

The Politics of Chaucer's *Boece**

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I.

The Boece, Chaucer's translation from Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*,¹⁾ has often been neglected in Chaucer scholarship.²⁾ Those few scholars who have shown their interest in the translation have mainly limited their discussion to the three linguistic issues: Chaucer's faithfulness to his sources, his translation techniques, and analyses of his language in the

* An earlier version of the paper appeared in my doctoral dissertation submitted to Michigan State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 2009.

1) Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* is abbreviated as the *Consolation* hereafter.

2) *The Boece* sections of "Bibliographical Citation and Annotation" in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, annual publication of The New Chaucer Society, list zero to four entries over the last five years.

translation.³⁾ The linguistic approaches to the translation, however, fall short of illuminating the political role of Chaucer's translation in the last two decades of the fourteenth century⁴⁾—in a period of a political turmoil which is characterized by the struggle between king Richard and the magnates, and the tyrannical rule of the king leading to his deposition in 1399. By examining the historical situation in the early 1380s, I argue in this paper that the translation may have been motivated by Chaucer's royalist concerns about king Richard's attempts to empower himself excessively, with a view of preventing the king from degrading into a tyrannical ruler. Contrary to Chaucer's initial expectation, I further argue, the translation may have had potential resonance with the concerns of the magnates about the misuse of royal power during their antagonistic rivalry against the king from the mid-1380s to the end of 1390s.

II. Chaucer's *Boece* as a Teaching Manual for a Prince

About what inspired Chaucer to render an English version of Boethius's well-known work, some scholars of Chaucer have suggested that the translation was made to develop his poetic skills and acumen as a poet.⁵⁾ Given the high

3) See, for example, Jefferson, Machan ("Chaucer"), Eckhardt, Elliott, and Donner.

4) The period spans roughly from around 1385 to 1399. On the other hand, the translation of *The Boece* probably falls around the first half of the 1380s; the translation was certainly in existence by 1387, before the execution of Thomas Usk on March 3, 1388, a literary disciple of Chaucer, who referred to Chaucer's translation along with *Troilus and Criseyde* in his *Testament of Love*.

5) In a book-length study of Chaucer's use of language in *The Boece*, Tim William Machan concludes that the translation was done as "a personal exercise" in language (*Techniques* 124). Similarly, others have suggested that *The Boece* is the product of Chaucer's attempt either "to absorb" or "to master" Boethius's Latin text. In his discussion of the translation, Derek Pearsall argues that "Chaucer's translation of

level of difficulty of the Latin work, however, the notion that Chaucer's translation of the *Consolation* was made as "a personal exercise" in language or "to master" the Latin text should be taken with some reservations. As Henry Chadwick asserts, the *Consolation* is a product of "a very well-read mind using Latin densely packed with concentrated argument," which must have been a great hindrance for a literary person like Chaucer to translate:

This [Boethius] is not a man composing with a library of books open before him, but a very well-read mind which can recall a phrase from here or from there at will. His Latin is densely packed with concentrated argument: and the argument is carried on from the prose sections into the poems which he inserts, he says (iv, 6, 57) with the intention of lightening the reader's task with a difficult subject. (223)

Far from viewing *The Boece* as Chaucer's individual effort for his own benefit, I suggest that the translation was possibly aimed at educating the young king Richard.⁶ The argument that *The Boece* could possibly be

Boethius is the product of his desire to make the work fully his own, to absorb it...fully into his imaginative experience" (164). Discussing the nature of late medieval translation, Rita Copeland also asserts that "*Boece* is arguably a translation undertaken to master Boethius's text by studious attention to a difficult and specialized philosophical vocabulary" (57).

