all of the arguments I have made?"

"What?"

"Certainly, that that all fortune is clearly good."

"And how may that be?"

"Now understand that all fortune, whether it is joyful or bitter, is given either as a reward, or else to strengthen good folks; or it punishes or chastises rogues. Thus, all fortune is good, since it is either justified or profitable."

"Truly, this is a solidly true reasoning, and if I consider Providence and fate about which you just now taught me, these arguments are supported by rock-solid truth. But if you will permit, let us number them among those things which you recently said were beyond the reach of the people."

"Why so?"

"Because common people misuse this word 'fortune' so that they often refer to a man's 'bad fortune.'"

"Would you prefer that I use the language of the people so that I shouldn't seem to depart too far from their ordinary speech?"

"As you wish."

“Don’t you consider that all that is profitable is good?”

“Yes.”

“And surely that which strengthens or corrects is profitable?”

“I firmly concur.”

“Then is it good?”

“Why not?”

“But this is the fortune of those who are virtuous and who battle against bitter things, or of those who wish to eschew and reject their vices and follow the path of virtue.”

“I can’t deny this.”

“But what do you say of that merry fortune that rewards good folks? Do the people consider that it is wicked?”

“Truly not” I answered, “they see it correctly as right good.”

“And what do you say of that other fortune that although it is bitter, it restrains rogues with justified punishment, do the people judge it to be good?”

“No. The people deem it to be the worst thing imaginable.”

“Beware now and pay attention lest we, in studying the opinion of the people, have concluded and believed something that no one could accept.”

“What is that?”

“Certainly, it follows or is a consequence of things that have been proven, that all fortune – of whatever kind – is good for those who possess virtue, are working to increase virtue, or are seeking virtue. And all fortune is bad for those who are evil [Chaucer’s note: *The people don’t believe this*].”

“This is true, even though no one admits it or knows it.”

“Why not? The strong man does not appear abashed or irritable whenever he hears the noise of battle; nor does the wise man take it grievously whenever he is led into fortune’s strife. For both of them difficulties are material to be used. For the one man, to increase his glorious fame; for the other man, to confirm his wisdom [Chaucer’s note: *the asceticism of his life*]. That’s why it is called “virtue,” for it sustains and strengthens one who is not overcome by adversity.⁶⁰

“Certainly you, who are in the vanguard or front line of virtue, have not begun to be enervated by luxuries or to wallow in bodily lust. You have sown or planted a righteous battle within your heart against all fortune. In order that the sorrowful fortune will not confound you; nor the merry fortune corrupt you, steer a middle course with steady strength. For everyone who travels either over or under the middle way is terribly unhealthy or vicious, and gains nothing for his efforts. For it is in your hands what fortune you choose (good or evil). For all fortune that seems sharp or bitter, if it doesn’t strengthen good folks, it chastises or punishes the wicked.”

Book IV—Meter 7

“The avenging son of Atreus, Agamemnon, waged and continued a war of vengeance for ten years, destroying Troy in order to recover his brother’s stolen wife [Chaucer’s note: *Agamemnon won back Helen, wife of his brother, Menelaus*].

“This same Agamemnon, desiring to fill the sails of the Greek navy, paid for the winds with blood. He stripped himself of a father’s pity and allowed a grim priest to cut his daughter’s throat [Chaucer’s note: *Agamemnon let the priest cut his daughter’s throat to win favor with his god so that he might make the voyage to Troy*].

⁶⁰ In Latin, it is a pun: *virtus*: virtue, and *vires*: strength

The Ithacan, Ulysses wept for his comrades lying in the great cave of the fierce Polyphemus who had gnawed and gorged on them filling his empty stomach. But nevertheless, Polyphemus, maddened by his blinded eye, gave joy to Ulysses with his sorrowful tears [Chaucer's note: *Ulysses struck out Polyphemus' single eye that stood in his forehead, giving Ulysses joy when he saw Polyphemus weeping and blind*].

Hercules is celebrated for his hard labors:

He subdued the proud Centaur [Chaucer's note: *half horse, half man*];

He ripped his spoils from the cruel lion [Chaucer's note: *He killed the lion and took his skin*];

He killed the birds called Harpies with sure shots of his arrows;

He stole apples from the guarding dragon and carried away in his hands the heavy golden metal;

He dragged Cerberus [Chaucer's note: *the hound of hell*] by his triple chains;

He made a proud lord fodder for his cruel horse [Chaucer's note: *Hercules killed Diomedes and fed him to his horse*];

He slew Hydra, the serpent, and burned his venom;

He disfigured the forehead of Achelous, the river god who hid his embarrassed face in the riverbank [Chaucer's note: *Achelous could transform himself into various forms, and as he fought with Hercules, he turned himself into a bull. Then Hercules tore off one of his horns and he, for shame, hid himself in his river*];

He threw down Antæus the giant on the shores of Libya;

Cacus appeased the wrath of Evander [Chaucer's note: *Hercules slew the monster Cacus thus appeasing Evander's wrath*];

The bristly boar flecked with its lather Hercules' shoulders which would bear the high sphere of heaven; and his last labor was that with neck unbowed, he held up the skies and, soon after, for his labors, won the prize of attaining heaven.

