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Karin E. C. Fuog

Placing Earth at the Center of the Cosmos:
The Kingis Quair as Boethian Revision

The Kingis Quair opens with a cosmic reference:

Heigh in the hevynnis figure circulere
The rody sterres twynklyng as the fyre;
And in Aquary, Citherea the clere
Rynsid hir tressis like the goldin wyre,
That late tofore in fair and fresche atyre,
Through Capricorn heved hir hornis bright,
North northward approachit the mydnyght.¹

and the poet deliberately echoes this first verse at the end of the poem. This opening from and return to the stars alludes to both the Ptolemaic universe and to Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. A medieval poem deeply steeped in the conventions and traditions of its time, *The Kingis Quair* contains many such references to medieval literature, philosophy, and science. The poem is a love story: like Palamon and Arcite in Chaucer's "Knight's Tale," the imprisoned narrator gazes from a window upon a maiden in a garden and falls in love. However, this narrator's story ends very differently from the tale of the Knight's two heroes: he successfully woos his lady and their love endures many years—even into the present of the writing of the poem. After falling in love, the narrator has a dream vision which foretells his success in love. That

¹*The Kingis Quair*, ed. John Norton-Smith (Oxford, 1971), lines 1-7. Henceforth *Quair*.

in itself is conventional, as are the goddesses Venus, Minerva, and Fortune whom he encounters in the dream. Less conventional is that both Venus (Love) and Minerva (Reason) agree that they can be friends and help the narrator to his love. Although Minerva had by this time begun to be associated with passionate love, her role in such an affair is quite different from the role she plays in this poem. Even the certainty of the dream's truth granted to us as readers goes against all literary custom.²

The changes wrought to medieval conventions by *The Kingis Quair* demonstrate not only how completely this poem belongs to the Middle Ages—for only an author with an intimate understanding of these conventions could play upon them with such confidence—but also the beginning of a modification in attitude towards the Christian humanism of the Renaissance. The alterations the author of *The Kingis Quair* makes to Boethian philosophy exemplify the reconstruction of medieval convention conducted throughout the poem.

In the *Consolation* Boethius calls upon the maker of the heavens to govern humans as He governs all aspects of the universe. The *Metrum* begins with the stars and spirals inwards to the seasons and finally questions the Maker for neglecting the ways of humans. This Boethian passage is echoed in the first stanza of *The Kingis Quair* with images of a horned moon and a great wheel of the heavens.³ According to Chauncey Wood, it was from Boethius that the Middle Ages gained the philosophical explanation to match the physicality of the Ptolemaic universe: the idea that there is a hierarchy of movers, each influencing the spheres beneath them, with God at the top.⁴ That the higher spheres—the spheres further out from earth—are more desirable can be seen in literature from the *Somnium Scipionis* to Dante's *Paradiso*.

Boethius is no exception to the authors who subscribe to this hierarchy; he longs for the Supreme Good immediately and directly. To Boethius, it is irrelevant that God directs and influences all because He occupies the highest

²Both J. Stephen Russell in *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus, OH, 1988) and Steven Kruger in *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1980) discuss how literary dreams were almost without exception left enigmatic in terms of their source and their ultimate truth. Both critics demonstrate the strategic benefits poets gained from this practice.

³The passage from Chaucer's translation of the *Consolation* reads: "O thow makere of the whele that bereth the sterres, whiche that art festmyd to thi perdurable chayer, and turnest the hevene with a ravysschyngwe sweyghe, and constreynest the sterres to suffren thi lawe; so that the moone somtyme, schynynge with hir fulle hornes metynge with alle the beemes of the sonne hir brothir, hideth the sterres that ben lasse; and somtyme, whan the moone pale with hir derke hornes aprocheth the sonne, leaseth hir lyghtes...." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd edn. Ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1986), Bk, 1, Metr. V.

