

### 33. A lady philosophy or a concealed wife of Bath: Geoffrey Chaucer's Prudence in *the Tale of Melibee*

Nazan YILDIZ<sup>1</sup>

**APA:** Yıldız, N. (2022). A lady philosophy or a concealed wife of Bath: Geoffrey Chaucer's Prudence in *the Tale of Melibee*. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (28), 498-507. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1132591.

#### Abstract

Renowned as a reference book of Dante and Chaucer, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* occupies a peerless room in literary realm. Dante draws on the Boethian elements in his *Vita Nuova*, *the Convivio* and *the Commedia*. Among his other works, Chaucer's making use of Boethius's *Consolation in Troilus and Criseyde* has been well documented by Chaucerians. A work belonging to the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire, *Consolation* focuses on fate, fortune and free will and was translated into numerous languages even by Chaucer himself, *Boece*, and by an Anglo-Saxon king, Alfred the Great. Recognised as a philosophical treatise, this exceptional work embraces a patchwork of Aristotelian, Stoic, Epicurean, and neo-Platonic thoughts. Alongside its philosophical concerns, featuring Lady Philosophy as a guide, teacher and a doctor to Boethius, *Consolation* suggests the authority of women over men via the power of female discourse. Tracing the footsteps of Lady Philosophy, another female character, Chaucer's Prudence in *the Tale of Melibee* consoles and guides her husband Melibee to goodness via her powerful discourse. Mostly treated as a dull text by critics, *the Tale of Melibee* is put in the category of the least favourite tales of Chaucer. In this paper, yet, I will focus on the tale with positive lens and read it as a text revealing the mastery and authority of women over men reversing the gender roles in a period well-known for its misogyny. Thereby, I assert that Prudence is an undisclosed Wife of Bath who raises the flag of victory in the everlasting power struggle between women and men. Finally, the paper comes to an end with an appeal for attraction in that women should take their share in real world alongside in fiction in accordance with Virginia Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own*.

**Keywords:** *Consolation of Philosophy*, Lady Philosophy, *Tale of Melibee*, Prudence, Medieval Woman

#### Leydi Felsefe mi yoksa gizli bir Bath'lı Kadın mı: Geoffrey Chaucer'ın *Melibee'nin Hikâyesi*'ndeki Prudence karakteri

#### Öz

Dante ve Chaucer'ın başucu kitabı olarak bilinen Boethius'un *Felsefenin Tesellisi* edebiyat dünyasında emsalsiz bir yere sahiptir. Dante, *Vita Nuova*, *Convivio* ve *Commedia*'da Boethian öğelerinden yararlanır. Diğer eserlerinin arasında, Chaucer'ın *Troilus ve Criseyde*'de Boethius'un *Tesellisi*'nden yararlanması Chaucer kritikleri tarafından etraflıca incelenmiştir. Roma İmparatorluğu'nun çöküş zamanına ait bir eser olan *Teselli*, kader, talih ve özgür iradeye odaklanır ve Chaucer'ın kendisi, *Boece*, ve bir Anglo-Sakson kralı olan Büyük Alfred tarafından da olmak üzere birçok dile çevrilir. Felsefi bir inceleme olarak kabul edilen bu istisnai eser, Aristoteles, Stoik, Epikür

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü (Trabzon, Türkiye), nazanyildiz1@hotmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5776-0268 [Araştırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 20.05.2022-kabul tarihi: 20.06.2022; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1132591]

