



HAL
open science

Contradiction and conciliation in Chaucer's "Tale of Melibee"

Wendy Harding

► **To cite this version:**

Wendy Harding. Contradiction and conciliation in Chaucer's "Tale of Melibee". L'articulation langue-littérature dans les textes médiévaux anglais 3, Jun 2000, Nancy, France. pp.177-189. hal-04674677

HAL Id: hal-04674677

<https://hal.science/hal-04674677v1>

Submitted on 21 Aug 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Contradiction and Conciliation in Chaucer's "Tale of Melibee"

One of the few things on which critics agree about Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* is that, in our time, it is probably the least read of all the *Canterbury Tales*. The "litel tretys" that the pilgrim narrator offers after the Host interrupts his *Tale of Sir Thopas* is far too long for modern taste. Over a century ago W. P. Ker labelled the *Melibee* "the worst example that could be found of all the intellectual and literary views of the Middle Ages", and at the same time suggested a way to save Chaucer's authorial reputation in speculating that the poet intended it as a mischievous companion of the *Rime of Sir Thopas*", a parody of "the worst kind of 'drasty speech'".¹ Not surprisingly, a number of critics have followed this interpretative direction, representing the tale as parody,² in spite of the fact that it seems to be a fairly close translation of Renaud de Louen's *Livre de Melibee et de Prudence*, itself one of a large number of medieval vernacular translations of Albertano of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii*. Reading the *Melibee* as parody resolves the contradiction between the delightful comedy of some of the more widely read *Canterbury Tales* and what one critic has described as the "stifling sententiousness" of Chaucer's prose translation.³ Our view of Chaucer would be a lot less conflicted if he had kept to poetry, leaving the *Melibee*, the *Parson's Tale* and the *Retraction* out of the *Canterbury Tales*. But in spite of all

¹ W. P. Ker, "Chaucer", in *English Prose, I: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Henry Craik (New York: Macmillan, 1893), 40-43.

² For an overview of critical formulations of the "joke theory", see Edward E. Foster, "Has Anyone Here Read *Melibee*?", *Chaucer Review*, 34 (2000), p. 399.

³ Thomas J. Farrell, "Chaucer's Little Treatise, the *Melibee*", *Chaucer Review*, 20 (1985), p. 64.

the ingenious efforts that critics have expended to turn “ernest into game”, I believe that Chaucer did have his serious side and, like the other writers of his age, he is nowhere more serious than when he is writing in prose. In this paper I will argue that the *Tale of Melibee* deals in contradictions; however, these are not the subversive contradictions between literal and implied meaning that are the currency of irony, but the painful contradictions inherent in the medieval social order. Moreover, rather than being written into Chaucer’s translation from the French *Livre* so that canny readers might deconstruct the whole enterprise of *consolationis et consilii*, these contradictions are apparent in the English poet’s sources. The conflicts and tensions that structure the tale are reconciled in the end by the protagonist’s acceptance of his wife’s Christian counsel. The particular contribution Chaucer makes in his version of the tale of Melibee and Prudence is the special emphasis he places on the role of pity, a quality he associates with femininity,¹ in conciliating conflict.

Just as the works Chaucer combined to make the *Parson’s Tale* offer a serious response to the spiritual struggles of medieval readers, the *Livre de Melibee et de Prudence* addresses the temporal conflicts they would have experienced as members of the ruling class.² The knightly aristocracy, for all the romance and poetry with which it was celebrated in the Middle Ages, was an élite group of men whose power depended upon the exercise of military force. Rather than fostering solidarity, the need to maintain their élite status pitted members of the knightly orders against one another. This internecine struggle, together with the conflicts of interest among different social groups, made the later Middle Ages an era of incessant conflict. Moreover, there were ideological conflicts between knighthood and

¹ For discussions of the link between pity and gender, see Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1991), especially pp. 171-185, and Wendy Harding, “The Function of Pity in Three Canterbury Tales”, *Chaucer Review*, 32 (1997), 162-74.

