The Parrhesiastic Game in Geoffrey Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee

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In this article, I use Michel Foucault’s discussion of parrhesia in Fearless Speech to elucidate Chaucer’s vision of political and personal disagreement in the Tale of Melibee. Melibee and Prudence’s argument over the proper response to violence represents a ‘parrhesiastic game’, i.e., the willingness of an individual to accept the criticism of the parrhesiastes (one who uses parrhesia) and the courage of the parrhesiastes to offer that criticism in the first place. My article focuses on parrhesia as a defining feature in any community that wants to survive the strains and demands which competing viewpoints exact on its members.

The Tale of Melibee represents a community in disagreement and provides guidance on how to negotiate the perils of competing points of view. When I refer to community in this article, I have in mind Jeannine Quillet’s definition of the medieval community in The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350-c. 1450:

communitas [or community] refers to a body of individuals who by their common action based on the existence of bonds between them, constitute a more or less [my emphasis] institutionalized group, but also one that varies in size and which may or may not be based in a particular territory. ¹

These standard definitions are useful, yet also limited because they suggest a greater sense of constant unity among people than usually exists. A text like Melibee calls attention to the complexity of the concept of community because it reveals the contestation and argumentation that goes into deciding actions that contribute to how a community defines itself. For readers unfamiliar with the Tale of Melibee, the following is a brief synopsis.

The tale is an allegory that I interpret in terms of leadership and advice. Melibee, a rich man, has a wife named Prudence and a young daughter named Sophie, which means ‘wisdom’. Three foes of Melibee’s, associated allegorically with the world, the flesh, and the devil, attack Sophie, i.e., Melibee’s wisdom, and wound her in her feet, hands, ears, nose, and mouth, which are associated allegorically with the senses and communication. The remainder of the tale consists of various conversations that Melibee has with his counsellors and his wife, Prudence, to determine the best course of action in response to the attack. A minority of his

counsellors advise Melibee not to respond with violence, while the majority of them interpret that Melibee wants to respond with violence and encourage him to do so. Prudence disagrees and spends the remainder of the tale arguing for two related points: first, that Melibee needs to choose his counsellors wisely, and that second, he needs to reconcile with his foes rather than fight them.

Much scholarship on the *Tale of Melibee* centres on the relationship of the tale to advice literature. Lee Patterson believes that Chaucer originally translated Renaud de Louen’s *Livre de Melibée* as a mirror for princes for a young Richard II and then later recycled it into the *Canterbury Tales*. Patterson criticises Prudence as an educator because she, to use the parlance of modern educational techniques, takes a ‘sage on the stage model’ of education rather than a ‘guide on the side’ methodology. In two related essays, Ruth Waterhouse and Gwen Griffiths criticise Prudence’s pedagogy because she contradicts herself in her lessons with Melibee. Lynn Staley Johnson focuses on the importance of having advisors who put the ‘body politic’ before personal revenge. Carolyn P. Collette and David Wallace highlight the volatile relationships between men and women, emphasising the importance for women to use patient strategies of communication that steer men towards a path of non-violence. Judith Ferster observes that during the fourteenth century, official parliamentary administration and personal advisement to the king occurred simultaneously; advice manuals such as Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee* offered the king guidance on negotiating the competing terms of advice in the official and personal realms.

In this article, I use Michel Foucault’s discussion of parrhesia in *Fearless Speech* to elucidate Chaucer’s vision of political and personal disagreement. I do not turn to Foucault to disagree or dismantle any of these scholars’ fine contributions to the scholarship on *Melibee*. Instead, I view the tale through the lens of parrhesia because it ties these scholars’ varying interpretations of *Melibee* together and highlights the applicability of Chaucer’s vision of disagreement and reconciliation to modern readers. Before I delve into my reading of *Melibee*, I must offer an explanation of Foucault’s terminology, that is, parrhesia and the parrhesiastic game, as used in this article.

