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Craig McDonald

John Ireland's *Meroure of Wyssdome* and
Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*



In 1490, John Ireland, an eminent Scottish theologian, priest, jurist, diplomat, and political counselor in the reigns of James III and IV of Scotland, completed a tract in Middle Scots prose entitled *The Meroure of Wyssdome*.¹ His professed aim was to instruct the king, specifically, but the Scottish nation, more generally, in the "ABC's of Christianity," that is, to expound various articles of the Christian faith—the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Sacraments, predestination, and the like—with an eye towards strengthening the belief of his king and country. To this discussion, theological in nature, he appends a political treatise along the lines of the popular *regimen principum*, instructing the king in the rudiments of governing the realm.

As one might expect, Ireland cites a number of classical, Biblical, and theological sources throughout the entire work. But interestingly enough, he also exhibits a more than passing knowledge of English literature. The late J.A.W. Bennett brought to our attention two references to Chaucer in the *Meroure*. Ireland first applauds Chaucer's lay discussion of predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde* and then reminds his reader that Chaucer resorts to prose when discussing matters of great importance, as

in the Parson's Tale. Ireland himself was a Latin poet and was familiar with other major English poets, namely Gower and Lydgate.² Professor Bennett made his observations on the basis of the printed portions of Ireland's *Meroure*, which is found in a unique manuscript (National Library of Scotland Advocates MS 18.2.8). The transcription of the work, however, is incomplete; and in the unprinted last book of the *Meroure*, the political treatise, Ireland further reveals his familiarity with Gower and Chaucer.³ As to Gower, Ireland concludes his exposition on the significance of the precious stones found in the king's crown (*ff.* 353v-354v) by commenting: "wis gower in his buk twichis ye significacioun of the sammyn mater and quhat yai figur and signifyis" (*f.* 354v). The "buk" in question is Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Bk VII, which like the seventh book of Ireland's *Meroure* stands in something of an anomalous relationship to the rest of the work.⁴

Ireland's familiarity with Chaucer appears to be even greater. On *f.* 357 Ireland writes: "And Souuerane lord thir reulis and doctrynis ar led fra ye fonten and well of ye nobile lady and morall wertyu dame prudence." He refers to the wife of Melibeus; and in the passage preceding this one, he reproduces a substantial portion of the Melibeus story that corresponds, with some major omissions and some minor additions, to B² ll. 2305-2421 in Chaucer's text. I hope to demonstrate that Ireland had access to Chaucer's version and indeed based his text on that version rather than the French version of Renaud de Louens.⁵

Before embarking on such a demonstration, I should first point out two things. Chaucer, as has been noted elsewhere, translated his French source closely, anglicizing many of the French words he met.⁶ Thus, many of the verbal parallels between the *Meroure* and the English *Melibeus* might be explained by Ireland's proceeding independently from the French source in the same manner.⁷ Furthermore, Ireland's version is a free rendering. And in a number of instances he departs from the both the English and French texts. Several examples will illustrate the differences.

There are numerous verbal differences between the Scottish text and its French and English counterparts. The most interesting of these is the substitution of the word "crabitnes" (*f.* 355) for "ire," the French and English word and the obvious choice for a schoolman like Ireland. Such a word as "crabitnes,"