² This line of argument is also suggested in Donald Howard, *The Idea of the “Canterbury Tales”*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 309-315.

the other great medieval power center, the Church.¹ The Christian imperative to forgive clashes with the knightly demands of honor; the Christian emphasis on humility and renunciation conflicts with the aristocratic appreciation of status and wealth. These numerous contradictions, central to medieval aristocratic life, are at the core of the *Tale of Melibee*.

Nowadays, the question of taking personal revenge for grievances is no longer as relevant as it was for medieval nobles, and the clash between Christian renunciation and chivalric pride seems equally remote. Since Melibee's struggle is of little interest to modern readers, they understandably locate the point of Chaucer's tale elsewhere, for instance, in the parody or deconstruction of the discourse of authority.² Language and its indeterminacy, "the elusive shifting relationship between signifier and signified",³ are topics of interest to the learned few who read the *Melibee* today; however, Chaucer's original audience would have been very much concerned with the questions that Melibee and Prudence debate.

The tale centers on the problem of how a man should respond to the offences committed against him by his enemies. Should he reply to violence with violence, or should he attempt to procure peace by exercising mercy? To complexify the question, the conflict has allegorical as well as literal implications. On the literal level, an affront to Melibee's honor has been committed by an attack on his house and its female occupants. Three of his enemies have broken into his house, beaten his wife, and grievously wounded his daughter. At

¹ See Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Norman, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1987).

² For a reading of the Melibee as parody, see Dolores Palomo, "What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre de Melibee*", *Philological Quarterly*, 53 (1974), 304-20; for the most extended treatment of the tale as a deconstruction of the discourse of the authorities see Ruth Waterhouse and Gwen Griffiths, "'Sweete Wordes' of Non-Sense: The Deconstruction of the Moral Melibee", *Chaucer Review* 23(1998), 333-61 and 24 (1989): 53-63.

³ Waterhouse and Griffiths, p. 352.

the same time, on the figurative level, Melibee himself has suffered moral injury. Prudence explains this to her husband:

‘for certes, the three enemyes of mankynde—that is to seyn, the flessch, the feend, and the world—thou hast suffred hem entre in to thyn herte wilfully by the wyndowes of thy body, / and hast nat defended thyself suffisantly agayns hire assautes and hire temptacions, so that they han wounded thy soule in fyve places; / this is to seyn, the deedly synnes than han been entred into thyn herte by thy fyve wittes.’ (1421-1424)¹

In some ways the allegorical level of the tale is at war with its literal level.² For example, the story hinges on Melibee’s need to forgive his enemies in order to reclaim his lost spiritual integrity, but, if the allegory is pushed to its logical conclusion, this would imply reconciling with the World, the Flesh and the Devil. However, once allegory has been used to show how the knight’s judgment is impaired by his desire to exact vengeance through violent reprisal, the figurative meaning of the three enemies is abandoned. Apparently, in a work of this length, medieval writers did not feel the need to elaborate allegory in a consistent and uniform fashion from beginning to end.

Another inconsistency between allegorical and literal levels occurs at the beginning of the tale when Melibee weeps for his injuries and Prudence thinks of Ovid’s advice on grief: “‘He is a fool that destourbeth the mooder to wepen in the death of hire child til she have wept hir fille as for a certein tyme’” (976-977). In citing the first in a long line of authorities, Prudence assumes her allegorical role as the voice of good sense; however, this conflicts somewhat with her literal role as the mother of the wounded child. These inconsistencies can, of course, be justified if they are read as intentionally ironic. Waterhouse and Griffiths comment: “It is ironic that the child’s own mother is the narratorial interpreter who places her daughter’s physical hurts in an

¹ All quotations from Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, Third Edition, ed. Larry Benson (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

² Waterhouse and Griffiths (p. 346) are among those who find an “irreconcilable gap” between the allegory and the narrative line, which they feel calls into question the tale’s seriousness.

abstract and allegorical perspective.”¹ Indeed, Prudence is unconvincing as a mother, but rather than signalling irony, this suggests that, for the medieval authors and translators of this treatise, the drama of opposing ideas could hold as much interest as the drama of character or situation.