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2 L. Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’: Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, vol. 11, 1989, p. 139.
3 Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’”, p. 160.
Parrhesia means telling the truth to another despite any danger to oneself. The classic exemplar of the parrhesiastes (i.e., one who uses parrhesia) is the philosopher who risks his or her life by telling unwanted truths to a sovereign; for instance, that the king’s reign ‘is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice’. A hallmark of parrhesia is that there is some danger to the parrhesiastes to speak the truth. The danger could be in the form of physical violence or even as passive as the alienation of another person. Foucault asserts that the ‘touchstone of the good ruler is his ability to play the parrhesiastic game’, that is, the willingness to hear truth in the form of criticism from someone in an inferior position. He uses the term ‘game’ because parrhesia cannot be institutionalised; it can only be a ‘moral obligation’ by the parrhesiastes to speak and the ruler to listen.

The parrhesiastic game ‘tests the degree of accord between a person’s life and its principle of intelligibility’. The leader shows his or her worthiness as a leader by playing according to the rules of parrhesia, while the person who risks telling the truth displays his or her commitment to the community. The willingness of a leader, such as Melibee, to participate in a parrhesiastic dialogue with an advisor reveals the ethical or unethical nature of his character. The parrhesiastic relationship moves beyond an oversimplified dichotomy of an active truth-teller and a passive listener. The parrhesiastic dialogue, which refuses the flattery often inherent in relationships based on power or vulnerability, provides the ruler with a model of communication designed to internalise the parrhesiastes’ rigorous standards of truth for the purpose of perpetuating an ethical life in the community. Ethical participation in a community remains possible only insofar as a parrhesiastes retains the right to speak the truth at all times.

The relationship of Melibee and Prudence resonates with this description of the king and the philosopher. Melibee is a wealthy, aristocratic man whose wife and child have been attacked by three foes. Although Melibee is only referred to as a ‘yong man … myghty and riche’ at the beginning of the tale (VII.967), by the end of Melibee, his former foes acknowledge him as ‘youre heigh lordshipe’ (VII.1818). As Larry Scanlon observes, Melibee may not technically be a king, but he ‘has the regal right of disinheritance and exile, though Prudence persuades him not to use it’. Prudence provides a voice of reason with a rich understanding of philosophy to counter her husband’s violent impulses. Melibee and Prudence’s arguments over the proper response to violence evoke what Foucault calls a ‘parrhesiastic game’, which is defined as the willingness of an individual to accept the criticism of the parrhesiastes and the courage of the parrhesiastes to offer that criticism in the first place. Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee lends itself well to a reading of the parrhesiastic game

9 Foucault, Fearless Speech, p. 16.
10 ibid., pp. 22-23.
11 ibid., p. 33.
12 ibid., p. 97.
13 Chaucer provides a parody of the parrhesiastic game in The Manciple’s Tale.
14 Foucault, Fearless Speech, p. 11.
because it synthesises political parrhesia, which means telling the truth to another no matter the risk to oneself, and Socratic parrhesia, which asks one to become accountable for leading an ethical life. In the political domain, parrhesia occurs when one goes against the majority. Notably, parrhesia is also present in non-life-threatening situations:

when, for example, you see a friend doing something wrong and you risk incurring his anger by telling him he is wrong, you are acting as a parrhesiastes. In such a case, you do not risk your life, but you may hurt him by your remarks, and your friendship may suffer for it.

Melibee thus represents a synthesis of political and Socratic parrhesia in the dialogue between Melibee and Prudence over whether to seek revenge for an attack on their child or to seek reconciliation through forgiveness.

In Fearless Speech, Foucault not only posits the definition of a community’s ruler, but he also recognises the community’s contribution to its ruler’s definition. The parrhesiastes helps the ruler to understand that his or her actions affect the community that depends on his or her leadership. By increasing the ruler’s awareness of his responsibility to the community, the parrhesiastes potentially creates the conditions for a relationship between the governor and the governed that thrives on shared governance rather than top-down hierarchical commands. Parrhesia’s productive capacity to improve the community depends entirely on the character of the community’s leader and the parrhesiastes’ willingness to speak the truth because it ‘lacks all institutional foundation’.

Foucault asserts that parrhesia is extra-institutional because no one holds a paid position to speak the truth no matter the danger to himself or herself. Parrhesia functions strictly as ‘a moral obligation’ to be embraced or ignored, according to a person’s character.