⁴Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery* (Princeton, 1970), p. 32. Henceforth Wood.

sphere.⁵ Fortune operates only within God's providence, but Boethius determines to bypass Fortune and the transitory pleasures she offers and dedicate his life directly to God, the Supreme Good. Dolores Noll names this Supreme Good of the *Consolation* the Absolute-God. Drawing on A. O. Lovejoy's work, Noll delineates the two gods. Absolute-God is self-sufficient and doesn't need the rest of the universe. Creator-God is unselfish and created the bounty of the world for enjoyment. Absolute-God discourages participation in the earthly sphere; Creator-God would encourage it. However, in Boethius's work, Absolute-God is completely dominant.⁶

Since he is unable to emulate the Supreme Good and travel to a higher sphere until after he dies, Boethius can only avoid Fortune's influence by not desiring what she offers and controls: the goods of the earth. Like the Ptolemaic universe, Boethius's philosophical hierarchy places earth at the center of the cosmos. God created earth and the universe as a setting for His most important creation: humanity. However, that placement also makes earth the lowest part of the celestial sphere: all things influence it and it is furthest from God's immediate action.

To demonstrate the influence of *The Consolation of Philosophy* on *The Kingis Quair* is a relatively simple task. Early in the poem the narrator mentions Boethius by name (l. 3) and briefly describes the content of the *Consolation* (l. 4). Both the man and his book are held up as standards for virtue and poetry. When viewed broadly, the *Quair* and the *Consolation* both have the same subject: Fortune. And even when compared in detail, the narrators of both poems have many similarities: both are imprisoned because of evil fortune, both are writers, both must learn to overcome Fortune. There is no doubt that we are meant to see the parallels between the two men and apply Boethian philosophy to the situation of the later narrator. The Boethian influence in the *Quair* is apparent to all, but scholars have disagreed on exactly how to interpret that influence. Two scholars, Vincent Carretta and Clair F. James, have deemed *The Kingis Quair* an ironic poem where in the author's use of the *Consolation* criticizes the love affair and attitudes of the narrator.⁷ However, I

⁵Wood points out that the Boethian attitude that the stars influence humans without abrogating their free will was very popular in the Middle Ages because it allowed for free will, celestial influence, and no exact predictability (p. 42).

⁶Dolores L. Noll, "'The Romantic Conception of Marriage': Some Remarks on C. S. Lewis' Discussion of *The Kingis Quair*," *Studies in Medieval Culture*, 3 (1970), 161-64. Henceforth Noll.

⁷Vincent Carretta believes the *Consolation* functions as a moral touchstone in the *Quair* to demonstrate that the narrator has made immoral choices; see "*The Kingis Quair* and *The Consolation of Philosophy*" in *SSL*, 16 (1981), 14-28. Clair F. James claims that the author of the *Quair* uses the *Consolation* for ironic inversion to demonstrate the narrator's loss of reason

believe that while the author of the *Quair* agrees with Boethius on the hierarchy of spheres and celestial powers, he also revised Boethian philosophy to allow for the moral pursuit of earthly pleasures and mundane joys.

The Kingis Quair recognizes, and indeed exploits, the *Consolation's* philosophical stance. However, the later poem places earth in the center of the cosmos in a different way. Instead of being the lowest, least powerful spot, the earth is seen as the most important. The God that rules *The Kingis Quair* is the Creator-God, who encourages participation in His creation (Noll, p. 164). It is how people live on earth that determines their place in the spheres after death; moreover, all heavenly influences ultimately descend to earth and seemingly originate for that purpose; and, perhaps most important, earth and humanity are the central reasons for God's creation of the universe. The *Quair* suggests that people should proceed in a manner consonant with earth's importance, and thus the poem does not finally accept Boethian philosophy. The poet's break with it seems very non-medieval; however, the skillful manipulation of the Boethian source could only be managed by a poet with intimate knowledge and understanding of medieval conventions and paradigms of thought. Even though he (or she) demonstrates those sentiments which become Christian humanism, the poet of the *Quair* remains rooted in the Middle Ages.

