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*Sylvia Jurchen / Silvan Wagner (Hrsg.)*

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*Madeline Fox*

## Optical Theory and Feminine *Auctoritas* within Chaucer's the ›Tale of Melibee‹

*Abstract.* There is a discrepancy between Chaucer's the ›Tale of Melibee‹ and its base text, Albertanus of Brescia's ›Liber consolacionis et consilii‹: Sophie's wounds. Chaucer does not include the eyes in the list of her wounds, whereas Albertanus does. Allowing the eyes to remain unharmed, Chaucer creates an opportunity for Prudence and her feminine wisdom to take center stage. The story's predominantly feminine voice is reminiscent of allegorical feminine personifications. However, Prudence's prose is distinct – it crosses the border of abstraction and enters into the realm of humanity. Applying medieval optical theory to the ›Tale of Melibee‹ allows for a deep analysis of Prudence's wisdom as well as her authoritative role in her medieval marriage.

As part of Geoffrey Chaucer's greater work, the ›Canterbury Tales‹, the ›Tale of Melibee‹ has been often neglected. For centuries, due to its long, burdensome, and dense contents, it has seemed separate from the rest of the ›Canterbury Tales‹. Within the past few decades, however, the ›Tale of Melibee‹ has caught the eyes of medieval scholars such as Suzanne Akbari, David Wallace, Eleanor Johnson, and Amanda Walling. Some discuss its unique representation of gender and some declare it a deliberate and unique statement of Chaucerian morality, similar in parts to the rest of its sister tales.<sup>1</sup> Modern scholarly work often argues that the tale's dense philosophical and moral matters are separate from its emphasis on gender. I agree that it presents a distinctive view of gender, yet I disagree with the notion that gender is separate from the intellectual matters of the tale. In fact, as both gender and philosophical counsel are central to the text as a

whole, I will argue that the two are dependent upon one another – yet it is the way by which these two entities connect that forms the crux of this paper. Through a comparative study of the ›Tale of Melibee‹ and its base text, Albertanus of Brescia's ›Liber consolacionis et consilii‹, a discrepancy between the texts has manifested regarding Sophie's eyes. I will argue that the presence of Sophie's eyes preserves Prudence's feminine *auctoritas*, enabling Prudence to guide her husband with wisdom through a time of great grief and moral blindness. Once we recognize this connection, the dynamic between Prudence and Melibee begins to acquire a new meaning. Prudence's place within the tale, fully realized through optics, reveals the depth behind the tale's central allegory, reveals Prudence's wisdom and feminine *auctoritas*, and reveals Chaucer's manipulation of medieval marriage politics.

The base of the tale forms within the first six lines, and thus the discrepancy is unveiled. Sophie, the daughter of Melibee and Dame Prudence, is attacked by her father's enemies when she and her mother are left alone in their home. She is left with five different wounds in five different places: her feet, her hands, her ears, her nose, and her mouth. These five wounds are reminiscent of the five senses, with one exception: the eyes. Rather than the fifth sense suffering injury, Chaucer lists Sophie's feet instead. It is within this seemingly simple exclusion that the discrepancy manifests. Chaucer does not include the eyes in the list of her wounds, whereas Albertanus of Brescia does. In the ›Liber consolacionis et consilii‹, Melibee's daughter suffers injuries in her eyes, her hands, her ears, her nose, and her mouth. This discrepancy is often thought to be a mere scribal error, causing this aspect of the translation to seem insignificant, therefore overlooked. However, evidence shows that this difference in translation is almost certainly not a scribal error. Chaucer's tale is supposed to be a direct Middle English translation of the ›Liber consolacionis et consilii's‹ French version, yet there is only one known French manuscript that replaces the word *yeux*

with *piez*. It is unlikely that Chaucer both used this manuscript and overlooked this mistake. Therefore, this was a conscious choice of Chaucer's – to exclude the eyes from harm, leaving them functional.

Based on optical theory of medieval scientific and theological treatises, eyes and vision in medieval literature can often signal a character's connection with God, morality, and wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Peter Limoges' ›Moral Treatise on the Eye‹, a late thirteenth-century Latin text that »attempt[s] to articulate the moral and spiritual implications of perspectivist optics,« connects optics and morality (Denery 2005, p. 6).

