

The Tale of Melibee

The Tale of Melibee: Local Government, Power, Lordship, and Resources

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The *Tale of Melibee* sits at both the margins and the center of the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer describes *Melibee* as a “murye tale,” though modern readers often disagree with that assessment (Th 964). Scholars have dismissed it as either nothing more than a joke—the pilgrim Chaucer’s long-winded revenge on Harry Bailey for cutting off his *Tale of Sir Thopas*—or as an important but awfully boring translation of another important but awfully boring French version of an important but awfully boring Latin text.

The *Tale of Melibee* is, however, also the pilgrim Chaucer’s own tale. The tale is an allegory that can also be read as political commentary. What’s more, the argument *Melibee* contains is based in shared cultural knowledge stored in medieval proverbs, collected in a form that reveals the cultural distance between medieval and modern readers. The tale can be accessed from many other points as well: it’s a text that holds up well under several theoretical lenses, in part because it is a text about interpretation. Recently many scholars have argued that the tale is central to our understanding of the *Canterbury Tales* and also to Chaucer’s political, ethical, and interpretive work.

Tools

The *Tale of Melibee* is informed by the power dynamics inherent in lordship, in which one man demanded obedience from another. The tale also fits within the larger category of didactic literature, or literature meant to educate or nourish the reader. In typical Chaucerian style, *Melibee* both builds on these bases and challenges them. It is important to acknowledge that the *Tale of Melibee* is not the easiest of Chaucer’s tales to read. The tools that follow are meant to aid and inspire new interpretations of the pilgrim Chaucer’s own tale.

Medieval Lordship

Lordship was the basis for local social structure. Lords were members of the aristocratic class, the medieval “estate” who fought and administered; they had dominion over those who worked under them and they held the resources (the land, the money, and the people power) that made society run (Bisson). Historically, the concept of lordship developed from the Roman idea of a *dominus*, a male head of the household, who held near-absolute authority over his family,

servants, and those clients for whom he served as a patron. Although English gets the word *lord* from the Anglo-Saxon term *hlaford* (literally, the keeper of the bread), it gets its word *dominion* from the Latin *dominus*. While medieval lordship had evolved significantly from both historical root-words, the concepts of the household, of power, and of resources such as food were still central to its meaning. Lordship was hereditary, passed from father to son. A lord held a position of power over his wife, his children, his relatives, his workers, and all those within the locality of his estate (Hicks).

Chaucer's fourteenth century was a time in which the idea of lordship was put to the test. Judges were appointed to arbitrate local disputes in the king's name throughout England, a task that had in the past been (mis)handled by lords. At the same time, the aristocracy gained political authority as the power of the parliament increased. The parliament meant to help the king rule appropriately, in effect to ensure that the sovereign's authority was exercised in a way that was beneficial for the whole country. Lords had taken on the role of counsellors to the king while simultaneously losing some of their power over their own subjects. That said, the older model of the lord as authoritative over all his local affairs was still a part of the larger consciousness, and it informed Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Didactic Literature

The *Tale of Melibee* is an example of the didactic (or instructional) literature popular among fourteenth century aristocrats. This literary context helps to illuminate the specific work Chaucer undertook in his translation. There are two other extant versions of Melibee's tale: the French tale *Livre de Melibee et de Dame Prudence* (written in the mid-fourteenth century by Renaud de Louens) and the Latin *Liber consolationis et consilii* (written in the mid-thirteenth century by Albertanus of Brescia) (Benson). The Latin treatise, written for an Italian nobleman's son, served as the base for the French text, though Renaud's *Livre de Melibee et Prudence* is a loose translation. Chaucer followed the French treatise much more closely; in fact, much of what appears in the *Tale of Melibee* (from the plot all the way down to most of the proverbs) is not original to Chaucer. This is especially important to note when reading the tale as a commentary on contemporary politics.

All three versions fit within a genre of didactic literature called *principum specula*, or mirrors to princes. These texts were written for young princes and noblemen to advise them about how to live their daily lives. More specifically, these texts were written to teach the nobility how and when to accept counsel, so that they might rule their house, their estate, and perhaps even a kingdom. The genre was popular in the fourteenth century, especially in aristocratic circles, and offered a sophisticated, if veiled, critique on the ways in which those in power exercised that power (Ferster).