The plot of the poem demonstrates the narrator's eager participation in earthly pleasures and the reward he gains for these actions. There are two driving forces in the plot: the narrator's desire for freedom, and the narrator's love for the lady. Even before he sees her, the narrator blames Fortune for his imprisonment and wishes to be free as are all other creatures. Once he falls in love, he desires freedom so that he may court the lady, and he willingly gives himself to her as her thrall. In doing so, the narrator has already taken the first step towards freedom in that he unconsciously recognizes that freedom is a state of mind as much as a physical state: he can will himself thrall or free. For the narrator of *The Kingis Quair*, subjection to love becomes a kind of liberation.⁸ This acknowledgment of the mind's power over physical circumstances is a distinctly Boethian step, but Lady Philosophy would claim that the narrator of *The Kingis Quair* is going in the wrong direction. The narrator's desire for freedom becomes the same as his desire for the lady; he decides that enslavement in the bonds of her love is all the freedom he wants. As Clair

and consequent fall, see "*The Kingis Quair: The Plight of the Courtly Lover*," in David Chamberlain, ed. *New Readings of Late Medieval Love Poems* (Lanham, MD, 1993, henceforth James), pp. 95-118. All other scholars, both recent and historical, demonstrate that while the *Consolation* may serve to guide and correct the young dreamer of *The Kingis Quair*, ultimately the narrator's life and morality are not in conflict with the ideals set forth in the *Consolation*; instead, the narrator has gone beyond the principles set forth by Boethius.

⁸Julia Boffey, "Chaucerian Prisoners: The Context of *The Kingis Quair*," in *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen (London, 1991), p. 95. Henceforth Boffey.

James point out, in pursuit of his love the narrator chooses to place himself on Fortune's wheel and thus figuratively imprisons himself, no matter what his physical state (p. 98).

The lady represents all that is denied the narrator. He first sees her through a window, wandering in a garden; both window and garden become symbolic of her freedom and his imprisonment. The whole situation recalls the "Knight's Tale," where Emilie also symbolizes the freedom Palamon and Arcite lack.⁹ In the "Knight's Tale," the love these two young men experience does not bring them joy, but makes them enemies and finally causes death. Therefore it would seem that the allusion to this tale in *The Kingis Quair* would indicate that the narrator's love is similarly unwise. Certainly James views the allusion to the "Knight's Tale" as genial ridicule of the narrator (p. 96). In such a case, the poem would agree with Boethian principles to shun false felicities. However, the *Quair* reverses the narrative order, and therefore the moral, of the "Knight's Tale." Palamon and Arcite fall in love, then bemoan their fortune. The narrator of the *Quair* bemoans fortune, falls in love, and then finds he no longer has cause to bemoan fortune.¹⁰ Where Chaucer emphasizes the painful aspects of love, the poet of *The Kingis Quair* recalls its rejuvenating and health-giving benefits.¹¹ Boffey argues that the poet of *The Kingis Quair* compares his narrator to Palamon and Arcite to demonstrate the differences in their positions:

The prisoner's liberation here, from the physical confinement which symbolizes his ignorant and ungoverned subjection to the neutral power of fortune, is brought about because he is enabled through his love for another to perceive the beneficence and harmony of God's creation, and eventually to become a functioning part of it (p. 96).

Even though the poet deliberately recalls the "Knight's Tale" in order initially to mislead his audience into believing he advocates strict adherence to Boethian philosophy, he actually employs Chaucer's tale as a counterpoint to *The Kingis Quair*, to answer the earlier tale and to demonstrate that love need not be destructive.

The dream in the *Quair* is similarly concerned with mundane pleasures, for in this dream the narrator receives the promise that he will gain the lady's

⁹In fact, V. A. Kolve argues that Palamon and Arcite fall in love not with Emilie, but rather with her ability to "rome" (*Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, pp. 88-90).

¹⁰Lois A. Ebin, "Boethius, Chaucer, and *The Kingis Quair*," *Philological Quarterly*, 53 (1974), 325. Henceforth Ebin.