Vices, sins and every sort of moral laxity are explained in terms of perception, problems arising with the sinner's spiritual vision. Quite simply, the central problems of spiritual life are, when all is said and done, visual problems, problems with how things are seen and with how they appear. Just as God's ubiquity can be understood through an analogy with concave mirrors, so too can our distance from Him and our inability to see Him (cf. Denery 2005, p. 77).

The lack of clear vision can symbolize sin, moral confusion, and misconception, while clear vision symbolizes moral righteousness. Chaucer's choice to exclude Sophie's eyes from harm, understood according to optical theory, indicates a contrived outlet of wisdom and morality. Therefore, we can better understand Prudence's feminine wisdom and *auctoritas* and its relationship to Melibee's inaccurate perception.<sup>3</sup> His vision is clouded by vengeance, for he wants his enemies to suffer for what they have done. We see the first evidence of this swiftly after Melibee seeks the counsel of his desired *congregascioun of folk*, for *by the manere of his speche it semed that in herte he baar a cruel ire, redy to doon vengeaunce upon his foos, and sodeinly desired that the werre shold biginne* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, vv. 1004, 1009). Throughout the rest of the text, the word *vengeance* in relation to Melibee appears sixty-six more times – emphasizing Melibee's violent fixation.<sup>4</sup> Prudence, assisted by the clear sight of her daughter, is there to assert her wisdom and convince him of a more moral response.

Melibee continuously argues with Prudence, dismissing her words of wisdom. He must maintain his own *auctoritas* and *maistrye*<sup>5</sup> within his marriage – to do this, he must make sure his own voice is heard. He sees Prudence as subordinate to himself, as per the usual gender dynamics in a medieval marriage. Therefore, his focus on vengeance takes precedence in their argument. Melibee's lack of moral vision translates to his skewed self-perception. We can understand Melibee's misguided self-perception and its historical relation to optical theory through Denery's explanation of a similar concept:

The problem of spiritual misperception extends not only to how we see others, but to how we are seen by others and to how we see ourselves ... a sinner only perceives his sins through the refracting medium of his lusts. As a result, he does not see the malice in his acts, but only the improperly magnified delight his sin provides him. Or again, just as we are unable to see a thick cloud of fog that surrounds us, so too the sinner is unable to see the clouds of sin in which he dwells. (Denery 2005, p. 103)

Because of Melibee's moral blindness, he sees his obsession with vengeance, not as a malicious act or as a sin, but as a dire necessity – he feels that only vengeance will appease his overwhelming grief and sorrow. However, Melibee's focus on vengeance is not the only evidence of his misguided self-perception. Evidence lies within his view of his wife. Melibee sees Prudence as his subordinate. For the majority of the tale, she is seen without authority and good judgment because of her gender and typically submissive role. As Amanda Walling explains, »Melibee's refusal to listen to his wife is based not only on his contempt for her intellectual ability but also on his anxiety about the public performance of his own power as a man, a husband, and a lord« (Walling 2018, p. 170). He sees his own reasoning and inclination towards vengeance as inherently correct due to his presumed rightful *maistrye*. He dwells on vengeance just as he dwells on the injustice with which his family has been stricken. Melibee's refracted vision leads to misperception, not only in regard to how he sees his wife, but in regard to how he sees

himself. With Melibee's visually and, therefore, morally wounded character, there must be a force present to both correct and heal him: his wife, Prudence. Through Chaucer's deliberate choice to include Sophie's eyes and, therefore, clear vision within his tale, the heroine, Dame Prudence, is able to possess her own wise voice, counsel her husband through allegory and wisdom, and gain *auctoritas* in her medieval marriage.