I do not want to suggest here that Prudence’s gender and marital status are irrelevant to the tale. Though she is an allegorical figure, her social status as Melibee’s wife is a vital question in the debate she enters into with her husband. Melibee himself draws attention to the power dynamic in their relationship when early on he states his intention to reject her advice out of hand:

‘I purpose nat,’ quod he, ‘to werke by thy counseil, for many causes and resouns. For certes, every wight woulde holde me thanne a fool; this is to seyn, if I, for thy counseillyng, wolde chaungen thynges that been ordeyned and affermed by so many wyse./ Secoundely, I seye that alle wommen been wikke, and noon good of hem alle. For ‘of a thousand men,’ seith Salomon, ‘I foond o good man, but certes, of alle wommen, good womman foond I nevere’/ And so certes, if I governed me by thy counseil, it sholde seme that I hadde yeve to thee over me the maistrie, and God forbede that it so weere! For Jhesus Syrak seith that ‘if the wyf have maistrie, she is contrarious to hir housbonde.’/ (1055-1059)

Though this passage addresses a particularly Chaucerian theme of gender and “maistrie” it is a close translation of the French, where Melibee voices the fear that if he listens to his wife “*il sembleroit que je te donnasse sur moy seignorie*.”² Obviously, male dominance and the anxiety about how one appears to the world were the obsessions of the medieval aristocracy in general. Following Prudence’s advice means overturning the ethos of the knightly class, foregoing military power and social prestige for the sake of peace. This is not so much

¹ Waterhouse and Griffiths, p. 345.

² Renaud de Louens, *Livre de Melibée et de Dame Prudence*, ed J. Burke Severs, in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Demster (1941 ; rpt. Atlantic Highlands, N. J. : Humanities Press, 1958), p. 374. All subsequent quotes are from this edition.

the comic reversal that signals irony but the Christian inversion of worldly values for higher spiritual benefits.

If there is humour in Chaucer's treatise, it arises not from literary parody but from the sheer effort expended to address the contradictions of medieval aristocratic life. In order to present advice in the most pedagogically sound manner and to elaborate systematically all the arguments for a peaceful solution to conflict, Melibee is represented as a recalcitrant pupil who objects at every step. Prudence, on the other hand, is represented as an infinitely patient teacher, who has no objection to repeating variants on the same lesson over and over. Her preference for reconciliation over revenge is clear early on in her elucidation of the physicians' recommendation to counter an injury by its contrary. Melibee takes this to mean that he should respond to violence with violence: "For right as they han venged hem on me and doon me wrong, right so shal I venge me upon hem and doon hem wrong;/ and thanne have I cured oon contrary by another" (1281-1282). Prudence explains that her husband is mistaken in his interpretation, being persuaded rather by his own desire than by the physicians' advice:

For certes, wickednesse is nat contrarie to wickednesse, ne vengeance to vengeance, ne wrong to wrong, but they been semblable./ And therfore o vengeance is nat warissed by another vengeance, ne o wrong by another wroong,/ but everich of hem encreesceth and aggreggeth oother./ But certes the wordes of the phisiciens sholde been understonden in this wise:/ for good and wikkednesse been two contraries, and pees and werre, vengeance and suffraunce, discord and accord, and manye othere thynges;/ but certes, wikkednesse shal be warissed by goodness; discord by accord, werre by pees, and so forth of othere thynges./ And heerto accordeth Seint Paul the Apostle in manye places./ He seith, 'Ne yeldeth nat harm for harm, ne wikked speche for wikked speche,/ but do wel to hym that dooth thee harm and blesse hym that seith to thee harm.'/ (1285-1293)

The Christian remedy of forgiveness and of turning the other cheek is offered here as the cure for Melibee's injuries, backed up by no other authority than Saint Paul. The message should thus be clear to most readers quite early on in the treatise, but not to Melibee. In spite of his

reiterated approval of his wife's advice, the wronged lord repeatedly opts for violent reprisal to his enemies. His knightly impulses consistently overcome his Christian education, so that Prudence must constantly repeat her lessons. On the very eve of the reconciliation scene, when the conflict seems to have been settled peacefully, Melibee cannot resist the urge to counter evil with evil: "'Certes' quod he, 'I thynke and purpose me fully/ to disherite hem of al that evere they han and for to putte hem in exil for evere.'" (1834-1835). And Prudence comes back once again with a list of arguments in favor of mercy.