- 6) Possible use of Chaucer's translation as a teaching manual for the prince has already been discussed by some Chaucer scholars who have given due consideration to the historicity of Chaucer's works. Paul Strohm points out that "[p]erhaps *Boece* may be seen as advice to princes, with a possible (though very uncertain) relation to Chaucer's advancement" ("Politics" 108). Donald R. Howard's speculations also suggest an educational motive for the translation when he conjectures that Chaucer might have been "asked to prepare it [*The Boece*] as part of the education of young king Richard, since Boethius's work was deemed essential reading for a monarch" during Chaucer's time (379). It is in the work of Alastair Minnis and Machan that a more assertive view of the political implications in Chaucer's translation is evident because they suggest its possible use similar to Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum*, a treatise devoted to the education of Philip III's son, Philip the Fair of

motivated by, and could serve as, a part of the educational program for the young prince is persuasive enough when we delve into the political aspects in the *Consolation*, which are inherent and illustrated, but often discounted as nonessential. As Lynn Staley points out, the *Consolation* is an intrinsically political work as well as a philosophical one:

The *Consolation* is thereby also an appeal against the Roman state, or against the ruler of that state, Theoderic, who is either blinded by or implicated in the injustices through which Boethius was imprisoned and would be executed. In the *Consolation*, Boethius pits the individual against the state, demonstrating that the man who is truly free need not fear the false powers of the world. (44)

Moreover, since the historical examples are interpreted against a philosophical background in the *Consolation* (O'Daly 74)—that is, philosophy serves as a means of illuminating the circumstance of politics in Boethius's later life—Boethius's work is partly an analysis of his contemporary politics, specifically an attempt to define the nature of royal power, which is an indispensable knowledge for a king to be an ideal ruler. A close look at the discussion of the power of a ruler in the *Consolation* will indicate what a ruler like king Richard might learn from Boethius's work besides philosophical understanding of man and his or her position in the universe.

France:

...another part [of the reason for fifteenth-century interest in the translation of *The Boece*] may have been the way the *Boece* affirmed the essential moral and ethical *sententiae* then deemed to be the appropriate advice for writers to offer princes—it would have sat comfortably beside books written more formally in the *de regimine principum* mode. (167-68)

III. Royal Power and Tyranny in Boethius's *Consolation*

Boethius (ca. 480-524)⁷⁾ is known to have been a transmitter of the “wisdom and graces” of Antiquity to the Middle Ages, straddling two different worlds, and trying to stop the change “at the point of time when its [history’s] tides began to turn against classical civilization” (Payne 7). It is through his translations and commentaries on the works of other ancient men that Boethius the transmitter could also be a preserver of the ancient world.⁸⁾

When we consider his last work, the *Consolation*, however, Boethius’s role is not merely that of a transmitter or preserver but more importantly that of an eyewitness recorder of his contemporary history and politics.⁹⁾ Although it is mainly understood as a philosophical investigation into the nature of Fortune and Providence, God’s Foreknowledge and man’s free will, Boethius’s last

7) For the general background of Boethius’s life, see Matthews as well as O’Daly 1-8. Many of scholars agree that the three major sources for the life of Boethius are the *Anonymus Valesii* by an Italian Chronicler, and *History of the Wars*, Vol.1, by a Byzantine historian, Procopius, and the very words Boethius describes in his *Consolation* (Barrett 58-63).

8) Boethius’s translations and commentaries include the *Geometry* of Euclid, the *Musica* of Pythagoras, the *Arithmetica* of Nichomachus, the *Mechanica* of Archimedes, the *Astronomica* of Ptolemy, the theology of Plato, and the *Logic* of Aristotle, with the *Commentary* of Porphyry, which runs almost all the gamut of human knowledge.

9) Boethius makes it clear that his purpose of writing the *Consolation* is to tell his posterity the truth of his political persecution by recording related events: “Cuius rei seriem atque veritatem, ne latere posteros queat, stilo etiam memoriaeque mandavi.” [“though so that the true details of this affair cannot lie concealed from later generations, I have written it down to be remembered.”] (Book 1, Prose 4; 152-53). All quotations from Boethius are from *Boethius: The Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester. Subsequent quotations from the *Consolation* are followed by book and verse or prose numbers, along with page numbers of Latin and modern English translation, in the parentheses.

work also provides us with his autobiographical records of historical incidents, including the gradual rise and sudden fall of his political career. As Gerard O'Daly argues in his extended study of Boethius's poems, political themes are not only crucial but also intertwined with the structure of the work:

Political themes are important in the *Consolation*. It is a work written by an ex-consul, a man who has held the prestigious and influential post of Master of the Offices, and worked closely with Theoderic in the administration of government.... In the first four books of the *Consolation* political themes are interwoven with the very fabric of the work's structure, and linked to its overriding themes... (74)

The *Consolation* is thus in part a chronicle of Boethius's political ordeal, in which personal, tragic experience is depicted against the political situation of the State.

