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“The Wil of his Wif:” Discourse, Power, and Gender in Chaucer’s The Tale of Melibee

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“The Wil of his Wif:” Discourse, Power, and Gender

in Chaucer’s *The Tale of Melibee*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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“The Wil of his Wif.” Discourse, Power, and Gender in Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee*

Sara D. Jenkins

ABSTRACT

In the *Tale of Melibee*, Chaucer gives us an excellent illustration of a point French theorist Michel Foucault would make centuries later: That power is something that moves and shifts between people and within institutions, that it is not fixed nor permanent, that it is used as needed toward specific ends, and that it is enacted through the medium of discourse. In *Melibee*, Melibee’s wife Prudence achieves a place of authority and influence in her marriage via her use of discourse, and specifically by using a more “male” way of speaking. Chaucer is often considered feminist-friendly due to characters such as the Wife of Bath, but critics have also given us many reasons why the Wife fails as a truly empowered woman. Within Chaucer’s oeuvre, Prudence is often overlooked as an example of Chaucer’s proto-feminism because she is a wife who, despite her barrage of knowledge, at times is somewhat meek and subservient to her husband. But a closer analysis of Prudence shows that she is anything but a traditional wife. By primarily using the work of Foucault, I analyze Prudence’s speech as her tactic for achieving power and authority within her relationship.

Starting from an overview of Chaucer’s female characters, I discuss Foucaultian and discourse theory as they apply to Melibee. A close reading then follows. Although

Melibee is most often read allegorically, with Prudence being Melibee's virtuousness made manifest, for my analysis I engage in a literal reading of the tale, paying attention to the linguistic strategies used by Prudence and noting where the allegorical and literal interpretations overlap. I conclude that Prudence should be included in lists of strong Chaucerian women and that it is possible to read Prudence as a flavor of Chaucerian feminism.

Word Count: 288

Introduction

Given the ever-changing climate of modern literary study, the fact that Chaucer has survived as one of the “great authors” can be interpreted as a significant indication of his literary mastery and achievements. One of those achievements is his apparent pro-woman stance at a time when anti-feminism was the order of the day. While Chaucer’s portrayal of independent women, most notably the Wife of Bath, makes it easy to stick a feminist label on him, some feminist critics have seen in his work only “woman” as posited by a male writer (Hansen 12). Yet given the social climate of Chaucer’s day, it is significant that a male writer would choose to portray women as Chaucer did. The *Canterbury Tales* presents us with many different kinds of women, and although the Wife is the most widely-recognized example of a “strong” or “empowered” woman in the *Tales*, we get a quite different example in *The Tale of Melibee*. Melibee’s wife Prudence is educated and possesses a sharp mind, and her ability to display her knowledge verbally and argumentatively surpasses that of her husband. She doesn’t make obvious statements about her role as wife, as does the gregarious Wife of Bath; instead, she navigates that position with precision, attaining a position of authority, and earns much more respect in the process. In this way *Melibee* highlights the focus of feminist theorizing in recent years, theorizing that “has moved away from viewing women as simply an oppressed group...and has tried to formulate ways of analysing power as it manifests itself and as it

is resisted in the relations of everyday life” (Mills, *Discourse*). While the Wife endures as the figurehead of Chaucerian “feminism,” as an example of his “understanding of feminine power” (Hansen 27), Chaucer’s inclusion of Prudence in the *Tales* is a clearer indication of Chaucer’s understanding of that power. Although some critics have pointed to Prudence’s role as wife as a symbol of loss of power, such as Robert Sturges who notes that “even a character as wise and domestically powerful as Prudence... must go through a form of submission to her husband’s opinion before offering her own sounder advice” (42), a careful examination of the story reveals that despite being “just” a wife, Prudence commands respect and earns authority such as the Wife of Bath could never attain.

Prudence has traditionally been read as an allegorical figure, an embodiment of the virtue prudence and her daughter, Sophie, the embodiment of the virtue wisdom. In such a reading, Prudence is Melibee’s virtuousness made manifest, teaching and guiding him toward the lessons he must learn. However, a literal reading better highlights the interrelations of gender and power within the tale.

When it comes to discourse and gender in the *Tales*, the Wife of Bath and the idea of *maistrie* come first to mind. The Wife is candid about the plight of women and their lack of power in marriage, and in her Tale she is candid about how she would like the power structures to change: “Jhesu Crist us sende / housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresh abedde, / and grace t’overbyde hem that we wedde” (1258-1260).¹ She wants the tables turned, to have power over a meek husband so that *maistrie* is easy to obtain. For the Wife, “sovereignty is not something to be acknowledged by right, but power that any woman can win by force, by guile, by *maistrie*” (Green 21). As critics have pointed out,

the specific word *maistrie* designates an important point that Chaucer and his audience “would have recognized [as] related to power, dominance, and submission” (18). While the Wife speaks specifically of the “force” and “guile” she uses to gain power, Prudence instead uses logic and authority to gain *maistrie*, and then uses that power to achieve the idealistic goal of peace (instead of simply personal power for power’s sake). One of *Melibee’s* main focuses is power; from a literal standpoint it is “the struggle for power between the husband and the wife” (Pakkala-Weckstrom 399), with this power struggle situated within an argument for and against war. The argument is also religious, and this is an example of the allegorical reading overlapping the literal one; if Melibee listens to Prudence—as virtue or wife—he will not rashly rush to war. It is his wife who is the voice of knowledge and reason, a woman who demands the power to be heeded. Her presence in the *Canterbury Tales* shines a spotlight on intelligent, learned women, especially when compared to the Wife. While the Wife is savvy and witty, with an general understanding of power, she gains *maistrie* by force and guile; Prudence is able to attain *maistrie* by skilled discourse and intelligent argument. She deserves to be considered the strongest, most “feminist” woman in the *Tales*.