Now go, you strong men whither the high example of these great ones lead you. Oh, finnick men! Why do you bare your backs [Chaucer's note: *Oh, you slow and delicate men! Why do you flee adversity and not stand to fight against it with virtue and so win heaven's reward?*] For the conquered Earth, merits you the stars. [Chaucer's note: *When earthly lust is overcome, a man becomes worthy of heaven.*]"

Book V—Prose 1

She had finished and turned her attention to some other things to be dealt with and handled.

Then I said, “Certainly, your admonishing rings true and is fully supported by your authority. But I appreciate what you have just said (that the question of divine providence is coupled with many other questions) and can prove it in the same way. But now I would ask you if you think that chance has any real existence; and if it does, what is it?”

She replied, “I want to hurry to pay off the debt⁶¹ I owed you when I promised to point the way and open the door by which you may return to your homeland. Although the things you ask are certainly profitable to know, yet they diverge from the path of my intent and I worry that you may be so wearied by such straying that you will not have the energy to stay the course.”

“You needn’t worry about that. For learning all these things will bring me great pleasure; they will serve to refresh me. I have no doubt that the things you will relate, including every side of the arguments you shall make, will be the absolute truth.”

“Then I will do this for you,” And she began to speak as follows:

“Certainly, if anyone defines chance in this manner, that is, as an occurrence produced by random actions and not by the knitting together of causes, I would then agree that chance is nothing at all but a voice [Chaucer’s note: *an idle word*] without any real meaning attached to it.

“What room is left for folly and disorder if God leads and constrains everything by his direction? This saying is real and true: ‘Nothing has its origin in nothing,’ This was something that the ancients understood well, even though they neither understood nor applied it to the original works of God, Prince and Creator. They used it as a foundational concept for the material world [Chaucer’s note: *for the nature of all reasoning*]. If anything could grow or originate from no original cause, it would seem that something had come from nothing; but if this cannot be, then it is impossible for chance to be any such thing as I defined a little while ago.”

“How can this be? Is there nothing that might be rightfully called ‘chance’ or else ‘accident of fortune,’ or is there anything, even if hidden from the people, to which these terms apply?”

“My Aristotle, in his book *Physics*, defines this briefly and close to the truth.”

“In what way?”

“As often as men do anything to achieve something; and something other than what they intended results from some cause, they call this ‘chance.’ Just as when a man who digs in the earth to till the soil discovers a cache of buried gold; men might say that it was a lucky occurrence. But truly it is not that way at all; for it has its own causation...causes unforeseen and unrecognized make it seem like chance. For if the farmer hadn’t dug in the earth, and if the person who hid the gold had not cached the gold in that place, the gold wouldn’t have been found. These are the causes of reducing to chance things that comes from causes encountering and flowing together by themselves, and not by the doer’s intention. For neither the gold’s hider, nor the field’s digger knew that the gold would be found. But, as I said, it so happened that the one dug where the other had hidden the gold.

“Now I can define ‘chance’ as the unexpected confluence of causes residing in things that were done for some other purpose; but this order, proceeding from an inescapable binding together descends from the fountain of Providence which regulates all things in their place and time and makes these causes to flow and fit together.”

⁶¹ Another hint that Boethius knows his days are numbered?

Book V—Meter 1

The Tigris and Euphrates originate and spring from one source in the rocky crags of the country Achaemenia⁶² where fleeing warriors shot their arrows into the breasts of those who pursued them. Soon after, these rivers (Tigris and Euphrates) separate and send their waters on different courses.

If they were to merge, and again form one river, then everything floating in each river would be slammed together in the combined flood. Ships and tree stumps racing along with the torrent would collide. Then the joined waters would sink or swamp many things in jumbled accident. But actually, the gradual slope of the earth and the orderly process of the flowing of these waters govern.

Just so, fortune which seems to run along with slacked or ungoverned bridles actually does bear its reins [Chaucer's note: *in order to be governed*] and obeys this law [Chaucer's note: *the law of divine order*].

Book V—Prose 2

"I really do understand this," I said, "and I agree that it is just as you say. But tell me if there is any liberty or free will in this order of causation that clings together in itself. Or else, could it be that the chain of destiny constrains the movement of men's hearts?"

"Yes," she said, "the liberty of free will exists. Nor has there ever been any being with natural reason that lacked free will. For all things that naturally use reason have the power to discern and understand everything. Thus, they know by themselves what things to avoid and what to desire. And those things that a man judges to be desirable, he demands or desires; he shuns those things that he believes ought to be avoided. Thus, all things that have reason also have the liberty to will or not to will.

But I don't ordain or grant that this liberty is evenly distributed among all things. That's why in the celestial divine substances of angels, judgement is clearer, not subject to corruption, and with the power to speedily do things that are desired.

The souls of men are necessarily freer when they are absorbed in the contemplation of the divine thought; but when those souls descend into men's bodies, they are less free, and even less so when they are gathered up and subsumed by their earthly parts. But the final descent into slavery is when they are given over to vices and have tumbled from the possession of their own reason. For then they have turned their eyes from the light of the sovereign truth to low and dark things and are soon blinded by clouds of ignorance and are pestered by criminal desires. When these inclinations close in and people yield to them, their self-inflicted bondage is compounded and increased. This is how they become estranged from their own liberty. Nevertheless, divine providence sees this as it sees all things from its eternal perspective and grants to each according to his predestined merits. It is said in Greek that 'He sees all things and hears all things.'⁶³

Book V—Meter 2

"Homer with the sweet songs of his honeyed mouth sings of the sun, bright with pure light.