The political aspects of Boethius's *Consolation*, however, are not limited to his fluctuating political career; more conspicuously, they are revealed through Boethius's exploration of the nature of kingly power, especially its perversion into tyranny, which "unmasks" the royal power. By teaching the transitoriness, susceptibility to tyranny, and fundamental weakness of royal power, the *Consolation* attempts to give "consolation of power" to the innocent based not on its powerfulness but on its innate powerlessness to them.

Drawing from the examples of past tyrannical rulers such as Emperor Nero, Boethius's investigation into the nature of royal power begins with its evanescence, common to any other gifts of Fortune. Lady Philosophy explains that royal power, being transitory, is a cause not only of happiness but also of eventual misery, from which it is obvious that it cannot be a source of true happiness (Book 3, Prose 5; 250-51). What is striking in Lady Philosophy's

teaching is that during its fleeting regime, royal power can turn into tyranny if a king is bound only with “sinful lusts” or “passion”: “nec potestas sui compotem fecerit quem vitiosae libidines insolubilibus adstrictum retinent catenis” [“nor can power give a man self-control if he is too firmly in the grip of sinful lusts”] (Book 2, Prose 6; 212-13). By recounting in detail the tyrannical rule of Emperor Nero, Boethius points out the inadequacy of royal power governed by vices and mad rage, thus resisting Theoderic’s tyranny in persecuting the innocent like Boethius himself (Book 2, Meter 6; 214-15). Moreover, when he refers to notorious examples of tyrants in history,¹⁰ Boethius reveals that one major design of the *Consolation* is to exhort those in power to check their desires and not to be overcome by lust:

Qui se volet esse potentem,
 Animos domet ille feroces
 Nec victa libidine colla
 Foedis submittat habenis.
 Etenim licet Indica longe
 Tellus tua iura tremescat
 Et serviat ultima Thyle,
 Tamen atras pellere curas
 Miserasque fugare querelas
 Non posse potentia non est.

[The man who wants to be powerful/ Must tame his high spirits,/ Must not submit his neck, conquered by lust,/ To its striking halter;/ For indeed though far-off Indian soil/ Tremble under your sway,/ And furthest Thule serve you,/ Yet not to be able to dispel black care/ Or put complaining misery to flight/ This is no power at all.] (Book 3, Meter

10) Besides Nero, Boethius refers to Nicocreon as another notorious tyrant in Book 2, Prose 6. Moreover, Boethius brings up Nero as tyrant again in Book 3, Prose 4.

5; 252-53)

The discussion of the nature of royal power which is susceptible to tyranny culminates in the paradoxical nature of royal power—though seemingly powerful, it is basically weak so that, by implication, it cannot subdue an innocent victim like Boethius himself. By calling into question the power of rulers, and implicitly the power of Theoderic, by whom he has been condemned to a miserable death, Boethius provides himself with the consolation that he is a guiltless victim fighting against a tyrannical ruler. Besides, by telling the story of Anaxarchus, whose virtuous actions triumphed over the tyrant Nicocreon’s torments, Boethius identifies his own undaunted and unyielding spirit against Theoderic with Anaxarchus (Book 2, Prose 6; 210-11).¹¹⁾

In his discussion of the transient nature of royal power, its vulnerability to tyranny, and its paradoxical lack of power over the innocent, Boethius could have “console[d] himself by understanding and living the life of authentic freedom, and by ‘demythologizing’ the notion of Theoderic’s power” (O’Daly 75). Through his investigations into contemporary politics and philosophy, Boethius may not have succeeded in changing his own earthly fate, but he might have gained inner control of his own spirit which could have allowed him to meet his death with more serenity.

11) Earlier in the *Consolation*, by comparing himself directly with Canius, who defended himself before the Emperor Caligula against the accusation of having known of a conspiracy against the Emperor (Book 1, Prose 4), Boethius “placed himself in an entirely Roman tradition of opposition to a tyrannical monarch” (Matthews 37).

