

## Ubiquitous Format? What Ubiquitous Format? Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* as a Proverb Collection

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Ut librum aperirem, apertum legerem, lectum memorie commendarem. . . .  
quia lecta memorie commendata discipulum perficiunt, et perfectus ad  
magistratus cathedram exaltatur.<sup>1</sup>

In a sample letter for university students contemplating the job market, John of Garland articulates the formerly obvious idea that an aspiring professor would open and read a book in order to commit it to memory. According to many authorities besides this Englishman in thirteenth-century Paris, literacy represents a pragmatic step in the lifelong process of developing one's memory. A Chaucerian narrator makes a similar point: "yf that olde bokes were aweye, / Yloren [lost] were of remembraunce the key."<sup>2</sup> Books as external visual artifacts, as keys to remembrance, could help a pre-modern reader to stock and later to unlock his internal storehouse of knowledge and indeed wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

Not even the Clerk reads from a book on horseback, though, within the imagined scenario of the *Canterbury Tales*. Instead, using his listeners' vernacular language, this university student conveys to the less learned pilgrims a portion of the non-vernacular verbal art lodged within his memory: Petrarch's Latin tale, transformed orally into Middle English.

Geoffrey Chaucer's major unfinished work, in which the Host of the Tabard Inn urges a tale-telling contest upon "nyne and twenty . . . sondry

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<sup>1</sup> "For me to open the book, to read what I opened to, to commit what I read to memory. . . . because committing his reading to memory perfects a student, and the perfected man is promoted to a master's chair" (John of Garland 1974:62-63).

<sup>2</sup> Chaucer 1987:589 for lines F25-26 of the *Legend of Good Women*.

<sup>3</sup> I use masculine for the gender-indeterminate pronoun because the documents refer to males. On medieval memory systems, see Carruthers 1990 and 1998, Ja. Coleman 1992, and Yates 1966.

folk” en route to Canterbury, continues to offer vital evidence concerning the interaction between oral tradition and an individual’s creative writing process, five centuries prior to the invention of electronic sound recording. Folklorists and others have begun to demonstrate the extent to which careful analysis of such a performance event, albeit fictional, can add diachronic depth to investigations of orality enabled by the tape recorder.<sup>4</sup>

This article will analyze late fourteenth-century oral/written interfaces in England. It employs information and methodologies from a range of academic disciplines in addition to folklore: from the history of education, in reference to students bilingual in French and Middle English while learning the pan-European Latin language; and also from psycholinguistics, neuropsychology, translation studies, philology, and paremiology (to allow the study of proverbs its own domain name). These approaches intertwine toward an immediate goal that sounds quite familiar within the standard field of literary studies. The analysis will contribute toward a fuller understanding of everybody’s favorite Canterbury pilgrim, the Wife of Bath.

While raising broader issues, that is, this article’s primary purpose is to document one neglected literary source for the fictional character Alisoun of Bath. That source has, however, been right there all along. It is the second tale told by Chaucer-the-pilgrim (i.e., told by the first-person narrator created by Chaucer-the-author) after his cliché-ridden, sing-songy *Tale of Sir Thopas* has been silenced by the Host’s literary criticism, “Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!”<sup>5</sup>

Chaucer-the-pilgrim’s second tale, the *Tale of Melibee*, imitates one of the educational media that used to transmit Latin learning to speakers of Middle English. It does so even more pointedly than the *Clerk’s Tale*, which that tale-teller announces as an on-the-spot translation from Latin. Although the prose *Tale of Melibee* has been neglected, maligned, and interpreted from a range of twentieth-century critical viewpoints, no previous study has investigated the tale as a vernacular collection of proverbial sentences.

From such a vernacular collection, I will suggest, each item was meant to summon to a properly educated mind its equivalent proverb in

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<sup>4</sup> Major studies on medieval oral/written interaction include Lindahl 1987, Richter 1994, and Jo. Coleman 1996; the latter two contain bibliographies documenting the field.

<sup>5</sup> Chaucer 1987:216, l. 930 of the link between *Tale of Sir Thopas* and *Tale of Melibee*. Unless specified otherwise, subsequent Chaucer quotations in this article come from Chaucer 1987:212-41, encompassing the *Tale of Melibee* and its context, cited as CT VII (i.e., fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*) with line numbers. From elsewhere in Chaucer 1987, works are cited by full titles and line numbers only.

Latin, the language of learning.<sup>6</sup> Medieval schoolboys used to recite in unison long lists of Latin proverbs, sight unseen. Jacqueline Hamesse (1990) has demonstrated that adults continued to memorize Latin proverb collections entire. Those medieval scholars' mnemonic techniques presumably included the familiar, reliable, efficient one of repeated vocalization.

Affixed in a learned man's memory, each individual proverb could afterward be called into mind as a discrete unit. Each one could thereupon open mnemonic pathways toward other verbal contexts in which that scholar had encountered the same proverbial sentence. He would thus be able to recollect and to communicate intertextuality, that is, the diachronic resonances among authoritative texts that he had heard, had probably vocalized, and had perhaps even seen. To conclude this article, I will propose processes by which orally memorized proverbs used to facilitate a trained thinker's information retrieval from his own brain. I will suggest that such intracranial procedures functioned, metaphorically of course, somewhat like searches on today's internet.<sup>7</sup>

In the course of exploring the relationship between pedagogical proverb collections and the *Tale of Melibee*, I will align the tale's three Middle English labels for authoritative statements—"sentence," "sawe," and "proverbe"—with the French terms directly replaced and the Latin ones in the tale's ultimate source. This intentionally limited philological quest will, however, never venture far afield from literary issues. The trilingual terminological distinctions will enhance analysis of Chaucer-the-author's creative interaction with oral tradition that six centuries ago somehow produced "the characters which compose all ages and nations. . . . the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For surveys with bibliographies of scholarship on the *Tale of Melibee*, see DeLong 1987, Ferster 1996, and Patterson 1989:135-60. On medieval proverb collections see Habenicht 1963:1-28, Hamesse 1990, Louis 1993 and 1997, Rouse and Rouse 1976, Schulze-Busacker 2000, A. Taylor 1985:43-52, B. Taylor 1992, and Whiting 1932.

<sup>7</sup> On the validity of metaphor in scholarly writing, see Kintgen 1996:198, 232n. For an analogous point concerning oral tradition and the internet, see Foley 1998 and 2002:219-25.

<sup>8</sup> Blake 1982:532-33, describing his painting "Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the nine and twenty Pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury" (1809). On Blake and his verbal and visual precedents, see studies documented in Bowden 2001, espec. Bowden 1987.

The *Tale of Melibee* is a close translation from French of a household debate on peace versus revenge, in which female soundly trumps male. Nine prose lines of action open the narrative: while Melibee is away from home, enemies ravish his wife Prudence and his daughter. For the rest of the tale's 900+ prose lines, Prudence and other authority figures cite proverbial wisdom to persuade Melibee, a magistrate by profession, that reasoned conflict resolution is preferable to warfare.

I will show that Chaucer-the-author, even while translating closely, has nonetheless adjusted the proverb-related terminology found in his source text. The resulting effect is that Prudence in Middle English sounds even more justly victorious than in French, and her husband sounds even more wrong. Compared to his French predecessor, Chaucer's Melibee more foolishly agrees with the vengeful "sentence" urged by hot-headed youngsters; he more blatantly misinterprets the "sentence" beneath wise men's words of advice; and he more rashly proposes acrimonious judicial "sentences" for his enemies, until chastened yet again by Prudence, who succeeds at last in using "proverbs" to educate her man.