Though they seem exaggerated to the point of being comic, Prudence's difficulties in reconciling her husband with his enemies come from genuinely unresolved contradictions in medieval aristocratic life. Bringing the men together requires much tact because they are blocked by a masculine code of honour in which humility is seen as weakness. On one hand, the enemies fear that a show of contrition will bring on vengeance, and, on the other hand, Melibee cannot make the first move toward reconciliation because this would involve a loss of face:

'A,' quod Melibee, 'now I se wel that ye loven nat myn honour ne me worshipe./ Ye knowen wel that myn adversaries han bigonnen this debaat and brynge by hire outrage,/ and ye se wel that they ne requeren ne preyen me nat of pees, ne they asken nat to be reconciled./ Wol ye thanne that I go and meke me, and obeye me to hem, and crie hem mercy?/ For sothe that were nat my worshipe' (1681-1685).

The interests of peace are seen to clash here with the aristocratic ideals of "honour" and "worship".

Reconciling these apparently contradictory values requires that Prudence muster all her rhetorical skills. In the only display of anger she makes in the tale, she pretends to be enraged at the very suggestion that she would go against these interests:

Thanne bigan dame Prudence to maken semblaunt of wratthe and seyde:/ "'Certes sire, sauf youre grace, I love youre honour and youre profit as I do myn owene, and evere have doon;/ ne ye, ye noon oother, seyn nevere the contrarie./ And yet if I hadde seyde that ye

sholde han purchaced the pees and the reconsiliacioun, I ne hadde nat muchel mystaken me ne seyde amys./ For the wise man seith, 'The dissensioun bigynneth by another man, and the reconsilyng bygynneth by thyself.'/ And the prophete seith, 'Flee shrewednesse and do goodnesse; seke pees and folwe it, as muchel as in the is.'/ Yet se I nat that ye shul rather pursue to youre adversaries for pees than they shuln to yow./ For I knowe wel that ye been so hard-herted that ye wol do no thyng for me./ And Solomon seith, 'He that hath over-hard an herte, atte laste he shal myshappe and mystyde.'" (1687-1696).

Using the discourse of logical persuasion, Prudence sets up a conundrum that her husband cannot untangle without her help. First she proclaims her shared interest in her husband's honour, negating his suggestion that their priorities are different ("Certes, sire"). But this assurance is followed by a qualification ("And yet") that precedes a restatement of her former position ("if I hadde seyde [...] I ne hadde nat muchel mystaken me") This conditional structure establishes a paradox. Although Prudence professes the same concern with honor as Melibee, she aims to maintain that honor by pursuing the course that he sees as shameful. At the same time, even though all the authorities advise the pursuit of peace (the wise man, the prophet, Solomon), she concedes that she will not ask it of Melibee ("Yet se I nat"). This apparent concession to her husband's will prepares for a surprising assertion of wifely resistance in the form of an accusation against his hard-heartedness. Though wisdom, personified by Prudence together with an array of sages and prophets, recommends reconciliation, the obstacle of Melibee's hardened nature is represented as standing in the way of a satisfactory resolution of the problem.

Prudence's simulated tirade is the turning point in the debate, but this moment in the text demands close attention. Surely the message that Prudence is trying to convey ("Flee shrewednesse and do goodnesse") is negated by the manner in which she states it? Surely Melibee's submission to his wife's angry display would affirm the power of violence rather than forgiveness? Jill Mann notices the problem, though she glosses over it by enlarging her definition of

patience to include Prudence's show of anger.¹ In fact contradiction is avoided by Melibee's recognition that his wife merely simulates wrath to illustrate her argument. Prudence's violence is simply a theatrical performance holding up a mirror to her husband. Her "semblant of wratthe" makes him see the foolishness of his own anger: "dame, I prey yow that ye be nat displeased of thynges that I seye,/ for ye knowe wel that I am angrey and wrooth, and that is no wonder;/ and they that been wrothe witen nat wel what they don, ne what they seyn" (1698-1700). Melibee accepts his wife's unflattering image of himself (an image of male dominance) and finishes by agreeing to do as she desires.