ve yeni-Platonculuk düşüncelerinin bir karışımı niteliğindedir. *Teselli*, felsefi konuların yanı sıra, Leydi Felsefe'yi Boethius'a rehber, öğretmen ve doktor olarak öne çıkararak kadın söyleminin gücü aracılığıyla kadınların erkekler üzerindeki otoritesini gösterir. Bir diğer kadın karakter Chaucer'in *Melibee'nin Hikâyesi*'ndeki Prudence, Leydi Felsefe'nin izinden giderek güçlü söylemiyle kocası Melibee'yi teselli eder ve iyiliğe yönlendirir. Eleştirmenler tarafından çoğunlukla sıkıcı bir metin olarak görülen *Melibee'nin Hikâyesi* Chaucer'in en az sevilen öyküleri kategorisine girer. Fakat ben bu makalede hikâyeyi olumlu bir bakış açısıyla kadın düşmanlığıyla bilinen bir dönemde toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini tersine çeviren kadınların erkekler üzerindeki hâkimiyetini ve otoritesini ortaya koyan bir metin olarak okuyacağım. Bu doğrultuda, Prudence'in kadınlar ve erkekler arasındaki sonu gelmeyen güç mücadelesinde zafer bayrağını kaldıran gizli bir Bath'lı Kadın olduğunu iddia ediyorum. Son olarak makale Virginia Woolf'un *Kendine Ait Bir Oda*'daki tartışmasına uygun olarak kadınların kurgunun yanı sıra gerçek dünyada da paylarını almaları gerektiğine dair bir çağrıyla sona ermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Felsefenin Tesellisi*, Leydi Felsefe, *Melibee'nin Hikâyesi*, Prudence, Ortaçağ Kadını

### Introduction: *The Consolation of Philosophy* as a Reference Book to Geoffrey Chaucer

Farewell love and all thy laws forever;  
Thy baited hooks shall tangle me no more.  
Senec and Plato call me from thy lore  
To perfect wealth, my wit for to endeavour. (2006: 596)

In his sonnet "Farewell, Love", Thomas Wyatt takes shelter in philosophy, in Seneca and Plato, because of the pain of unreturned love. He designates philosophy as the source of the supreme riches which is, unlike love, worthy of his effort. From past to present, amongst the writers having philosophy in their hands, Boethius with his *Consolation of Philosophy* takes the lead and leaves indelible traces in literature. Dante, amidst his followers, makes use of the Boethian elements in his *Vita Nuova*, *the Convivio* and *the Commedia*. Dante, similar to Boethius unfairly put in prison; accused of fraud and expelled from Florence, especially in his *Commedia* brings Virgil and Beatrice into play acting Boethius' Lady Philosophy by guiding him to Hell and Purgatory, and to Heaven respectively. Another well-known contribution of Boethius's *Consolation* to literature can be traced in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. As discussed by Stroud, *Troilus and Criseyde* is "a practical study in real life of the working out of the Boethian teaching" and through Boethian elements, Chaucer transferred Boccaccio's *II Filostrato* into a perfect de casibus tragedy (1951:1). The Boethian elements are especially explicit in Chaucer's use of theme of fortune in *Troilus and Criseyde*. As pointed out by Camargo, the *Consolation* interpenetrated *Troilus* to an extent that, as a consensus, Chaucer is believed to compose his work during to early to mid 1380s when he was also translating the *Consolation* into English, called *Boece* (1991:214), making Chaucer a medieval conveyor of Boethian philosophy. Critics even have discussed Pandarus, the striking character of *Troilus*, as Lady Philosophy. To exemplify, Gaylord, in his "Uncle Pandarus as Lady Philosophy", affirms that Pandarus acts the Lady Philosophy and Chaucer caricatures the opening of the *Consolation* in Book I of *Troilus* (1961:571).

Along with *Troilus*, Yager highlights the influence of the *Consolation* on the well-known marriage group of *the Canterbury Tales* and asserts that the *Consolation* can be read as a subtext of the tales as in *the Wife of Bath's Prologue* which specifically mentions the *Consolation*, and in the tales of the Clerk and

the Merchant which echo the inspiration from Boethius in the interactions between husbands and wives (1995: 77). Indeed, mostly recognised as a reference book of Chaucer, the leverage of the *Consolation* in Chaucer's works has been a hot topic in Chaucer studies. Yet, these studies have generally focused on the shared philosophical and religious doctrines, and structural similarities of his texts with the *Consolation*. In what follows, as distinct from these studies, I will trace the similarities between Boethius's Lady Philosophy and Chaucer's Prudence in *the Tale of Melibee* with regard to the authority of women over men as the source of knowledge and wisdom. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to another central topic of Chaucer studies: Chaucer's treatment of women and his place in feminist/antifeminist discourse. To this end, I will, first, briefly discuss the Lady Philosophy in Boethius's the *Consolation* as the source of knowledge different from the traditional depiction of women, and then I will examine Prudence in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* as a wise woman by accentuating her similarities to the Lady Philosophy.