Chaucer and women

Chaucer’s work “frequently reveals keen interest in the strength of women, rather than their weakness” (Haskell 10), and thanks to him, “the lives of women especially are accessible through literature” (5). Much of his oeuvre concerns women characters and brings them to the forefront in a mixture of roles. In the *Tales*, the women include three

pilgrims and many varied characters within the individual stories. Some of the women are sexually active, such as May in *The Merchant's Tale* or Alison in *The Miller's Tale*; some are chaste, such as Cecile in *The Second Nun's Tale*. Some are moral and not so moral. Most are versions of the saint or sinner dichotomy; they are either devoted to religion and proper behavior (as nuns, virgins, devoted wives) or they are devoted to the opposite of those traits (sexual, promiscuous, or murderous). Yet despite such generalizations, Chaucer's women are also more individualized than idealized. As an example, instead of following expectations and correlating women's social status and morality, Chaucer inverts this correlation and gives us characters such as the morally upright yet lower-class old woman in *The Friar's Tale* and the kings' wicked mothers in *The Man of Law's Tale* (Haskell 7).

Of all the Canterbury women, the Wife stands out distinctly because of her bluntness and sexuality. She is expressive and forceful, a woman who is apparently in control. She is one of the three women actually on the pilgrimage, and one of the new, growing middle class. The Wife retains her property and control of her body after her husbands die; and she "challenges the male-dominated textual system by interrupting the privilege of male-oriented reading and writing" (Amsler 74). For all of these reasons, she has often been considered an example of Chaucer's pro-woman point of view. Yet despite the Wife's apparent empowerment, many critics have questioned that empowerment and the Wife's status as pre-feminist literary icon. Many critics have debated whether or not the Wife's "feminist" traits are actually empowering; some have said that Chaucer was merely making fun of women like the Wife:

In common sense human terms she is absurd and grotesque, a figment of that anti-feminist gallimaufry....that many take her as a triumph of Chaucer's...art tells us more about the place of women in our tradition than about the words before us...it can hardly be that those who talk of the mellowness and humanity that went into the Wife really mean they whole-heartedly enjoy Chaucer's curmudgeonly and old-fashioned humor. (Reid 73)

Another critic argues:

The Wife's discourse in the Prologue and Tale belies her apparent garrulity, autonomy, and dominance...she paradoxically represents not the full and remarkable presence with which modern readings...invest her, or even some feminine strategy of negativity and subversion...but a dramatic and important instance of woman's silence and suppression. (Hansen 27)

Elaine Hansen's detailed examination of the Wife's speech reveals more within the story than appears at first glance; she concludes that the Wife is able to speak only in "terms provided by the dominant language," and what she says upholds the power structures she is supposedly subverting (32). For example, by boasting that she is an expert liar and deceiver, she not only undermines the authority of the rest of her speech, but she also reinforces the negative stereotypes of women. As Mark Amsler also points out, she "schemes, deceives, bullies, harangues, and sexually abuses her men in order to gain the maistrie in her marriages. In this role, Alisoun is the *lex animata* (the living law) of the antifeminist cliché about women" (80). Also, the tale she tells includes a rapist who ends up with a beautiful, quiet, obedient wife, a wife who can be read as one who had been an

autonomous, self-sustaining woman and then gave it up to get married, thus giving power to her husband. While the tale can be interpreted as ironic and as the Wife's critique of traditional notions of romance, Hansen sees in it an oppressive strain that belies any liberation the Wife is attempting to articulate. Schauber and Spolsky also problematize the Wife's self-actualized power by noting that although her language contains logical arguments, it "proceeds by haphazard association...interrupted by argumentative digressions." The Wife's purpose is to impose her view of "proper behavior" on the world, and her way of attempting to do it thus shows her to be "knowledgeable but not wise, logical but not reasonable" (28-31).

It has also been pointed out that the Wife, and all of Chaucer's women, are not really women but are male creations that do more to shed light on "feminine absence and masculine anxiety" than on any type of actual feminism (Hansen 12). It is of course important to note that most female characters of the time were written by a male author, but it is also important to remember that this distinction can give us insights into what the author considered important and worth sharing. As gender studies grapple with the "problem" of men writing women, the question then arises that if Chaucer's women are "merely" male creations, what good does it do to study them as "women?" Or, as Hansen succinctly asks, "What is the nature and function of late twentieth-century feminist analysis of these canonical, male-authored late medieval texts?" (11). As she goes on to point out, "attempt[s] to recuperate a feminist Chaucer...based on the assumption that Chaucer is sympathetic to women's problems...is misguided. Such efforts...have prevented feminist critics from making much difference in the way we read and theorize about Chaucer" (12). She suggests re-analyzing obvious feminist readings in order to

make “new models” for feminist interpretations of Chaucer’s work. Her suggestion might be explained by the fact that the texts are almost too easy to analyze from the usual feminist standpoints—that is, these women are created by men who hold power and who can’t understand the subjectivity of “female” in a “male” world—and so we must find new methods of reading and analyzing that will provide fresh insights into Chaucer’s work.

Hansen additionally points out that “female characters in Chaucerian fiction are always problems for other male characters and, at another level, for the (male) audience, and these problems are...coterminous with the ‘larger’ interpretive problems of language and authority” (56). Part of the “problem” for male characters and readers—and writers—is, as the Wife’s tale asks, “what thing is it that women moost desiren” (117). Despite the relative lack of writing by women of the time, women were not invisible in society; Chaucer’s focus on them in so much of his work and their highlighted status within the courtly love tradition are two examples that speak to a very real presence of “woman” in medieval England. Although there is much to be learned by questioning the implications of the idea of “woman” being explored by male writers, when looking at Chaucer’s work it is useful to see what kinds of “woman” a man like Chaucer, who had an audience, wanted to portray. For as Nicky Hallett puts it, “for a character to be made a ‘woman’ is to imbue her (un)wittingly with a set of histories and reputations” (482). Chaucer *deliberately* chose to write significant female characters, and this choice is what makes them worth study. For him to deliberately make characters women—even if he was poking fun at their types—tells us that women were varied and vibrant and did not

always conform to a what modern readers envision when they think of “medieval women.”

What is interesting, however, is that Chaucer did not create Prudence himself. *The Tale of Melibee* is Chaucer’s translation of the French *Livre de Melibee et de Dame Prudence*, which is itself a translation of the Latin *Liber consolationi et concilii*. Yet Chaucer decided that *The Tale of Melibee* was worth including in the *Tales*, without much deviation from his source, and this inclusion suggests that he saw value in what it had to say.