⁶² "Persia (from Achaemenes, the grandfather of Cyrus); here extended to include Armenia, where the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates are near together though not identical." *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, F.N. Robinson, Ed., Riverside Press, 1957, Explanatory Notes p. 808.

⁶³ "Father Zeus, that rulest from Ida, most glorious, most great, and thou Sun, that beholdest all things and hearest all things..." Homer, *The Iliad*, III, 277, translated by A.T. Murray, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1924.

“Nevertheless, its weak beams may not break through nor pierce the inner entrails of the earth or of the sea.

“This is not true of God, creator of the great world. He observes all things from on high; and his vision is not withheld by heavy earth, by the night, nor by the black clouds.

“This God sees in one stroke of thought all things that are, or were, or will be.

“Of this God, who alone looks and sees all things, you may say that he is the true sun.”

Book V—Prose 3

Then I said, “Now I am confounded by a harder doubt than ever.”

“What doubt is that? Though certainly I can conjecture now about the things that trouble you.”

“It seems repugnant and contrary that if God knows everything beforehand, there could be any free will. For if God sees all things before they happen, and if God can’t possibly be deceived, then it must follow that all things occur just as God in his foresight had earlier seen. If God knows beforehand not only the works of men but also their decisions and their will, there can be no free will. Then it must follow that all things that the power of God foresees must occur. If people could wriggle away in other directions than had been predicted, there would be no steadfast foreknowledge of things to come, but only an uncertain opinion. To think this of God would, I believe, be unacceptably criminal.

“Nor can I approve of this same reasoning by which some men believe that they can assail and untie the knot of this question. They say that events do not occur because the power of God has foreseen them, but rather the contrary: because a thing is going to happen, it may not be hidden from God’s powerful precognition. In this way, the necessity shifts to the opposite side. It is not required that things that have been foretold should happen, but that things that have happened were predicted. But we struggle [Chaucer’s note: *meaning that this answer proceeds just as if men labored or busily tried*] to find out what are the causes of things – whether foreknowledge causes things to happen, or else if the necessity of things happening is the cause of foresight. But I’m not going to try to explain now whether the occurrence of things that are previously known is inevitable, or what is the order of causation; although it doesn’t seem that foreknowledge creates the need for things to happen in the future.

“Certainly, if a man sits, the opinion of one who judges that the man is sitting must be true. And seen from the opposite viewpoint, if the opinion that the man is sitting is true, then surely the man must be sitting. So, we have here necessity in one and the other: in the one is the necessity of sitting, and, of course, in the other is the necessity of truth. But the man is not sitting in order to make the opinion true, rather the opinion is true because the man was already sitting. And thus, although the cause of the truth comes from the sitting and not from the true opinion, still it is the common necessity for both of them.

“Thus, I may show that similar power exists in God’s Providence and in the future existence of things. For although things that will happen, may be foreseen, as opposed to things happening because they were foreseen, nevertheless, it must be that either things that will happen are known to God, or else that the things God knows, will happen. And this alone is sufficient to destroy the freedom of our judgement [Chaucer’s note: *of our free will*].

“But surely it is now clearly evident how far from the truth and how up-side-down is this thing that we observe: that the occurrence of temporal things brings about eternal foresight. To believe that God’s foreseeing things makes them happen, isn’t this nothing but belief that things that happen are caused by God’s power?”

“And now I add this thing: just as when I know that a thing is, it must necessarily exist; and when I know that something is going to happen, that thing will certainly happen; so it follows that the occurrence that I foresaw may not be avoided.

“Finally, if a man believes a thing to be otherwise than it is, he is not only ignorant, but has a perverse opinion quite divergent and far from true knowledge. Wherefore, if anything were to happen in such a way that its occurrence could not be unerringly predicted, who could know before-hand that this thing was about to happen? For just as truth cannot be merged with falsehood [Chaucer’s note: *If I know something to be true, it cannot be false that I know it*], a thing that is conceived by reality can not stray from the path by which it was conceived. That is why reality lacks falsehood [Chaucer’s note: *why wisdom cannot incorporate lies into its ideas*]. For it must be that everything exists just as science understands it to be.

“What more can I say? In what way does God know the things to come if they are not certain? For if He deems that they will unavoidably happen, and it so happens that they do not occur, God is deceived. But it would be a criminal sin to believe or to say aloud that God could be deceived. But if God knows that things will come to pass just as they will, so He knows equally that things must be done or not done.

“What kind of prescience is this that can’t comprehend anything with stability? Or else, what would be the difference between prescience and that foolish divining of Tiresias the Prophet⁶⁴ who said, ‘All that I see shall either be, or not be’?

“Or else, how much more would the divine prescience be worth than the opinion of mankind if it were to be as uncertain of the future as people are? And man’s judgement is most uncertain! But if it is so that nothing uncertain can exist in Him who is truly the origin of all things, then everything must happen just as He has truly foreseen it.