In his interrogation of parrhesia as the principle behind ethical communities, Foucault poses three questions that are directly relevant to the Tale of Melibee: ‘How can we recognise someone as a parrhesiastes? What is the importance of having a parrhesiastes for the city?’ and ‘What is the training of a good parrhesiastes?’.

The question of the parrhesiastes’ relevance extends the effects of the parrhesiastic game from interpersonal social relationships to communal political relationships. As a critical process, parrhesia moves beyond simply telling a person in power that he or she is wrong. Rather, parrhesia influences that person to change him- or herself for the sake of self-improvement. The parrhesiastes does not simply use argumentative techniques to ‘persuade others’ to change, but ‘relates to others as an exemplar’.

The act of parrhesia is defined by a sense of obligation and duty

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18 ibid., p. 16.
19 ibid., p. 33.
20 ibid., p. 33.
21 ibid., p. 172.
rather than an emotional investment in a particular outcome.\textsuperscript{24} In this sense, parrhesia recalls the medieval mirrors for princes tradition, as represented by John of Salisbury’s \textit{Policraticus}, in which a writer identifies moral (i.e., kingly) and immoral (i.e., tyrannical) behaviour for the king to emulate or eschew if he wants to be considered a king rather than a tyrant.\textsuperscript{25}

In \textit{Melibee}, Prudence links the impulse to violence that characterises Melibee’s first council with the limitations in his leadership. After his daughter/wisdom, Sophie, is attacked, Melibee holds a council to determine how he should respond to the attack. Despite a minority of dissenters against violent reprisal, Melibee is initially persuaded to retaliate violently by a majority of the council. Prudence disagrees with this stance and criticises Melibee for choosing counsellors who tell him what he wants to hear rather than what is best for the community. Prudence’s parrhesiastic task centres on the necessity for Melibee to change himself so that his counsellors reflect how he should be. To lead the community, Melibee must change himself, but this growth will require him to cast aside those advisors who reflect his untutored self from the opening of the tale.

My article focuses on parrhesia as a defining feature in any community that wants to survive the strains and demands which competing viewpoints exact on its members.

\textbf{Parrhesia and Violence}

\textit{Melibee} suggests that an act of violence by one individual against another impacts the entire community and not merely the violator and the victim. The attack on Melibee and Prudence’s child, Sophie, forces Melibee to decide on the proper response to the executors of violence: either retaliation or reconciliation. The tale begins with the attempted murder of Sophie by Melibee’s enemies and never resolves definitively whether she survived or not. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the attacks emphasise the violation of parts of the body associated with the senses and communication. Melibee’s foes break into his home and inflict ‘fyve mortal woundes in fyve sondry places’, including the feet, hands, eyes, nose, and mouth, which allegorically represent the five senses (VII.971-2). The calculation of the attack moves it beyond a crime of passion that is intended to deprive Sophie of her life. Consequently, the cold, calculated violence of the attack prompts heightened emotions in Melibee that shift the retributive emphasis from the perpetrators of the acts to the entire group to which the attackers belong.

Melibee and Prudence play the parrhesiastic game to determine how to respond to the attack on their child, i.e., Melibee shows the potential to be an ethical leader by allowing Prudence to put a mirror to him that shows his culpability in the violence that occurred to Sophie. Prudence’s role as parrhesiastes exceeds tempering Melibee’s impulsiveness and extends to teaching Melibee to put the common good before his personal responses to violence. Prudence’s political philosophy accords with Thomas Aquinas’ interpretation of a king’s relationship to the common good:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Foucault, \textit{Fearless Speech}, p. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{25} John of Salisbury fell afoul of Henry II and was sent into exile—see Q. Taylor, ‘John of Salisbury, the \textit{Policraticus}, and Political Thought’, \textit{Humanitas}, vol. 19, nos. 1-2, 2006, p. 137.
\end{itemize}
If … a community of free men is ordered by a ruler in such a way as to secure the common good, such rule will be right and just inasmuch as it is suitable to free men. If, however, the government is directed not towards the common good but towards the private good of the ruler, rule of this kind will be unjust and perverted.²⁶

To accomplish the task of re-education, Prudence instructs Melibee on the importance of leading the community to a correct and ethical response to disruptions of violence. More importantly, she teaches him how to recognise when his counsellors advise him in an ethical manner that puts the community first. Prudence’s role as a parrhesiastes illustrates the importance of patience and persistence in criticism as well as the ability to distinguish criticism that deserves to be heard. Melibee’s willingness to play the parrhesiastic game determines whether he leads the community beyond retaliation (’werre’/’war’) and towards reconciliation.