Interestingly, the tale’s translation by Renaud de Louens from Latin into French omitted Chapters vi-ix, where the original author, Albertano of Brescia, explains the characteristics of the virtue prudence (Baker 249). Chaucer translated Renaud “virtually unrevised” (249), and this suggests that the tale “already appropriately develop[ed] the theme that Chaucer wanted to present” (249). But omitting the specifics regarding the virtue prudence has been blamed as why modern readers often fail to understand an allegorical reading of *Melibee*, to not recognize “how the definitions of this cardinal virtue inform the characterization of Melibee’s wife” (249). But perhaps its omission speaks to a decision by Renaud, and subsequently Chaucer, to make Prudence less of a virtue and more of a person in an attempt to make her more understandable and relatable to readers. This change additionally highlights her rhetorical skills, because the knowledge Prudence recites therefore comes from an actual person.

Also omitted by Renaud were significant passages where Prudence debates specific matters of state, such as how much Melibee should spend on defense of his estates and what kinds of policy to create for the poor (Askins 324). This omission has

been seen as an attempt to “domesticate” Prudence, to present her “as someone concerned primarily with how her husband and his circle of advisors think” (324). Yet instead this change can be read as another attempt to make her “real.”

Also interesting is that *Melibee* is one of the tales told by Chaucer the pilgrim, again suggesting that Chaucer the poet found value in it. That it portrays a woman who is able to verbally hold her own with her husband, who actually surpasses his skill, tells us something about Chaucer’s attitude toward women; while it is true that Prudence is a wife who is ultimately subservient to her husband (as she had to be as a wife), she is perhaps an example of a what a woman could achieve if she is smart enough to understand the mechanisms of power and authority. Prudence uses her reason and intelligence in order to earn her upper hand, working on par with her husband and utilizing skills that would have been traditionally ascribed to men.

It is this point that makes Prudence stand out among Chaucer’s women. Her arguments are indisputable, she calls upon a vast knowledge culled from reading, and her ability to navigate a conversation are traits that were not often portrayed in women. As noted above, the Wife of Bath attempts to call upon authority, although her misquotes and overall argumentative style leave much to be desired. Prudence, however, is a skilled rhetorician who can argue better than her husband can, and she uses the logical, rational argument style that is typically associated with and used by men more often than women. Her style of arguing is what makes it possible to analyze her speech on level with her husband’s and to see her as a wife who understands the use of a “masculine” trait to gain respect and authority. She uses traditionally “masculine” forms of discourse—logic, reason, Socratic dialogue—and takes on a traditionally “male” way of speaking. This

adaptation of “male” discourse by a woman stands out in Chaucer’s work; as Hansen points out, often women who attempt to “transgress gender lines” find themselves dead for the effort, such as White in *Book of the Duchess* and Alceste in *Legend of Good Women* (17). Hansen is talking about symbolic transgressions, and the message is clear: Women are women and deviation from the norm is rarely allowed. Within Chaucer’s work, Hansen argues that men can get away with flirting with traditional femininity, but women do not often get away with flirting with masculinity: “Chaucerian fiction as a whole suggests that role reversal really only goes one way; both the risks and the benefits of gender instability are for men only” (17). Yet Prudence certainly argues in the rational, learned way that readers of the time would normally ascribe to men, and she is rewarded for her effort with respect and authority. The fact that she appears at all in the Tales is therefore highlighted, and it could be theorized that Chaucer wanted to acknowledge smart women and to show that, as Prudence points out to Melibee, that there are indeed educated, intelligent women in the world—and perhaps Chaucer expected a few to be readers of his work.

Precedence for Chaucer’s interest in Prudence is most likely found in *Boece*, Chaucer’s translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. While the central figure in the *Consolation* is Boethius, who wrote from a prison cell awaiting his death, his comfort in his hour of need is Dame Philosophy, a female figure of authority, reason, and knowledge. But her consolation of Boethius does not involve coddling or easy words; she engages Boethius in a Socratic dialogue that forces him to think and reason.

The central questions Boethius asks involve the nature of true happiness and why wicked people are rewarded while good people are persecuted, and it is Dame Philosophy

who guides Boethius to the answers she wishes him to find. Similarities with Prudence are immediately apparent: Prudence provides comfort to Melibee during his grief over the attack upon herself and their daughter. She certainly does not coddle her husband; from the beginning, she works to bring his attention back from grief to matters at hand by using forceful words, such as “why make ye yourself for to be lyk a fool?” (980) and “though attempree wepyng be ygraunted, outrageous wepyng certes is deffended” (989). Like Dame Philosophy, she engages Melibee in a philosophical dialogue. And like Dame Philosophy, she knows what Melibee needs to do and uses skilled arguments that help him eventually recognize the correctness of her ideas.

The popularity of the *Consolation* during Chaucer’s day tells us that medieval readers were not ignorant of this idea of a strong, intelligent, self-possessed female, although perhaps such a figure was more often recognized as allegorical instead of literal. Chaucer would have known the *Consolation* quite thoroughly after translating it, and his inclusion of *Melibee* with the *Canterbury Tales* could very well be linked to its similarity to the *Consolation*. The many parallels between the two female figures lend credence to the theory that Chaucer found this image of woman worth repeating for a larger audience.