IV. The Political Function of Chaucer's *Boece*

Although *The Boece* is a faithful reproduction of the *Consolation*,¹²⁾ Chaucer's translation differs from its Latin source since Chaucer's decision to translate the Latin work may have been conditioned by social and political circumstances of the first half of 1380s. In other words, Chaucer's *Boece* could be read as a product of his own response to the tumultuous social upheaval and its political legacy during that period. A brief discussion of the history of the early 1380s will lead us to a better understanding of what might have inspired Chaucer to render his *Boece* from the *Consolation* and what *The Boece* could have meant for him initially.

If, as Pearsall suggests, the translation of *The Boece* was launched around 1381, simultaneously with the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde*, ending up by 1386-87,¹³⁾ the Great Revolt of 1381 may help us to understand the political circumstances under which Chaucer translated the *Consolation*. I suggest that the confrontation between king Richard and the rebels during the revolt and its aftermath may have been connected to Richard's later development as a tyrannical ruler.

The immediate cause of the uprising of 1381, often called "the largest and most serious outbreak of popular unrest in England in the middle ages" (Saul, *Richard II* 56), is attributed to the levy of a heavy poll tax in 1380 and consequent ineffective intervention by the government which further instigated

12) Most of scholars of Chaucer's translation agree that *The Boece* is a faithful, literal translation. For example, see Jefferson and Machan (*Techniques*) among others.

13) Pearsall notes that "[i]t is possible that Chaucer's translation of Boethius went on book by book with the writing of *Troilus*. It was finished, as we know from Alceste's reference as well as Thomas Usk's use of the work, by 1386-7" (160). The possible beginning year of the translation is from the "Chronological Table" appended to Pearsall's same book.

the “eruption of riots” (Harriss 447). Besides the poll tax of 1380, Nigel Saul points out “deep underlying social and economic causes,” which had been brought into existence by the Black Death of 1349 (*Richard II* 59). Saul continues to suggest that the uprising was a result of a chain reaction of historical incidents: “[a]s a result of the Black Death and the visitations that had followed it there had been a massive fall in population... [w]ages, as a result, had risen sharply”; in response to rising wages, the government took measures “to peg wages at their pre-Black Death levels” by “passing first the Ordinance (1349) and then the Statute of Labourers (1351)”; but “wages had continued to rise” (*Richard II* 59). However, it was initially landowners’ efforts to maintain their standing that prompted people to riots¹⁴: “From these cases we can see that lords were using all the powers at their disposal to strengthen their hold over their tenants. In effect they were maintaining their living standards at the expense of those beneath them in the hierarchy” (*Richard II* 60).

Whether the uprising was brought about by an excessive poll tax or extreme economic burden of people, it could be both crisis and opportunity for Richard as king. When the rebels entered London, Richard saved his regality by conceding to their demands:

Richard and his immediate retinue advanced to meet their leader, Wat Tyler, in the intervening space. Faced with demands for social revolution

14) The Great Revolt of 1381 was formerly known as the Peasants’ Revolt, which implied that most of the participants of the revolt were peasants. However, as David Aers points out, “[t]he coalition that made the great revolt of 1381 involved ‘the whole people below the rank of those who exercised lordship in the countryside and established authority in the towns’, while it was led by the elites of rural communities in East Anglia and Kent, the village office-holders” (“*Vox Populi*” 433-34). For the original sources of Aers’s remark, see n. 7 on page 434 of his article.

–the abolition of serfdom, and an end to lordship, the disendowment of the Church—Richard readily conceded all, saving his regality, and ordered the rebels to disperse. (Harriss 448)

The revolt, however, was not merely a threat to Richard's throne; it was also a chance for Richard—a young king who became fourteen in January 1381, marking his “passage from ‘pueritia’ to ‘adolescencia’” (Saul, *Richard II* 108)—to demonstrate his regal power and authority. Since he himself could stop the spread of the revolt nationwide by confronting and dispersing the violent, infuriated rebels successfully, “[w]hether the king's intervention was rehearsed or improvised, Richard had displayed courage and assurance” (Harriss 448): it was his “personal triumph in outfacing the rebels” (Bennett 190).