Written in the time of the Roman Empire's collapse and centring upon fate, fortune and free will, Boethius's *Consolation*, before Chaucer's *Boece*, is a work translated by a highly revered Anglo-Saxon king, Alfred the Great, to contribute to the cultural accumulation of his nation along with the success in warfare. After those translations, translated into many different European languages, into English many times, the *Consolation* was also translated into Turkish by Çiğdem Dürüşken as *Felsefenin Tesellisi* (2015). Mostly acknowledged as a philosophical treatise and an example of the Menippean Satire, this unique work embodies copious deep-thinking thoughts: Aristotelian, Stoic, Epicurean, and neo-Platonic, in harmony, Curley states (1987:343). There are numerous questions remained unanswered about the text such as where and under which conditions Boethius wrote it? And was he really in prison and sentenced to death? The influential work consists of the dialogues between the prisoner Boethius and Lady Philosophy who comes to console him while he laments on his fall from fortune. Boethius defines the stature of her as extraordinary: "At one moment it exceeded not the common height, at another her forehead seemed to strike the sky; and whenever she raised her head higher, she began to pierce within the very heavens, and to baffle the eyes of them that looked upon her" (2021:5). Thus, Boethius describes Lady Philosophy as she belongs to another world along with her godlike qualities. Lady Philosophy sends the Muses of Poesie away as they feed Boethius's malady with "sweet poison" (2021:5). Acting as a guide and teacher, Lady Philosophy endeavours to make her pupil Boethius appreciate God as the source of ultimate good and power, whose wisdom controls the universe. As the instructor, Lady Philosophy has already declared her authority over Boethius.

### **The Lady Philosophy: A Woman as the Source of Wisdom and Knowledge**

*The Consolation of Philosophy* opens with Boethius, put unfairly in prison and fated to die, in his bed, in misery. To sooth himself, he pens his sorrows in verse. Upon coming of Lady Philosophy, he leaves his pen to be able to find solace by her hands. In the rest of the text, through dialogues, Lady Philosophy bit by bit guides Boethius to discover himself as a human being, fortune as the required element for the rebuilding of his freedom and God as the eventual source of good. Gradually, like an instructor trying to teach a lesson to her unwilling pupil, Lady Philosophy persuades Boethius to receive her lesson on the arrogance of being upset about losing the favours of fortune and appreciation of true good. She begins with disclosing the source of his sorrow to make silent Boethius speak and says "Why dost thou weep? Why do tears stream from thy eyes? "Speak out, hide it not in thy heart". If thou lookest for the physician's help, thou must needs disclose thy wound." (2021:8). Addressing him as a child designating her authority again, she tells how she saved Plato and Socrates from the "unjust death"

(2021:8). Through questioning<sup>2</sup>, taking on another authoritative role, a doctor, Lady Philosophy diagnoses three main causes of the illness in Boethius's soul: forgetting his own true nature, not knowing the end of the cosmos and how the world is controlled (2021:3). To cure his sickness, Lady Philosophy guides Boethius to see that "God governs the world" (2021:12) by divine reason (2021: 13). Then, she tries to make Boethius realise the vanity of fortune's gift and fortune is free to give or take gifts away. As the flamboyance of his former fortunes is the source of Boethius's grief, she asks him to be thankful and states that rather than in fortune, power, fame or worldly possessions, happiness and good should be sought within. Moreover, Lady Philosophy prefers ill fortune to good fortune:

For truly I believe that Ill Fortune is of more use to men than Good Fortune. For Good Fortune, when she wears the guise of happiness, and most seems to caress, is always lying; Ill Fortune is always truthful, since, in changing, she shows her inconstancy. The one deceives, the other teaches; the one enchains the minds of those who enjoy her favour by the semblance of delusive good, the other delivers them by the knowledge of the frail nature of happiness. (2021:24)