“So it follows that the freedom of decision and of the works of mankind is nothing, since the mind of God that sees everything without false error, binds and constrains them to follow a necessary course. And once this concept that there is not free will is granted and received, then we could clearly see what great destruction and damage would be done by the deeds of man. For it would be in vain that they reward good folks and punish bad folks, since no acts of free will would have led to either reward or punishment being deserved. And it would then seem that this thing that is now deemed the most just and rightful is the worst: namely that the wicked should be punished and good people rewarded, because their own will would not set people on one course or the other [Chaucer’s note: *neither to do good nor harm*], but they would be compelled to act as they do. Then there never could be any virtue or vice, but rather a mixed confusion of all desserts without discretion. And there would follow another inconvenience, even more criminal and wicked: since the order of all things is directed by and proceeds from the power of God, then nothing is the result of mankind’s deliberations [Chaucer’s note: *since men are powerless to do anything, nor to will anything*] then it would follow that our vices are attributable to the Maker of all good [Chaucer’s note: *Then it follows that God ought to be blamed for our vices since His will constrains us to act upon our vices*].

“Then there could be no reason to hope in God, nor to pray to God. For what might any man hope from God, or why should he pray to God, if the operation of an inflexible destiny binds and constrains all things that men may desire? There would be destroyed the only alliance between God and man: to hope and to pray. But for the price of righteousness and true meekness, we earn the reward of inestimable divine grace. And this hope and prayers is the only

⁶⁴ Horace’s *Satires* II, 5, 59.

manner by which it seems men might speak with God, and through supplication, be conjoined to that brightness that may not be approached in any other way but only through seeking and supplication. And if men think that hope and prayer have no strength due to the necessity of things being set to happen as they will, what is left then for us to be conjoined and to cleave to the sovereign Prince of all things? For then we would necessarily be separated from our lineage of mankind as you sang a little while ago, be pulled away from and detached from His wellspring and fail from God's origin."

Book V—Meter 3

"What discordant cause has torn and uncoupled the binds or alliance of things [Chaucer's note: *the conjunction of God and of man*]?"

"What kind of God has instigated so great a battle between these two real or true things [Chaucer's note: *between the power of God and free will*] so that they are singular and divided rather than blended and coupled together?⁶⁵

"But there is no discord among true things for instead they always cling to themselves. It is man's mind, confounded and defeated by the dark members of the body that can't shed light on his feeble search [Chaucer's note: *by the vigor of his insight while the soul is within the body*] to reveal to himself the subtle fabric of things.

"But how does it become warmed by such a love to uncover the notes of truth? [Chaucer's note: *How is the mind of man heated by so great a desire to know these signs that have been hidden under the covers of truth?*] Does it know this thing that it painfully struggles to learn? [Chaucer's note: *No, for no man labors to learn things that he already knows.*] Who works to learn things already known? And if he does not know, what does this blind mind seek? Who is it that desires something of which he knows nothing? [Chaucer's note: *Whoever wants anything, needs to know something about it; otherwise, he couldn't desire it.*] Or, who would pursue things about which he knows nothing? And even if he did seek those things, where shall he find them? Could a stupid and ignorant man recognize the form of the thing he found?

"But when the soul beholds and sees the elevated mind of God, then it recognizes the sum and the singularity [Chaucer's note: *the principles and everything by himself*]. But now, while the soul is hidden in the cloud and darkness of the flesh of the body, although it has not entirely forgotten itself, it withholds the sum of things and loses that singularity.

"Then whoever seeks truth, he inhabits neither one existence nor the other because he has neither recalled everything, nor forgotten everything. But yet he remembers the sum of things that he retains; he asks counsel and deeply reconsiders things he previously saw [Chaucer's note: *the great sum in his mind*]. Thus, he adds parts that he has forgotten to those he retains."

Book V—Prose 4

Then she said, "This is the old question of God's foresight. When Marcus Tullius⁶⁶ picked apart the divinations [Chaucer's note: *in his book on divinations*],⁶⁷ he extensively dealt with this question; and you, yourself have pondered it often, deeply, and at length. But still none of you have figured it out, nor accomplished anything firmly or diligently. And the cause of this darkness and difficulty is that the course of man's reason cannot move toward [Chaucer's note: *combine or join with*] the simplicity of divine intelligence. If it could, [Chaucer's note: *if men could think and*

⁶⁵ Chaucer ends this and several sentences with a period when the Latin makes it a question: *Quis tanta deus veris statuit bella duobus, ut quae carptim singula constant eadem nolint mixta iugari?*

⁶⁶ Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.), famed Roman orator, rhetorician

⁶⁷ De Divinatione, ii, 60

comprehend things as God sees them] then they would have no doubts whatsoever. I will try, eventually, to teach you and to expedite this reasoning and the cause of your difficulty, but first I will explain and clarify for you the reasons for your separation.