Yet critics have found the inclusion of *Melibee* problematic. This topic was recently addressed by Edward Foster in his article, “Has Anyone Here Read *Melibee*?” Foster questions the inclusion of the tale because of its ability to make “the teeth ache with boredom” (402), and he wonders “why [Chaucer] would incorporate [*Melibee*] into the *Canterbury Tales* and give it prominence as the lynchpin of political moral theology, when all but the most patient and sober must be tried beyond perseverance by its tedious style and structure” (403). He concludes that Chaucer shaped his version of *Melibee* so

that it “did not have to be read to make its point” (408). This “point” he refers to is one of moral theology, although an observation Foster makes about Chaucer’s audience highlights the possibility that Chaucer included the tale because of its strong female star. Foster points out that Chaucer’s audience would have been comprised of members of the court, who were most likely literate if unsophisticated in their “literary tastes” (404), and also of the new, upwardly mobile middle class. Foster doubts that any of them might have enjoyed the length and style of *Melibee*—thus leading to his conclusion that the tale was not meant to be read all the way through—and thus would have engaged the tale superficially, if at all. If Foster is correct in his analysis of Chaucer’s audience, then this lends credence to the idea that Chaucer included *Melibee* because of Prudence. If the audience most likely wouldn’t comprehend any larger meanings in the tale, then what they would immediately notice is Prudence, even with only a cursory reading of the story. If it truly is “hard to imagine the appeal of *Melibee*” for Chaucer’s audience (Foster 404), then perhaps it is useful to consider that the audience perhaps enjoyed *Melibee* as a fun tale about a strong, intelligent woman who knows more than her husband and deftly guides him to her wishes. If, however, Chaucer’s audience did read more deeply, they were rewarded with a tale that demonstrated the intricacies of matrimonial power struggles, as well as one that provided a strong woman at its center.

Power, resistance, and discourse

Prudence gains authority in *Melibee* via her rhetorical skill, and therefore discourse theory can be a helpful analytical tool to apply to the tale. Michael Stubbs

defines discourse analysis in this way: “It refers to attempts...to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. It follows that discourse analysis is also concerned with language use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers” (qtd. in Slembrouck). Since *Melibee* is a “conversational exchange,” it is then possible to analyze that conversation using discourse theory. While at least one recent critic has pointed out that *Melibee* is concerned with the fight for power via linguistic strategies, these strategies were regarded as “feminine powers of persuasion” (Pakkala-Weckstrom 411). While she is certainly female, Prudence’s discourse is not “feminine” in any traditional sense, and she is certainly not working “wiles” upon her husband. Instead, her “linguistic strategies,” her use of language in the social context of her marriage, are a more “masculine” form of discourse, a deliberate, specific use of her knowledge with the goal of being heard and heeded. Her use of this discourse can also be regarded as a form of resistance to the power relations that exist within medieval marriage, although her goal is one of peace, not power for power’s sake.

Just how Prudence achieves *maistrie* can be examined by investigating her use of discourse as her location of power. Discourse is not simply the utterances made by a particular person, discourse is the choice of what is said, how it is said, what is not said, what is allowed to be said, and so on. Prudence does not simply say, “Melibee, I know what I’m talking about, so listen to me and do as I say.” Her knowledge of herself, her husband, her situation, her role as wife—all of this information comes into play as she chooses what to say and when, crafting her responses for maximum effect.

Recent work in discourse theory has highlighted the importance of who speaks and how, and the types of speaking enacted become indicative of the power struggles

happening just under the surface (Mills, *Discourse*). Although such power struggles are often connected to gender, as it is through gender that institutions throughout history have attempted to localize power (for example, medieval religious edicts keeping women silent in church), power itself is not gendered nor is it static. “Power” can be defined as something that is performed; it is the performance of will over another person or group of people. The idea of the performative nature of power comes from the work of Michel Foucault, and his work is a helpful tool with which to analyze Prudence’s speech.

Foucault’s work on power and discourse has been extremely influential on both discourse and feminist theory, and his work provides valuable tools for finding new ways to read and understand *Melibee*. He theorized that power is not something bestowed upon a particular person or institution; rather, power is everywhere, imbuing everything at all times, and therefore accessible to anyone:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here and there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 96)

In this view, power is not taken or seized; it is exercised, performed. Assuming this view as a starting point, “power” can be viewed within medieval marriage as something open to either party, although social edicts existed to contain and locate that power in men. But Prudence’s ability to circumvent those edicts demonstrates not only the fluidness of

power but also her own considerable knowledge and skill. Foucault might have found *Melibee* quite interesting because despite his work on large institutions such as the prison system, much of his work on power centered upon the ways power is enacted at the “local” level of everyday life and interpersonal relations (which is where feminist theories engage with Foucault).

Because *Melibee* illustrates power relations between a married couple, the story provides fertile ground for seeing Foucault’s theories at work. *Melibee* also fits well with Foucaultian theory because Foucault was interested not in the “author” as a specific individual but in what he called the “author-function,” an attempt to disconnect the work from the politics of the person. Despite the fact that “Chaucer” can be read within his work—most notably as Chaucer the pilgrim in the *Tales*—*Melibee* is not his creation and would therefore be an excellent candidate for author-function analysis. Because the version given to us by Chaucer is twice translated, a story that has been (re)told by three different authors, it could be argued to be far enough removed from its original, actual author to now be considered as a product of an “author-function.” Obviously Foucault wrote hundreds of years after Chaucer, but both of them dealt with the ideas of language and power; these ideas had long been illustrated by authors such as Chaucer, which theorists like Foucault subsequently internalized, theorized, and published.

Another interesting aspect of Foucault’s work on power is that he does not consider power to be simply an oppressive force enacted to keep people down; he sees it as something that also gives, that allows certain forms of freedom even to those under its influence. Foucault states in the *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*: “If power was never anything but repressive...do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?” (36).

Taking this view of power-as-giver into consideration when we read *Melibee* sheds light on the local “institution” of medieval marriage. If marriage and the power it gives men is always only repressive to women, why would women submit to it? Why wouldn't they rebel, *en masse*? That they did not supports Foucault's view that power gives as well as takes.

Looking simplistically at marriage as it was in Chaucer's day, it is possible to see that although it took most power away from women, it also gave benefits such as security and safety, as well as opportunities for regaining power in other ways. Power is always flowing in and around people and institutions; marriage might attempt to localize power within the man, but as Prudence demonstrates and Foucault explains, the ever-flowing nature of power makes it unable to be truly contained and therefore it is available to anyone. The Wife of Bath rails against men and marriage, yet she is called the *Wife*. She gains independence, a form of power, through marriage and then through widowhood. So although it is easy to think of a wife as an institutionally-repressed figure, according to Foucault there is another way to look at this relation. Prudence is an example of how the power within marriage could be navigated.