Prudence, that is, cheers from the sidelines while her soul-sister Alisoun clobbers those three old, rich husbands of Bath with their own misogynistic proverbs, all proven wrong, wrong, wrong. The wife of Melibee influenced the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* in ways that range from the largest overall theme, that of confronting male verbal authority, down to details. Early on, for example, Prudence's French husband posits five reasons to ignore female advice. Chaucer's version trims the list to three reasons, supported by merely two authorities opposed to women's mastery.<sup>9</sup> Then his Middle English Prudence profusely disproves all five reasons, stated or no, by citing contrary words and deeds from dozens of authorities, including Jesus Christ. In addition, she explicates for her man the sense intended when, for example, "men seyn that thre thynges dryven a man out of his hous— . . . smoke, droppynge of reyn, and wikked wyves." This proverb refers to women who are wicked, Prudence points out, "and sire, by youre leve, that am nat I." In reference to virginal perfection, the Wife of Bath delivers that same conclusive rebuttal, which Chaucer transmuted from a Frenchwoman's meek "you know well that you have not found me such a woman."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> CT VII 1055-63, rendering lines 155-73 of Renaud 1958:573-74, hereafter cited as "Renaud" with line numbers.

<sup>10</sup> CT VII 1086-88, rendering Renaud ll. 217-21, and anticipating the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* ll. 278-80, 112.

The *Tale of Melibee* and its analogues, because of their debate framework, stand conspicuous among the collections of proverbial sentences that saw long-term education-related employment under multitudinous names, later including “florilegium” and “commonplace book.” Aristotle, having compiled proverb collections now lost, articulated intellectual relevance for the already well established practice, which remained basic to Hellenistic Greek and to Roman education. Christian educators retained the format and many of the same proverbial sentences, adding ones from Christian authorities. Attention to proverbs continued well into this past century via schoolrooms and, for example, descendants of Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack*.

Many decades have come and gone, however, since schoolchildren regularly recited unseen lists of proverbs.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, it was an earlier generation of literary scholars who documented proverbs in Shakespeare’s plays and other vernacular literature, on the model developed by Erasmus for Greco-Roman literature.<sup>12</sup> Thus current researchers have to discover anew the significance for Chaucer’s audience of the educational mainstay represented by the *Tale of Melibee*.

A note on terminology. Although folklorists now reserve “proverb” for anonymous statements expressing unofficial culture, consistent appellation does not predate the twentieth century. Chaucer uses “proverbs” as a cover term for all of the items in the *Tale of Melibee*.<sup>13</sup> I therefore use that generic label instead of either alternative in *Melibee*, “sentence” or “sawe,” and instead of other words that entered the language then or in subsequent centuries, such as adage, admonition, aphorism, apothegm, axiom, balet, byword, commonplace, dict, dictum, epigram, example, gnome, lesson, maxim, old text, old thing, parable, paroemia, platitude, precept,

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<sup>11</sup> Traces of the practice continue in some Latin and Greek courses. For modern languages see Rowland 1926-27 and Florio 1953, the latter discussed by Simonini 1952 and Yates 1968.

<sup>12</sup> Twentieth-century Anglo-American results include three editions of *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (Wilson 1970) and specialized indexes including Dent 1981 and 1984, Smith 1963, Tilley 1950, and Whiting 1958. Erasmus’s first work to be printed, *Adagiorum Collectanea* (1500), was expanded as *Adagiorum Chiliades* to provide commentary and literary references for 4151 proverbs. See Appelt 1942, Bowden 1995:316, Erasmus 1982-92, Kintgen 1996:20-46, and Phillips 1964.

<sup>13</sup> CT VII 956. See Abrahams 1972 for a folkloristic overview on proverbs. Ongoing research can be found in the journal *Proverbium* (1984-) and in numerous bibliographies and anthologies by Wolfgang Mieder (for example, Mieder 1982).

saying, sententious remark, theme, topic, truism, word, or words of wisdom. In languages besides English as well, these and many other terms all label the kind of item under scrutiny here: those succinct, authoritative verbal units that are considered worth memorizing, “sententias philosophicas ut quecumque . . . memoria digne videbantur.”<sup>14</sup>

Within Chaucer’s sociohistorical context, a proverb collection could function as a vehicle to convey basic literacy, religious instruction, courtly manners, political allegory, political advice, patristic exegesis, and other concepts according to which scholars have analyzed the *Tale of Melibee*.<sup>15</sup> Only one category among those proposed by Chaucerians must be eliminated. *Melibee* is not a parody of boring literature. Indeed, the frame story’s hints of characterization and colloquial dialogue place *Melibee* high among the very liveliest, on paper, of any extant proverb collection ever. The format appears boring because an untrained twentieth-century mind can but stare blankly at its bleak surface, baffled as to access, wondering how our forebears could have remained entranced for so many millennia by all those dull grey screens with static icons.

Studies underway in diverse fields, from medical science through a range of humanistic disciplines, all point toward the educational context here ascribed to *Melibee*. First and foremost, Mary Carruthers and Janet Coleman have demonstrated the prominence of memorization techniques in times and places including late fourteenth-century England. In addition, historians of education have documented both proverb collections in extant curricula and the long-standard classroom methodology of rote recitation in unison.<sup>16</sup> Translation studies demonstrate the diachronic, worldwide extent

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<sup>14</sup> See Hamesse 1990:226n, quoting Wilhelm von Doncaster.

<sup>15</sup> For surveys of scholarship see note 6 above.

<sup>16</sup> For orientation see Riché 1985. On proverb collections and/or memorization by recitation, see also Bonner 1977:172-77; Bowen 1972-81:ii, 68-72, 163-65; Comparetti 1966:53-55; Courtenay 1987:15-20; Curtius 1953:57-61; Davies 1974:73-80; Gehl 1993:93-96; Hamesse 1990; W. Harris 1989:30-36; Jaeger 1994:21-23; Kintgen 1996:18-57; Leclercq 1982:168-70; MacKinnon 1969; Marrou 1956:150-54, 165-66; Minnis 1988:9-12; Orme 1973:59-141 and 1989:82-85, 221-42; Pfeiffer 1968:83-84; Reynolds 1996:7-16, 137-44; Riché 1976:458-76; Sebastian 1970:207-9; and B. Taylor 1992. Also, two direct descriptions of late-medieval classroom practices are indirectly relevant. In *De ordine docendi et studendi* (1459) Battista Guarino describes memorization by recitation in classrooms postdating Chaucer (Woodward 1964:161-78), and in *De recuperatione Terre Sancte* (1306) Pierre Dubois describes the same for ideal schooling, presumably related to actual fourteenth-century practice (Dubois 1956:125-39).

to which education has precisely meant second-language acquisition.<sup>17</sup> Medievalists observe that this tale and its analogues often appear in pedagogically oriented manuscript anthologies; one such *Tale of Melibee*, uncredited, is entitled *Prouerbis*.<sup>18</sup> Another literary approach shows that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers continued to value the whole of Chaucer's writings as a repository of proverbs.<sup>19</sup> Philologists explore such fundamental concepts as *sententia*, *lectura*, *compilatio*, and *auctoritas*.<sup>20</sup> Psycholinguists experiment with comprehension and retention of longer or shorter verbal units, noting distinctions for input that is only oral, only visual, or combined oral and visual.

More specifically, neuropsychologists have discovered that the human brain, in sending sensory data to appropriate cells for interpretation, incorporates outside stimuli at intervals of three seconds. In a related clinical test, proving why poetry is easier to memorize than prose, researchers read verse aloud in many ancient and modern languages. They found that whatever sound pattern demarcates a poetic line, be it meter or rhyme or pitch shifts or puns, that pattern always recurs at an interval of two to four seconds, often exactly three seconds.<sup>21</sup> Folklorists' research shows that, in every documented language and culture, proverbs likewise occur in temporal units close to the three-second size that is most efficient for brain processing and thereby for verbatim memorization. Finally, an overview finds proverb collections among the earliest records of every world culture

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<sup>17</sup> See Bassnett-McGuire 1980 for an overview. For representative case studies in this expanding field, see Beer 1989 and 1997, Beer and Lloyd-Jones 1995, Copeland 1991, Machan 1985, Morse 1991, Workman 1972, and the journal *Translation and Literature* (1993-).

<sup>18</sup> See Astell 1996:188-90, Ferster 1996, K. Harris 1998, Lerer 1993, Patterson 1989, Scanlon 1994, and Silvia 1974.