“Why do you believe that the reasoning of those who analyze this question is not adequate nor sufficient for you? Their solution or reasoning deems that foreknowledge does not create a necessity for things to happen; and therefore, that freedom of will is not disrupted. Nor must we give up belief in prescience. Don’t you cite other arguments making the case that things are fated to happen the way they do [Chaucer’s note: *other than this one*] because these things that foresight knows in advance may not be avoided? [Chaucer’s note: *Because they must come to pass.*] But then, if foreknowledge does not create an obligation for things to happen, as you yourself confessed and understood a little while ago, what cause or what is it [Chaucer’s note: *meaning there is no cause*] that could force voluntary actions to end in certain conclusions? For argument’s sake, let’s suppose the impossible in order to assist you in better understanding what follows: that there is no prescience. Then would there be any obstacle to free will – would things be forced to happen by necessity?”

“No,” I said.

“Then again, let us suppose that there is foreknowledge, but that it did not constrain the actions of things. Then I believe that this freedom of will would exist whole, absolute, and unimpaired. But you will say that even if foreknowledge is not the cause of future action, nevertheless, it signifies that things are bound to a course of action. In this way then, even if foreknowledge never existed, yet the ends and development of things would always be pre-set. For every kind of sign only shows and indicates existing things rather than creating the things it points to.

“So, now we must show that nothing happens unnecessarily so that we can demonstrate that foreknowledge is a sign of this necessary course of action. Or else, if there was no necessity, this foreknowledge would point to things that don’t exist. But certainly, it is now certain that the proof of this, sustained by steadfast reason, will be neither controlled nor proven by signs nor by external arguments, but by proper and necessary causes.

“But you may say, ‘How could it happen that things that are foreseen, might not come to pass?’ Surely, that would be as if things didn’t turn out as we believe Providence foresaw them. But then we shouldn’t judge although they may happen despite having no natural necessity to occur. You will easily understand this from these words:

“We have observed many things that happen before our eyes. Just as you see the driver working to turn, slow, or control his cart or chariot it is the same way with all other workmen. Is there then any force that constrains or compels any of these things to their course of action?”

“No,” I said, “for all skill would be useless and in vain if everything was forced to happen [Chaucer’s note: *by constraining the course of our eyes or vision*].”

Philosophy said, “Then the things that men do without being compelled, those things, before they were done, were about to happen without predetermination. Thus, there are some things that happen whose end results and actions are absolutely free of all necessity. For certainly I don’t believe that any man would say that the things that men do now were occurring first before they happened; and those same things, although men might know of them beforehand, yet they transpire freely.

“For just as knowledge of the present does not create an obligation for men to act as they do, so the foreknowledge of future actions does not cause men to do those things. But perhaps you may doubt whether things and actions that are not predetermined can be known in advance,

for certainly it seems incongruent. For you know that if things are known beforehand, then they must, necessarily happen; and if they fail to occur, they could not have been seen before. Nothing may be known with certainty except those things which must happen, and if things that have no certain outcomes are predicted as certain, that is the darkness of opinion, not the truth of science. And you know that it diverges from the wholeness of science when men believe a thing to be other than it is. The cause of this error is that of all the things that men recognize, they believe those things are knowable only by the strength and by the nature of these things. And this is all backwards. For everything that is known is understood and recognized not by its own strength and nature but by the faculty [Chaucer's note: *the power and the nature*] of the observer.

"And so that this may be shown by a short illustration, consider one round body: how the sight of the eyes may know it, and how differently it may be known by touching. The sight watches it by casting its gaze over the whole body without needing to move itself; but the touch clings and attaches to the round body and moves over the circumference, and so understands by parts its roundness.

"And the man in different ways senses himself: sometimes by imagination, and sometimes through reason, sometimes with intelligence. For with the senses he comprehends externally the figure of the body of the man that is made up of lower matter. But Imagination comprehends only the immaterial being. Reason tops imagination and comprehends by a universal vision the common species that is represented by the singular individual. But the eye of Intelligence is higher. It rises above the encircling universe and sees with the purity of subtle thought this same simple form of a man that is forever in the divine mind.

"This really needs to be considered: the highest power to comprehend things embraces and contains the lower ability, but the lower ability can never rise up to the higher strength. Therefore, the senses can't comprehend nonmaterial things; nor can the imagination see universal forms; nor can the reason grasp the simple form as intelligence can. But intelligence, which sees all from above, when it has comprehended the form, it knows and understands everything that lies beneath that form. It knows them in this way: it comprehends the same simple form that is unknowable to any of the others [Chaucer's note: *to any of the three aforesaid powers of the soul*]. For it knows the universality of reason, the shape of imagination, and the material world grasped by the senses. But it does not use reason, imagination, nor the senses. Instead it beholds all things just as I said, by a stroke of thought without discourse or discussion.

"Certainly, when reason sees anything universal, it does not engage the imagination or the senses, although it comprehends things imaginable and sensible. For reason is that which defines the universal in its own way just so: man is a reasonable two-footed beast. And while this is universally recognized, nevertheless, no one will deny that a man possesses imagination and sensibility, and likewise reason. But this reason isn't through the use of imagination nor of the senses, but it perceives through reasonable concepts. Also, imagination although it uses the senses to see and to form images, even if the senses were absent, yet it would surround and comprehend all sensible things, not via sensible thought, but by imaginative ideas.

"Can't you see now that the processing of knowledge depends more on the faculties or powers of the knower than of the faculty or power of the object of its study? And there is nothing wrong with this since every judgement is the deed or the action of he who judges. Therefore, everyone must make his own efforts, and his achievements should come not through an outside force, but from his own power."