It is important to pause here to say a few words about Foucault and gender. He did not specifically apply his work to gender studies, and he has been faulted for this omission. While his theories have been successfully integrated into gender studies, his work was not aimed at a particular gender but at the forces that influence them. His theories on power and discourse explain how these forces work on everyone, at any time; thus, he tells us that power and discourse can be used by either gender. They are there for the taking, in a sense. Of course, the politics of gender that play into the aspects of daily

life attempt to limit or channel the access to power for particular groups and people, yet “power” is still there, genderless.

Another relevant feature of Foucault’s theories of power is that, “Where there is power, there is resistance,” (*Sexuality* 95). He describes power as something that is actively resisted, that cannot exist without resistance. Power is an unending web of power and resistance, flowing back and forth. He calls these forms “a plurality of resistances” (96) and describes resistances as an “opposite” of power, yet as an integral part of power. Resistances can exist only “in the strategic field of power relations” (96). They support and create power as power supports and creates resistances, although,

They are distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, *certain moments of life*, certain types of behavior. (96, emphasis mine)

Prudence demonstrates resistance by taking verbal command of the situation when her husband is too distraught to successfully deal with what needed to be done. Foucault’s quote provides an interesting snapshot of the literal *Melibee*; the incident which precedes the story—the attack on Prudence and her child—is one of those “moments of life,” the catalyst that creates the opportunity for resistance in which Prudence is able to assume the dominant position in the marriage. Prudence does not explicitly critique marriage or the fate of women as the Wife does; rather, we get a sense that Prudence is aware of these things, but does not need to voice them. She has an understanding of the workings of power and she uses her knowledge, successfully arguing her case. She makes Melibee,

who at first is completely closed off to her suggestions, open up and become willing to listen and learn.

Since power can be accessed by either gender, it is then worth considering how power is distributed. Prudence's power is revealed throughout her numerous speeches, speeches that Melibee attempts to curtail: "If I governed me by thy conseil, it sholde seme that I hadde yeve to thee over me the maistrie" (1058). Right away, *maistrie* is connected to *conseil*; power is connected to ideas, which are communicated through speech. Taken in its entirety, the *Canterbury Tales* is a fluid drama of speech and of becoming-through-speech; it is through the telling of tales that characters exist on the pilgrimage. What is said, how it is said, and who says it are therefore highlighted; Chaucer "operates...in the performative arena of language" (Hallett 481). Discourse is the avenue through which power is possessed and enacted; it is "an arena whereby power may be appropriated, rather than societal roles being clearly mapped out for participants before an interaction takes place" (Mills, *Discourse*). As a husband, Melibee (and readers) assume that Melibee has the power, underscored when he tells her that he cannot take her advice because it goes against just about all known dictates (1055-1061). Yet Prudence dominates, and it is through her voice and her skilled, well-reasoned arguments that we see her achieve a dominant position in the relationship. Put another way, "It is possible for someone who has been allocated a fairly powerless position institutionally to accrue to themselves, however temporarily, a great deal of interactional power by their verbal dexterity, their confidence, their linguistic directness" (Mills, *Discourse*). Prudence's speeches give us a clear picture of "language use as social action...as situated performance...as tied to social relations and identities, power, inequality and social

struggle” (Slembrouck). If much of the Wife of Bath’s power is associated with her ability to speak in a commanding way (Schauber and Spolsky 21), then Prudence is likewise imbued with such power. As Foucault succinctly explains, “It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (100). Prudence, who as we will see is certainly knowledgeable, is able to use her rhetorical skill to focus that knowledge and speak with authority.

Reading linguistic power in *Melibee*

A close, literal reading of *Melibee* will highlight Prudence’s rhetorical skill in using “masculine” forms of discourse to achieve respect, power, and authority in her marriage. The essence of the tale is the dialogue between Prudence and Melibee, although “dialogue” suggests duality and Prudence speaks more by far. Her long monologues are interspersed with responses from Melibee, and this design tells us that she commands the tale. She is logical and precise: Most of her speeches follow a recognizable pattern where she gives her opinion, backs it up with authoritative quotations, qualifies her opinion, and then backs it up again (Schauber and Spolsky 28). There are times when Prudence seems larger than life as she deftly calls forth her knowledge to rebut Melibee’s responses. Her way of speaking—her choice of words, the details she uses to get her points across—earns Melibee’s respect and persuades him that she is to be heeded.

From the beginning, Prudence recognizes that her husband is lost and will be guided by emotions when dealing with his family’s attack. She also knows that an

emotional response will lead to more problems and that she must make him see this error. Allegorically, Prudence-as-virtue, reflecting a part of Melibee himself, steps in to avert potential disaster, but literally Prudence-as-human demonstrates a keen understanding of her husband and of human nature. In order to guide Melibee to a peaceful resolution, Prudence knows that she must first gain his respect and trust in her word.

So she begins strongly, in such a way as to get his attention: “Allas, my lord,” quod she, “why make ye youreself for to be lyk a fool?” (980). She has been beaten and her daughter left for dead, yet when Melibee arrives and begins wailing, she ignores her physical state and immediately recounts the words of Ovid, who counsels people to let grievers grieve for a time. But when Melibee seems ready to grieve unceasingly, she “saugh hir tyme” (980) and verbally shakes him out of his grief by suggesting he looks like a fool. Melibee answers her indignantly, and a touch defensively, protesting that he has cause to weep so much. She counters his defense with many lines of specifics as to why he should be done with weeping. To this Melibee again hedges: ““Alle thy wordes,” quode he, ‘been soothe and therto profitable, but trewely myn herte is troubled with this sorwe so greuously that I noot what to doone”” (1001).

Here begins a pattern we see repeated throughout the tale: she offers her advice, and he at first refuses to accept it. Yet she proceeds calmly, and we get the impression that she understands that it will take a bit of time to thoroughly convince her husband that she is worth heeding. Melibee’s repeated rebuffs of her advice are perhaps also a defense of her onslaught of knowledge, for he may not possess the ability to rebut her arguments. From the beginning, Prudence unleashes her skill almost without mercy; as a woman, she understands the obstacles she faces in gaining a share of power in the relationship—the

power of being heard and heeded—and she understands that she will need to those obstacles in order to gain respect.