<sup>19</sup> Bowden 1995; also see Bowden 1992 on eighteenth-century attention to Chaucer's proverbs.

<sup>20</sup> "Sentence," "reading," "compilation," and "authority." See Hunt 1991, Maieru 1994:16-25, Parkes 1976, and Weijers 1987, 1990, 1991, and 1992.

<sup>21</sup> Turner and Pöppel 1983. To a surprising extent, scientists investigating memory continue to cite the pioneering research of Bartlett 1932 and Vygotsky 1986 (orig. 1934). Ongoing psycholinguistic and neuropsychological studies may be exemplified by Baddeley 1990, Begg 1971, Conrad 1972, Fillenbaum 1973, Honeck 1997, Nickerson 1981, and Scribner and Cole 1981. On different literary issues that also involve cognitive psychology, see Pasnau 1997 and Spolsky 1993.

that had acquired literacy by 1200 CE: Egyptian, Sumerian, Chinese, Indian, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

In Chaucer's day, two millennia after literacy had emerged in Europe, prototypes for his Canterbury-bound Clerk were still relying upon their ears and their voices to "gladly . . . lerne and gladly teche." (So do we all.) Likewise, before and after the late fourteenth century, across the former Roman Empire and beyond, most pedagogy was intended to expand a student's vocal/aural memory for Latin. Even sight-reading, a parallel skill, used to be taught with far more mnemonic emphasis than is usual nowadays.<sup>23</sup>

Controlled psycholinguistic experiments relating voice to ear imply a hierarchy of mnemonic effectiveness. One memorizes unseen words most readily by singing them in unison with other voices, then (in approximately descending order) by speaking poetry in unison, by speaking prose in unison, by solo singing, by individual recitation of poetry and then of prose, by hearing words sung, by hearing metrical words spoken, and by hearing prose.<sup>24</sup>

Experience, not psycholinguistic authority, had established standard curricular steps in medieval European classrooms. The youngest children learning Latin would sing the Psalms in unison, and would recite the two-part *Distichs of Cato*: the prose *Parvus Cato*, a randomly ordered list of two- to five-word imperative sentences; and the metrical *Magnus Cato*, a randomly ordered list of self-contained distichs (two-line verse units). From *Parvus Cato* preadolescents progressed to longer lists of discrete prose sentences; a widely used one was credited to Seneca, or later to Publilius Syrus. From *Magnus Cato* students progressed to short then to longer continuous works in distichs, such as the fables of Avianus and Ovid's

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<sup>22</sup> See Bowden 1996. On folkloristic attention to proverbs, see note 13 above.

<sup>23</sup> *General Prologue*, l. 308. As a humanist lacking the wherewithal to conduct scientific experiments, I can but remark on the apparent coincidence by which the abrupt abandonment of unison recitation in elementary education—on the supposition that required memorization might hamper "creativity"—has occurred simultaneously in time and in place (that is, U.S. public schools) with the abrupt skyrocketing of "attention deficit disorder," "hyperactivity," "obsessive-compulsive syndrome," and other conditions now being covered up—never cured—by feeding psychotropic drugs to little children.

<sup>24</sup> See Serafine 1989; Rubin 1995:65-89, 287-90; and works cited in note 21 above.

amatory poetry.<sup>25</sup> By reciting aloud in unison, schoolboys also internalized grammatical rules to be applied orally to those works in distichs and thereafter in harder-to-memorize continuous hexameters.

Exercise builds brain cells, just as it does muscle cells. The more one memorizes, especially in youth, the easier it becomes to memorize more. An intelligent, conscientious medieval European adolescent was able to keep on expanding his ability to memorize verse—that is, his ability based in *Magnus Cato*—until he was able to recite the *Aeneid* and other epic-length narrative hexameter poems. In parallel classroom activities, he would expand his ability based in *Parvus Cato* to memorize larger and larger collections of proverbial sentences, often but not always in the imperative voice, each one comparable in length to a poetic line but metrical only by chance.

No medieval text recommends rote memorization of proverbs on the grounds that neurological data enter human brain synapses at three-second intervals. However, pre-modern writers commonly note that two characteristics of the proverb, its brevity and its memorability, make it effective for educational purposes. Quintilian, the major classical source for medieval pedagogy, recommends “quod vulgo sententias vocamus” because “feriunt animum et uno ictu frequenter impellunt et ipsa brevitate magis haerent” (“what we commonly call *sententias*. . . . strike the mind and often produce a decisive effect by one single blow, while their very brevity makes them cling to the memory”). Isidore of Seville and other medieval authorities reiterate Quintilian’s point about the usefulness of proverbs.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Texts and translations of the works attributed to Cato, Publilius Syrus, and Avianus, along with other schooltexts, are published by Loeb Classical Library in Duff and Duff 1935. For translations (only) and background on several, see Thomson and Perraud 1990. Erasmus helped transfer attribution from Seneca to Publilius Syrus, according to Duff and Duff 1935:3-9. On Avianus see also Wheatley 2000. On Cato see also Bowden 2000a and 2000b. For bibliography and the implications of schoolboys’ memorization of Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris*, see Bowden 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Quintilian 1920-22:iv, 476-77 (book 12, chapter 10, line 48), second clause trans. by H. E. Butler, who footnotes the impossibility of translating the “ever-recurring technical term” *sententia*. Although Poggio Bracciolini dramatically announced his discovery in 1415 of a complete text at St. Gall, Quintilian’s ideas were known throughout the Middle Ages in fragmentary manuscripts, in related treatises such as *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (misattributed to Cicero), and in oral (that is, classroom) tradition. References to proverbs’ functions by Isidore of Seville, Matthew of Vendôme, and others are documented in B. Taylor 1992:19-22; references by Othlonus of Saint-Emmeram and others in Schulze-Busacker 2000. Besides Erasmus (see note 12 above), potentially applicable post-Chaucerian educators include Vittorino da Feltre and others in

Mnemonic utility is implied also by comments on proverbs in sermon materials (e.g., *Fasciculus morum*) and in rhetorical treatises (e.g., those by John of Garland and Ramon Llull), and by descriptive accounts of recollection (e.g., those by Augustine of Hippo and Hugh of Saint-Victor).<sup>27</sup>

Most directly, brevity and memorability are often specified in the prologues to and commentary upon the late medieval Latin proverb collections studied by Jacqueline Hamesse. She concludes that key terms such as *memoria* (“memory”), *utilitas* (“utility”), and *brevis* (“brief”) recur in patterns indicating that scholars normally memorized the collections full-length, so that they could employ the contents at any time in their classes, sermons, or writings.

Hamesse’s philological evidence enriches a reconsideration of the fictional storytelling event that features Chaucer-the-pilgrim. As usual in tale links, the Host takes center stage in the prologues and epilogues to the tales of Sir Thopas and Melibee. Harry Bailly likes to draw attention to the pilgrims’ respective levels of education. Elsewhere he uses medical jargon to address the Physician, for example, and legalese for the Man of Law. At this point in the tale-telling event, the *Prioress’s Tale* has left listeners too “sobre” for Harry Bailly’s taste. Hoping for “a tale of myrthe,” he calls upon a shy, chubby, pleasant-faced fellow of unascertained educational accomplishments. Soon, insulted, the Host interrupts Chaucer-the-pilgrim’s *Tale of Sir Thopas* in order to decry its “rym dogerel” that represents “verray lewednesse,” that is, its metrically simplistic verse suitable for very young children or for uneducated adults less discriminating than himself. Begging his pardon, Chaucer-the-pilgrim presents instead the *Tale of Melibee*. At its conclusion the Host, bursting with delight, displays his ability to derive instruction from the proverb-collection format associated with Latin schooling. He is even able to articulate his own perception of the tale’s

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Woodward 1964; and Agricola 1992, discussed by Crane 1993:17-25. On analogous educational practices outside of European tradition, representative studies include Eickelman 1978 and Gutas 1981.