particularly Scottish in nature, indicates the strength of Ireland's desire to instruct in their native tongue the Scottish people and king in the way of moral, religious, and political truth (ff. 357v-358). Frequently, Ireland condenses his source. After listing the three passions that should be absent from the king's counsel—"crabitnes," "cuuatis," and "hastines" (f. 355)—Ireland assumes the dangers to be self-evident and, unlike Renaud and Chaucer who elaborate, passes on without comment to the next part of the discussion. In a second instance of condensation (f. 356v), Ireland abbreviates a passage which urges the king's careful consideration of the end of an action (i.e., the medieval conception of prudence). Aside from an appeal to a larger number of authorities, the English and French texts twice cite a dictum not found in the Scottish text: "esliz plus tost le souffrir que le commencier" (Renaud, f. 61, p. 582); and "chese rather to suffre than begynne" (Chaucer, l. 2407). Ireland often omits substantiating authorities or merely alludes to them rather than citing them directly. For example, when he warns against the perils of drunken counsel, he rests his case by simply commenting, "as Salamon sais" (f. 356), a reference to Proverbs 31:4, which both Chaucer and Renaud quote. Such contracting of material leads to at least one illogical transition. On f. 355v Ireland concludes the passage on the kinds of counselors a king should have by stating that they "suld be trew wis and auld/for yai suld haue experiens in the materis yat yai suld counsale of." Immediately succeeding a similar statement in the English version (ll. 2359-61), Chaucer (following his French source) promotes the employment of many counselors and quotes Proverbs 11:14 to substantiate his remark. Ireland includes the citation—"for Salamon sais/*ibi salus vbi consilia multa*"—but omits the necessary preceding material. In effect he submits the quotation to prove the wrong point.

It would be natural for Ireland, who has a specific purpose in mind, to stress points of particular importance by expanding as well as contracting his material. And he does so. Along with the three previously stated vices that a king should avoid, Ireland includes the catch-all phrase "na sic passiounis" (f. 355). In contrast to Renaud and Chaucer he also suggests that the king, in evaluating counsel, should ask his counselors the reasons for their advice (f. 355). To the three criteria which Renaud and Chaucer establish as the means of evaluating friends—loyalty, wisdom, and

age—Ireland adds a fourth, urging the king to consider "quhilk of yame lufis him best" (f. 355v). He adds synonyms to emphasize a point. Whereas Prudence in Renaud and Chaucer warns Melibeus of the influence of wicked men, Ireland warns his king to avoid the counsel of "synnaris and euill lyffaris or wykit men" (f. 356). Two passages in particular show Ireland's independence in expanding his material. He draws upon his own classical knowledge in order to prove that wisdom should be preferred to strength. Ulysses, as he is portrayed by Homer, Aristotle, and Horace, serves as a model of wisdom; and Ireland quotes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, XIII, to illustrate the triumph of Ulysses' wisdom over Ajax's strength (f. 355v). On f. 356v he shifts slightly the emphasis of his two predecessors by adding to the opening of his inquiry into the circumstances which allow a king to change his plans the statement: "for quhen a man sais yat he can nocht cum to ye honour na proffit yat he pretendit/bot gret lak and skaith he wauld incur be werray necessite followand yat purpose/yan suld he change his purpos *quia sapientis est mutare proponitum*." In essence the addition is unnecessary because the same advice appears shortly thereafter (f. 357). It is conceivable that Ireland is providing the king with a greater latitude in formulating and acting upon his counsel: in addition to considering carefully his plans before he acts, the king should continue to judge those plans once he has begun to act and be willing to change them if necessary. From these two examples it should be clear that Ireland's method of reproducing the Melibeus story is not to copy slavishly the pertinent passages but to adapt them for his specific needs and those of his king.

One can find other examples of pruning and elaboration, but the above illustrations give an idea of what Ireland is about. It now remains to prove Ireland's dependence on the English version instead of the French. The criteria I wish to present are as follows: exclusive verbal and syntactical parallels between the English and Scottish versions; the presence of corresponding additions in the Scottish and English texts to the French of Renaud; and Ireland's familiarity with Chaucer's work.