Melibee's words of "I noot what to doone," provide an opening for her to use. These words also suggest that he wants advice, although he doesn't yet realize that she can provide it. Yet he does listen when she tells him to call together his trusted friends and ask their counsel. Melibee follows this advice without comment: "Thanne, by the conseil of his wyf Prudence, this Melibeus leet callen a greet congregacion of folk" (1004). The men come, and they decide that Melibee should go to war against the men who wronged him. Prudence realizes the folly of this course of action and knows that forgiveness and peace will be better for everyone—as well as being the right moral path. For all of Melibee's protests against her advice based on religious edicts, he has certainly forgotten the edict of peace between enemies. Prudence has not. She also realizes that it will take good arguments and reason to turn men from warmongering to peace, and that it is only her skillful discourse that can do it. Thus begins the meat of the tale where Prudence sets forth to convince Melibee not to fight.

The tale tells us that she begins her anti-war campaign, "in ful humble wise, whan she saugh hir tyme" (1051). These words have stood out to many readers as evidence of her humbleness and awareness of her status as wife; however, a different interpretation is possible. Prudence from the very beginning knows how to navigate an argument and how to bring her husband to her way of thinking. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that she fully understands her "place" as it is in the marriage, a place where Melibee's word is instantly heeded and she must fight to be heard. Instead of starting a head-on argument, Prudence starts off from a place of apparent humbleness. But this tactic is merely to gain

the attention of Melibee and to have him listen to her, not dismiss her out of hand. The linguistic tactics that she subsequently employs speak more to her understanding of power than to any actual humbleness on her part. Prudence has a clear understanding of the nature of power and how to use it to achieve the end she seeks. Her humbleness and timing are therefore calculated to give the most powerful effect.

Despite a promising beginning, it does not take long before Melibee realizes that social dictates should prevent him from listening to his wife. When she next petitions Melibee to accept her counsel, he tells her that the worst thing he could do would be to take advice from his wife, and he invokes the word *maistrie* for the first time: “if I governed me by thy conseil, it sholde seme that I hadde yeve to thee over me the maistrie” (1058). What is interesting at this point is that he has already taken her advice and it worked well; that he now so adamantly refuses more—he offers three distinct reasons why he will not “werke by thy conseil”—suggests one of two things. Either he suspects that she will give more good advice and he does not want to be upstaged by her again, or he does not want to take her advice while the other men are around. It isn’t clear if the men are within hearing range, but since we don’t know that they *aren’t*, it remains a possibility that they are hearing the exchange.

Prudence is unperturbed at Melibee’s reasons for refusing her advice, and we quickly see why: she easily counters each one with eloquence and wit. To his charge of her counsel giving her *maistrie* over him, she replies,

Youre thridde reson is this: ye seyn that if ye governe yow by my conseil,
it sholde seme that ye hadde yeve me the maistrie and the lordshipe over
youre persone. / Sire, save youre grace, it is nat so. For if it so were that no

man sholde be conseilled but oonly of hem that hadden lordshipe and
maistrie of his persone, men wolden nat be conseilled so ofte. (1081-1082)

By so wittily and ironically assuring him that all men are masters of themselves even when taking advice, Prudence has already begun to gain the upper hand she needs to lead him to a peaceful solution. Her words can be read as a concession to his weakness, since she seems to understand that Melibee needs assurance that he is in charge.

To Melibee's quotation from Solomon regarding the lack of honorable women in the world, Prudence deftly replies:

That ther hath been many a good womman, may lightly be preved. / For
certes, sire, oure Lord Jhesu Crist wolde nevere have descended to be born
of a womman, if alle wommen hadden been wikke. / And after that, for the
grete bountee that is in wommen, oure lord Jhesu Crist, whan he was risen
fro deeth to lyve, appeered rather to a womman than to his Apostles.

(1073-1075)

Not only does she effectively counter his arguments, she also does so with sharp, specific insights, invoking Jesus as a trump card over Melibee's Solomon. She implies that Jesus had more faith in women than in men, a very strong statement that Melibee either ignores or doesn't understand. Either way, she has gained a foothold.

We also start to see the specifics of her discourse in action, such as her ability to weave self-effacing words and platitudes into her arguments. These placating words are used to suggest that Prudence is the proper wife she obviously wants her husband to believe she is, yet we begin to see how she uses these tactics in order to keep Melibee listening. She walks a fine line between traditional expectations and convincing angry

men not to go to war. She knows the subtleties of social behavior and how to use them in order to produce the desired effect—in this case, peace. Prudence’s subservience has been seen as her apparent need to “say the right thing” to her husband before being able to say what she really wants, but “a combination of adaptive strategic behavior and the dialogue implicit in most power relations ensures that public action will provide a constant stream of evidence that appears to support an interpretation of ideological hegemony” (Scott 70). Prudence understands the importance of maintaining the appearance of meekness, but her clever use of language reveals her powerful knowledge that Melibee will come to respect.

Prudence gives an especially long monologue about why Melibee’s reasons for dismissing her advice are unsound. Melibee again does not accept her authority outright; he first accepts Solomon’s: “I se wel that the word of Salomon is sooth” (1113). He does not see truth in the words of his wife but in the words of Solomon. He adds almost as an afterthought, “And, wyf, by cause of thy sweete wordes....I wol governe me by thy conseil in alle thing” (1114). His use of the word “sweete” suggests that he might be trying to placate her and to put off the inevitable: conceding to her vast knowledge.

At this point Prudence lets her great knowledge spill forth. She begins by telling him what kind of people to use as advisors: “I wol enforme yow.” Prudence is much less placating and more powerful now. She quotes saints, apostles, Seneca, and more as she clarifies her points, demonstrating even more vividly just how well she can argue her case. When she moves to her next point, explaining how to choose the best advice, she uses the words, “Now, sith that I have *toold* yow of which folk ye sholde been counseilled, now wol I *teche* yow which conseil ye oghte to eschewe” (1172, emphasis

mine). Her speech becomes more directly didactic and forceful; she is no longer suggesting, she is *telling* and *teaching*. There are no careful or meek suggestions; she will teach him how to judge his advisors, effectively putting him in the role of student and firmly establishing her authority. This situation is continued when she moves to her third suggestion about how to get rid of advisors he decides he no longer wants: “Now is it resoun and tyme that I shewe yow whanne and wherfore that ye may chaunge youre conseillours withouten youre repreve” (1223). Again she focuses on proper timing, illustrating her command of the situation. She understands that timing does matter, and which words she uses at what time influence their overall effect. This is her masculine discourse in action: her choice of words, when she uses them, the arguments she chooses—all combine to create an argumentative style that can authoritatively gain the respect she needs to convince the men that war is not the answer.