Suzanne Akbari's claim regarding optics within the ›Tale of Melibee‹ seems to be at the forefront of scholarly discussion. Her claim revolves around the relationship between eyes and Melibee's moral and intellectual ignorance. Akbari argues, »Sophie's eyes, the embodiment of wisdom's capacity to perceive truth, are absent, figuratively representing Melibee's intellectual blindness« (Akbari 2004, p. 218). Because Chaucer does not mention the eyes in the list of Sophie's wounds, Akbari considers them »absent« when they, realistically, remain present and unharmed. While this argument is reasonable, the relationship between Sophie's eyes and her parents is a bit more complex. Rather than Sophie's absent eyes symbolizing her father's intellectual handicap, her intact eyes align with her mother. Prudence's strong and unwavering wisdom is the result of her daughter's eyes, for clear vision correlates with moral strength, allowing Sophie and Prudence to work together as one. Sophie, completely maimed, left only with her eyes, finds agency and mobility through her mother with one common quality: her eyes, and, in turn, her wisdom. Without the eyes listed as wounded, they remain unharmed, they remain p r e s e n t . Rather than the lack of eyes symbolizing Melibee's lack of wisdom, the p r e s e n c e of eyes symbolizes Prudence's p r e s e n t wisdom. Sophie's eyes act as a translucent border for the light of her mother's wisdom – allowing it to effortlessly transcend past Sophie's corporeal form into the world around her. The majority of this tale revolves around Melibee's inclination towards vengeance and Prudence's wisdom, swaying him towards forgiveness. While Melibee is devoid of wisdom, Prudence is replete with it.

Prudence's wisdom, however, is not immediately accepted by Melibee. It is not until the resolution of the allegory that Melibee accepts Prudence's counsel. The allegory begins within the first six lines of the tale. After explaining Melibee's departure, Chaucer narrates:

Thre of his olde foos had it esped, and setten laddres to the walles of his house  
and by windows ben entred,/and betten his wif and wounded his doghter with  
five mortal woundes in five sondry places/ – this is to seyn, in hir feet, in hir  
hands, in hir eris, in hir nose, and in hir mouth – and leften hir for deed and  
wenten away. (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, vv. 967–972)

Prudence will later interpret the damage of Melibee's house through its windows as connected with Melibee's moral damage through the windows of his soul. This description of the household as well as Sophie's wounds, of course, is also where the discrepancy lies. Albertanus similarly writes:

Three neighbors and old enemies saw this, and, with a ladder, entered through  
the window of the house, Melibeus' wife, named Prudence, was severely beaten,  
and his daughter was served five strokes, namely in the eyes, ears, mouth,  
nose, and hands, and leaving her half dead, they went away. (Albertanus:  
›Liber consolacionis et consilii‹, p. 2)<sup>6</sup>

Eyes, however, are not the only change Chaucer makes. Though these two versions seem quite similar, there is one more variance that is yet another connection between Sophie's eyes and Prudence's wisdom. In the ›Liber consolacionis et consilii‹, Melibee and Prudence's daughter is unnamed. She is simply referred to as *filia* and *filia* only. Yet Chaucer names their daughter Sophie, or Sophia. *Sophia*, meaning ›wisdom‹ in Greek, thus turns her into the personification of her name; through her name she embodies her purpose. Sophie and her eyes, as pertaining to the medieval conception of optics, act as a beacon of wisdom. Yet, almost completely maimed, she herself does not act on this wisdom. Rather, it is Prudence who embodies *sophia* by acting on behalf of her daughter. Now assisted by the wisdom of

her daughter, Prudence acts and discerns with the virtue her name implies, while also utilizing and enacting the virtue of her daughter's namesake.

It is Prudence's unwavering wisdom that allows the allegory to form fully. The allegory comes full circle later in the tale when Prudence compares the windows of their home to the windows of Melibee's soul: all portals for damage within. *Thow hast doon sinne again our Lord Crist* Prudence counsels:

For certes, the thre enemys of mankind – that is to seyn, the flessch, the feend, and the world – /thow hast suffred hem entre into thin herte wilfully by the windowes of they body,/ and hast nat defended thyself suffisantly agains hir assautes and hir temptacions, so that they han wounded thy soule in five places/ – this is to seyn, the dedly synnes that been entred into thin herte by thy five wittes./ And in the same manere oure Lord Crist hath wold and suffred that thy thre enemys been entred into thin hous by the windowes,/ and han wyounded thy doghter in the foreside manere. (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, vv. 1419–1426)

Just as Sophie's body is wounded by enemies who have entered her home through its windows, Melibee's soul is wounded by the three enemies of mankind which have entered him through the windows of his body, or his five senses. However, this passage presents the allegory on a strictly surface level – »it serves to help Melibee see who he is and where he is at this stage of the dialogue« (Wallace 1999, p. 240). A deeper familiarity with the medieval allegorical tradition is the key to unlocking the intricacies of this multifaceted allegory.