The points at which Ireland diverges from the Melibeus story prove to be departures from both the French and English versions. This does not seem to be unusual, considering Chaucer's close translation of the French. And except for two minor instances, any similarities between the Scottish version and

the French are also present in Chaucer. One of these exceptions is to be found on *f.* 355v. Here Ireland's text reads "lelest"; Renaud's, "le plus loyal" (*f.* 59v, p. 579); and Chaucer's, "moost feithful" (*l.* 2345). In the second, Ireland, on *f.* 356, condemns those who counsel one thing "sacretlie" and another openly. Renaud uses the term "en secret" (*f.* 60v, p. 581), Chaucer, "prively" (*l.* 2385). The strength of such similarities between the Scottish and French versions is debatable. In both cases, the *Meroure* shows verbal and syntactical parallels with Chaucer's *Melibeus* which are absent in the French. Both Chaucer and Ireland describe the best counselors as being "eldest," whereas Renaud speaks of them as being "le plus ancien." And Chaucer and Ireland agree in the second passage, where Ireland condemns those who "counsalis him [the king] a thinge sacretlie/and opynly yai counsale the contrar"; Chaucer, those who "counseille yow o thyng prively, and conseille yow the contrarie openly"; but Renaud, those who "conseillent une chose en secret et autre dient en apert." It is possible that Ireland, following Chaucer's text, introduced terms that were more familiar to him and that happened to resemble the French. Nowhere else in the *Meroure*, as far as I have been able to determine, do the words "prively" or "feithful" (as defined by Chaucer) appear.

Besides the verbal parallels just described, one can find others. When the Scottish king seeks the judgment of his counselors, Ireland urges him to consider whether the "werray treuth be said" (*f.* 356v). Chaucer's parallel phrase is "verray trouthe be seyde and conserved" (*l.* 2393). The French states that the "pure verité soit gardee and dicte" (*f.* 60v, p. 582). Of the choice between multiple counsels Ireland recommends, "And of all thir ye prince suld euir ches ye best." Chaucer responds similarly, "And in alle these thynges thou shalt chese the beste" (*l.* 2398). Compare Renaud, "Et en toutes ces choses tu dois tousjours eslire ce qui est a ton proffit" (*f.* 61, p. 582). A possible parallel is to be found in "repruf" (*Meroure*, *f.* 356v) and "repreve" (*l.* 2413 of the English *Melibeus*), in contrast to the French "reprehension" (*f.* 61r, p. 583). The conclusion of Ireland's discussion of good counsel (*f.* 357) bears a syntactical similarity with the corresponding passage in Chaucer (*l.* 2421). Although Chaucer follows the French version very closely at this point, he reserves until the end of the sentence making a judgment on counsel that is so strongly followed that it might not

be changed. Ireland also makes his pronouncement at the end of the sentence. Renaud, however, condemns such blind adherence at the beginning of his sentence (*f.* 61, p. 583).

Ireland: ye counsale yat is tane and concludit sa starklie yat it sal nocht be changeit for na condicioun or thinge yat may be or happin yat counsale is wranguis and inproffitable.

Chaucer: every conseil that is affermed so strongly that it may nat be chaunged for no condicioun that may bityde, I seye that thilke conseil is wikked.

Renaud: tout conseil est mauvais qui est si fermes que l'on ne le puet changier par condition qui surviengne.

The additions to be found exclusively in both Chaucer and Ireland are few but illuminating. On *f.* 355v of the *Meroure*, one finds the phrase "as ye mater requiris"; "as the caas requireth" occurs in the English version (*l.* 2346). The French has no such corresponding phrase. When he exhorts the king to inquire of his counselors what they would advise, Ireland delineates two specific alternatives, "wer or pes" (*f.* 355), the alternatives ("pees or werr"—*l.* 2339) that Chaucer himself mentions, but that his French source does not. A third addition common to Chaucer and Ireland occurs on *f.* 355v of the Scottish work and *l.* 2359 in the English. Whereas Renaud alludes to the three qualifications of good counselors, "Toutevoye, les trois condicions que j'ay dictes si doivent estre es conseilliers tousjours gardees" (*f.* 60, pp. 579-80), both Chaucer and Ireland review what those qualifications are: Chaucer—"looke alwey that thy counsellours have thilke thre condicions that I have seyde bifore, that is to seyn, that they be trewe, wise, and of oold experience"; Ireland—"yus the counsalouris of the king and prince suld be trew wis and auld/for yai suld haue experiens in the materis yat yai suld counsale of."