Melibee is helpless under the onslaught, as evidenced by his response:

As yet into this tyme ye han wel and covenably *taught* me as in
general...but now wolde I fayn that ye wolde *condescende* in especial
/ and telle me how liketh yow, or what semeth yow, byoure conseillours
that we han chosen in oure present ned. (1233-1235, emphasis mine)

He acknowledges her role as teacher and his as student, and even asks her to “condescend” to teach him more.

At this point, the roles have reversed, and she is now in the position of authority and respect. Now she must maintain that power, and her continued use of strong discourse achieves this maintenance. Through her clever arguments, she has effectively caused him to not only take advice, but to *ask* for more of it. We get the sense that she is

fully aware of the situation—and perhaps surprised at how fully he has accepted her authority in the matter—because she suddenly heaps platitudes upon him before continuing, perhaps recognizing that she must tread more carefully lest he remember his reasons for not listening to her and close up again:

“My lord," quod she, "I biseke yow in al humblesse that ye wol nat wilfully replie agayn my resouns, ne distempre youre herte, thogh I speke thyng that yow displese. / For God woot that, as in myn entente, I speke it for youre beste, for youre honour, and for youre profite eke.” (1236-1237)

The platitudes also, of course, temper him in case he takes issue with the fact that she is about to tell him how much he has “erred.”

He takes her criticisms well, acknowledging that he “erred” in his choice of advisors, and replying that since she just explained how to choose good advisors and how to change them, he will proceed to do so. He is now fully receptive and respectful of her, ready to follow her instruction. She then launches into an analysis of his councilors, leading him to see which ones to keep and which to replace. Melibee interrupts with assurances that he understands her points, “I understonde it in this wise,” (1278) and he goes on to stubbornly say that he should still revenge himself on his enemies in order to right the balance. Prudence, of course, blasts this idea, and her words illustrate her continued place of power: “how lightly is every man enclined to his owene desir and to his owene plesaunce!” (1283). Her ability to make such an emphatic statement, without recrimination, underscores her newly acquired position of authority and power.

Now that Prudence has achieved respect and authority regarding matters of council, the story’s focus turns to Melibee’s desire to enact vengeance on his enemies and

Prudence's desire to enable peace. The discussion takes the same framework as used up until now: Prudence lays down long and well-quoted reasons why Melibee should recognize the truth in her words, and Melibee agrees yet tries hedge his agreement, as if he isn't quite ready to learn what she's teaching. Each time he mentions revenge, she deftly explains why this idea is no good and why her ideas are. Despite acknowledging her authority and good advice, Melibee refuses to let go of thoughts of revenge until Prudence finally uses a "semblant of wratthe" to force his acquiescence. Her anger prompts Melibee to answer with, "Dame, I prey yow that ye be nat displeasid of thynges that I seye....But seyeth and conseileth me as yow liketh, for I am redy to do right as ye wol desire" (1698-1702). He is eager to smooth her anger and regain her goodwill, another sign that she still occupies a position of authority. At this point, her anger could have the effect it does only because she has achieved the place of power; had she still been in the powerless/subservient role, her anger would not have affected Melibee.

Her position is underscored again when next Melibee asks her "wyl" and "conseil." He is fully open to what she wants as well as her advice. Prudence then moves from political advice to religious advice: "Aboven alle thynges, that ye make pees bitwene God and yow...if ye do as I sey yow, God wol sende youre adversaries unto yow / and maken hem fallen at youre feet, redy to do youre wyl and youre comandementz" (1714-1718). What is interesting at this point is that she equates her will with God's. Within a literal reading, this tactic might seem audacious, but it fits in perfectly with her use of powerful discourse. Male religious leaders equate their word with God's, and she uses this same tactic to retain authority. She is expert at using words to their best effect, and after all she has spoken up to now, the coup de grace is that if Melibee does what she

says, God will smile upon him and melt his enemies' enmity. This works in very well with Melibee's earlier protestations against listening to her based on passages from the Bible; she is now offering him heavenly praise should he follow her instruction—and indeed, peace is the path that Melibee should take if he is sincere about following advice from the Bible. This (positive) maneuvering is very well done on Prudence's part.

Prudence next tells Melibee: "I prey yow lat me speke with youre adversaries in privee place...thane, whan I know hir wil and hire entente, I may conseille yow the moore seurely" (1721-1723). She has all but told him that she will be the one to sway the men; she wants to be alone to speak to them, to "know hir wil," but we have already seen how Prudence is able to work her own will on Melibee. Melibee, though, doesn't seem to realize that the situation will be in Prudence's hands more than God's, even though he responds with, "dooth youre wil and youre likynge; / for I putte me hoolly in youre disposicioun and ordinaunce" (1724-1725). He has put his faith in his wife. Allegorically, God is working through Prudence-as-virtue, and her word is that of God's. It takes Melibee longer to understand this connection, as it is his tale and his lesson of prudence to learn. The other men in the tale immediately recognize Prudence for what she is, and come to "hir wil" quickly.