<sup>27</sup> On sermon materials see Wenzel 1978 and 1986, both indexes s.v. “proverbs,” and Bland 1997. Representative rhetorical treatises are John of Garland 1974, index s.v. “proverb,” and Llull 1994:27-31. The wide-ranging pedagogical writings by Augustine of Hippo and Hugh of Saint-Victor are documented and discussed throughout Carruthers 1990. Also see McMahon 1963 and Stock 1996:212-26, 261-73.

overall moral, which he thereupon applies to the belligerence of his own big-armed wife.<sup>28</sup>

By placing the childish, versified *Tale of Sir Thopas* alongside a framed proverb collection, Chaucer-the-author has set up a vernacular mirror to the structure of the Latin *Distichs of Cato*. Manuscript order implies that schoolchildren learned to recite the brief prose items of *Parvus Cato* prior to the two-line verses of *Magnus Cato*. (In actual schoolrooms, learning processes overlapped; younger boys repeatedly listened to more advanced recitations before vocalizing them.) Although the Host does not realize it, the two sections of the most basic Latin schooltext are being reversed and readjusted to suit his level of education and his self-esteem. Chaucer-the-pilgrim's initial offering inflicts upon the ears a verseform with phonemic and stress patterns so repetitive that *Tale of Sir Thopas*, like nursery rhymes, almost compels memorization.<sup>29</sup> Apologetic then, for having misestimated his Host's capabilities, the narrator turns from that undersophisticated evocation of the metrical *Magnus Cato* to an elaborated rendition in the format of *Parvus Cato*. Chaucer-the-pilgrim's second affable attempt to please and to teach, *dulcere et docere*, hits right on the proverbial target.

Further implications of the two tales' juxtaposition will soon be clarified by research in progress on the marginal glosses and markings in manuscripts of *Canterbury Tales*. The pioneering variorum editors John M. Manly and Edith Rickert (1940) copied only those glosses that "seem[ed] important" for the purpose of establishing textual evolution, and therefore few from copies of *Melibee*. The same manuscripts' marginalia, now being documented by scholars including Stephen Partridge and Joel Fredell, will illuminate to what extent near-contemporary scribes shared later readers' avid attention to Chaucer's proverbs. How typical is John Lydgate's praise of his colleague's "many prouerbe diuers and vnkouth," or William Caxton's appreciation for the "short quyck and hye sentences" in the *Canterbury Tales*?<sup>30</sup> In the samples provided by Manly and Rickert, margins often

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<sup>28</sup> *CT* VII 691-711, 919-35, 1889-1923; also *Physician's Tale* ll. 304-17 and *Man of Law's Tale* ll. 33-38.

<sup>29</sup> See Gaylord 1979 on the verse form of *Thopas*. See Quinn and Hall 1982 on mnemonics for Middle English verse forms resembling it. See Burling 1970:137-46 on similar verse forms in nursery rhymes and also in children's poems in Chinese and Sumatran vernaculars, with broader implications.

<sup>30</sup> Manly and Rickert 1940:iii, 483, 524-25; iv, 148-215; Lydgate, prologue to the *Siege of Thebes* (c. 1422), and Caxton, preface to the *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1483), both here quoted from Spurgeon 1960:i, 28, 62.

contain Latin equivalents of the Middle English text's proverbs. Frequent also are phrases like "nota prouerbium" or "a prouerbe," and graphic marks including hands—the prototypes for all those disembodied hands that point to proverbs from the margins of seventeenth-century Chaucer folios, as requested by late sixteenth-century readers.<sup>31</sup>

Pending further studies on manuscript and readership contexts, re-examination of the Middle English text itself can bring us one step closer to re-establishing late fourteenth-century perception of the *Tale of Melibee* and, through it, the irrepressible Wife of Bath. The remainder of this article will document the tale's three labeling terms for memorable statements—"sentence," "sawe," and "proverbe"—with reference to the expressions at parallel positions in Chaucer-the-author's direct French source, the *Livre de Mellibee et Prudence* by Renaud of Louens (1958), and in Renaud's Latin source, the *Liber consolationis et consilii* by Albertanus of Brescia ("Book of Consolation and Advice," 1873).

That Latin ancestor of Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* clarifies its relationship to educational media. Albertanus of Brescia, for his three adult sons, compiled three proverb collections with three different organizational schemata. For his son Vincentius in 1238 he compiled *De amore . . . et de forma vite* ("About love . . . and about the form of life"). This collection resembles many others, including theological ones, that assemble proverbs according to topic: a group entitled "De fortuna" ("About fortune"), a group "De timore" ("About fear"), and so on.<sup>32</sup> For his son Stephanus in 1245 Albertanus compiled *De doctrina dicendi et tacendi* ("About the knowledge of speaking and remaining silent"). Adapting the "type A" *accessus* formula or its rhetorical prototype, he arranged proverbs into six subdivided chapters demonstrating *quis, quid, cui, cur, quomodo*, and *quando*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Manly and Rickert 1940:iii, 483-527. On Thomas Speght's insertion of pointing hands into the margins of his second edition (1602), in response to requests concerning his first edition (1598), see Bowden 1995:314-15, 320-21. On the convention itself see Hunter 1951. An analogous phenomenon is noted by Wenzel 1978:87-90: for sermon auditors, various Middle English proverbs might replace a given Latin proverb.

<sup>32</sup> Albertanus 1980. On the context and contents (but not the format) of Albertanus's works, see Powell 1992. The author's name appears also as Albertano da Brescia and, due to library data-entry clerks oblivious to Latin inflections, Albertani Brixiensis (sometimes as if part of a work's title).

<sup>33</sup> Albertanus 1884, using the title preferred by Powell 1992. On types of *accessus*, see Minnis and Scott 1988:12-15.

For his youngest son Joannes one year later, Albertanus experimented with even more innovative organization. The *Liber consolationis et consilii* embeds its list of proverbs in a gender-specific debate. The format echoes the verbal triumph of a female Judeo-Christian Alithia (Truth) over a male Greco-Roman Pseustis (Deceit) that takes place in a widely used medieval schooltext modeled on Virgil's eclogues, the *Eclogue of Theodulus*. In Albertanus's *Liber consolationis et consilii* the male disputant's name Melibeus has associations with Virgil's first *Eclogue*. The female vanquisher's name, Prudentia, is one of the four cardinal virtues that Christian teachers applied to the four books of the pre-Christian *Distichs of Cato*.<sup>34</sup>

Albertanus's debate between Melibeus and Prudentia is divided into fifty-one chapters of uneven length. Each has a summarizing or topical title: "De necessitate" ("About necessity"), "De improperio mulierum" ("About women's improper behavior"), "De excusatione mulierum" ("In defense of women"), "De bona fama" ("About good fame"), and so on. Nearly every chapter provides more proverbs on its stated topic, including variants of some, than does the equivalent section left untitled in French or Middle English. Thus, like the two treatises for Joannes's older brothers, the *Liber consolationis et consilii* exemplifies a thoughtfully ordered collection of proverbs. Just as in other such collections, it provides mnemonic links to the items' occurrence in authoritative sources such as the Bible, Ovid, Cicero, Seneca, and anonymous oral tradition.