Afterwards, Lady Philosophy adds that unlike good fortune, ill fortune helps people to reveal their own nature and to distinguish true friends from false: "[...] this cruel, this odious Fortune hath discovered to thee the hearts of thy faithful friends—that other hid from thee alike the faces of the true friends and of the false, but in departing she hath taken away *her* friends, and left thee *thine*?" and "in true friends thou hast found the most precious of all riches." (2021:24). Later on, she gives the source of true happiness not in fame, power, wealth, rank or noble origin but in the ultimate good which can be found in God: "God is very happiness, and in a manner, therefore, the happy man partakes also of the Divine nature" (2021:25). Thus, "good is proved to be the end towards which the whole universe tends" (2021:25) and "true happiness is the perfect good; therefore true happiness must dwell in the supreme Deity." (2021:36). Boethius, completely convinced by the arguments of Lady Philosophy, says: "I accept thy reasonings, [...] they cannot in any wise be disputed [...] I cannot see how anyone can dissent from these conclusions" (2021:38). Diagnosing vice as the reason for the sickness of Boethius, Lady Philosophy, perplexing Boethius, suggests that all fortune is good fortune in that the wrongdoers are more upset when they achieve their aims than when they cannot reach them. They are also more auspicious if they are punished rather than they are left unpunished. To appreciate this, all things are led to good, one needs to recognize the difference between fate and providence and God's moral authority: "Since every fortune, welcome and unwelcome alike, has for its object the reward or trial of the good, and the punishing or amending of the bad, every fortune must be good, since it is either just or useful" (2021:59).

The last lesson of the Lady is on free will and God's foreknowledge. Upon Boethius's question: "if there is really any such thing as chance" (2021:59), Lady Philosophy answers, in accordance with Aristotle's definition, that chance is simply related to the aim of human beings and it is based on causation. Free will is a required aspect of reason. One should not forget that what human beings do is in the sight of all-seeing God. Thereby, underscoring the momentous of reason through the dialogue, Lady Philosophy moves away from the deep-rooted adjective "irrational" attributed to women and guides Boethius to find who really he is and the secrets of human nature and God. Here are the last words of Lady Philosophy to Boethius: "[...] withstand vice, practise virtue, lift up your souls to right hopes, offer humble prayers to Heaven. Great is the necessity of righteousness laid upon you if you will not hide it from yourselves, seeing that all your actions are done before the eyes of a Judge who seeth all things" (2021:72). In a format of a sermon, Lady Philosophy completes her mission possessing this time the role of a woman of religion. This role is also very significant in that preaching has been largely accepted as a ground peculiar

<sup>2</sup> Although it is a part of the tradition, the Lady Philosophy's making use of the Socratic Questioning to lead her student Boethius to the truth is another token of her authoritative and knowing position.

to men which reminds us of the absence of women from the upper ranks of the Church in the Middle Ages or, as an example of fiction, Eliot's Dinah and her struggle to be acknowledged as a Methodist preacher in *Adam Bede*. It is widely believed that Boethius wrote the *Consolation* during his exile and the text has been accepted as his self-justification in the face of humanity. Shortly after writing the *Consolation*, Boethius dies by a pitiless demise. It is not certain how he died, yet, to one explanation; he was killed by sword before his judgment. To another account, a rope was tightened round his forehead, until "his eyes started", and then he was murdered with a whip (2021:72).

In order to appreciate how important the role of Lady Philosophy in the text is and how gender roles are reversed better, it is convenient to look at the meaning of the word philosophy. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines philosophy as "the search for knowledge and understanding of the nature and meaning of the universe and of human life" (1995:867ia). Man has always been acknowledged as the cradle of knowledge and understanding and it is man always comes to mind when philosophers are mentioned, to name a few, Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Kant, Descartes, Nietzsche, Locke, Hume, Marx, Foucault and more. The *Consolation*, a reference book for both readers and copious writers since the antiquity, along with philosophy and existence course it gives in a single reading, tells a lot about the equality of men and women and the place of women in society, which is one of the major concerns of civilizations even today. In the *Consolation*, woman has been stripped of the attributes assigned to her-weak, ignorant, unreasonable and temptress- from the past to the present by her authoritative role as the source of knowledge and wisdom.

