



## **Activity 2 – Boethius and Chaucer**

Chaucer was deeply influenced by the Roman philosopher Boethius. In the Middle Ages Boethius was best known as the author of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a treatise on fortune, fame and the problems of individual free will in a world created and ordered by God. Chaucer translates this treatise into Middle English and calls it *Boece* (also found in *The Riverside Chaucer*).

Consider the passage below, both in Chaucer's Middle English translation and in the modern English translation. Think about how the passage understands the connections between nobility and fame. Can fame be of any good in this world?

In this discussion of fame (*gratia*), I do not think mere popularity even worth mentioning since it does not rest on good judgement, nor has it any lasting life (*firma perdurat*). Moreover, everyone knows that to be called noble (*nobilitatis*) is a stupid and worthless thing. If it has anything to do with fame, the fame belongs to others; for nobility appears to be a kind of praise which is really merited by parents. If praise makes a person famous, then those who receive praise are famous; therefore, the praise of others (in this case, of your parents) will not make you famous if you have no fame of your own. In my opinion, therefore, if there is anything to be said for nobility, it lies only in the necessity imposed on the nobility to carry on the virtues of their ancestors.

– Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, III. Prose 6 (trans. Walsh)

\*Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. P.G. Walsh (Oxford, 1999; repr. 2008)

And certes amonges thise thynges I ne trowe nat that the pris and the grace of the peple nys neyther worthi to ben remembred, ne cometh of wys jugement, ne is ferme perdurably. But now of this name of gentillesse, what man is it that ne may wele seen how veyn and how flyttynge a thyng it es? For yif the name of gentillesse be referred to renoun and cleernesse of lynage, thanne is gentil name but a foreyne thyng (*that is to seyn, to hem that gloryfien hem of hir lynage.*) For it semeth that gentillesse be a maner preisyng that cometh of the dessertes of auncestres; and yif preisyng make gentillesse, thanne mote they nedes ben gentil that been preysed. For whiche thing it folweth that yif thou ne have no gentillesse of thiself (*that is to seyn, prys that cometh of thy deserte*), foreyne gentillesse ne maketh the nat gentil. But certes yif ther be ony good in gentillesse, I trowe it be al only this, that it semeth as that a maner necessite be imposed to gentil men for that thei ne schulde nat owtrayen or forlynen fro the vertus of hir noble kynrede.

– Geoffrey Chaucer, *Boece*, III. Prosa 6