Did the frame story of Albertanus's third proverb collection enhance its educational effectiveness? Do proverbs exchanged in a husband-wife debate adhere faster to a thinker's mind than do proverbs listed in the two usual ways, by topic or at random, or listed in alphabetical order like those of Publilius Syrus? This issue could be investigated possibly by psycholinguistic experiments, but assuredly by more medievalists' primary research into the pragmatics of pre-modern education. It is known that the innovative format well outlasted its counterparts. Although Albertanus's other writings soon faded, "as the author of the Tale of Melibeus . . . he would continue to exercise influence well into the sixteenth century" in

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<sup>34</sup> Albertanus 1873. On the *Eclogue of Theodulus* see Thomson and Perraud 1990:110-26. Concerning Melibeus's name, Powell 1992:78-79 posits as intermediary Godfrey of Winchester. Concerning Prudentia, see Bowden 2000b and Hazelton 1957:167n.

printed editions and in translation into Italian, German, Dutch, Spanish, Czech, French, and thereupon Middle English.<sup>35</sup>

Some of those vernacular translations today remain in manuscript, and the *Liber consolationis et consilii* itself deserves re-editing. We must not leap to philological conclusions about access to Latin learning by speakers of other medieval vernaculars merely on the grounds that the *Tale of Melibee* employs the Middle English cognate to the Latin term *sententia* both for specific words quoted and also for an expandable set of authoritative interpretations of those words, whereas the Middle English cognate to *proverbium* is used only to label the succinct, memorable words themselves, whether as separate quotations or as a cover term. Other languages' cognates may or may not make like distinctions. It is even possible that an exhaustive search through Middle English would show Chaucer's usage in this one tale to be idiosyncratic. Another open-ended issue looms insofar as Chaucer's other writings employ "byword," "precept," "word," and other terms besides the three to be investigated within the *Tale of Melibee*. Within this article, therefore, carefully limited philological data will serve but as humble handmaidens to the creative genius of The Parent of English Literature.

Among the three terms, "sawe" early entered Middle English from Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon; it appears, for example, in Layamon's *Brut* (c. 1200). Both "proverbe" and "sentence" came to Middle English from Latin via French, resounding with authoritative echoes from the biblical book of Proverbs (and similar non-canonical collections) and from the *Four Books of Sentences* wherewith Peter Lombard crystallized for university use the tradition of compiling proverbial sentences from Christian sources.<sup>36</sup>

Within the *Tale of Melibee*, it is essential to note, by far the majority of statements quoted are labeled as neither "sawe" nor "proverbe" nor "sentence." Many are said by generic authorities: by men or by laws; by a philosopher or a versifier; by the law, the book, the poet, the prophet, the apostle, the wise man. Most statements overall, however, are introduced by

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<sup>35</sup> Powell 1992:121-27 (quoted from 125).

<sup>36</sup> Davis 1979 and Kurath 1956-, in both s.v. *byword, precept, proverb, saw, sentence, and word*; also see Louis 1997 on *proverb*. On the two religious contexts see, respectively, Fontaine 1982 and Colish 1994:i, 42-43, 77-90.

the reliable mnemonic device of direct attribution, accurate or no, to a named authority figure.<sup>37</sup>

Occasionally, one of the three labeling terms plus an authority's proper name together introduce a quotation. Within the tale, "sentence" appears in a range of usages to be described. One of its occurrences refers to a statement also being attributed to a named authority: the "sentence of Ovide" in Prudence's opening comments. In *Melibee* the term "sawe" occurs three times. Twice it accompanies a named attribution to Christian scriptures—quoting David and Paul respectively, and thus the Old and New Testaments. The other instance is instead an anonymous "comune sawe."<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, of the seven occurrences of "proverbe" labeling eight statements, none is conjoined with an authority's proper name in the *Tale of Melibee*. Anonymous origins are likewise implied by the noun's attributive adjectives, which modify it thrice as a "commune" and once as an "old" proverb. Philological complications arise in that the prologue to *Melibee* uses "proverbe" not just for the eight items so labeled but also as cover term for all statements to follow: this "litel tretys" comprehends "somwhat moore / Of proverbes than ye han herd bifoore."<sup>39</sup> The current folkloristic definition, therefore, may be adapted to apply to earlier contexts. A Middle English "proverbe" did tilt philologically toward indeterminacy of origin—as wise words transmitted in "commune," "old" oral tradition, indeed, but also as a generic term for authoritative statements from named and anonymous sources alike, including the biblical book of Proverbs.

Compared to "sawe," which likewise could be "commune," "proverbe" entered Middle English closer to Chaucer's time. So did "sentence," bearing a host of meanings related to *sententia* (and not yet including the grammatical unit with subject and predicate, first recorded in 1447).<sup>40</sup> In classical Latin *sententia* meant an opinion or a way of thinking, especially one backed by judicial or legislative authority. By extension, it could also mean both a thought succinctly expressed in words and also the

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<sup>37</sup> William of Wheteley, for example, notes that "statements of 'authentic' men are more diligently and firmly inscribed in the mind of the hearer" (trans. by Sebastian 1970:300).

<sup>38</sup> CT VII 976, 1735, 1840, 1481.

<sup>39</sup> CT VII 955-57. See below, notes 60-65, for the term's seven occurrences within the tale.

<sup>40</sup> Simpson and Weiner 1989, s.v. *sentence*.

implications behind a given set of literal words. For Great Britain, late medieval Latin documents add a usage associated with university degrees in theology, and make more specific the application of *sententia* to a judge's courtroom decision.<sup>41</sup> On the Continent as well as in England, late medieval scholars continued also to employ *sententia* in classically based, overlapping uses involving truth and/or authority and/or exact words and/or some deeper meaning beneath a specified set of words.<sup>42</sup>

Some well-documented medieval meanings of *sententia* may even appear mutually exclusive: most obviously, the quoted words themselves versus an allegorical interpretation of such words. As will be noted further, this anomaly signals an issue in pre-modern education that has lately been relegated to "Folklore" as an artificially separated academic discipline: the issue of variants created, intentionally or no, during the oral transmission of a given item of verbal art.<sup>43</sup> Several *sententiae* differently worded, that is, may express much the same underlying *sententia*. Conversely, an exactly quoted *sententia* may be assigned somewhat different *sententiae* by several equally authoritative interpreters. In short, what is truth? How do we recognize truth in, or in spite of, variable human language? And for that matter (pun intended) who knows?

The Middle English term "sentence" bore interlocking meanings quite as complex as those of its Latin cognate. Within the *Tale of Melibee* Chaucer-the-author employs an entire spectrum of usage for "sentence." Moreover, he leads into the tale by placing both extremes close together. As mentioned, the "sentence of Ovide" quotes the exact words of a pre-

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<sup>41</sup> See under *sententia* and its derivatives in Du Cange 1954, Latham 1965, Lewis and Short 1966, and Souter 1949. Although university curricula changed across time, one advanced degree was the "baccalaureus sententiarius," which seems to have proven a holder's ability to lecture spontaneously upon any assigned *sententia* among those collected by Peter Lombard. See Colish 1994 and Maieru 1994.

<sup>42</sup> See Weijers 1991:87-88 and Woods 1992. The range of usage may be exemplified by the translations that *sententia* necessitates in an anthology of medieval commentaries. In excerpts provided, an introduction to *Eclogue of Theodulus* uses *sententia* in the sense "profound saying"; Conrad of Hirsau uses it as "idea," Peter Abelard as "opinion," Hugh of Saint-Victor as the "deeper meaning" beneath the two layers of letter and sense in a text, William of Conches as the "profound meaning" beneath the text's letter (that is, just one layer down) but elsewhere as a "fully expressed thought," and so on. See Minnis and Scott 1988:18, 55, 95, 83, 83n., 131.

<sup>43</sup> See Bowden 1995:310-11 concerning the mid-1950s split of Folklore and English into separate academic disciplines.

Christian authority. Just thirty lines earlier, in striking contrast, Chaucer's verse prologue states three times that a true, unified "sentence" underlies the four Evangelists' divergent verbal accounts of the Crucifixion.<sup>44</sup> Sacred versus secular connotations reinforce the dichotomy established between the Bible's deeper meaning, diversely worded, and Ovid's literal words, exactly quoted. In between these two contrasting usages, Chaucer further shifts the kaleidoscopic term in order to describe his own work as a humble human wordsmith. Don't blame me for translating sense for sense rather than word for word, he urges, because my own "sentence" preserves the "sentence" of the treatise that is my source text (*CT* VII 961-64):

Blameth me nat; for, as in my sentence,  
Shul ye nowher fynden difference  
Fro the sentence of this tretys lyte [little]  
After the which this murye tale I write.