### A Disguised Wife of Bath: Prudence Acting the Lady Philosophy

Another female character who guides men with her role as the wise woman is Prudence in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Tale of Melibee*. Just as Lady Philosophy consoles and guides Boethius to ultimate good, Prudence guides her husband Melibee to goodness. *The Tale of Melibee* is one of the least popular tales of *the Canterbury Tales*. It is Chaucer's translation of *The Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*, translated by Renaud de Louens from Albertano of Brescia's *Liber Consolationis et Consilii*. To Bornstein, Chaucer's *Melibee* is a very close translation of the original work, yet quite different in stylistic grounds (1978:238). To Owen, Chaucer's translation is "a close, almost slavish translation" (1973:268). For Geismar, Chaucer's style is "literal to the point of servility" (1969:50). Strohm describes the text as a combination of classical and Christian elements full of "proverbs and moral sentences" concerning the "good life" in the universe as well as the "spiritual life" in line with the principles of Christ and the Church (1967:32). Pearsall defines the plot of the text as a "peg on which to hang a vast quantity of moral discourse on a variety of matters," (1985:286). For Mackail, it is "enormously long besides being portentously dull" (1909:50). Whittock, likewise, states that the text is "an enormous bore" (1968:50). Similarly, as asserted by Benson, *Melibee* is "dull, lengthy, and somewhat suffocating" (1986:39). Ker mockingly labels it "a thing incapable of life, under any process of interpretation, a lump of the most inert 'first matter' of mediaeval pedantry" (1985:535). A kind of consensus of critics' views on the tale, Ker continues

*The Tale of Melibee* is perhaps the worst example that could be found of all the intellectual and literary devices of the Middle Ages- bathos, forced allegory, spiritless and interminable moralizing [...] beyond rivalry for its enjoyment of the rankest commonplaces. There is glow and unction about its mediocrity; the intolerable arguments of Dame Prudence are masterpiece, as though written in an orgy and enthusiasm of flatness and insipidity. (qtd. in Christmas, 1968:1)

For Foster, in *Melibee*, Chaucer was simply "preserving a Medieval tradition" (2008: 410). Forster adds that it "might have been written to be leafed through and not to be read in its entirety" (2008: 410).

Bornstein merely encapsulates the issue and points out that in the fifteenth century, it was a tradition for Chaucer and his contemporaries to produce refined works out of the foreign models eluding the old alliterative convention (1978: 237). In this sense, it can be supported that critics are a bit unfair to the text. Similarly, O'Keefe points out that generally critics have diminished the worth of the text and observed it via a negative point of view; but, especially its rhetorical form and function are worth examining (2021: 5). In this paper, with positive lens, but rather than its rhetorical, didactic or philosophical qualities, I will focus on how through her discourse, similar to Lady of Philosophy, Prudence acquires power and authority in marriage and in a way reverses gender roles. *Melibee* tells of the story of Melibee, who is a rich and leading figure in society. One day, his enemies assault his wife Prudence and his daughter Sophie, Greek name means wisdom (Thundy, 1976:596). They beat Prudence yet Sophie is fatally injured: "His wyf and eek his doghter hath he left inwith his hous, of which the dores weren faste yshette./Thre of his olde foes han it espyed, and setten laddres to the walles of his hous,/ and by wyndowes been entred, an betten his wyf, and wounded his doghter with fyve mortal woundes in fyve sondry places." (1957, lines 969-971). Melibee, the angry and sorrowful father, in tears, asks for revenge against his enemies. Prudence, however, tries to persuade him not to shed blood and, similar to Lady Philosophy, asks him to stop crying and try to find a solution to the problem by referring to Seneca:

"Allas, my lord," quod she, "why make ye youreself for to be lyk a fool?

For sothe it aperteneth nat to a wys man to maken swich a sorwe.

[...]