Each injury of Sophie's corresponds to a blow to Melibee's body and soul, or his *propre persone* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, v. 1026). The term *propre persone* encompasses both the body and the soul of an individual. As *propre* indicates ownership and possession of one's soul and nature, and *persone* indicates one's physical body, the phrase suggests ownership of not only one's physicality, but their essence, their soul, and what makes them an individual being (cf. Middle English Compendium). Through her alle-



gory, Prudence indicates that it is Melibee's *propre persone* that is damaged. The damage to his personhood leaves him with a lack of his own conscience, wisdom, and clear sight. However, with Sophie's eyes untouched, wisdom is still able to prevail throughout the story through the actions of her mother. Just as Sophie's eyes act as a beacon of wisdom, Prudence allegorically is wisdom. With all of these factors in place, Melibee is now exposed to a source of wisdom – an outside source that he must eventually accept as his own. In the end, Sophie is left with only her eyes, just as Melibee is left with only Prudence's wisdom – both providing him the counsel he needs. Wallace explains, »It is only when Melibee has incorporated Prudence, has seen her image in himself, that he can return to the public world« (Wallace 1999, p. 239). Melibee needs Prudence in order for him to see clearly, as they are two parts of one whole. Melibee's *propre persone* will only begin to heal once he and his wife unite as one. In this case, Akbari's notion that Sophie's eyes symbolize a figurative relationship with her father is plausible, yet it works differently – it works by way of her mother.

Prudence is able to persuade Melibee through her unfaltering sagacity – she becomes wisdom. This is a fundamental aspect of the allegorical tradition. The allegorical tradition has presented numerous feminine personifications, all named after the trait they embody. In Boethius' sixth-century text ›De consolacione philosophiae‹, for example, Lady Philosophy is the personification of her name. Similarly, Prudence appears to be a personification in Chaucer's tale – she is an »allegorical figure, representing the virtue of reason, or indeed, prudence, as opposed to emotion, which in the tale is represented by her husband Melibee« (Pakkala-Wesckström 2001, pp. 400f.). While Prudence does, indeed, represent »prudence, as opposed to emotion,« she also yields compassionate wisdom on behalf of her daughter, *Sophia*. Though deeply related in these ways to the allegory tradition, with a firmer understanding of Prudence's character and her personified ancestors, Prudence quickly becomes the outlier in the history of

allegory. Similar to Prudence, other personifications embody a certain quality like wisdom. But unlike those others, Prudence is able to take a fundamental step away from personification and towards personhood by using and applying wisdom in order to counsel her grieving husband.

The story's predominantly feminine voice and unwavering wisdom is specifically reminiscent of that of Boethius' Lady Philosophy. Yet Prudence and her voice are unique in the way that they are presented. Often falling into a category of the otherworldly or the supernatural, traditional feminine personifications, found in ancient and medieval philosophical and religious treatises, are unlike Prudence; they do not necessarily act the way normal women would. Instead, their actions reflect their abstract and detached nature. They are usually platonic beings that express no real relation to the male counterpart whom they are trying to counsel. These beings are rarely considered women. Rather, they are to be seen as a form of the other. Barbara Newman »suggest[s] a new interpretation of medieval goddesses,« or medieval personifications: »reading them precisely as goddesses: *female* but not necessarily *women* ... not ›representations of woman‹ but ›modes of religious imagination‹« (Newman 2016, p. 38). For this reason, they appear as distant figures without any emotional purpose or connection to their narrative counterparts – appearing only as a mode for the philosophical and »religious imagination.« Similarly, these personifications must be described as having the ›figure‹ of a woman. The word »figure« or *figura*, originally meaning »plastic form,« has a long history of being associated with allegory (Auerbach 1984, p. 11). Lucretius adapted the word further, assigning it the connotation of »dream image,« »figment of fancy,« or »ghost« (Auerbach 1984, p. 17). By Boethius' time in the sixth century, we find *figura* to be an indicator for the ethereal, the ghostly figments of the imagination, and personification. This forces feminine figures to further align themselves with the category of ›goddess‹ rather than ›woman.‹ This, however, is where Prudence and her form begin to differ from the long and rich tradition of feminine personification.