Ireland's familiarity with Chaucer's work—the last criterion—is beyond question. We have the passages noted by Bennett, which exhibit a knowledge of both *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*. There is also a third—one that relates Ireland's admiration of Chaucer's "eloquens" (*f.* 357v)—which appears within a page of Ireland's adaptation of the Melibeus story. This

passage in itself proves nothing, since Ireland does not directly associate the Melibeus story with Chaucer, but it does offer the tempting possibility that the English poet's work may have been fresh in Ireland's mind.

On the basis of such evidence, one might reasonably conclude that John Ireland borrowed directly from Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*. Ireland acknowledges Chaucer's greatness as a poet and as a lay theologian; exclusive verbal and syntactical parallels exist between portions of the *Meroure* and corresponding portions of Chaucer's *Melibee*; and some minor additions that Chaucer has made to the French source are repeated by Ireland. To be sure, the context of Ireland's version differs radically from Chaucer's: Ireland is instructing a king in his choice of counselors; Chaucer, while arguably engaged in instruction himself, has a literary interest in mind as well. But Ireland, with an eye for teaching wherever it lay, is quite content to turn the English version to an account more suitable to his own purposes.

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APPENDIX

The following is a transcription of the appropriate portions of Ireland's *Meroure*. Abbreviations have been expanded silently. Otherwise, I have followed his manuscript with regard to capitalization and punctuation.

[f. 354v] and as to ye fyrst Souuerane lord yi hienes suld in all yi werkis and operaciounis/ ask at the hie god of wisdome yat he will direk ye to wyrk in all thing/ eftir his plesaunce and will/ for sua [f. 355] teichit Tobias his sone And eftir yis yi hienes suld considir in yi self quhat is maist expedient for yi persoune yi realme and pepil And in consideracioun of ye thingis yat yi hienes pretendis lat nocht crabitnes na cuuatis na hastines na sic passiounis haue dominacioun in yi mynd or persoune/ for thir thingis as I haue said befor puttis impediment agane wisdome & wertuus counsal And quhen yi hienes has found be wys & sad deliberacioun quhat thinge is best and maist conuenient in the mater yat proponis to do yan suld it be sacretlie kept in yi mynd/ for and it war tauld/ oftymes ye entencioun and purpos of ye wis prince mycht be lichtlie brokin And quhen a persoune

reuelis his sacret counsall to ane vthir/ yan puttis he him in his danger of reueling of it/ And gif you prayis him to hauld it sacret/ it war bettir yat yi (sef *struck out*) self held it sacret/ for it yat yi self can nocht do quhow suld you traist in ane vthir persoune And gif you will alway spek of yat mater/ you may propone ye mater on sic a maner to yi frend/ sayand quhat think ze maist expedient/ yat I haue wer or pes/ or of ony sic thing yat you proponis to do/ and quhat part yat yi counsalour ansueris to speir his ressoune and caus yarof/ for and ye king or prince schaw his mynd and purpos he yat heris him incontinent is abill for plesauns of him to condiscend to ye sammyn quheyir it be rycht [*f. 355v*] or wrang And als the sacret mynd and purpos of the kinge it is abill tobe reuelit/ And eftir yis ye prince sulde consider his frendis and quhilk of yame lufis him best & quha ar lelest quha visest and quha eldest and has maist experiens in gouernyng and in counsale And at sic men suld the prince ask counsal as ye mater requiris *quia in sensibus viget sapientia et in longo tempore addicitur prudentia/* as sais nobile philosophouris and als the haly scriptur And yus the counsalouris of the king and prince suld be trew wis and auld/ for yai suld haue experiens in the materis yat yai suld counsale of/ for Salamon sais/ *ibi salus vbi consilia multa/* And the grete poet of grece Omer sais yat vlixes yat had gret experiens/ was ane of ye wisest amange all ye grekis in the wynnynge of troie Arestotill and syn oras the poet allegis omer in yat and sais *da michi musa virum capte post menia troie/ qui mores hominum nouit cognouit & vrbes/* And yarfor yocht aiax was mar of strenth and hardines Zit ye grekis preferrit vlixes to him for his gret wisdome and prudence *Et dabant ei arma achillis/* as declaris ouid ye poet/ in *maiore opere* quhar he inducis ye gret contencioun betuix aiax and vlixes/Bot now wil I declar quhat persounis ye prince suld nocht admyt to his counsal/ in the fyrst fulis and men of na knowlage suld nocht be counsalouris to princis/ yis is in the self manifest for yai haue nowthir wisdome na prudence/ ye prince suld nocht thole flatterouris be of his counsale Tule ye oratur sais *quod nulla est [*f. 356*] capitalior pestis in amicitia quam adulacio* And sa it is in counsall ye flatterour schawis to ye prince na thinge bot it yat may ples him/ bot the haly and wys kinge Sanct dauid ye prophet askit at god counsalouris to argvne him and tell him ye verite and nocht to flatter or dissaif him (*psalmus is inserted*)/ *Corripiet (ms Corripiat) me iustus in misericordia*