Prudence must lead Melibee to realise that his desire for revenge will cause great harm to the community. The ritualised attack conveys symbolic significance that requires a parrhesiastes to read and to interpret in order for the community to survive without recourse to further violence. When Melibee sees his violated daughter, the effect on him is initially beyond language: ‘he, lyk a mad man rentynge his clothes, gan to wepe and crie’ (VII.973). Melibee’s emotional response to the violence against his wife and child consists of pain and tears, but it is Prudence’s task as a parrhesiastes to dissuade Melibee from making a decision that would adversely affect the entire community.

The problem for Prudence in this situation is that Melibee ‘has been truly wronged’.²⁷ Because he has a reasonable grievance, Melibee inclines to retaliatory violence as an option rather than looking into his own culpability for the crimes committed against him. Melibee finds it difficult to depersonalise the violence because his immediate family suffered the attacks. Prudence interprets Melibee’s name as

‘a man that drynketh hony[,] / ... so muchel hony of sweete temporeel richesses, and delices and honours of this world / that thou art dronken and hast forgotten Jhesu Crist thy creatour (VII.2600-01).

Prudence highlights the allegorical quality of the attack on Sophie, i.e., Melibee’s wisdom, by relating the three foes to the sin, the flesh, and the devil (VII.2610). Her purpose is to show that Melibee’s ‘lack of moral vigilance’ led to the three foes’ attack on his Sophie/wisdom.²⁸ Out of habit, Melibee blurs his private and public roles: when he should attend to the needs of the community, he plays in the fields; when he should attend to issues affecting the community, he puts his personal feelings

²⁸ ibid., p. 153.
first. Essentially, Prudence is trying to make Melibee see that his own selfish preoccupations led to this external attack.

If a leader, such as Melibee, allows his emotions or passions to sway him, then his own internal emotional instability will result in external social instability. Prudence makes the connection for Melibee that the violence in the community fits into a larger pattern of failed leadership on his part. Johnson comments, ‘Prudence offers Melibee counsel that is intended to help him alter a secular and political situation that is poised on the brink of chaos’.29 Before this rapprochement can occur, Melibee must learn to maintain himself in such a way as to ‘master the appetites that threaten to overwhelm’ him.30 This inability to ‘master his appetites’ impedes parrhesiastic communities because it presents a ‘persistent illusion about what we really are’ instead of the truth.31 After all, ‘[w]e are our own flatterers’, Foucault observes, which makes it difficult to determine whether an advisor is a parrhesiastes or not,32 and because of this self-flattery, people do not want a parrhesiastes. However, they need the parrhesiastes to ‘disconnect the spontaneous relation [people] have to [them]selves’ so that they can recognise truth.33 Prudence the parrhesiastes helps Melibee ‘to form [him]self, to surpass [him]self’, and, ultimately, to control himself.34 Staley Johnson alludes to this kind of parrhesiastic care of the self when she writes:

What Prudence teaches [Melibee] to do through her own wise counsel is to exercise control, not over others through force, but over himself by cultivating his sense of measure, of justice, and of mercy.35

To change Melibee effectively, Prudence teaches him to see his actions as they relate to the community. In part, Prudence dissuades Melibee from retaliating against his attackers because a person in a position of authority and responsibility holds an obligation to put the community’s needs, i.e., the common good, before his own desires. The parrhesiastic game that Prudence sets before herself is to shift the grounds of their discussion from the relative merits of peace or war to the more practical problems associated with the creation and maintenance of viable social units.36

Instead of encouraging Melibee’s impulse to slaughter the attackers of her daughter, Prudence models a parrhesiastic discourse of truth-telling in order to ensure that the needs of the community supersede an impulsive, emotional response. In this context,