Senek seith: "The wise man shal nat take to greet discomfort for the deeth of his children, but, certes, he sholde suffren it in pacience

as wel as he abideth the deeth of his owene propre persone." (1957, lines 980- 985A)

In the rest of the text, through dialogues, again analogous to Lady Philosophy, Prudence gradually guides Melibee to reason and peace<sup>3</sup> in contrast to emotion and violence by stating that it should be wisdom to govern his heart and mind: "And therefore, if ye governe yow by sapience, put away sorwe out of youre herte." (1957, line 994). After a short a dialogue, Prudence convinces her husband to call up a gathering of people ranging from surgeons to physicians to ask their advice upon the trouble. Some of the advisors, taking side of violence, say that "he anon sholde wreken hym on his foes and bigynne werre." (1957, line 1020). Yet, Prudence disagrees with them, and here comes one of the most relevant parts of the story to the purpose of the article. Seeing her husband ready for revenge and violence, in a modest manner, Prudence asks her husband to give her a hearing and, by giving example from Petrus Alphonsus and making use of proverbs, says rush goes to death and it should be a considered decision. However, in line with the notorious misogyny of the time,<sup>4</sup> Melibee says: "I do not intend, [...] to work according to thy advice" (1957, line 1054) listing the following reasons:

For certes, every wight wolde holde me thanne a fool;

this is to seyn, if I, for thy conseillyng, wolde chaungen

thynges that been ordeyned and affirmed by so manye wyse.

Secoundely, I seye that women been wikke, and noon good of hem alle.

<sup>3</sup> Stillwell discusses the issue of peace in the tale on political grounds and points out that it is an appeal as a caution against the Hundred Years War to approve the peace policy of Richard II and reject the war policy of Edward III (24).

<sup>4</sup> Women, considered to be physically, mentally and morally inferior to men in the Middle Ages, had almost no place and say in society. The social status of women was determined by their fathers or husbands. There were generally two main options for medieval woman: marriage or entering a nunnery (Power, Eileen. *Medieval Women*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975. Hanawalt, Barbara A. "Medieval English Women in Rural and Urban Domestic Space." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998):19-26).

'For of a thousand men', seith Salomon, 'I foond o good man, but certes,  
of alle women, good woman foond I nevere.'  
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 forbade that it so were! (1957, lines 1055A-1059).

That is how Melibee shows men's perspectives on women which Walling describes as an "antifeminist attack" (2018:163). It is impossible for a man to take a woman's word instead of men which might be even accepted as a sign of stupidity. Moreover, according to this misogynist thought, embodied by Melibee, all women are sinners and it is impossible to find a good woman. To Melibee, if he takes the advice of his wife, he will put the authority in her hands, *God forbid*. Thus, Prudence finds herself in a different war than Lady Philosophy: it is the war of Eve, of the narrator of the *Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf*, of the *Wife of Bath*, of Charlotte Bronte, of Virginia Woolf, of Simone de Beauvoir, of Margaret Atwood and of more. This is the everlasting woman question. In the end, however, Prudence wins over Melibee and, in his person, over Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*, Sir Gawain's attacks on women and *Wife of Bath's* Jenkin. Foregrounding the significance of reason, Prudence refutes the first argument of her husband by changing his mind that "it is no folie to chaunge conseil whan the thyng is chaunged,/or elles whan the thing semeth ootherweyes than it was biforn." (1957, lines 1065A-1065B). With regard to the second argument of her husband, Prudence, with constant confidence and intellectual perspective, asks her husband not to put every woman in the same basket as the book says: '[H]e who despises all, displeases" (1957, line 1070B). Moreover, to prove her argument, Prudence employs the story of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary and how Jesus Christ values women more than men when he rises from the dead:

For certes, sire, oure Lord Jhesu Crist wolde nevere have descended to be born of  
a woman  
if alle women hadden been wikke.  
And after that, for the grete bountee that is in women,  
oure Lord Jhesu Crist, whan he was risen fro deeth to lyve,  
apeered rather to a woman than to his Apostles. (1957, lines 1074- 1075B).

Afterwards, Prudence also refutes the argument of her husband in relation to the words of Salomon even implying that Melibee gets his words wrong:

And though that Salomon seith that he ne foond nevere woman good,  
it folweth nat therefore that alle women ben wikke.  
For though that he ne foond no good woman, certes,  
Many another man hath founden many a woman ful good and trewe.  
Or ells, per aventure, the entente of Salomon was this:  
that, as in sovereyn bounte, he foond no woman—  
this is to seyn, that ther is no wight that hath sovereyn bountee save God alone,  
as himself recordeth in hys Evaungelie. (1957, lines 1076-1079A).