¹¹Michael D. Cherniss, *Boethian Apocalypse: Studies in Middle English Vision Poetry* (Norman, OK, 1987), p. 202. Henceforth Cherniss.

love. However, the geography of the dream indicates that this love is not completely grounded in the sublunar sphere. In the dream, the narrator ascends to the heavens, which suggests that the dream may be divinely inspired, and certainly places the narrator in the realm of forces which influence events on earth, rather than in the sphere of those events themselves. Indeed, placing Venus in a higher sphere may indicate that she is not the goddess of mere earthly love, but rather that deity which governs the moral and spiritual love humans may experience on earth (Cherniss, p. 202). The complain to Venus and the remedy she urges "is linked to the sacrament [of marriage] by the homily of Minerva."¹² Venus promises to help the narrator, but she alone is not capable of granting his love. This demonstrates that she is but one of many powers, not the highest, and, most importantly, that she is aware of her place in the universe. Venus is the goddess of sexual love in *The Kingis Quair*, but also a planet, and therefore an agent for carrying out God's will (Noll, p. 165). Because she alone cannot grant his desires, Venus sends the narrator to Minerva, and Minerva scorns neither Venus' recommendation nor the narrator's love. Again, we can here see the beginnings of Christian humanism as the poet of the *Quair* rewrites Boethian philosophy.

In an earlier medieval text, this conjunction of Venus and Minerva would be odd, since Minerva is the Roman goddess of wisdom or reason, and reason and love were known to be bitter enemies.¹³ However, as James points out, Minerva has been linked with Venus from the Roman writings through the late Middle Ages (pp. 110-111). In each of the cases she lists, James argues that Minerva is not a figure of true wisdom or reason, but rather "functions...as a type of worldly wisdom, or cunning" (p. 110). If this is the aspect of Minerva being invoked in *The Kingis Quair*, then reason and love need not be at odds. Another way of reading Minerva in the *Quair* would be to see her as corresponding to Lady Philosophy in the *Consolation*. Both Philosophy and Minerva are female figures who counsel reason to distressed narrators; the narrator of *The Kingis Quair* makes such a correlation likely by invoking the *Consolation* and implicitly comparing himself to Boethius. James would read the conjunction of Minerva and Lady Philosophy as an ironic inversion. Lady Philosophy demonstrated to Boethius that all his earthly affections were vain and useless wastes of emotion.¹⁴ However, according to Ebin, Minerva's scope is greater than Lady Philosophy's. Her range of knowledge is broader than Philosophy's, and in the later Middle Ages Minerva's wisdom acquired an

¹²John MacQueen, "Poetry—James I to Henryson," in R. D. S. Jack, ed., *The History of Scottish Literature*, Vol. I (Aberdeen, 1988), 58.

¹³An obvious example comes from the *Roman de la Rose* where Reason counsels Amant to forsake love.

¹⁴See *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. II pr. V to Bk. III pr. X.

explicitly Christian emphasis as it descended from God (pp. 334-5), whereas Philosophy consisted simply of the application of the best of the human mind. Noll agrees with Ebin: "Minerva clearly represents Christian wisdom" (pp. 165-6). How are we to judge which Minerva it is to whom the narrator is referred?

The most straightforward way to judge any character is by his or her actions. Minerva sets the narrator certain rules as a lover; she also promises to help his love if he follows those rules. Moreover, her requirements are not such as to render love impossible; instead they render love moral. The narrator is told that he must love "in Cristin wise" (l. 989); Minerva teaches God's law while teaching love,¹⁵ and C. S. Lewis has interpreted her instructions to mean that she will not help the narrator unless his love leads to marriage.¹⁶ Minerva has no problems with desire, as long as it is expressed within marriage (Noll, pp. 165-6). She continues the narrator's lesson on the connection between liberation and correct observance of divine law (Boffey, p. 96). James objects to a moral interpretation of Minerva on the grounds that we never see the narrator love in a Christian manner. The advice is spoken, but not necessarily enforced (James, p. 110). Yet we are told by the narrator that he finds love which has lasted many years; the simplest conclusion is that he has followed the rules laid out for him. Given that we never see the narrator interact directly with his lady, the poem cannot meet James's demand that we see Christian love enacted. Love and reason are friends in *The Kingis Quair*, but only a particular kind of love meets the approval of divinely inspired reason. Boethian philosophy is being realigned to fit a life experience where enjoying earthly goods does not lead to destruction.