31 Foucault, Fearless Speech, p. 134.
32 ibid., p. 135.
33 ibid.
36 ibid., p. 141.
the paradox of parrhesia is that although there is no risk for the leader to tell the truth, there is a risk to the community if he does not hear the truth and act upon it.\footnote{Foucault, Fearless Speech, p. 16.}

**Parrhesia Requires Patience**

Melibee and Prudence’s relationship combines both the political and personal emphases of parrhesia in that Prudence, Melibee’s wife, guides her influential husband to make the best civic decision for the benefit of everyone, i.e., whether to forgive or retaliate for the violence against his family. The tale resonates greatly with Foucault’s discussion of the power imbalances that characterise the parrhesiastic dialogue even as Prudence leads her husband through parrhesia to make the best decision for the community. Though married to Melibee, Prudence’s role as wife and counsellor retains an ‘imbalance in power’ even as she uses her proximity and relationship with her husband to persuade him to mitigate his responses.\footnote{A. Walling, “In Hir Tellyng Difference”: Gender, Authority, and Interpretation in the *Tale of Melibee*, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2005, p. 170.} Collette suggests that Prudence’s rhetorical strategies of patience and prudence ensure that she avoids the explosive temper that characterises her husband: ‘prudence was a woman’s way to physical safety and domestic harmony’.\footnote{Collette, ‘Heeding the Counsel’, pp. 423-424.} Wallace, in particular, elaborates on the threat of violence that permeates their relationship. Prudence must dissuade Melibee from thinking solely in terms of his honour because the idea of appearing to be ruled by a woman ‘threatens [her] right of continued existence in the household; the thought of dispensing with her and the virtues she mirrors back to him … evidently cross[es] Melibee’s mind’.\footnote{Wallace, ‘Household Rhetoric’, pp. 242-243.} In her dialogue, Prudence must balance the frank speech necessary to make Melibee see himself as the root cause of all of his problems, while simultaneously protecting herself from his temper.

*Melibee* explicitly teaches that patience serves as the ideal response to violence, but patience is just as important in the process of parrhesiastic counsel. Prudence, in her role as a parrhesiastes, is an effective counsellor not only because she has the courage to tell the truth to a violent autocrat (‘in his herte he baar a cruuel ire’), but also the patience to persist in speaking her understanding of the truth to Melibee (VII.1008). The task in parrhesia calls for the parrhesiastes to recognise positive traits in the interlocutor so that she can lead him to ethical decisions. The tale emphasises Melibee’s potential to be a better person than he seems to be at the beginning. Though initially vengeful, Melibee shows he is capable of civil discourse. His interpretations may be faulty, but his references show an awareness of the texts that Prudence uses to instruct him.\footnote{ibid., p. 410.} Melibee’s very ability to ‘persist’ in pursuing his own train of thought, in turn, requires a parrhesiastes with the patience to persist.\footnote{Mari Pakkala-Weckström, ‘Prudence and the Power of Persuasion—Language and Maistrie in the *Tale of Melibee*, *Chaucer Review*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2001, p. 410. Pakkala-Weckström calls attention to Melibee’s persistence, which I suggest is a key element in parrhesia that *The Tale of Melibee* helps to highlight.} Prudence must have patience because in order to change Melibee for the better, she must tell him that which he does not want to hear. A parrhesiastes, such as Prudence,
ideally produces salutary effects on the community because of her moral obligation to educate the leader. This education consists of ‘disclos[ing] those truths which would ensure the salvation or welfare of the’ community.43

The Parrhesiastic Community

In the Tale of Melibee, Chaucer adds a vital addition to our understanding of parrhesia’s capacity to mitigate the deleterious effects of violence on the community through his emphasis on the importance of choosing wise counsellors. Parrhesia involves not only correcting a powerful person but also influencing that person to change him- or herself for the sake of the community. Melibee already has a parrhesiastes in the form of his wife, but Prudence wants to create a parrhesiastic community that includes a greater number of ethical resources for comprehending the violence that pervades the community. She does not simply want Melibee to follow blindly what other people say. Instead, she wants him to choose counsellors whom he can trust and also to be able to discern whether their advice is positive, productive, and ethical. Prudence’s parrhesiastic task involves persuading Melibee to change himself so that his counsellors are a reflection of who he should be rather than who he currently is.