The porch [Chaucer's note: *a gate of the town of Athens where philosophers disputed with their congregants*] – sometimes attracted old men with very dark ideas [Chaucer's note: *philosophers known as Stoics*] who advanced the idea that images and sensibilities [Chaucer's note: *sensible imaginations or else, imaginings of things of the senses*] were imprinted onto souls from external bodies [Chaucer's note: *these Stoics taught that the soul began naked, like a mirror or a clean parchment so that all facts must come to the soul from outside to be imprinted onto it*]; just as we might sometimes use a swift stylus to imprint letters on a smooth wax tablet or on a blank sheet of parchment.

[Chaucer's note: *But now Boethius argues against that line of thinking*]. But if the healthy soul explains nothing or does nothing by its own efforts but submits and lies subject to the ideas and rhythms of outside bodies, while reflecting idly and vainly like the images in a mirror, then from where does the self-knowledge come that probes and beholds all things? And from where does this strength come that beholds singular things; or the strength that divides known things; or the strength that gathers together divided things; or the strength to choose from many paths?

For sometimes it raises up its head [Chaucer's note: *it lifts up its attention to truly high things*], and sometimes it descends into very low things. And when it again turns back to itself, it regrets and destroys the false things, replacing them with true things. Certainly, this strength is a more efficient and a much mightier way to see and know things than that causality that just allows and receives the notes and figures to be impressed upon it like passive matter. In any case, the passion (*the forbearance or the will*) in the living body advances, exciting and empowering the strength of the mind.

Just as when a bright image strikes the eye and moves it to see, or when a voice or other sound hurtles into the ears and causes them to hearken, so is the strength of the mind energized and excited and it calls up to active sensations the species that it holds within itself and adds those species to the notes and other external things, and mingles the images of those things outside itself to the forms kept within itself.

Book 5—Prose 5

“But what if sentient bodies [Chaucer's note: *who are able to have knowledge of bodily things*], and even if external beings were to activate and enliven the instruments of the mind, and even if the passion of the body [Chaucer's note: *the wit or the will*] precedes the strength of the working heart whose passion or will calls forth the action of the mind and activates and enlivens in the meantime the forms that lie dormant within – and if within sentient bodies, as I have said, our hearts are not instructed or imprinted by passion to know these things, but judge and know by their own strength the passion or will subject to the body much more than do those things that are absolute and distant from all abilities and affections of bodies [Chaucer's note: *God or his angels*] who do not follow outside influences in discerning things, but instead speedily accomplish the goal of their thoughts.

“By this reasoning, then, there exists many kinds of intelligence among diverse and differing substances. For the bodily mind, which is naked and devoid of all other knowledge, -- this wit belongs to creatures that lack the ability to move themselves here and there, such as oysters and mussels and other such shell fish in the sea who cling to and are nourished by rocks. But the imagination belongs to mobile beasts who seem to have the talent to flee from or to desire anything. Reason belongs only to the lineage of mankind just as intelligence is only for divine natures. So it follows that this final knowledge is more valuable than those others since they know

by their own nature not only their own subject [*Chaucer's note: knowing not only all that pertains to their own knowledge*] but all other levels of knowing.

"But how would it be if the bodily mind and animal imagination strove against reason and said, 'The universal things that reason is able to see are just nothing?' For bodily mind and imagination see that which is perceptible or imaginable; but do not reach to the universal. Then, either reason's judgement is true and there is no such thing as the sensible mind; or else, because reason knows well that many are subject to bodily mind and to imagination, then the conception of reason is vain and false that looks and understands that which is sensible and singular as universal.'

"Then suppose that reason were to answer back to these two (*bodily mind and imagination*), saying that she herself looks at and understands through the universality of reason things of the senses and of the imagination; and that these two (*bodily mind and imagination*) are incapable of extending or enhancing themselves to know universal things, since their level of understanding may not exceed or surpass the realm of the physical body.

'Then surely, in the understanding of things, men should lend credence to the more steadfast and perfect judgement. In this struggle then, we that have the powers of reasoning, imagination, and bodily mind should praise the cause of reason (over *bodily mind and imagination*).

"Similarly, mankind's reasoning doesn't grasp that divine intelligence beholds and knows future things except as you people know them. For here's what you say and argue: if it doesn't seem to men that some things have certain and necessary outcomes, they cannot be known in advance with certainty. Therefore, there can be no prescience of such things. And if we believe that prescience is possible in these things, then it cannot be that their outcome is uncertain. But surely if we possessed divine intelligence, since we are partakers of reason, and just as we deem that imagination and animal mind are beneath reason, so should we have to believe that human reason must be subservient to and beneath divine intelligence. So, if we could [*Chaucer's note: suppose that we could, as I believe,*] elevate ourselves to the height of this divine intelligence, our reason would clearly see that it cannot regard itself; and surely in this way: that the prescience of God sees all things with certainty and plainly regardless of whether they have clearly defined outcomes. Nor is this sight just opinion, rather it is the certainty of divine knowledge that is neither caged nor trapped within any bounds."

Book V—Meter 5

"The beasts that travel the earth take many diverse forms.