More startling than Minerva's conjunction with Venus is her conjunction with Fortune. After all the advice and promises she gives him, Minerva reveals that even she cannot grant his desire, and he must apply to Fortune for help. While Boethius's Lady Philosophy demanded that Boethius shun Fortune and all of her goods, the *Quair*'s version of this authority figure recommends that the narrator ask Fortune's favors. Yet, Minerva does not completely disagree with Lady Philosophy, explaining that the more people know and foreknow, the less power Fortune exerts over them; hence Fortune has no power over God, since He knows everything. As even James concedes, Minerva fully understands free will (p. 99). Since people cannot know enough on earth to escape completely Fortune's influence, and since what the narrator desires necessarily falls into the category of things affected by Fortune, Min-

¹⁵Lois A. Ebin, *Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (Lincoln, NE, 1988), p. 52.

¹⁶C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London, 1959), p. 237.

erva can only advise the narrator to learn as much as possible and to beg Fortune's help as well. In this poem the reason-figure, Minerva, does not admonish disdain of all things subject to Fortune, but rather teaches a cautious approach; Minerva advises befriending Fortune (Noll, pp. 166-7). Moreover, although pure reason, in the form of the goddess Minerva, may overcome Fortune, Minerva recognizes that human beings are not motivated by reason alone, and that she herself is not the final or only power influencing sublunar existence.

The third goddess the narrator encounters in his dream is Fortune herself. For this meeting he returns to earth. This is appropriate, for the object of his desire is mundane, and it is on earth that Fortune wields her power. On his approach to Fortune, the narrator notices the earthly paradise that surrounds him. It is similar to those found in other dream visions: there is a clear river with bright fish; fruit trees of all descriptions line the banks; all sorts of animals, real and fictitious, live along the shores. All that the narrator sees falls under Fortune's dominion.¹⁷ Within the list of animals is a line likening the panther to an emerald: "The pantere, like unto the smaragdyne" (l. 1080). Bain points out that the panther and the emerald are alike in that "both by symbolic association with the highest truths of the day, were emblems of a sovereign virtue which offered comfort and healing to mankind" (Bain, p. 422). Even within the sublunar sphere, we are reminded of God's providence at work.

Fortune alone of all the goddesses mentions no limits on her power, needs no assistance from external forces, and demands no action from the narrator to ensure that he gains his goal. Thus Fortune seems to be the most powerful of the goddesses. And for the narrator's purposes, in some ways she is. The narrator may prepare himself as a lover by obeying the command of Venus to love, and the command of Minerva to love in a Christian and moral fashion, but only Fortune can ensure that the narrator is granted the opportunity to court his lady, and thus to exercise his obedience. Yet Fortune is also symbolically the weakest of the goddesses, for her sphere encompasses only earth, and is influenced by all around it. Because Fortune operates only on earth, Lady Philosophy admonishes Boethius to abjure Fortune's goods. Since the author of the *Quair* took care to ensure that we would compare his narrator's choices with Boethius's, should we not assume that submitting oneself to Fortune's wheel is actually an immoral choice?

The Kingis Quair does not leave its audience in this quandary for long. The end of the poem, written from the point of view of the narrator many years after the dream has taken place, supplies reassurances concerning the advice given in the dream. First of all, immediately upon awakening, the dreamer

¹⁷Carl E. Bain, "The Kingis Quair 155:2," [line 1080], *English Studies*, 47 (1966), 419. Henceforth Bain.

learns that the dream was true. In response to his plea for a sign, a turtledove flies in his window bearing a message which reinforces the dream's content. The turtledove operates in this poem as an agent of divine power.¹⁸ Such physical assurance external to the dream is very rare in dream vision literature,¹⁹ and almost certainly marks a true dream. Moreover, the life following the dream has borne out its predictions. The narrator has gained his freedom and his lady's love. These events demonstrate that the advice given in the dream was efficacious; however, was this advice and the love it addressed moral? Or was the narrator simply indulging in a mundane pleasure which has led him from God, the Supreme Good?²⁰