Melibee presents a highly vocal and politically motivated ‘congregacion of folk’ who call attention to the necessity for Prudence’s parrhesiastic game (VII.1004). The ‘congregacion’ falls into two different factions who want to influence Melibee to be either for or against ‘werre’ (‘war’) with Sophie’s attackers.44 The diverse ‘congregacion’ reflects the competing interests of those in the community who want to influence Melibee to act on their interests. The surgeons, physicians, the advocates, and the old wise man advise against war, but the ‘gretteste partie of his conseil weren accorded that he sholde maken werre, anoon he consented to hir conseillyng and fully affermed hire sentence’ (VII.1050). Notably, the anti-‘werre’ advocates recognise that vengeance will be devastating to the community. The old man, in particular, speaks eloquently of the deleterious effects of war entered into too lightly:

  when that werre is ones bigonne, ther is ful many a child unborn of his mooder that shal sterve yong by cause of thilke werre, or elles lyve in sorwe and dye in wrecchednesse (VII.1041).

He attempts to connect the attack on the child Sophie with the increased potential for ‘werre’ to harm even more children. The majority of the counsel disagree with the old man and flatter Melibee by following the example that he set at the beginning of the meeting. Seeing the expression of his ‘crueel ire’ manifested so openly, they flatter Melibee with what he wants to hear, that is, ‘vengeaunce upon his foes’ (VII.1009). Thus, despite minor dissenting voices that are shouted down easily,

43 Foucault, Fearless Speech, p. 102.
44 The ‘greet congregacion of folk’ who respond to Melibee’s call for counsel includes: surgiens, phisiciens, olde folk and yonge, and somme of his olde enemys reconsiled as by hir semblant to his love and into his grace; / ... neighebores that diden hym reverence moore for drede than for love ...[,] / subtille flatereres and wise advocatz lerned in the lawe/ (VII.1005-7).
Melibee retains majority support for a retaliatory war against his enemies. Ultimately, the old man’s unwillingness to persist in advising the best course of action disqualifies him as a parrhesiastes. The ‘werre’ advocates shout him down, and instead of countering their bad counsel with ‘deliberacion’ (VII.1033), ‘he sette hym doun agayn’ (VII.1046). Rather than risk the danger of speaking the truth any further, he closes with an aphoristic flourish and says, “‘[G]ood conseil wanteth whan it is moost need’” (VII.1048).

Unlike the old man, however, Prudence recognises the need to persist with ‘good conseil’ and perseveres. In her assessment of the ‘congregacion’ in which everyone gave their opinions freely, Prudence discriminates among the advisors based on how the community will be affected. Given the importance of parrhesia to the health of a community, the greatest challenge for a leader and his or her followers is to recognise ‘who is entitled to use parrhesia’.45 In Melibee, therefore, Chaucer illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing good counsel from bad through his acknowledgement that the ‘congregacion’ membership includes both dissemblers and flatterers.

Similarly, Foucault cites ‘two major criteria’ for recognising the parrhesiastes.46 First, there must be a ‘conformity between what the real truth-teller says with how he behaves’; and second, there must be ‘the permanence, the continuity, the stability and steadiness of the true parrhesiastes ... regarding his choices, his opinions, and his thoughts’.47 For Foucault, the care of the self is inextricably bound to the other:

[T]he care of the self ... implies a relationship with the other insofar as a proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counsellor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you.48

That is to say, the parrhesiastes and the interlocutor relate to each other ethically through a relationship based on criticism rather than through a top-down relationship of a tutor to a pupil. With parrhesia, as Alison Ross explains:

[I]t is a question of moral character rather than intelligence that defines the courage of the parrhesiastes. It is not that what the parrhesiastes sees is invisible to others, it is not the case that “truth” is recalcitrant, but that others choose not to see it.49

Furthermore, Thomas Flynn adds that parrhesia serves as ‘a moral virtue [that] makes you admit the truth even if it costs you your self-image’.50 In the tale, Melibee’s sense of self-absorption, rather than responsible leadership, subverts his

45 Foucault, Fearless Speech, p. 72.
46 Ibid., p. 136.
47 Ibid.
obligation to remain vigilant in controlling his desires. This loss of vigilance over himself carries over to his responsibilities to the community. To change, Melibee needs an exemplar who can offer him alternatives to the violent impulses that he feels upon seeing his violated daughter/wisdom.