Melibee's tale also fits within the medieval genre called wisdom literature. Medieval wisdom literature involved—among other things—collections of proverbs, often attributed to well-known Roman or biblical figures. These collections were regularly framed as the wise sayings of a teacher to someone who was still learning, and they were often used in educational contexts. One of these, called the *Distichs of Cato*, was among the first books medieval students encountered when learning to read (Cannon). It is important to keep in mind that medieval readers did not use

or think of proverbs in the same way that modern readers do. Medieval wisdom literature is often self-contradictory, repetitive, incorrectly attributed, de-contextualized, and mundane. While many modern readers find such traits undesirable, medieval readers may have found such proverbs enjoyable. As Christopher Cannon argues, medieval wisdom literature was comforting in its familiarity, friendly in its assurance that others have also learned from mistakes, and useful in its abundance, even if also contradictory. The *Tale of Melibee* is an excellent space in which to explore how at least one medieval writer made use of proverbs as a textual resource.

Text

Chaucer's tale presents us with conversations between Melibee, a young lord of indeterminate rank, and a "greet congregacioun" of locals who will be affected by his response to an attack from his enemies. Each of these conversations (and especially those with Prudence, Melibee's wife) contains proverb-heavy advice regarding the best course of action for Melibee as a lord (Mel 1004). In considering who gives Melibee counsel, what counsel they give, and why, we can identify several different—and at times competing—models for lordship in the tale. The idea of lordship resonates in the story at household, local, and national levels. It also serves as a metaphor when considering ethical and religious ideas throughout the tale. The paragraphs that follow introduce a range of questions about lordship, power, and resources. Each paragraph is meant to prompt further discussion instead of providing definitive answers.

How does a lord's power affect his view of his subjects?

The traditional model of lordship as military and administrative power over others is assumed throughout the tale. At its most basic, the plot is driven by a lord's decision to use his power either for vengeance or mercy. This assumes, first, that lords have such power: to command forces, to seek retribution, to protect their property, to expend their human and financial resources in whatever way best suits their goals. Prudence's association between "maistrie and ... lordshipe" suggests the extent of a lord's power over his subjects (Mel 1081). Donald Green has argued that when Chaucer used the term "maistrie" he referred to individual power over others, often against the others' will. That this is an inherently violent form of government is further emphasized by Melibee's persistence "to doon vengeance upon his foes" (Mel 1009). Even after a great deal of debate with Prudence, the young lord believes he has both the power and the resources for war. Melibee tells his wife

"I kan nat seen that it myghte greetly harme me though I tooke vengeance./ For I am richer and moore mighty than myne enemys been;/ and wel knowen ye that by moneye and by havynge grete possessions been alle the thynges of this world governed." (Mel 1547-9)

Here Melibee equates his wealth and military strength with lordship, for just as subjects are governed by lords so too "alle the thynges of this world" are governed "by moneye and by havynge grete possessions." What's more, Melibee's view of lordship denotes his subjects to the status of "thynges" to be governed and used, for Melibee considers only his own risk in his plans for vengeance, though a war would undoubtedly bring harm to many of his subjects.

What power do subjects have in response to their lord's decisions?

The imbalance of power between Melibee and his “greet congregacioun” is further emphasized by the local response to his call for vengeance: Melibee’s friends and subjects appear to support him, though Chaucer’s narration makes it clear they do not. The power dynamics present in this passage are striking. Melibee’s “neighebores” are envious of Melibee, even in his current tragic situation. His “freendes” are not friends at all, but only “semeden reconciled.” The others are “flatereres” who only pretend to weep.