In Boethius' ›De consolacione philosophiae‹, its central feminine personification, Lady Philosophy, is described by the narrator as an ethereal, ancient figure:

I was writing this in a silence broken only by the scratchings of my quill as I recorded these gloomy thoughts and tried to impose upon them a certain form that in itself is curiously anodyne, when there was a presence of which I gradually became aware looming over my head, the figure of a woman whose look filled me with awe. Her burning gaze was indescribably penetrating, unlike that of anyone I have ever met, and while her complexion was as fresh and glowing as that of a girl, I realized that she was ancient and that nobody would mistake her for a creature of our time. (Boethius: ›The Consolation‹, p. 3)

For Prudence, it would not be appropriate to refer to her as having the ›figure of a woman.‹ She is introduced to us as Melibee's wife and Melibee's wife alone; she is presented as a human woman rather than an otherworldly ghost. In fact, Prudence is Melibee's wife above all else. This alone is a distinction from other medieval and ancient works that incorporate feminine personifications such as ›De consolacione philosophiae‹. These goddesses such as Lady Philosophy are platonic counterparts to a greater story. They are not included to develop a rapport with the other characters; rather, they are included to supply the knowledge their name implies. Prudence, on the other hand, has human qualities. She is Melibee's wife, and she is Sophie's mother. She has opinions in addition to her strictly proverbial wisdom. She is able to quote scholars and then interpret them in order to apply them to her own and her husband's situation: a human quality.

Whereas female personifications like Boethius' Lady Philosophy are ethereal beings that speak in musical verse and proverb, Prudence's words are presented in prose as she engages in marital discourse with her husband – establishing her as human from the tale's inception. While she follows the tradition of abstract feminine personification, Prudence uniquely crosses the border of abstraction into the realm of humanity through her prose and

discourse. Prudence's speech follows in the footsteps of Boethian prosimetrum: »The specific prose tale that the Chaucer pilgrim tells accentuates its affiliation with the proeses of the *Consolation* and deepens this miniature prosimetrum's thematizations of Boethian literary theory and practice« (Johnson 2013, p. 130). While Chaucer's tale presents Boethian themes and overtly affiliates itself with ›De consolacione philosophiae‹ in its style, Prudence's consistent prose is different than the prosimetrum of Lady Philosophy. They appear similar in the way that they converse and provide boundless tokens of proverbial wisdom for their male counterparts, but they are different in the way that their conversation is presented. Rather than appearing to assist Melibee in a moment of anguish by singing him songs of wisdom, Prudence, present at the onset of the trauma, provides him the counsel he needs through her wise prose, as she is his wife and companion. Prudence plays the role of both Lady Philosophy and Melibee's wife by counseling him and still engaging in marital discourse. She understands Melibee's disposition as his wife and is able to counsel him from a place of familiarity. Rather than just presenting him with reason, she works with him, allowing him to gain opinions from other sources and allowing him the illusion that he is drawing conclusions for himself.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in the midst of their discourse, Prudence continues to quote multiple sources such as the Bible, Seneca, and Ovid. She is providing counsel for Melibee by utilizing centuries' worth of influential thought, applying it to the situation at hand, and manipulating it in order to convince her husband to choose the path of forgiveness rather than vengeance. Though similar in this way to Lady Philosophy and possessing qualities of female personifications, Prudence is still human by nature.

An example of this wise application and manipulation of proverb appears in the very beginning of the tale as Prudence personally recalls something she once read: *This noble wif Prudence remembred hire upon the sentence of Ovide, in his book that cleped is the Remedye of Love* (Chaucer:

›Canterbury Tales‹, v. 976). After looking at her weeping husband, Prudence recalls the specific words of Ovid, remembering his verse regarding the disturbance of a weeping mother. Ovid’s words, *He is a fool that destourbeth the moder to wepe in the deth of hir child til she have wept hir fille as for a certein time./ and thane shal man doon his diligence with amiable words hire to reconforte, and preye hire of hir wepyng for to stinte, ring throughout her memory* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, vv. 976–977). Prudence, with her own words, does her *diligence* to comfort Melibee. She consoles him by saying, *Youre doghter, with the grace of God, shal warisshe and escape./ And al were it so that she right now were deed, ye ne oghte nat as for hir deth yourself to destroye* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, vv. 982–983). This is our first real introduction to Prudence’s way of thinking, and it previews how her character is going to be handled throughout the story. She is treated as a real, literal woman, someone who is able to remember teachings she has learned and apply them to her family’s situation, specifically for the purpose of comforting her distraught husband. Unlike Lady Philosophy, who is wisdom, Prudence had to learn it. While much of her wisdom comes from sources such as Ovid, Seneca, and the Bible, she is undeniably clever, for she is able to rework the written word and apply it as a form of marital counsel to Melibee. She is able to establish her own *auctoritas* in her marriage while also assuring Melibee of his *maistrye* in order to appease him: something a personification would not need to do, nor care to do – there is not a relationship of which to be wary. While Lady Philosophy freely preaches without consequence, Prudence must strategically implement her wisdom. Prudence does not just apparate to provide counsel like Lady Philosophy. Prudence is Melibee’s wife and must work within the bounds of her medieval marriage in order to ensure her voice is heard – she »exercises politeness befitting the medieval wife: she waits for the proper moment to speak, and assumes a humble tone«