Prudence’s task, as a parrhesiastes, then, calls for her to make Melibee recognise his responsibility for the violence that has happened. Prudence shows Melibee that his inability to depersonalise the violence against his daughter fits into a larger pattern of irresponsible leadership. For Melibee ‘to become an agent for positive change’, he must change himself by seeing himself for who he truly is rather than to flatter himself with a false image of himself. Melibee’s ‘greet congregacion of folk’ reiterates Foucault’s point that parrhesia cannot be institutionalised, that is, there are ‘no social, political or institutional laws determining who is able to speak the truth’. According to Foucault:

[A] ruler cannot be considered wise unless ‘there exists someone who can use parrhesia to criticise him, thereby putting some limit to his power, to his command.\(^5\)

If the leader ‘lacks self-mastery’ and is ‘carried away by his passions ... then he does not hear the truth’ and is a ‘bad ruler’. An ethical ‘ruler ... exercise[s] his power over himself. And it is the power over oneself that thus regulates one’s power over others’. The parrhesiastes rigorously seeks the ‘truth’ of the situation rather than misreads the passions that blind his or her interlocutor. Through stalwart criticism in active dialogue, the parrhesiastes assists the good ruler in exerting self-control as a prerequisite to power over others. In sum, the parrhesiastes’ capacity as truth-teller and the leader’s willingness to be influenced by the truth in the parrhesiastic game determines his status as either a good ruler or a tyrant.

The parrhesiastic approach to ethics matters in Melibee because the two possible responses, either peace or war, presented to Melibee in his council offer two divergent outcomes: either Melibee’s leadership will guide the community to success or his acquiescence to his flatterers will result in its dissolution. Melibee provides a positive example of the parrhesiastic game that shows the eponymous character how to read the signs of violence productively, contextualise the origins of violence, and redefine the definition and direction of the community. The advocate from the first council correctly diagnoses the solution to the problem as the need for ‘espace to have deliberacion in this case to deme’ (VII.1029). Foucault acknowledges the importance of this type of ‘deliberacion’ when he writes, ‘[A]s soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes ... very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible’. Prudence and the old advocate are both characterised as wise, but Prudence is the only parrhesiastes in Melibee’s circle who

\(^{51}\) Staley Johnson, ‘Inverse Counsel’, p. 141.
\(^{52}\) Foucault, Fearless Speech, p. 72.
\(^{53}\) ibid., p. 29.
\(^{54}\) ibid., p. 32.
can lead him to provide ethical leadership to the community. Prudence cannot coerce Melibee into acquiescing to her demands, but she provides a model of ‘pacience’ in persuasion that Melibee acknowledges repeatedly as effective. Their parrhesiastic game inculcates a new found care of the community because Prudence’s lessons to Melibee on how to examine counsel involve an examination of the self and its relation to the community.