oleum autem peccatoris i.e. adulacio non impinguet capud meum
 Alsua the nobile king or prince suld nocht tak his auld innemy
 yat is recounsalit to him of his tendyr and sacret counsale/ for
 yar remanis zit ane euill rute in his mynd and mony thingis that
 he dois to ye prince he dois be dissimilacioun/ bot and he mycht
 se his tyme the prince suld be war w^t him The prince suld haue
 nane of his counsale yat ar sone chargit w^t aill or wyn/ na to
 yame suld na sacret counsal be reuelit/ for na sacret is kept w^t
 yame/ as Salamon sais/ and it is manifest be experiens/ and the
 counsale of ye prince suld be sacret Alsua the nobile prince suld
 nocht tak of his counsal ye persounis yat counsalis him a thinge
 sacretlie/ and opinly yai counsale the countrar for yir persounis
 wsis nothir in wertu na verite Alsua the king suld nocht use the
 counsale of synnaris and euill lyffaris or wykit men/ for
 commonly yer persounis ar full of fraude and decepcioun/ and sa
 is yar counsall and of ye gud wertuis king sais ye prophet *beatus*
vir qui non abiit in consilio impiorum/ And to ye thrid punct ye
 king and prince/ suld wislie examyn his consale [f. 356v] yat is
 gevin to him in the first he suld consider gif werray treuth be
 said to him of the thing yat he desirit counsal of for ye
 persoune/ yat desiris counsale suld propone his mater in verite
 w^tout ony dissimilacioun or ficcioun And the gud counsalouris
 suld ansuer be verite And eftir yis ye prince suld consider gif
 ressoune inclynis to vse and do all thing yat is counsalit to him
 And gif his power extendis yar to/ And gif ye counsale stand in
 diuisioun ye prince suld consider/ quhat part haldis yai yat ar
 lelest wisest and of maist experiens/ And he suld consider of
 quhilk counsale is abill to folow maist surte honour & proffit and
 w^t les perell or danger And of all thir ye prince suld euir ches ye
 best and principalie gif he can cum to ye end and perfeccioun
 yar of/ bot and the prince se aperandlie yat yar is gret dout or
 perell in ye mater or yat he can nocht cum to ye end and
 perfeccioun of ye werk/ yat he proponis/ or yat ye counsale
 ordanis or yat yar wauld folow mar lak or dampnage na proffit
 or honour yan war bettir to leif and nocht begin/ na to forthink
 gretlie eftirwert And yan war expedient and proffitabile to
 change ye counsal w^tout ony lak or repruf/ for quhen a man sais
 yat he can nocht cum to ye honour na proffit yat he pretendit/
 bot gret lak and skaith he wauld incur be werray necessite
 followand yat purpose/ yan suld he change his purpos *quia*
sapientis est mutare proponitum/ Or gif he knawis a gret errour