To resolve the stalemate between Melibee and his enemies, Prudence is needed in her allegorical role as a moral quality, but more particularly in her literal role as a woman. Because of her secondary position as a woman, Prudence can serve as mediator in the conflict, creating the conditions which enable the renunciation of aristocratic pride. Though Melibee feels he cannot humble himself by making the first move toward reconciliation, his wife can, by virtue of the inferior place she occupies in relation to men of her class.

In his treatment of Prudence's mediation with Melibee's enemies, Chaucer makes some of the very few additions to a translation that otherwise follows the French source very closely, additions which emphasize factors of gender. First, there are covert suggestions of sexuality in the description of the first meeting. The French text reads: "Et quant elle vit qu'il fu temps, elle manda les adversaires en lieu secret" (2918-2919), and Chaucer translates: "And whan she saw hir tyme, she sente for thise adversaries to come unto hire into a pryvee place" (1728). Perhaps this is unintentional, and I am guilty of over-interpretation, but "pryvee place" ("lieu secret") echoes the words the Wife of Bath uses as a euphemism for her sexual organ. This sexual

¹ Interestingly, his submission is finally achieved by a 'semblant of wratthe' in Prudence (1686) which induces a placatory attitude in him; patience is not all saccharine sweetness but includes 'seeing the time' for sterner measures" (Mann 123).

suggestiveness continues in the description of the enemies' response to Prudence's peace-making overtures. The French text reads: "Quant ceulz oïrent les douces paroles de Dame Prudence, ilz furent si surprins et orent si grant joye que nul ne le pourroit extimer" (2923-2924), and Chaucer translates: "And whan they herden the goodliche wordes of dame Prudence,/ they weren so supprised and ravysshed and hadden so greet joye of hire that wonder was to telle" (1733-1734). The addition of "ravysshed" to make a doublet with "supprised" is not inconsistent with Chaucer's general practice of forming doublets, but the addition of the words "of her" to "hadden so greet joye" ("orent si grant joye") again makes a reference to gender that is absent from the French source. The latter suggestion is heightened by an intertextual parallel with *Troilus and Criseyde*, where a similar collocation of words occurs in the passage where Criseyde reflects on Troilus's attraction to her and considering her own beauty, she asks, "What wonder is though he of me have joye?" (II 749). What are we to make of Chaucer's additions, which underline Prudence's sexuality at this crucial moment? There is certainly something disturbing in the way that Prudence responds to the assault on her daughter by seducing her attackers, particularly if we follow Celia R. Daileader's provocative reading of the mother and daughter as a split feminine entity: "If Sophie is the mute, mutilated, violated body made so by patriarchy, Prudence is the separated voice of that body, calling for a renewal of their reunion."¹ If we read the tale in terms of gender conflict, the newly-embodied woman seems to be offering herself to her rapists.² Chaucer's translation gives a sexual inflection to the Christian imperative of turning the other cheek, emphasizing Prudence's vulnerability in her role as mediator between two male enemies. If in her role as counsellor to her husband she seems to be challenging gender hierarchies, in her role as go-between,

¹ Celia R. Daileader; "The Thopas-Melibee Sequence and the Defeat of Antifeminism", *The Chaucer Review*, 29 (1994), p. 32.

² Daileader reads the attack on Melibee's household as "a rape, albeit an allegorized rape" (29).

she is subjected to them, risking the same fate as her daughter Sophie in approaching her husband's enemies.