For some of them have skinny bodies and creep through the dust drawing after them a continuous trail or a furrow like snakes; and other beasts with the fluttering lightness of their wings beat the wind and swim through the great airy spaces by smooth flight; while yet other beasts are pleased to imprint their tracks or steps on the earth as their feet amble along, either by green fields, or else under the trees.

And while you can see that they all move along by diverse means, nevertheless, their downward faces are in accordance with their dull wits.

Only the race of man raises his head high, and lightly stands his body upright, and observes the earth beneath him. And unless you, earthly man, have turned your wits toward evil, this imagery will admonish you who addresses heaven with your upright visage and raises up your

head to support your heart so that your mind is not weighted down nor trampled underfoot, given a body that is elevated so highly.⁶⁸

Book V—Prose 6

“Therefore then, since as I pointed out a little while ago, all things are known not by their own nature, but by the nature of that which perceives them, now let us look, as far as we are permitted [Chaucer’s note: *let us look now as we might*] at the nature of the divine substance, so that we may also know its mind.

“The consensus of all reasonable creatures is this: God is eternal. So, let’s consider what eternity is. For certainly that will show us at once the divine nature and the divine mind. Eternity is the perfect and immediate possession of unending life. That can be shown more clearly by comparing or contrasting it with temporal things. Everything that lives within time is in the present, and proceeds from the past into the future. There is nothing that exists in time that can embrace at a single moment the range of its lifetime. For certainly it hasn’t experienced tomorrow, and it has lost yesterday. And surely, in the life of this day, you cannot live other than in this movable and transitory moment.

“This thing that has a temporal existence, even if it never had a beginning, nor will ever have an ending, as Aristotle believed is the case with the world, and although its life stretches out infinitely long, yet nevertheless, it may not rightfully be considered eternal. For although it encompasses and embraces the extent of infinite life, yet it cannot embrace the extent of its life at one moment, for it does not know the, as yet, unexperienced future, nor does it still retain the past that is over and done.

“But this thing then that holds and comprehends all at once the fullness of the unending life, and does not fail to see the future, and misses nothing of the past – done or gone, this same thing is known and proven by right to be eternal. And it necessarily behooves this thing to always be present to itself and fully in charge [Chaucer’s note: *always present to itself and so mighty that everything is subservient to it*]. The infinity of passing time must ever be its present.

“So, when some men hear that according to Plato this world never had a beginning nor will ever have an ending, they wrongly believe that the world is made co-eternal with its maker. [Chaucer’s note: *they wrongfully believe that this world and God were both created everlasting.*] For it is one thing to lead an interminable life, as Plato assumed was true of the world, and another thing to embrace all at once the presence of the endless life which is clearly the purview of the divine mind. Nor should it seem to us that God is older than things that exist temporally, but rather He is distinguished by the property of His simple nature. For this same infinite moving of temporal things mimics the ever-present state of the immovable life; and so, since it may not counterfeit it, nor imitate it, nor even be similar to the immovability of God’s eternity, it fails and it falls into moving from the simplicity of God’s presence to descend into an infinite quantity of futures and pasts. And though it cannot hold at once all the variety of life, nevertheless since it never ceases to exist in some manner, it seems to us that it follows and resembles that which it is unable to attain or fulfill. It attaches itself with some kind of presence to these little and swift moments which gives it a resemblance to the ever-stable presence of God, thus giving it the appearance of real existence. But since the presence of such little moments can’t endure, it

⁶⁸ Watts (op. cit.) in a footnote contrasts this with “the picture of the sufferer contemplating with downcast eyes the lowly dust in I, 2.”

appropriates and takes the infinite passage of succeeding moments of time. And in this manner, it exists; for it continues its transient life since it may not embrace the abundance of the stable existence. Therefore, if we are to accurately name things, and follow Plato, let's say honestly that God is 'eternal,' and that the world is 'perpetual.'

"Since every judgement knows and understands, according to its nature, things that it is called upon to evaluate, then truly for God there is always an eternal and present state; and the knowledge of He who supersedes all temporal movement exists in the simplicity of His presence, and encompasses and considers all the infinite space of past and future and sees with His simple knowledge all past things just as if they were occurring at this moment.

"If you will then ponder and consider the prescience by which He knows all things, then you won't think of it as the prescience of things to come, but more rightfully that it is knowledge of a present or of instant moments that never cease. That's why it should not be called 'foresight' but rather be called 'providence' for it exists far above the ability of lower beings and beholds from afar all things just as though from a high vantage point.

"Why then do you ask, or argue that these things that are seen and known by divine sight must necessarily occur since truly, men cannot make these things occur which they observe as they happen? For does your observation create any necessity for those things that you presently behold?"

"No," I said.

Philosophy: "Certainly then, if men might make any valid comparison or correlation between the divine present and mankind's present, then just as you see some things in this temporal present, so God sees all things in His eternal present.

"Thus, this divine foreknowledge does not change the nature or property of things but beholds such things as present to Him as shall later appear to you. Nor does it confound the judgement of things; but by one glance of His mind He knows the things to come: both those that are necessary and those not necessary. It is just as when you see, at one moment, a man walking on the earth, and the sun rising in the heavens. Although you behold the one and the other together, nevertheless you deem and discern that the one is voluntary, and the other is necessary. In just that way, the divine sight beholds all things under Him, nor does He upset the quality of things that are certainly present to Him, although in the temporal world, they are in the future. So, it follows that this is not mere opinion, but rather a steadfast knowledge strengthened by His truth. When God knows any future thing, He doesn't need for that thing to be necessary.