(Pakkala-Weckström 2001, p. 406). All of these elements of humanity present within Prudence's demeanor and speech come to fruition because of wisdom's place within the tale.

Similarly, Prudence is able to establish her *auctoritas* through her wisdom as well as her persuasion. Directing her remarks towards Melibee, Prudence persuades:

For the book seyth: ›Axe alwey thy conseil of hem that been wise.</ And by this same reson shul ye clepen to youre conseil, of youre freendes that ben of age, swiche as han seighen and ben expert in manye things, and ben approved in conseillinges;/ for the book seyth that in olde men is the sapience, and in longe time the prudence./ And Tuillius seyth that grete things ne ben nat ay accompliced by strengthe ne by delivernesse of body, but by good conseil, by auctoritee of persones, and by science; the which thre things ne been nat fieble by age but certes they enforcen and encreasen day by day./ And thane shal ye kepe this for a genral reule: first shal ye clepe to youre conseil a fewe of youre freendes that been especiale. (Chaucer: ›*Canterbury Tales*<, vv. 1162–1166)

Prudence utilizes the Bible as well as Marcus Tullius Cicero in order to establish a foundation for Melibee to accept counsel. She frames this advice in a way that gives Melibee the illusion of *maistrye* in the situation – she is allowing Melibee to choose his own source of counsel. Still, it is in this passage that Prudence hints at her own authority by naming herself, *for the good book seyth that in olde men is the sapience, and in longe time the prudence*, and that great things are not accomplished by strength, but by *good conseil* and *by auctoritee of the persones*. These are two qualities that Prudence possesses and offers to Melibee. She is setting the stage for Melibee's later acceptance of her counsel, and her counsel alone. Nevertheless, she still must know her place within the bounds of her medieval marriage, *For Jesus Sirak seyth that if the wif have maistrye, she is contrarious to hir housbonde* (Chaucer: ›*Canterbury Tales*<, v. 1058). Prudence must assure Melibee that he continues to possess the *maistrye* within their relationship.

*Maistrye* is not a concept or term that is unique to the ›Tale of Melibee‹. Discussion of Chaucer's other uses of *maistrye* throughout his other works is crucial to understanding both the word's place within his corpus and also its relationship to the characters to whom the word applies. The *maistrye* of a woman in a medieval marriage is a concept that Chaucer also explores in the ›Wife of Bath's Tale‹, thus making it a recurring theme in ›The Canterbury Tales‹. While *maistrye* in both the ›Tale of Melibee‹ and the ›Wife of Bath's Tale‹ »engage in struggles for maistrie that demand a moment of masculine surrender,« the *maistrye* present in ›The Wife of Bath's Tale‹ is not quite the same as that in the ›Tale of Melibee‹ (Wallace 1999, p. 234).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to understand its different representations and how it evolves throughout Chaucer's greater work.