Triumphant as he was in dealing with the rebels, Richard began to feel both “fear and contempt for his lesser subjects” (Harriss 449) because of the rebels' atrocities. As Saul points out, after Richard's encounter with the insurgents at Mile End, “there were many more who were still roaming the streets and thirsting for blood and the looting and killing continued” by them. Worse still, their general assault on the aliens resulted in the killings of over 150 foreigners in London (Saul, *Richard II* 69).¹⁵⁾

Another, but no less important, lesson Richard could have drawn from the revolt was his “belief in the immunity afforded by kingship” (Harriss 449). Since “[t]hey [the rebels] thought of the monarchy as an institution standing

15) Steven Justice, however, argues that historical documents on the rising of 1381 recorded events from chroniclers' point of views rather than what really happened in the year, thus rejecting the idea of the rebels' violence: “Altogether, the image of indiscriminate, raging violence in 1381 is more a function of its chroniclers' anxieties than of the events themselves” (41 n. 85).

above individuals and classes, capable of dispensing even-handed justice,”¹⁶ they not only “greeted the king courteously” in their encounter with him at Mile End (Saul, *Richard II* 68) but “professed their loyalty to the king” (Harriss 447). The insurgents’ unmitigated loyalty to him may have contributed to reawakening his awareness of kingship and to increasing his firm conviction about the inviolability of his regality, which are suggested in his attempts to extend “his knowledge of his realm and his people” by undertaking “extensive tours through the realm” (Bennett 191).

In a time of socio-political unrest and the ensuing political changes that the Great Revolt of 1381 brought to England, it was Richard’s efforts to strengthen his regal power and governance that could have led Chaucer to a renewed interest in the *Consolation*, as a work reminding people of the nature of worldly power and its possible peril of turning into tyranny. Chaucer’s act of translating the *Consolation*, then, may have arisen from a desire to share among his circle his worry about the king’s going too far in empowering himself as a supreme ruler and ultimately becoming a tyrant. That Chaucer may have wanted to express such desire in his *Boece* was more pressing around 1384 because by that time, Chaucer “probably realized... that the wind was blowing against the royal party... [by exercising his] often demonstrated powers of political analysis” (Strohm, “Politics” 91-92).¹⁷

16) Justice 59. The original quotation is from Hilton, 225.

17) Considering the dates of Chaucer’s translation and of the king’s political reform, we have good reason to believe that Chaucer’s translation of the *Consolation* began probably after 1384, since Richard’s empowering of himself was not conspicuous until that year:

Up to the end of 1383 there is slight evidence either of Richard’s active involvement in government or of the influence of a courtier group. The major decisions were still being taken in great councils and parliaments where the directive force was not the king’s will but that of Gaunt and the political

As a public officer and royalist, Chaucer may have found other aspects of the *Consolation* as significant as the political ones. As Sheila Delany asserts in her study of the *Physician's Tale*, Chaucer is characteristically "socially conservative":

To glorify rebellion—the original aim of the Virginius legend—is utterly alien to Chaucer's world-view: our poet is a prosperous, socially conservative, prudent courtier and civil servant, directly dependent for his living upon the good will of kings and dukes. (137)

To his conservative mind, the moral teaching in the *Consolation*, which suggests endurance of evil, was more agreeable than anything else because the emphasis on endurance in the *Consolation* does not teach people such a revolutionary act as deposing a tyrant, but rather a passive forbearance of the wrongdoing of a tyrannical ruler.

The lessons of political conservatism that Chaucer presents appear in the latter part of the *Consolation*. In Book 4, Prose 1, Boece the prisoner brings up the issue of evil in the world by asking why, in a world where God governs all things, wicked people torment the innocent, whose virtuous acts are not rewarded:

But yit to this thing ther is yit another thing ijoynd more to ben wondrid uppon: for felonye is emperisse, and floureth ful of riches, and vertu nis nat al oonly wthouten meedes, but it is cast undir and fortroden undyr the feet of felenous folk, and it abyeth the tormentz in stede of wikkide felouns. Of alle whiche thinges ther nys no wyght that may merveillen ynowghe ne compleyne that swiche thinges ben don in

community. (Harriss 450-51)

the reigne of God, that alle thinges woot and alle thinges may and ne wole nat but only gode thinges. (24-36)¹⁸⁾

To his question, Lady Philosophy answers as follows:

I speke, that certes the gode folk ben alwey myghty and shrewes ben alwey outcast and feble; ne the vices ben neveremo withouten peyne, ne the vertus ne ben nat withouten mede; and that blisfulnesses comen alwey to gode folk, and infortune comith alwey to wykkide folk. (49-56)