“His neighebores ful of envye, his feyned freendes that semeden reconsiled, and his flatereres / maden semblant of wepyng, and empeireden and agreggeden muchel of this matiere in preisyng greetly Melibee of myght, of power, of riches, and of freendes, despisyng the power of his adversaries, / and seiden outrely that he anon sholde wreken hym on his foes and bigynne werre.” (Mel 1018-1020)

These counsellors behave this way in order to “empeir[en] and agregg[en]” the situation—to make matters worse and aggravate Melibee. Later Chaucer tells us that “Yet hadde this Melibeus in his conseil many folk that prively in his eere conseilled hym certeyn thyng, and conseilled hym the contrarie in general audience” (Mel 1049). These lies make sense for only two reasons: either Melibee’s subjects fear him and so say whatever they think will appease him or they are actively working toward Melibee’s downfall. In either situation, the imbalance of power has led to Melibee’s lordship being destructive, especially because he does not seem self-aware enough to realize his counsellors’ insincerity. This power imbalance is further emphasized by the way in which Melibee’s counsellors seek to encourage him toward war: they praise their lord’s resources and make little of the power of Melibee’s enemies, using language similar to Melibee’s own assessment of his situation. Melibee’s counsellors use his resources to suggest the great reach of his lordship while simultaneously undermining his power through their falsehood.

What matters more: Power, or the appearance of it?

These are questions Melibee himself considers, albeit from the perspective of a lord capable of considering only an *apparent* shift in power. Melibee conflates his position as lord of an estate with his position as lord of his marriage in his fears regarding Prudence’s counsel. He worries that following her advice could take away from his own power:

“I purpose nat,” quod he, “to werke by thy conseil, for many causes and resouns. For certes, every wight wolde holde me thane a fool;/ this is to seyn, if I, for thy conseillyng, wolde changen thynges that been ordeyned and affirmed by so manye wyse./.../ And also, certes, if I governed me by thy conseil, it sholde seme that I hadde yeve to thee over me the maistrie, and God forbode that it so weere!” (Mel 1055-6, 1058)

Melibee’s fear here works in both the political and domestic sphere of lordship: he fears that being “governed” by the counsel of another shifts the balance of power, or at least creates the impression of a shift in power dynamics. It is worth noting that Melibee’s objections to Prudence’s advice have nothing to do with the morality or pragmatism of her suggested course of action. Instead, Melibee is concerned with appearances: he fears that to contradict the advice of his many counsellors for the advice of his wife would cause everyone to think him “a fool.” What’s worse, “it shoulde seme” to others that Prudence, and not Melibee, had “maistrie” in their

marriage. This speaks volumes regarding the status of women in medieval society, but that is the subject of another chapter. This attention with appearances in his marriage is also a matter of his political status, a point Prudence makes in her repetition of Melibee's concern. "Ye seyn," she tells her husband, "that if ye governe yow by my conseil, it sholde seme that ye hadde yeve me the maistrie and the lordshipe over your persone" (Mel 1081). Note the change here: Prudence has tied "maistrie" to "lordshipe," recognizing that both are at stake. If Melibee is not seen as the lord of his marriage, he will not likely be seen as lord of his estate either. Melibee's concern with his own demonstration of power helps us to recognize that, at least to a certain degree, lordship is contractual: a lord maintains his power so long as others believe he is in power.

Who governs a lord? Who should govern a lord?

Although it is possible to argue that Melibee's counsellors hold a great deal of power, both Prudence's response to Melibee's fears and his own language in describing his response to counsel reject the idea that accepting counsel reduces one's claims to power. Prudence argues that "soothly thilke man that asketh conseil of a purpos, yet hath he free choys wheither he wole werke by that conseil or noon" (Mel 1083). Key here is Prudence's argument for "free choys." While "maistrie" is the ability to command someone against their will, acting by counsel is a near opposite in that the actor can always decide whether or not to follow his counsellors' advice. This is already apparent in Melibee's own words. In his conditional clause "if I governed me by thy conseil," he is both the subject and the reflexive object of the act of governing. So while, when considering the lord as an object of governance, it is possible to see why counsel might be feared as power-diminishing, it is important to note that a lord is also the agent, the one *doing* the governing, and therefore the one with free choice over his actions.

Who is a lord? Who can learn from a lord's education?