When it comes to the third reason of Melibee that he does not want to yield the authority of a woman, Prudence, keeping her relentless respect for her husband, claims that if it was the case, no one would be able to advise anyone and giving advice does not mean assuming authority. Furthermore, underscoring

the significance of free will, she adds that “[f]or smoothly thilke man that asketh conseil of a purpose, yet hath he free choys/ weither he wole werke by that conceil or noon.” (1957, lines 1083-1083A). Against her husband’s assertion that women cannot hide what they know, Prudence gives an example of herself and says: “[F]or ye han ful ofte assayed my grete silence and my grete pacience, and/ how wel that / I kan hyde and hele thynges that men oghte secreely to hyde.” (1957, lines 1089-1089A). Finally, in her last words in her defence of women, Prudence, in a way encapsulates her case, and says a wife of reason and good advice should be praised rather than to be blamed: If you do something wicked and “overcometh yow by reson and by good conseil,/ certes youre wyf oghte rather to be preised than yblamed.” (1957, lines 1092A-1093) and clarifies her point by making use of biblical characters such as Jacob and Rebecca, and Jydith and Bethulia (1957, lines 1094-1100). Additionally, supporting women, Prudence reverses the story of Adam and Eve, mostly used against women, and beats men at their own game. She reminds her husband of the creation story and states that God, after creating Adam, says “It is nat good to been a man alloone; make we to hym an helpe semblable to himself./ Heere may ye se if that women were nat goode, and hir conseils goode and profitable,/oure Lord God of hevene wolde nevere han wrought hem,/ ne called hem help of man, but rather confusioun of man.” (1957, lines 1104-1106A). In saying so, Prudence foregrounds that since the beginning of the world, women have been sent to help and support men who cannot cope with life alone. Thereby, proving her arguments and refuting the arguments of her husband, Prudence asks her husband to trust her words to solve the problem (1957, line 1110).

Finally, in a similar manner to Boethius, Melibee accepts Prudence as his guide and trusts in her wisdom by saying: “I wol governe me by thy conseil in alle thing.” (1957, line 1114A). In the rest of the text, Prudence informs Melibee of the choice of advisors highlighting God as the main advisor and origin of wisdom (1957, line 1116) by giving examples from various biblical figures as Saint James (1957, line 1119), and advises him against the danger of “ire, covetise, and hastifnesse.” (1957, line 1122). Then, Prudence *teaches* her husband how to examine an advice (1957, lines 1201-1206A) and change a plan by referring to Seneca (1957, lines 1223-1237A). Afterwards, Prudence, as the authority, makes her husband see his mistakes about assembling of his advisors (1957, lines 1241-1260) and Melibee accepts that he has erred, he will change his advisors (1957, line 1261) and will not try to avenge himself on his enemies as she has shown him “the perils and the yveles that myghten falle of this vengeance.” (1957, line 1428). Moreover, as Lady Philosophy does, Prudence shows Melibee that the real good and treasure is the love of God rather than the riches of the world (1957, lines 1628-1631). At the end of the text, the enemies of Melibee even accept the authority of Prudence: “A, lady, quod they, “ye han shewed unto us the blessynge of swetnesse, (1957, line 1735) and ask for forgiveness (1957, 1879). Melibee forgives them by referring to the endless mercy of God (1957, line 1883). Thereby, similar to the debate between Boethius and Lady Philosophy, the debate between Melibee and Prudence ends with the authority of women over men. Throughout the text, as her name suggests, Prudence stands for reason and endeavours to stop her husband, who takes side with violence, to make peace with his enemies. To achieve her aim, analogous to Lady Philosophy, Prudence employs an influential discourse abounding with proverbs, sermons and references to classical figures and the Bible. To end with, as discussed by Owen, Melibee *learns* clemency which is also lengthened to his enemies (1973: 272) as a lesson in Christianity. More importantly, in the progression of the debate, Prudence gradually increases her authority over her husband and gains the upper hand. Thus, in this didactic text, Prudence symbolises reason and constructs her authority as the source of knowledge and wisdom. To use the words of Stillwell, Prudence reaches her aim and concludes that “women can be as good counsellors as” men (1940:25) as well as the figures of authority.