In Lady Philosophy's explanation, what is emphasized is the idea of *patientia*, "the quality of the passive endurance of suffering," which is "the point of most of the Boethian examples of the confrontation of tyrant and philosopher" (Burnley 76). Boethius's notion of a philosopher, which stresses "passivity and humility rather than determination and strength" (Burnley 76), becomes more than a moral virtue of a philosopher since, as Pearsall points out, it provides people with a politically conservative norm of behavior:

Philosophy's answer to Boethius's rather pointed question about the lack of reward for merit and the evil tyranny and oppression of those in power (IV, pr. 1) is not that the good should band together to put the wicked out of power but that there is no need for action of any sort, since the good always have true *welifulnesse* and the wicked do not *really* enjoy power or anything else, given that they lack the serenity of virtue. (163)

From the discussion of the history of the early 1380s in relation to

18) Quotations from Chaucer's *Boece* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. Line numbers of quotations from *The Boece* appear parenthetically in the text.

Chaucer, it is arguable that Richard's undue efforts to strengthen his governing power may have inspired Chaucer's translation of *The Boece*, and, if so, one of his major concerns in translating the work may have been his worry as a royalist that the king would become a tyrant, a type of kingship that the *Consolation* opposes as ultimately impotent. Because of its concrete depiction of bad rulers, however, Chaucer's *Boece* may have had potential resonance with the king's opponents during their serious conflict with the king. As Richard's emphasis on his regal power, and consequently his confrontation with his magnates, grew stronger, *The Boece* may have begun to reflect the concerns of the magnates, who increasingly saw tyrannical behavior in Richard, over the possible abuses of royal power. The history from the mid-1380s to 1399 will show what possible political implications Chaucer's *Boece* may have had during that period.

As Lee Patterson rightly estimates, the Revolt of 1381 brought to England neither peace nor recovery from the upheaval; instead, England fell into another long-lasting confrontation between the king and the great magnates which culminated in the king's deposition in 1399 (156-57). The conflict between Richard and his nobility began in the winter of 1383-84 with the king's attempts to restore traditional royal rule, which he planned to develop in several directions (Harriss 451).

Among these various plans for the restoration of Richard's kingship, the war with France was the primary issue between the king and his magnates:

Also in dispute between the crown and its nobility—and perhaps the primary issue between them—was the question of the war. Richard and his chancellor Michael de la Pole had sought to obtain a more or less permanent peace with France, a policy that was intensely unpopular with

the nobility. (Patterson 157)

The war with France was not just a matter of losing or gaining a territory; beneath the issue of war, there were deep-rooted economic concerns on which the magnates could no longer make concessions. In traditional feudal society, during the war, the king depended on his great lords for their military support, in return for which they were given monetary benefits in the form of wages for the soldiers they provided. Richard's peace policy with France was particularly detrimental to the nobility's profits because peace with France meant their loss both of enormous gains from the war and of the king's dependence on them:

The traditional feudal function of the great lords of the land was military. Insofar as Richard turned away from the war, he lessened his dependence on the feudal aristocracy and frustrated their interests in war-making.... They found this erosion of their sources of wealth intolerable. (Ferster 79-80)

Because of these economic reasons, in spite of positive aspects of the Richard's diplomatic efforts seeking peace between England and France, the magnates resisted his peace negotiations with France by "attempt[ing] to reignite the war" (Harriss 420), an attempt that resulted in failure.

Besides Richard's policy of making peace with France, his reorganization of the court as the center of regal power made the great lords impatient with the king's policy. Instead of turning to the magnates who traditionally gave advice to the king for the running of the government, Richard was "surrounded by a group of nobility and knights whom he had chosen and favoured, whose loyalty and services were both personal and political" and to the nobility's

disappointment, "they formed an exclusive and manipulative clique" (Harriss 453).

However, Richard's peace policy with France and his court-centered method of ruling with a view of fortifying his own regal power became difficult to seek when the threat of French invasion was renewed in 1386, which was a clear indication that his efforts to promote peace between England and France were ineffective (Harriss 458). In the Wonderful Parliament later that year, the conflict between Richard and the magnates was aggravated. Those magnates against Richard's policy and impatient with the luxury of his court passed a statute, clarifying that "the king should be guided by his magnate counsellors, and the departments of state and household scrutinized to eliminate corruption, waste and extravagance" (Harriss 460).