The enemies' reply to Prudence in Chaucer's *Melibee* continues the focus on femininity that we have already seen in her dealings with them: "And therefore, noble lady, we biseke to youre wommanly pitee/ to taken swich avysement in this nede that we ne oure freendes be nat desherrited ne destroyed thurgh oure folye" (1750-1751). The French source makes no reference Prudence's gender: "*Et pour ce, plaise vous en ce fait avoir tel advisement que nous et noz amis ne soyons desheritez et perduz par nostre folie*" (2939-2041). Chaucer adds the emphasis on the femininity of the mediator ("noble lady") and on the feminine quality ("wommanly pitee") to which the enemies make special appeal. The addition of these courtly compliments maintains the ambiguity in the scene, as the word "pitee" resonates with other occurrences in the *Canterbury Tales* which can be taken as sexually suggestive or not, depending on the context.¹

Chaucer's additions of gender specific language in this translation draw attention to gender politics as well as to the way allegory uses feminine figures to stage the psychomachia of the male subject. Readers should keep in mind that Chaucer's story is, after all, the tale of Melibee, and Prudence's function in the plot is to resolve the conflict among men by introducing behavior that is culturally taken to be feminine to remedy a situation where behavior culturally taken to be masculine has reached a stalemate. At the same time, reading Chaucer's *Melibee* on a less figurative level leaves the impression that women are best suited to give lessons in the advantages of reconciliation over revenge. Masculine attachment to honour hinders the renunciation of dominance necessary to conflict resolution. It takes a woman (whose position is naturally inferior) to teach men how to act out the social script of humility and grace, to school the weaker

¹ I am thinking in particular of Chaucer's repeated use of the phrase, "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!", which refers in the Knight's romance to Theseus' compassionate response to the the Argive women and then in the Miller's fabliau to May's adulterous yielding to Nicholas.

adversaries in submission and contrition and the stronger in pity and forgiveness.

Though the *Melibee* is a tale that deals in contradictions, it ends in conciliation as Melibee pardons his enemies in a God-like act of forgiveness. Prudence's final speech reconciles aristocratic honour and Christian humility:

And Tullius seith, 'Ther is no thyng so comendable in a greet lord/ as whan he is debonaire and meeke, and appeseth him lightly.'/ And I prey yow that ye wole forbere now to do vengeance,/ in swich a manere that youre goode name may be kept and conserved,/ and that men mowe have cause and mateere to preyse yow of pitee and of mercy,/ and that ye have no cause to repent yow of thyng that ye doon.
(1860-1865)

In the course of the *Melibee*, Prudence has redefined honour and worship so that her husband's reputation can be enhanced in the end by his exercise of the "feminine" qualities of meekness, pity and mercy. The echoes of courtly romance in the Chaucerian additions to the French source help reconcile feminine humility with noble rank.

Nevertheless, the victory of femininity celebrated in recent readings of the tale¹ is only partial, for Prudence is absent from the public scene of reconciliation that concludes the tale. A literal reading of the conflict between husband and wife in the *Tale of Melibee* shows that the arena of a good woman's influence is confined to the private sphere. Though Prudence orchestrates the final magnanimous scene of forgiveness, her presence is not allowed to detract from Melibee's final display of "maistrie". Her counselling has all been done in private, with the utmost discretion, the characteristic that Melibee singles out when he thanks God, "of whom procedeth al vertue and alle goodnesse, that him sente a wyf of so greet discrecioun" (1873). Indeed if we read Prudence's disappearance at the end allegorically, as

¹ For example, Mann argues that "The *Melibee* inculcates the virtue of patience, and it makes of it a womanly quality, exemplified in the 'greet pacience' with which Prudence treats her husband" (p. 125). Daileader asserts that "The *Melibee*, far from simply mocking the antifeminist patristic tradition, actually deconstructs it" (p. 38).

a sign of the reintegration of Melibee's lost wisdom, we understand that rather than valorising women *per se*, Prudence's performance represents a transitional stage toward a nobler and more evolved definition of masculinity. At the end of the *Tale of Melibee*, the knightly ethic is refined by the addition of the Christian virtue of mercy, and some of the conflicts in medieval culture are conciliated.