By the end of the poem, the narrator understands that God has written his life—and necessarily, then, his love—and therefore all the circumstance which led to the love were providential. The narrator thanks not only the pleasant events which caused his falling in love, but also the unpleasant events, including the very imprisonment against which he railed as a youth. If God wrote the narrator's life, then that life must be commensurate with God's commands. Fortune and the good and evil circumstances she bestows are under God's control. Even more importantly, God wrote the narrator's life in the stars, and the narrator exploits this fact; he repeats the line with which he opened the poem at the end of the second-last stanza (ll. 1 and 1372). The circular motion of the poem thus implies a center, and that center is the dream and Venus's promise to fulfill the narrator's love. Moreover, the circularity of the poem carries with it the implications of a stable circle enclosing the unstable world.²¹

The Kingis Quair not only draws upon the images of the Ptolemaic universe with its references to the *Consolation*, the poem is also shaped like that universe. The dream constitutes the center around which the poem coalesces—the earth at the center of the heavens. The events of the narrator's life encircle the dream. But they also have a linear element, unlike the heavens. The circumstances of the narrator's life—his imprisonment, his falling in love—occasioned the dream, and his life afterwards—his release from prison

¹⁸Carl E. Bain, "The Nightingale and the Dove in *The Kingis Quair*," in *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 9 (1964), 22.

¹⁹The only other example of a physical sign external to the dream which I have encountered is the ring which remains with the dreamer's companion even after both awaken in Guillaume de Machaut's *Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*.

²⁰The scholarship on this issue leans strongly towards the position that the narrator's love is sanctioned by God. Vincent Carretta and Clair F. James alone believe that the contrast with the *Consolation* proves the narrator's love to be immoral.

²¹Alice Miskimin, "Patterns in *The Kingis Quair* and the *Temple of Glas*," *Papers on English Language and Literature*, 13 (1977), 354.

and successful winning of the lady—influenced how he came to interpret the dream and mark it as a turning point of his life. Just as earth is at the center of the universe, so the dream is at the center of the *Quair*. But in this poem that imagery is transformed, and the center does not mean lowest point, but rather point of origination, beginning, positive outward growth.

The Kingis Quair differs from *The Consolation of Philosophy* although both depend on an understanding of the Ptolemaic universe, one which places earth at the center of the cosmos. But for the author of the *Quair*, this placement does not represent the nadir of the universe, but rather the position of primary importance. The earth is the center of the cosmos not only spatially, but from a human point of view also philosophically and emotionally. It is on earth that people learn the lessons they need in order to attain heaven; it is on earth that people learn of human love, and of God's love. There is no doubt that *The Kingis Quair* is a medieval poem, for it could not manipulate medieval conventions and standards with such skill did its author not have a complete and intimate understanding of the thinking from which they arose. However, this poem also makes changes to those same conventions, changes which all seem to point in the direction of the Christian humanism of the Renaissance. When properly expressed, sublunar love, even sexual love, does not pollute the body and tie the mind to base earth. Instead, for the narrator it is through his love of the lady that the narrator learns of God's providence and begins to climb the inclusive hierarchy of love to Love. Nor is the earth base: the detail and variety of flora and fauna which the narrator notices on his return from the celestial spheres demonstrate the beauty and value earth has in and of itself. Even the human communities which arise from such frivolous occupations as love and poetry inspire and aspire to the best on earth and in heaven.

Love, beauty of nature, happiness on earth: Boethius learned that all of these must be shunned, and only the Supreme Good—God—should be sought. The *Quair* draws upon an audience's knowledge of the *Consolation*, but also calls attention to the differences between the narrators (Boffey, p. 93). The narrator of the *Quair* is no less ardent than the narrator of the *Consolation* in his pursuit of God; however, he points towards the Renaissance when he disagrees with the assertion that those happinesses which are not the Supreme Good lead away from God. *The Kingis Quair* offers reassurance to readers that when they gaze at the heavens they are looking not only on the glory to which they must aspire, but also on the ultimately benevolent forces which operate to enable them to find happiness on earth.²²

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²²I would like to acknowledge the help of Dr. Evelyn Newlyn in the preparation of this paper.