In the Merciless Parliament of 1388, the Appellant Lords imposed even more serious restrictions on the king:

The Merciless Parliament had dealt severe blows to Richard's kingship. Although Gloucester and his fellow Appellants abandoned their briefly held plan to depose Richard (*RP*, 3:379), and although commons would renew homage to Richard and his coronation oath to them (*West.*, 294), the parliament nevertheless ended with severer circumscription of his prerogative.... (Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow* 63)

During the period of 1386 and 1388, between the Wonderful Parliament and the Merciless Parliament, when many of the magnates would believe that Richard grew closer to a tyrant, Chaucer's *Boece* could have served for their political interests. Because of its potential criticism of abuses of royal power, Chaucer's translation could have made it easier for the parliament to attempt "to reform the [royal] household and rid the government of excessive royal favoritism and patronage" (Sanderlin 174).

Chaucer's *Boece* may also have had another political significance during the later years of Richard's rule, especially in his deposition in 1399. The years roughly from 1389 to 1399 were those under Richard's personal rule. After recovering his power and dismissing the Appellant Lords, Richard "determined to rebuild and reassert royal authority, so that never again would he be subjected to such humiliation" (Saul, "Richard II" 862). It is in 1397 that Richard turned to be more despotic:

In the summer of 1397 Richard II's kingship suddenly changed its character. The king's behavior became more tyrannical. In mid-July the three senior Appellants were arrested, and two months later they were put on trial. In the Parliament which met in September the legislation of the Merciless Parliament of 1388 was reversed. In the final months of the year new oaths were required of the sheriffs, and oaths were extracted from the king's subjects to uphold the measures which had been approved in Parliament. (Saul, "Richard II" 854)

Richard's tyranny in his last three years as king coincided with his effort "to cultivate a loftier and more exalted image of himself as king" and his "desire to stress the divine origin of his kingship" (Saul, "Richard II" 854-55). However, his lawless governing of the kingdom resulted in the eventual termination of his tyranny by means of deposition. As the 1399 Articles of Deposition suggested, "the ruler had become a tyrant exercising arbitrary will in the mistaken assumption that law resided in his own breast" (Aers, *Chaucer* 34). In this political situation, though not advocating active resistance to Richard's tyranny, the circulation of Chaucer's *Boece* could have helped enhance the heightened awareness of misuses of regal power within his courtly and literary circle, thereby contributing to undermining Richard's governing power.

V.

By discussing the historical and political circumstances in the last two decades of the fourteenth century, we have seen a possible political motive of translation and later political functions of Chaucer's *Boece*. Chaucer's translation could have been intended as an admonition to the young king Richard to prevent him from becoming a tyrant in the early 1380s, but by reawakening interest in what constitutes a tyrant, it could have served as an effective weapon attacking Richard's tyranny after 1386, especially during his last years from 1396 to 1399, thus weakening the king's governing power. In short, the later fortune of Chaucer's *Boece* shows political implications and applications of the work that he had originally intended in quite opposite direction.

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The Politics of Chaucer's *Boece*

Abstract

Inchol Yoo

By focusing on the historicity and politics of translation, I discuss in this paper the political motive and functions of *The Boece*, Chaucer's translation from Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. After examining the political implications of Boethius's work, I argue that the Latin source provides an insight into the nature of royal power, especially its perversion into tyranny. From the investigation of the history and politics in the early 1380s when the young Richard began to establish his sovereignty firmly, I suggest an educational motive of Chaucer's *Boece* for the king: the translation might have been aimed at giving the young king lessons about what constitutes a tyrant, thus warning him of the vices and dangers of aggregating excessive governing power. I also suggest that, during the period from the mid-1380s to 1399 when the king became more and more tyrannical, *The Boece* may have had potential resonance with the concerns of the king's opponents, his magnates, about the misuse of royal power. I conclude with the observation that, contrary to Chaucer's expectations of diverting the king from the dangerous road of excessive power, his *Boece* could have served as one of the tools of attack for the magnates to confront, and eventually depose, Richard II.

Key Words

Chaucer, *The Boece*, Boethius, Translation, Richard II, Politics

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