[Chaucer's note: *When God knows that something is going to happen, he fully understands whether or not it may not be necessary*].

"And if you say here that whatever God sees will happen – must and may not fail to happen, and that a thing that may not fail to occur must necessarily occur, and if you compel me to use this term 'necessity,' certainly I will confess this sober truth. But no man may see this or arrive at this truth unless he is a student of the divine mind. For I will answer you thus: that a future thing, when it is considered in respect of the divine knowledge, is then necessary. But certainly, when it is understood on the plane of man, then it is utterly free from all necessity.

"Certainly, there are two kinds of 'necessity.' One is simple necessity, as thus: it is truly by necessity that all men are mortal or doomed to death; another is conditional necessity: if you observe that a man walks, it necessarily must be that he walks. Thus, a thing that is known cannot be otherwise than it is known to be. But this conditional necessity is not the same as the simple necessity. For certainly conditional necessity is not true because of its own nature but due to the

addition of the condition. For no necessity constrains a man to go who goes by his own will. But once he chooses to go, it is necessary that he went.

Just so, if the foresight of God sees anything presently, then this thing must, by necessity happen even though it need not of its own nature be necessary. For surely the futures that occur by freedom of will are seen by God all together in His present. These things then, if they are considered in the light of the divine sight are made necessary by virtue of the divine knowledge. But certainly, if they are considered by themselves, they are without necessity and do not cease to have the freedom of their own natures. Then, undoubtedly, all things that happen are known to God before they come to pass. But some of them occur through free choice or free will so that even though they happen, they maintain their own natural freedom to have not acted beforehand.”

Boethius: “What’s the point of saying that things are not necessary according to their own nature when everything is made necessary by the condition of divine knowledge?”

Philosophy: “This is the difference: Those examples that I proposed to you a little while ago [Chaucer’s note: *the sun arising and the man walking*], that while these things are being done, they can’t be undone, but for one of them, before it was done, it was necessary that it should happen, but not the other. Just so, the things that are undoubtedly present to God, shall occur. But some of them are due to the nature of things (as the sun arising); and some are due to the power of the doers (as the man walking). Then I say there is nothing wrong that if these things are seen in the context of divine knowledge, they are both necessary; and if they are considered by themselves, then they are freed from the bonds of necessity. It is just like everything that appears or is shown to the senses: if you refer it to reason, they are universal, but looked at or referred to by itself, it is singular.

“But you will say, ‘If it is in my power to change my course of action, won’t I void the foresight of God when, perhaps, I shall have changed the things that he previously knew?’ Then I would answer you this way, ‘Certainly you may well change your purpose, but inasmuch as the ever-present truth of the divine power Who beholds your changing purpose, and knows whether you will change it or not, and in what direction you will turn it, you cannot escape the divine presence. It is just as if you could not escape the sight of a present eye though you turn yourself by your free will in various directions. But you may say again, ‘How can it be – shall the divine knowledge not be changed by my disposition when I will do one thing now and then another? And this foreknowing—doesn’t it seem to alter from moment to moment its knowledge?’ [Chaucer’s note: *Doesn’t it seem to us that the divine presence interchanges His diverse strands of knowledge, so that sometimes it knows one thing, and sometimes the opposite?*]”

“Surely not,” I said.

“The divine sight runs ahead and sees all futures and summons them and returns them to the presence of His own understanding. Nor does He swap as you think, the moments of foreknowledge as in now this—now that; but He, always stable, comes ahead and embraces all your mutations. And this presence to comprehend and to see all things—God has not plucked it from the future possibilities, but from his own simplicity.

“Thus is resolved this thing that you raised a little while ago. Namely, that our futures give occasion to God’s knowledge. For certainly this strength of the divine mind which encompasses everything by His immediate knowledge, sets the way for all things and owes nothing to future things. And since that is the way things are [Chaucer’s note: *since necessity is not in things due to divine foreknowledge*], then freedom of will lives whole and unsullied in mortal men. Nor do the

laws wickedly dole out rewards and punishments for the behavior of men who are unbound and free from all necessity.

“God, beholder and foreseer of all things dwells above, and the eternal presence of His sight reigns always over the various qualities of our deeds, dispensing and ordaining rewards to good men and torments to wicked men. Nor is it in idle nor in vain to place hope and prayers in God fearing that they may not reach Him nor be ineffectual as long as they are righteous.

“Then withstand and eschew vice; worship and love virtue; lift up your heart to righteous hopes; send up your humble prayers on high. A great obligation of power and virtue is charged and commanded for you, if you will not dissemble. Your work and strivings [Chaucer’s note: *your deeds or your works*] are before the eyes of the Judge who sees and judges all things, and to whom we give glory and praise for ever, Amen.⁶⁹”

⁶⁹ The phrase, “to whom be glorie and worshipe bi Infynyt tymes, AMEN” is not in the Latin, nor in most manuscripts of Chaucer. See Robinson’s (op. cit.) Explanatory Note to line 311, page 810.