Once Prudence meets with Melibee's enemies she works the same linguistic skills she used with Melibee. First we are told that she spends time "thinkinge how she myghte brynge this need unto a good conclusioun," thus embodying the virtue she is named after. Then she "shewed wisely unto hem the grete goodes that comen of pees" (1729). Using nothing but her reasoning skills, her "goodliche wordes," Prudence makes the men see the error of their ways. They are only too happy to tell her that "ye han shewed unto us

the blessynge of swetnesse” (1735). Speaking as one, the men tell her that her words have caused them to better understand the words of Solomon—again, Prudence has served as a religious philosopher, in a way, and like Dame Philosophy she is a female voice explaining the way of things to men. Unlike Melibee, these men required only one brief meeting with Prudence to recognize her rational good sense and her authority in this matter: “we putten oure dede and al oure matere and cause all hoolly in youre goode wyl” (1741). They agree to do whatever Melibee asks of them, and they are “redy to obeye to the speche and comandement of my lord Melibee” (1742). Prudence has therefore succeeded in securing the outcome she promised Melibee. She then quotes Solomon to them, specifically that “to thy sone, to thy wyf, to thy freend, ne to thy brother ne yeve thou nevere might ne maistrie of thy body whil thou lyvest” (1755-1756) but that it is acceptable for them to give Melibee *maistrie* over them because “I woot wel and knowe verrailly that he is debonaire and meeke, large, curteys” (1760). Prudence does not have to convince them to give away *maistrie*, as she did with Melibee, but comes right out and tells them that despite what Solomon says, they must give Melibee complete power over them so that he can do as he wishes to them in the name of justice and peace. Because Melibee is a good man, he will not take advantage of them. She is no longer just reciting or preaching religion, she is literally practicing it and symbolically embodying it. She underscores this change when she says, “Forthermoore I knowe wel and am right seur that he shal nothing doon in this need withouten *my conseil*” (1763, emphasis mine). At this point, it is purely her *conseil* that is ruling the day. And like Melibee before them, the assembled enemies have been convinced by Prudence’s speech to do as she tells them to do. A literal reading does not explain why the enemies came to see Prudence’s reasoning

so quickly, although it is possible to conclude that they are afraid of what Melibee will do to them and are eager to accept a more peaceful resolution, especially one given by Prudence, who has proven herself to them:

Thanne seyden they with o voys, "worshipful lady, we putten us and oure goodes al fully in youre wil and disposicioun, / and been redy to comen, day that it like unto youre noblesse to lymyte us or assigne us, / for to maken oure obligacioun and boond as strong as it liketh unto youre goodnesse, / that we mowe fulfillle the *wille of yow* and of my lord Melibee. (1765-1768, emphasis mine)

When Prudence returns to Melibee, she tells him how his enemies are ready to let Melibee have justice over them. But she does not tell him that she was instrumental in making them so; she lets him think that his enemies have become repentant because he made "pees bitwene God and yow" as Prudence had advised. She tells him merely that, "his adversaries [were] ful repentant, / knowelechyng ful lowely hir synnes and trespass, and how they were ready to suffren all peyne" (1770-1771).

Melibee finds this satisfactory, and agrees to peace with his enemies, but wants to get his friends to agree as well. The friends are called in, listen to "hire avys and deliberacioun of the forseide mateere" and, as now to be expected, agree to peace. We are then told that, "Whan dame Prudence hadde herd the assent of hir lord Melibee, and the conseil of his freendes / accorde with hire wille and hire entencioun, / she was wonderly glad in hire herte" (1791-1793). As well she would be; she has not only successfully gained a position of authority and respect within her marriage and in her community, but she has achieved peace between enemies.

By the end of the story, a significant change is seen in Melibee: Once his enemies gather before him, and with his friends also assembled, Melibee speaks of Prudence as his equal: “And therefore wol I knowe and wite of yow / whether ye wol putte the punyissement and the chastisyng and the vengeance of this outrage *in the wyl of me and of my wyf Prudence*, or ye wol nat?” (1814-1815, emphasis mine). Although he has talked thus far of what he will do to them as a thing to be done by him especially, he now asks the men, in public, whether or not they will submit to the decision of “me and of my wyf Prudence.” It is significant that Melibee makes a public statement that equates the roles of himself and his wife. She has not only earned his respect privately, she has impressed him enough that he publicly declares her his equal.

Melibee plans to disinherit and exile the men, which Prudence considers excessive. So she goes to work on Melibee again, detailing for many lines why this idea is wrong. Melibee cannot help but agree: “Whanne Melibee hadde herd the grete skiles and resouns of dame Prudence, and hire wise informaciouns and techynges, / his herte gan encline to the wil of his wif, considerynge hir trewe entente, / and conformed hym anon, and assented fully to werken after hir conseil” (1870-1872). Melibee then ends the tale by forgiving his enemies.

Although the story ends focused on Melibee extolling the virtues of God’s mercy, Prudence is still at the heart of the conclusion, because without her Melibee would have gone to war and left unheeded several religious edicts of which Prudence—both literal and allegorical—reminds him. As a literal reading shows, the story demonstrates how a truly intelligent medieval woman could navigate the structure of power within marriage to attain respect, power, and authority.

Conclusions

Chaucer certainly seems to have had a soft spot for strong women characters; he included all manner of women in the *Canterbury Tales*, including the Wife of Bath. He translated the *Consolation of Philosophy*, and he translated and included *Melibee* in the *Tales*. It is possible to conclude that Chaucer chose to include *Melibee* because he liked what this story demonstrates: That a medieval woman could be intelligent and understand how to use that intelligence for positive ends, and that she did not need to remain a powerless, voiceless figure in marriage. Prudence is the ultimate voice of reason and authority that her husband ultimately listens to.

Although Prudence is the one to heed by the end of *Melibee*, she arrives at that place of respect and authority only after the power struggle that makes up most of the tale. This struggle between a husband and wife plays out in the arena of language, within strategic uses of discourse. Because of this emphasis on speech and power, Foucault's theories about power and discourse provide additional ways of analyzing the interplays of *Melibee*. Although Chaucer wrote hundreds of years before Foucault, it becomes clear that the subjects Chaucer wrote about remained relevant and worked their way into Foucault's theorizing. Foucault then can be used as an interesting and relevant companion to a reading of *Melibee*.

While her uncommon amount of knowledge and obviously allegorical name urge a symbolic reading of the tale, Prudence can also be read as fully human, a woman who knows how to navigate her position with aplomb. She understands how to use words for

their greatest effect. There is a definite sense of logical precision on her part, which suggests that she knows what she wants and how to get it. She is often overlooked when Chaucer's strong, proto-feminist women characters are named, but she deserves a higher place on such a list. Her powerful rhetorical skills and vast knowledge definitely earn her a top place among Chaucer's strong women.

Notes

¹ All quotations and citations come from Larry Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

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