Conclusion—The Lesson of Melibee: Parrhesia Never Ends

Scholarship on Melibee often returns to the ambiguity of the survival of Sophie, a transliteration of the Greek word for ‘wisdom’, and her allegorical relation to Melibee’s intellectual and political maturity.57 The end of the Tale offers no definitive revelation of Sophie’s recovery, nor does it offer definitive proof that Melibee’s tutelage under Prudence ends. On the one hand, Chaucer writes that the ‘feendes … leften hire for deed’ (VII.972) and that Sophie suffered ‘fyve mortal woundes’ (VII.971). On the other hand, in the first meeting after Sophie’s attack, the surgeon assures Melibee that ‘al be it so that she perilously be wounded … she shal be hool and sound as soone as is possible’ (VII.1015). Prudence further suggests that Sophie survives the attack when she compares her daughter’s five wounds to Melibee’s ‘fyve wittes’ (VII.1424). She refers to Sophie as ‘ywounded’ and not dead (VII.1426). On the one hand, Sophie has been interpreted as ‘Melibee’s own wounded wisdom, which needs to be healed’.58 On the other hand, Sophie has also been interpreted as ‘the wisdom [he] did not use when he gave disproportionate attention to the attractions of the world’.59 Celia R. Daileader adds that ‘linking Sophie’s wounds to her father’s failings … implicates the father in the violence against his daughter’.60 Sophie, the personification of wisdom, will only be found again with a ‘process conducted through right reason’.61 Prudence’s allegorical interpretation thus ‘urges [Melibee] to stop seeking an outward remedy (one outside of himself and his domestic space) for what is essentially an inward trespass’.62 The ambiguity of Melibee’s relation to wisdom at the end of the Tale troubles Lee Patterson enough that he considers Prudence’s pedagogy a failure after Melibee suggests he will disinherit and exile his foes as punishment for attacking his family (VII.1835). Patterson sees Prudence’s ‘coercive’ pedagogy as antithetical to the very ‘self-reflection and self-sufficiency at which it aims’.63 He identifies a contradiction in ‘training as the imposition of discipline’ and the idea that ‘education requires patient meditation’ to achieve its aim of ‘philosophic detachment and wise self-

57 S. Hiltz Romino, explanatory notes to The Tale of Melibee, in Benson (ed.), The Riverside Chaucer, p. 924. ‘Sophie’ marks one of Chaucer’s additions to his translation of Renaud de Louen’s version of the story, p. 924.
58 Benson (ed.), The Riverside Chaucer, p. 924.
62 Walling, ‘“In Hir Tellyng Difference”’, p. 172.
63 Patterson, ‘“What Man Artow?”’, p. 158.
reflectiveness’. Melibee’s relapse into foolish selfishness, rather than ‘wise self-reflectiveness’, to use Patterson’s phrase, illustrates that the parrhesiastic game must be an ongoing engagement rather than an isolated dialogue.

These references to Sophie as representative of the state of Melibee’s wisdom illustrate how violence tears apart communities as much as individual bodies. Rather than suggest that Prudence’s parrhesiastic game fails, Melibee’s controversial ending illustrates dramatically the importance of patience and persistence in creating and maintaining a parrhesiastic community. A simple conclusion suggests that Melibee’s reconciliation with the attackers and avoidance of war represents the renewal of Melibee’s wisdom as well as the healing of his daughter. Sophie, like the community, can be assumed to be ‘hool and sound’. Chaucer’s refusal to acknowledge explicitly this new found ‘hool’-ness in Sophie and the community complicates this interpretation and emphasises the ambivalence of the ending. Chaucer refuses to confirm Sophie’s full recuperation to draw attention to the need for ongoing parrhesiastic struggle between the parrhesiastes and the interlocutor.

Chaucer’s ambivalent ending draws attention to the fact that Melibee cannot be expected to attain ‘self-reflection’ and ‘self-sufficiency’ after one parrhesiastic dialogue, no matter how in depth. Parrhesia works as an on-going process rather than a final examination that provides a definitive endpoint to a course of study. Melibee’s relapse into planning vengeance reflects the difficulty of self-mastery and reiterates the prudence of patience and persistence in the reiteration of Prudence’s message of reconciliation. Allegorically, the tale illustrates the importance of struggle in its positioning of Melibee’s foes as ‘the flesh, the feend, and the world’ (VII.1420). The tale begins with a devastating attack on wisdom by these foes, but ends with the foes performing obeisance to Melibee. The ambivalence of Sophie’s recovery suggests the precariousness of the wisdom Melibee shows. Through Prudence, Chaucer illustrates that parrhesiastic models of education require a series of dialogues to inculcate the lessons of the care of the self and the other that are vital to the well-being of the community. In the same way that it requires repeated lessons by the parrhesiastes to make Melibee change, maintenance of an ethical community will also be an ongoing process.

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64 Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’”, p. 159.
66 Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’”, p. 159.