›The Wife of Bath‹ tells a tale revolving around a young knight tasked with searching for what women want most in life. From an old woman who becomes his wife, he learns that women most want *maistrye* and *soverainetee* over their husbands. The woman narrates, *But at laste, with muchel care and wo,/ We fille accorded by us selven two./ He yaf me al the bridel in min hond,/ to han the governaunce of house and lond,/ An of his tonge and of his hond also,/ And made him brenne his book anon-right tho* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, vv. 811–816). It is *by maistrye* that she gains *al the soverainetee* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, vv. 817–818). In this instance, *maistrye* is used to indicate the means by which the woman gains *soverainetee*, or supremacy in her relationship. *Maistrye* in the ›Wife of Bath's Tale‹ takes the form of both skill and authority – she gains sovereignty through *maistrye*, but in the end finally possesses the *maistrye* of her husband when she states, *Thanne have I gete of yow maistrye* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, v. 1236). *Maistrye*, what every woman wants, has finally been granted to her. Yet, from here, the story takes an unforeseen turn. The woman, even though she persistently works throughout the tale to gain *maistrye* over her husband, becomes cooperative and submissive after it is granted to her. Though possessing *maistrye*, she chooses not to

utilize it – her husband’s realization is reward enough. This is far different from the *maistrye* we see in the ›Tale of Melibee‹. Rather than it being presented as both a skill and goal for women to attain, *maistrye* belongs to Prudence throughout the tale, but she must force her husband to realize it before she utilizes and enacts her power.

Rather than a skill and authority that only needs to be validated by her husband, Prudence’s *maistrye* takes a different form. *Maistrye* takes the form of decision-making in the ›Tale of Melibee‹. Prudence puts decision-making into the hands of her morally wounded husband, allowing him the illusion of authority before he is later forced to ask for her assistance. Decision-making, specifically in regard to Melibee, is of utmost importance in the tale:

The whole of the Melibee is suspended at this moment of Melibee’s choosing how to act; this is what the text is about. The struggle to ensure that Melibee makes the right choice, long and exhausting as it is, is one that Prudence (and her historical surrogates) cannot give up, for if the counseling process should stop, Melibee’s emotions will be loosed onto the public world with disastrous consequences. (Wallace 1999, p. 241)

Prudence as well as her wisdom carry the burden of Melibee’s decision, as she is the only one with the power and sagacity to guide him the moral direction. Wisdom is always present for Melibee, as Prudence is always there to provide it, therefore giving her the upper hand in their relationship. However, he does not accept this wisdom immediately. His trepidation as well as his doubting and argumentative nature pose a challenge for Prudence, on top of her being the subordinate sex in a medieval marriage. She must work through this problem logically. Just as she does many times throughout the tale, Prudence is quickly able to relate an allegory to the situation at hand. She allegorizes her daughter’s wounds to help Melibee make his decision. She begins by breaking the attack down piece by piece in order to show him how his situation looks holistically. Although Melibee



resists Prudence's counsel both before and immediately after this explanation, Prudence is able to twist her husband's own words and references and use them in her favor.

The moment the allegory fully materializes is when Melibee says, *Therefore the prophete seyth that troubled eyen han no cleer sight./ But seyeth and conseileth me as yow liketh, for I am redy to do right as ye wol desire* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, vv. 1701–1702). Melibee repeats a similar phrase a few lines later and says, *Seyeth shortly youre wil and youre conseil, and I am al redy to fulfille and parfourne it* (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, v. 1712). In these moments, Melibee asks Prudence to act as his eyes, his wisdom. Melibee, referencing redoubled *eyen han no cleer sight* admits that he alone does not contain the wisdom he needs in order to make the right and moral decision. He accepts Prudence's counsel, stating that he will act upon whatever decision she makes. She knows best; she, now, possesses the decision-making power; she, now, possesses the *maistrye*. Unlike the ›The Wife of Bath's Tale‹, this is not enough for Prudence. In fact, this is the moment that Prudence has been waiting for – she can finally fully act on her *maistrye* and make the moral decision for her husband. With Prudence acting as Melibee's eyes, this allows Melibee and Prudence to become a single entity and a single mind as Prudence's wisdom is now Melibee's. This unification, with Prudence's wisdom at the forefront, implies a *maistrye* that belongs to Prudence – *maistrye* that has belonged to Prudence throughout the entirety of the tale. Whereas Lady Philosophy's wisdom is contingent on her detachment from her male counterpart, Prudence's wisdom as well as its impact grows stronger as she and Melibee more fully realize their marriage – allowing it to be a unifying factor of both their literal and allegorical relationship.