How, then, should a wise lord govern himself in order to avoid the danger of false friends and dissembling counsellors? In Prudence's attempts to answer this question, the story can clearly be identified as a mirror to princes. Prudence's counsel suggests a rather wide audience for this didactic tale as well, because she provides Melibee with a new way of thinking about lordship. Instead of limiting lordship to governance over a household or locality, Prudence's version of lordship involves self-governance. Prudence explains, "he that may have the lordship of his owene herte is moore to preyse than he that by his force or strengthe taketh grete citees" (Mel 1516). If the tale is read, as Prudence suggests, as an allegory in which "the flesh, the feend, and the world" have "wounded [Melibee's] soule in five places," then lordship is an individual act of religious and ethical significance (Mel 1421-3). Each person, each reader, is the lord of his or her own being, answerable to their sovereign "Lord Crist." In fact, Chaucer the pilgrim goes so far as to refer to his audience as "lordynges alle" before beginning the "Tale of Melibee" (Thop 953).

What resources best inform ethical governance?

It is important to note that the proverbs that Prudence teaches Melibee are helpful in learning to self-govern. Prudence has a methodology for interpretation that involves first understanding a source text, then recognizing one's own situation, and finally manipulating and applying the source text so that it can be used appropriately in the current situation. This methodology of self-

governance allows all people greater agency over their own ideas and actions, and, according to Prudence, brings people closer to God. Although it is debatable whether Melibee actually learns anything from Prudence's teaching, perhaps the reader, as lord "of his owene herte" might learn more.

The "Tale of Melibee" often feels out of place in the *Canterbury Tales* because it seems so serious, so extensively argued, and so long. The questions in this chapter shine light on the complexity in Chaucer's "litel tretys" (Thop 957). These contexts can help us understand why medieval readers might have found such a tale not only useful but "murye" (Thop 964).

Transformation

Discussion Questions:

1. Is war ever justified? Re-read the tale, tracking arguments for and against war.
2. Does acting on counsel take away or add to power?
3. What's the relationship between an appearance of power and actual power? What is the connection between politics and popularity?

Projects:

1. Scholars debate whether anyone learns anything at the end of the "Tale of Melibee." Some scholars believe that Melibee does in fact learn from Prudence. Others see Melibee's final response to Prudence as a failure to learn, or read Harry Bailey's response to Chaucer's tale as evidence that he has not learned anything either. What do you think? Make an argument for or against the effectiveness of Prudence's pedagogy, or suggest something in between.
2. Compare and contrast Prudence's use of proverbs with the Wife of Bath's use of proverbs. Who do you feel better interprets texts? Do you find one woman's arguments and interpretations more persuasive than the other's? Why or why not?
3. Write your own mirror for princes, considering current political leaders as your audience. What counsel is good counsel for ethical decision-making in modern democracy? How should ethical leaders govern themselves and others?
4. The "Tale of Melibee" is primarily told with attention on the lord, Melibee, and his wife, Prudence. But many others were affected by a lord's actions. Imagine that you are a member of Melibee's "greet congregacioun." Retell Chaucer's tale from the perspective of your imagined speaker. Or, imagine yourself as Melibee's daughter, Sophia. Rewrite the tale from her perspective.
5. Compare the "Tale of Melibee" with the pilgrim Chaucer's other tale, the "Tale of Sir Thopas." Do you see any similarities between these two tales? What are the key differences? Why do you think that Chaucer assigned these tales to his character?
6. In a classic article on the "Tale of Melibee," Gardner Stillwell argued, "The tale must have had many meanings for fourteenth-century England. Although it cannot be dated precisely, it would have been very *a propos* of current events and ideas during the whole of Chaucer's Canterbury period, to which it in all probability belongs" (433). Research a political context for "Melibee." You might explore the Peasant's Revolt, Richard II's

reign (and his relationships with his advisors), the Merciless Parliament of 1388, or any other military, legal, or social movement during the late fourteenth century. Discuss how “Melibee” might be seen as “very *a propos*” of the specific context you have chosen. How might the tale’s ideas and proverbs have served as “counsel” or commentary for that context? How might the tale have argued for or against the attitudes and decisions made in that context?

7. Both Melibee and Prudence acknowledge that his enemies have wronged him. They disagree, however, on what consequences are appropriate in response to his enemies’ crimes. What goals inform Melibee’s ideas of suitable punishment? What goals inform Prudence’s? Can the discussion of criminal justice in the tale be brought into conversation with current debates about sentencing and rehabilitating convicted criminals?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Lordship

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Wallace, David, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture). Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997

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