The humility topos helps to convey the author's teasing wordplay on a term that may refer to truth and/or authority and/or exact words and/or some deeper meaning beneath a given set of words, whether sacred or secular. Furthermore, "in my sentence" does refer to the meaning of the narrator's impending tale. At the enjambed line's end, however, the phrase momentarily implies a formal judicial ruling, like the courtroom "sentence and judgement" to be delivered by the magistrate Melibee only after he acquiesces to his wife's better judgment.<sup>45</sup>

Following the verse prologue to the *Tale of Melibee*, mutations of the term "sentence" may be traced via comparison to Chaucer's source text, the mid-fourteenth-century *Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*. Through 1179 lines of French prose, condensed by about one-third from the Latin of Albertanus of Brescia, Renaud of Louens uses "sentence" less frequently than does Chaucer, and in only three senses: secular quotation, human advice, and formal judicial ruling.

Concerning the respective word choices by Chaucer and Renaud, a point of contrast appears soon after the tale's brief but action-packed opening scene. Within the first seventy-five lines, besides quoting Ovid, Chaucer uses "sentence" to label three instances of advice: twice for valid advice from calm, experienced counselors, and a third time for the revenge-

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<sup>44</sup> *CT* VII 976, 943-52; Davis 1979 and Kurath 1956-, in both s.v. *sentence*.

<sup>45</sup> See above, note 17, regarding translation terminology such as "source text" and the distinction "sense-for-sense" versus "word-for-word."

happy youngsters' shouts of "Werre! Werre!" that temporarily convince Melibee. At parallel positions Albertanus of Brescia has "consilium," then the verb "consulimus," then again "consilium." Renaud renders the first two instances with "conseil" and "conseillons," applying "sentence" to the bad advice only.<sup>46</sup> Chaucer's use of "sentence" all three times, for good and bad advice alike, implies that contradictory "sentences" may sound equally authoritative on the surface, and that an educated person ought to make interpretive decisions more thoughtfully than Melibee does.

The next five times that "sentence" occurs in the *Tale of Melibee*, Chaucer has added it to the French text. The word's meaning continues to fluctuate in significant ways. First, responding to Prudence's dismay, Chaucer's Melibee agrees not to wreak the immediate revenge urged by young rowdies. He quotes a "proverbe," to be discussed, that justifies changing his mind. To Melibee's "sentence" thus expressed—that is, to his stated judgment based on that proverb and on her many citations of named authority—Prudence responds with joy. No labels at all occur for the equivalent statements in French or Latin.<sup>47</sup>

Next, the French wife asks how ("comment" with no noun) her husband understands the physicians' "proposicion" ("qualiter intelligas verbum dubium" in Latin). Chaucer's Prudence terms the physicians' oral advice a "text," then inquires about her husband's "sentence," that is, his interpretation of the deeper meaning beneath the literal words spoken by knowledgeable physicians.<sup>48</sup>

Melibee says what he thinks. Prudence disproves his explication with reference to eleven statements by secular and religious authorities. In the process, as the third occurrence of Middle English "sentence" with no parallel French (or Latin) noun, she states the general truth that Christ's counsel is best. "To this sentence," she continues, "accordeth the prophete David, that seith, 'If God ne kepe. . .'" Here "sentence" refers not to the subsequent quotation but rather to a major religious belief that is stated in certain words by "David" but also in other words by other authorities. This usage echoes the one reiterated in the prologue, of the unified sacred "sentence" described four ways in four Gospels.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> CT VII 1002, 1026, 1050; Renaud ll. 64, 100, 148; Albertanus 1873:6.10 (page 6, line 10), 8.13, 11.12, hereafter cited as "Albertanus" with page and line numbers.

<sup>47</sup> CT VII 1264-65, Renaud line [hereafter understood] 475, Albertanus 66.13.

<sup>48</sup> CT VII 1278, Renaud 487-89, Albertanus 67.18.

<sup>49</sup> CT VII 1303-4, Renaud 515, Albertanus 69.14; cf. CT VII 943-52.

Melibee cowers, perhaps, while Prudence briskly proceeds to her “seconde point” concerning household security measures. She wants to “knowe how that ye understonde thilke wordes [by other counselors] and what is youre sentence.” Except that the physicians’ “text” is replaced by these counselors’ “wordes,” the two passages are parallel. Having evoked a major Christian truth thirty lines earlier, that is, “sentence” reverts to label Melibee’s interpretive judgment, which again will prove downright injudicious. The French and Latin wives use no nouns to ask how, “comment” and “quomodo,” their respective husbands understand the counsellors’ advice.<sup>50</sup>

Three lines later, Melibee’s overwrought fortification plan is termed an ill-considered “sentence,” yet another misguided interpretation, which Prudence again proceeds to demolish with full assistance from an array of named authority figures. Again the French and Latin wives just reply, accompanied by no nouns.<sup>51</sup>

In summary, within four hundred lines Chaucer uses “sentence” ten times—five in the prologue, five in the tale—where Renaud has no equivalent term at all. At two additional points, Chaucer changes good counsel in Renaud’s text to good “sentence.” He and Renaud both use “sentence” for the bad advice from belligerent young people, and both use it for the first Ovidian citation (“verbo Ovidii” in Latin).<sup>52</sup> Through the rest of his *Tale of Melibee*, Chaucer follows Renaud. The term thereafter applies only to judicial “sentences” thrice proposed by the same Melibee whose interpretative “sentences” have been decisively overruled as such by only the Middle English Prudence, not by her French and Latin foremothers.

Among these three references to Judge Melibee’s professional sentencing responsibilities, the final one would seem to record female vocal tones that differ across the three languages. In Latin, using a singular noun for this one instance of bad judgment still open to remedy, Albertanus’s Prudentia informs her husband that he ought to “ab hoc malo praecepto desistas.” In contrast, the Frenchwoman employs a mellifluous verb and a culturally laden adverb to beg sweetly that her man “sentencier plus courtoisement.” Chaucer first translates word-for-word, “ye moste deemen moore curteisly”; after “this is to seyn,” he reiterates using plural nouns.

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<sup>50</sup> *CT* VII 1331-32, Renaud 550, Albertanus 72.9.

<sup>51</sup> *CT* VII 1335, Renaud 556, Albertanus 72.15.

<sup>52</sup> *CT* VII 976, Renaud 22, Albertanus 2.17. For the other occurrences see notes 44-51 above.

Thus a thoughtful schoolmarm urges that, as a general principle, Melibee “yeven moore esy sentences and juggementz.”<sup>53</sup> Presumably as happenstance, not as jocular irony, here in its final appearance the multi-faceted, labyrinthian word “sentence” is termed “esy.”

Of the other two labels for memorable statements in the *Tale of Melibee*, “sawe” hints at a range of meanings resembling that of “sentence,” whereas “proverbe” does not. The Germanic-based “sawe” replaces three verb phrases, not nouns, in Renaud’s work: “ce que dit” two biblical authorities, and “que l’on dit communément.” Chaucer uses “comune sawe” for the latter phrase, retaining its anonymity. Up north, Chaucer and Renaud heard commonly said a statement attributed elsewhere to Seneca. Albertanus of Brescia introduces the same with “scriptum est,” though giving no writer’s name.<sup>54</sup> Possibly the idea here expressed—that it is foolish to fight anyone at all, regardless of physique—retained a sense of authorship longer in Seneca’s homeland.

Albertanus does not, however, elsewhere make attributions more precise than those of his subsequent translators. In another instance behind a Middle English “sawe,” Albertanus surely knew the textual source for a statement that he introduces with a doubly passive verb phrase. Avarice “consuevit ‘radix omnium malorum’ nuncupari,” “is customarily called the ‘root of all evils’ in public.” Renaud names the biblical source: “selon ce que dit l’apostre.” Chaucer replaces Renaud’s phrase with three prepositional phrases: “for after the sawe of the word of the Apostle, ‘Coveitise is roote of alle harmes’.” Resembling one occurrence of “sentence” within the *Tale of Melibee*, here “sawe” refers to an authoritative meaning beneath the set of literal words being quoted.<sup>55</sup>

Regarding this usage and others, “proverbe” differs from both “sentence” and “sawe.” In the *Tale of Melibee* “proverbe” always refers to literal words themselves, never to any underlying meanings. Also, as noted, “proverbe” never occurs along with a proper name; and in the prologue

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<sup>53</sup> *CT* VII 1855-56, Renaud 1155-56, Albertanus 122.27-28. For the other two occurrences of judicial sentences, see *CT* VII 1830, Renaud 1128, Albertanus 118.24-25; and *CT* VII 1836, Renaud 1135, Albertanus 119.22-23.