As Melibee lets down his guard, showing his damaged soul, he acknowledges Prudence's strength by asking for her *conseil*, for his *troubled eyen han no cleer sight*. In other words, he is asking for her wisdom and for her advice, for he does not have the ability to make the moral decision on his

own. He is letting her know that he is finally willing to listen, and he is finally willing to let her guide him with her moral genius. Melibee is no longer acting as an individual, or as his own *propre persone*. He no longer solely owns his being. Rather, he accepts Prudence as a replacement for his lost sight, his lost wisdom. As Denery explains, »The eye does not stand between the soul and the world. Rather, the eye, with its initial cognition and judgment, marks the sensitive soul's literal extension into the world and the world's immediate presence to the soul« (Denery 2005, pp. 93f.). Eyes act as a permeable border between the soul and the world – a border that welcomes light when the soul finds itself shrouded in darkness. Melibee is allowing Prudence to be his beacon of light during his moment of blindness, allowing the world of morality back into his damaged soul. Sophie's sight has given Prudence a voice, and Prudence's voice has given Melibee clear sight.

Recognizing Chaucer's deliberate change to Albertanus' work, exercising medieval optics and allegory, births a unique view regarding gender and marriage politics in medieval literature. Interpreting the tale in this way stretches the boundaries contained within the preexisting literature of the time. Often grouped in the same category of Chaucer's women such as The Wife of Bath, Prudence and her intricacies are overlooked. Her character must be read in the context of ›The Canterbury Tales‹, but in many ways she has carved out a place of her own. While there are many similarities between Prudence and the Wife of Bath, there are still clear differences. While Chaucer's women tend to have submissive qualities and cater to their husbands despite their clear authority, Prudence hones her *auctoritas*, and she hones her *maistrye* in order to both think and act on behalf of her husband. By understanding the power she contains within her own tale and putting that power in the context of other medieval female characters, Prudence becomes distinct. Her character builds off of centuries'-worth of feminine personifications and subordinate wives. Yet, Prudence contains her own

voice, her own *auctoritas*, and her own *maistrye*, defying medieval standards and catalyzing the future of autonomous female characters.

## Anmerkungen

- 1 For discussions of gender and contextuality in the ›Tale of Melibee‹, see Walling 2005, Walling 2018, Daileader 1994, Crosson 2018.
- 2 The basis of medieval optical theory and the science of perspective is summarized by Dallas Denery as he states, »Imagine that an eye is placed in the centre of a spherical, concave mirror. The natural properties of this mirror are such that wherever that eye looks, it will see only itself. Now imagine that another eye, placed somewhere else, anywhere else but the mirror's centre, looks at the mirror. It will never see the reflected image of that other eye. One eye sees itself everywhere while remaining entirely invisible to the other – ubiquitous, yet hidden« (Denery 2005, p. 75). This is further explained and related to the divine, for just like the eye in the concave mirror, God is ubiquitous. This forms the foundation for the relationship between eyes, the divine, and morality.
- 3 The Middle English connotation and definition is that of »the right to rule or command, legal power; position of authority, official position; without any outside sanction or authorization, independently; (b) the power to convince or influence people, capacity for inspiring belief or trust« (Middle English Compendium).
- 4 There are multiple forms of the word *vengeance* that are used that make up the total number of sixty-seven. These forms include, *venge*, *vengeance*, *vengeances*, *vengeancetaking*, *vengeancetakinge*, *vengeaunce*, *vengeauncetaking*, *venged*, *vengen*, and *vengeth*.
- 5 The Middle English connotation and definition is that of »(a) Control, dominance, rulership; to grant (the kingship) to (sb.); (b) preeminence, status, prestige; (c) authority, warrant; (d) the upper hand, victory in a contest« (Middle English Compendium).
- 6 *Quidam iuivenis, Melibeus nomine, vir potens and dives, relinquens uxorem and filiam in domo, quas multum diligebat, clauso estio domus, iuit spatiatum. Trees vero sui vicini et hostes antique hoc videntes, appositis scalis ac per fenestras domus intrantes, uxorem Melibei, Prudentiam nomine, verberaverunt fortiter et, filiae ejus plagis quinque appositis, videlicet in oculis, auribus, ore et naso ac manibus, illamque semivivam relinquentes, abierunt.*

- 7 Prudence suggests that Melibee gain advice from professionals such as *sirurgiens*, *phisiciens*, *olde folk* and *Yonge* before he accepts her counsel and her counsel alone (Chaucer: ›Canterbury Tales‹, v. 1005).
- 8 For more on this comparative analysis, see Chapter 8 of David Wallace 1999.

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