## Conclusion

**Adres**  
RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Arařtırmaları Dergisi  
Osmanağa Mahallesi, Mürver Çiçeği Sokak, No:14/8  
Kadıköy - İSTANBUL / TÜRKİYE 34714  
**e-posta:** editor@rumelide.com  
**tel:** +90 505 7958124, +90 216 773 0 616

**Address**  
RumeliDE Journal of Language and Literature Studies  
Osmanağa Mahallesi, Mürver Çiçeği Sokak, No:14/8  
Kadıköy - ISTANBUL / TURKEY 34714  
**e-mail:** editor@rumelide.com,  
**phone:** +90 505 7958124, +90 216 773 0 616

In the light of the discussions so far, it can be stated that *the Tale of Melibee* might be accepted as one of the tales which Chaucer asks the reader "to turn over the leef, and chese another tale" (1957, line 3177). Yet, beyond its lessons in Christianity and philosophy given in an age of faith as a part of medieval tradition, *the Tale of Melibee* is worth reading for its depiction of authority of women alone in a period known for its misogynist approach. Prudence attains authority with her wit and rhetorical talent shown in her discourse. Thus, Prudence performs the authoritarian figure as Boethius's Lady Philosophy by leaping from one dominant role to another such as a guide, a counsellor, a teacher or even a doctor. Referring to the leading philosophical and literary figures was a sign of knowledge in the Middle Ages, where literacy was not common. It is, therefore, very important that Chaucer gave this domineering role to a woman even though he followed a tradition. Chaucer, indeed, is acknowledged as one of the proto-feminists due<sup>5</sup> to her characters such as the Wife of Bath and Goodelief. However, her Prudence is mostly ignored among these authoritarian woman characters and associated with meek characters such as Constance and Griselda. Nevertheless, a closer examination of Prudence displays that she is of the same hue of the Wife of Bath. Unlike the Wife of Bath, she wears a gentle, obedient and respectful attitude, yet still gains authority over men. Based on her experiences in marriage, somewhat rowdy by tearing up her husband's book of women and giving him a blow, the Wife of Bath asserts her authority in marriage and takes no word on her word. Prudence, however, like in Philip Sidney's sonnet 2 from *Astrophil and Stella* where love/the lady conquers the speaker gradually, conquers the mind and heart of her husband, guides his to reason and raises the flag of victory in marriage.

To end, although my study develops and expands upon this line of thought that Prudence should be counted in the group of authoritative Chaucerian women by her feminine voice, I can't stop myself from agreeing with Woolf's argument in her *A Room of One's Own*. In the Middle Ages, appreciating the world or gaining knowledge was considered a man-specific ability. It was no different in the nineteenth century, when a queen ruled the country, or in the twentieth century, when a female prime minister was at the head. Thereby, as Virginia Woolf has stated in her monumental work, in imagination, woman is utterly significant, yet in the real world, she does not matter. In literature, she occupies a central role dominating the lives of monarchs, but she has no name in history. In real life, "she [can] hardly read, [can] scarcely spell, and [is] the property of her husband" (2021:36). I again can't stop myself from concluding that perhaps Charlotte Bronte's man in *Villette*-who locks woman in the attic, holds the key and unaware of her plight in the attic-needs a change of sex as in Woolf's *Orlando* to be able to see the truth. Possibly, only this way, woman can get out of fiction and have a say in real life, and the number of lady philosophies guiding Senecas, Platos, Boethiuses and Melibeas can accrue.

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<sup>5</sup> Appertaining to Chaucer's depiction of medieval woman, there are two main arguments. According to a group of Chaucerians, Chaucer should be counted as a proto-feminist owing to his presentation of women, to name a few, the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, Emily and Dorigen in his *Canterbury Tales* since these characters have a say and story unlike many medieval women. On the other hand, some critics evaluate Chaucer as a misogynist because of his women characters especially in *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Miller's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*.

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