<sup>54</sup> *CT* VII 1481, Renaud 740, Albertanus 92.27. For Seneca and other sources, see DeLong 1987.

<sup>55</sup> *CT* VII 1840, Renaud 1139, Albertanus 120.2-3; cf. *CT* VII 1303-4. Albertanus credits and explicates the biblical sentence elsewhere, e.g., in his chapter “De cupiditate seu voluptate vitanda in consiliis,” 35.4-39.4. The third occurrence of “sawe” is *CT* VII 1735, Renaud 1034, Albertanus 113.26.

“proverbes” serves as cover term for all of the memorable statements to follow, conveying authority both named and unnamed.

Furthermore, an intriguing dimension of the word’s usage would require research well beyond the scope of this article. Is it by chance that every “proverbe” so labeled in *Melibee*, save one, has a counterpart documented across time and recognizable today? During six centuries each proverb’s exact words have changed at the same rate as has the English language, while the underlying sense has remained stable. Unfortunately, despite the Pearl-maiden’s remark “the mo the myryer,” few present-day literary scholars are doing primary research on the diachronic tenacity of traditional, authoritative, succinct oral statements worthy of remembrance.<sup>56</sup>

Four of the eight “proverbes” in the *Tale of Melibee* are variants of one that, less diversified nowadays, survives as “haste makes waste.”<sup>57</sup> Instead of four variants at the equivalent four places, Renaud’s treatise has a duplicate placed twice, and elsewhere nothing. Usually, that is, Chaucer follows his source text closely. Here, instead, he has inserted a passage as vehicle for two additional alternative wordings of “haste makes waste.”

By adding variants in this one case, Chaucer is reamplifying a feature of Albertanus’s work that Renaud had condensed. At positions parallel to two of Chaucer’s four variant proverbs, Renaud exactly repeats “qui tost juge tost se repent,” introduced at both points with “[l’]on dit comunément.” At both of these places, plus many others that expand the Latin treatise’s size and complexity, Albertanus was providing his son Joannes with numerous proverbs on each topic (here on over-hasty judgment), including variant wordings that all convey basically the same underlying sense. At one place, for example, Renaud has substituted a

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew and Waldron 1979:94, for *Pearl* line 850. As mentioned above (note 13), Wolfgang Mieder keeps documenting essentially all proverb scholarship in all major European languages and many others.

<sup>57</sup> See Bowden 1995:317-20 on diachronic classification of proverbs and identification of variants. Methods of classification vary. Walther 1963-69 depends on key words that may, however, fluctuate. Wilson 1970 provides useful cross-references among key words, but no codes. The code system developed by Tilley 1950, and adopted by Dent 1981 and 1984, unfortunately is not aligned with the one developed by Whiting 1958, who covers late medieval writings, including Chaucer’s. For example, “Haste makes waste” is code H189 in Tilley 1950 but H162 in Whiting 1958, which also separates H171 (“He hastes well that wisely can abide”) from H166 (“In wicked haste is no profit [speed]”) with reference to line 1054 of the *Tale of Melibee*. Here I document each proverb as both “Tilley” and “Whiting” with their respective codes, on the understanding that Tilley’s system has prevailed overall.

single vernacular proverb for the seven Latin ones that constitute Albertanus's entire chapter "De festinantia vitanda in consiliis."<sup>58</sup>

Albertanus's *Liber consolationis et consilii*, that is, normally groups many differing *sententiae* "literal words quoted," each of which conveys much the same *sententia* "underlying meaning." Educated readers of or listeners to a vernacular proverb collection—Renaud's, Chaucer's, or another translator's—were able to use each vernacular statement to search their brains for a range of Latin equivalents, including but not limited to those listed by Albertanus.

Pedagogical practices had further trained users to recall and (if need be) to reconstruct aloud the relevant sections of the Latin texts that contained each proverb recalled. In addition, a thinker might wish to recollect various vernacular texts and oral contexts for each translingual proverb. In a classroom or another situation, he thus might relate his and his students' everyday unofficial culture to the broader human history and geography represented by Latin *auctoritates*.<sup>59</sup> I hope that future research—philological, folkloristic, literary, sociolinguistic, sociohistorical—will come to clarify these and other means by which a Middle English "proverbe" both could refer to traditional wisdom of anonymous masses and also could function as a generic term encompassing the highest secular and religious authorities.

Meanwhile, the *Tale of Melibee* can demonstrate to what extent Chaucer-the-author's attention to "proverbes" has reinforced the verbal triumph of a Christian-named woman over a Greco-Roman-named man (as in the *Eclogue of Theodulus*). While translating Rouen's work, Chaucer has introduced a narrative progression such that proverbial wisdom passes from local male authorities to Prudence. It passes thereafter to her husband, but only after he concedes the superiority of her argument.

To create this effect, whereby a proto-Alisounian Prudence uses proverbs to educate Melibee, Chaucer has added to his source four of the seven occurrences of "proverbe" (referring to eight items). At parallel places Renaud has either no introduction or else the verb phrase "[l']on dit communément," rendering Albertanus's "dici consuevit" or "semper audivi

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<sup>58</sup> Renaud 106-7, Albertanus 8.20-9.1; Renaud 286-87, Albertanus 39.5-25.

<sup>59</sup> See Blonquist 1987 for a valuable, neglected document: a thirteenth-century French translation of and commentary upon Ovid's mock-didactic *Ars amatoria*. Apparently preserving information provided by a schoolmaster, whether typical or atypical, this work explicates Ovid's text by quoting 84 French proverbs, 14 Latin proverbs, and excerpts from 68 French folksongs each carefully distinguished (with but one exception) as either a men's song or a women's song.

dici.” As will be noted, Albertanus does apply *proverbium* to one of the eight items.

Only in Middle English, however, is a “commune proverbe” first quoted by a respectable lawyer advising calm deliberation. Soon thereafter a wise old man, having been likewise shouted down by war-mongering youths, offers a different “commune proverbe” to prove his point that “good conseil wanteth whan it is moost nede.” The old man’s “proverbe” is the only one, among eight so labeled in the *Tale of Melibee*, that has not survived in oral tradition.<sup>60</sup>

The lawyer’s “commune proverbe,” however, is diachronically linked to “haste makes waste.” It reinforces a major point in his oral report on the legalistic deliberations so far. He and his colleagues advise Melibee to take defensive measures. They still need more time to consider evidence for and against declaration of war, he says, because “he that soone deemeth, soone shal repente.” A hundred lines further along, then, Prudence has wrung from Melibee a concession to her “grete sapience,” and has begun to instruct him “how ye shul governe yourself in chesyng of youre conseilours.” Seek God’s counsel first, she advises. Seek your own counsel next, after driving out of your heart wrath, and covetousness, and haste. “As ye herde her biforn,” she says, referring to the lawyers’ consultation, you ought to apply to your own internal emotions “the commune proverbe . . . ‘he that soone deemeth, soone repenteth’.”<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, in between these two slightly different wordings applied with equal wisdom toward two quite different situations, Chaucer’s Prudence also supplies the additional variants of “haste makes waste.” “The proverbe seith,” says she, “‘He hasteth wel that wisely kan abyde,’ and ‘in wikked haste is no profit’.” Her comment is one of very few supplements anywhere at all to Renaud’s text, which goes directly from the French Prudence’s quotation of Petrus Alphonsus to the first of Melibee’s five reasons to reject female advice. As noted, Chaucer truncates the five French reasons to three, then expands Prudence’s refutation of all five. To similar effect, the two additional variants intensify the Middle English wife’s debating skill. Seeing “how that hir housbonde shoop hym for [intended] to

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<sup>60</sup> *CT* VII 1048, Renaud 142 (as “proverbe commun”), Albertanus 11.3-4; Whiting C458, citing only this occurrence. No equivalent appears in Dent 1981 and 1984, Tilley 1950, or Wilson 1970 for this item from the collection attributed to Publilius Syrus (Duff and Duff 1935:100, line 653).

<sup>61</sup> *CT* VII 1030, 1114-15, 1135; Tilley J97; Whiting J78. See above, note 58, for parallels in Renaud and Albertanus.

. . . bigynne werre,” she not only quotes “Piers Alphonc” but also reinforces that authority figure’s stance with two independent wordings of the anonymous advice lately declared by a male neighbor with law school credentials.<sup>62</sup>

After Melibee concedes “I wol governe me by thy conseil in alle thyng,” as described, Prudence brandishes the same “commune proverbe” as did the local lawyer. Her next proverbial lesson coincides with the only instance of trilingual terminological alignment among the three treatises. Here “the proverbe seith” directly renders Renaud’s “l’on dit un proverbe,” which directly renders Albertanus’s “in proverbio dicitur.” Prudence’s statement so introduced occurs today as, usually, “don’t bite off more than you can chew”: “he that to mucche embraceth, distreyneth litel.”<sup>63</sup>

Thereafter Melibee not only concedes his wife’s point but also admits outright, “I have erred.” Upon agreeing to change his counselors to suit her specifications, he himself now becomes able to quote a “proverbe”: “to do synne is mannyssh, but certes for to persevere longe in synne is werk of the devel.” This tripartite proverb sometimes lacks the second clause, as here, and sometimes lacks the third, as in line 525 of Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism*: “To Err is *Human*; to Forgive, *Divine*.” Its initial clause alone remains in oral tradition. “To err is human” would nowadays accompany some interpretive gesture such as an embarrassed grimace, apologetic burial of face in hands, or nonchalant shrug of shoulders.

The treatises by Renaud and Albertanus both blend this long-enduring proverbial thought into the compliant husband’s speech, using no introductory phrase. By labeling it a “proverbe,” Chaucer implies that Melibee now qualifies to pass on traditional words of wisdom. He qualifies right along with his wife, and straight-talking lawyers, and wise old men, and (by the term’s wider implications) the Bible in Latin, common speakers of the vernacular, and a range of sacred and secular authorities both named and anonymous.<sup>64</sup>

At the word’s final occurrence in the *Tale of Melibee*, proverb power reverts to Prudence. Melibee agrees not only to refrain from war but also to

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<sup>62</sup> CT VII 1051-54, Renaud 146-54, Albertanus 11.8-12.3; Tilley H189; Whiting H171, H166.

<sup>63</sup> CT VII 1114, 1135; CT VII 1215, Renaud 405, Albertanus 59.1-2; Tilley M1295; Whiting M774.

<sup>64</sup> CT VII 1261; CT VII 1264, Renaud 472-74, Albertanus 66.11-12; Tilley E179; Whiting S346.

forgive his enemies, and thereby to “accorde with hire [his wife’s] wille and hire entencioun.” She expresses heartfelt gladness with an “old proverbe,” one now six centuries older but readily recognizable as “don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today”: “the goodnesse that thou mayst do this day, do it, and abide nat ne delaye it nat til tomorwe.”<sup>65</sup>

Besides seven of the eight labeled instances, at least one other statement in *Melibee* and its predecessors might well exemplify a proverb that has long survived across time and languages. Rudely shouted by reckless “yonge folk,” it occurs in all three languages as the exact same metaphor, “strike while the iron is hot.” Nowhere, however, is it termed a proverb or anything else.<sup>66</sup> In a different narrative situation, where these same words instead were to offer valid advice, might the statement qualify for an honorific label?

Wherever and whenever specific terms prove appropriate, pending further research, it is certain that proverbs do overleap language barriers and do outlast millennia. We still learn proverbs verbatim without trying, without even noticing. However, we and our students no longer memorize long lists of proverbs aloud on purpose, in order to retrieve data from our brain synapses. Perhaps we should. Perhaps they should. It is not the case that the human brain functions like a computer, nor that human recollection resembles a search on the World Wide Web. Fortunately, indeed blessedly, it is instead the case that computers are modeled upon the human brain.

As a closing metaphor, I propose that proverb collections once functioned as tools for information retrieval. Each proverbial sentence, lasting about three seconds when spoken aloud, could readily be memorized as a neuropsychological unit. Spoken aloud, or whispered if appropriate, each proverb used to open a sort of website within the internet of a properly trained human brain. An educated thinker could “click on” a proverb memorized verbatim, in order to reconnect his brain synapses with various verbal contexts in which he had encountered its equivalent statement in Latin and in vernacular languages including his own. He then could ransack his memory’s storehouse to re-open and refurnish one or more of that proverb’s contexts, reconstructing each one sense for sense more likely than word for word.

In classrooms today, we launch a haphazard approximation of such a search any time that a student’s question or another circumstance elicits oral

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<sup>65</sup> CT VII 1792-95, Renaud 1098-99 (as “proverbe”), Albertanus 117.6-8; Tilley T378; Whiting T348.

<sup>66</sup> CT VII 1035-36, Renaud 120, Albertanus 9.24-25; Tilley I94; Whiting I60.

information other than immediate class preparation. The longer one has been teaching, the faster and clearer and wider and deeper those mental websites open. Indeed, we might repeat ourselves verbatim and, experiencing a “senior faculty moment,” we might well ask, “Wait, wasn’t I just telling you people this? Or was that some other class?”

All information in the world always has been out there somewhere, awaiting access, transformable into knowledge and ultimately into wisdom within human minds. The computer can prove useful as a metaphor, however, in order to encourage scholars’ primary research into pre-modern educational practices in general and into the role of proverb collections in particular. Such research will allow new insights into aspects of the Middle Ages that still appear blurry: Chaucer-the-author’s mental processes while creating one of the most intimidating women in literary history, for example, or his assignment of the tales of Sir Thopas and Melibee to Chaucer-the-pilgrim, riding along among good fellows now and forever en route to Canterbury.

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The geoffrey chaucer page. The Tale of Melibee. A Modern English Translation. This is the translation without the original printed in the interlinear translations. To consult the original, see the interlinear translation Or consult the text directly in The Riverside Chaucer or The Canterbury Tales Complete. Heere bigynneth Chaucers Tale of Melibee.Â Therefore we ask leisure and opportunity to have deliberation in this case to judge. For the common proverb says thus: `He that soon judges, soon shall repent.' And also men say that that judge is wise who soon understands a matter and judges at leisure; for although it be so that all tarrying is bothersome, it is not always to be reproved in giving of judgment nor in vengeance taking, when it is sufficient and reasonable. The Canterbury Tales Summary and Analysis of Chaucer's Tale of Melibee. Buy Study Guide. The Tale of Melibee. There was once a young man named Melibee, mighty and rich, who had with his wife Prudence, a daughter called Sophie.Â Her role in the story is not as an active agent, she is a passive influence on the other characters; and she is a good example to consider in examining the issue of "female counsel", raised hitherto but particularly in the Nun's Priest's Tale. Melibee suggests, above all, that women are worthy counselors and interpreters, and, although the tale celebrates Prudence, its title is apt - it points to Melibee himself, a man able to learn from his wife, whose name means "sweet learning" or "sweet knowledge". What Ubiquitous Format? Chaucer's Tale of Melibee as a Proverb Collection. Article. Betsy Bowden.Â This book examines the development of English as a written vernacular and identifies that development as a process of community building that occurred in a multilingual context. Moving through the eighth century to the thirteenth century, and finally to the sixteenth-century antiquarians who collected medieval manuscripts, it suggests that this important period in the history of English can only