or decepcioun in the counsale/ yan he may change it/ for and he
 know gret [*f.* 357] dishonour in it for the law sais/ *In malis* (ms
male) *promissis rescinde fidem in turpi voto muta decretum*/ Or
 gif ye thinge yat you proponis to do be impossible or may nocht
 gudlie be done/ yan you suld change ye purpos and proced be
 bettir purpos and wisar counsale for ye counsale yat is tane and
 concludit sa starklie (ms starlie) yat it sal nocht be changeit for
 na condicioun/ or thinge yat may be or happin yat counsale is
 wranguis and inproffitable/ And Souuerane lord thir reulis and
 doctrynis ar led fra ye fonten and well of ye nobile lady and
 morall wertu dame prudence

NOTES

¹For Ireland's biography see F. Quinn's edition of *The Meroure of Wyssdome*, Scottish Text Society, 4th Series, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh and London, 1965), pp. xii-xviii; and J.H. Burns' "John Ireland and 'The Meroure of Wyssdome,'" *Innes Review*, 6 (1955), 77-98.

²"Those Scotch Copies of Chaucer," *RES*, NS, 32 (1981), 294-6.

³I have undertaken the transcription of the last two books of *The Meroure*, the sixth an examination of the Sacraments, the seventh political advice to King James IV. Quotations from the seventh book are by permission of the Trustees of the NLS.

⁴Like the seventh book of Gower's *Confessio* the seventh book of Ireland's *Meroure* formulates that advice necessary to good kingship. Not unusual in itself since its wisdom is conventional, the seventh book does seem to be out of place in a work that is predominantly a treatise on such theological subjects as the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and predestination. Yet Ireland's political theory is a natural extension of his religious beliefs in that his concept of law and justice presupposes a Christian framework: only as the king brings human law into conformity with divine law is true justice realized.

⁵This passage is printed in the appendix. Quotations from Chaucer's passage are taken from F.N. Robinson's 2nd edition of Chaucer's works (1957; rpt. London, 1974), pp. 171-4. Quotations from Renaud de Louens' French version are taken from the text reproduced by J.B. Severs in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, 1941), pp. 577-83.

⁶See Diane Bornstein's account of this debate in "Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* as an Example of the *Style Clergial*," *Chaucer Review*, 12 (1978), 236. Bornstein makes some valuable comments about medieval prose translations, some of which apply to Ireland's technique.

⁷Although there are many such parallels, a few should suffice to indicate the ease with which French words could be adapted in a translation.

Ireland

cuuatis, hastines (*f.* 355); deliberacioun (*f.* 355); recounsalit (*f.* 356)

Chaucer

coveitise, hastifnesse (*l.* 2312); deliberacion (*l.* 2328); reconciled (*l.* 2377)

Renaud

couvoitise, hastiveté (*f.* 59, p. 577); deliberation (*f.* 59v, p. 578); reconciliez (*f.* 60v, p. 580)

Ireland's long years in France would have provided ample opportunity, it seems, for him to view the French text, so we cannot posit his isolation from the French text, even though he mentions Chaucer on several occasions and fails to mention Renaud. The possibility that Ireland relied directly on Albertano of Brescia's *Liber Consolationis et Consilii* is rather easily eliminated. Besides failing to satisfy the criteria mentioned below, the *Liber* also fails at the one point where there would be the likelihood of Ireland's borrowing. All of Ireland's quotations are in Latin, whereas Chaucer and Renaud quote in the

vernaculars. Evidently, Ireland relied on his own knowledge of the sources or else he translated from the English back into Latin. For example, the quotation from Job 12:12 in the *Liber Consolationis* reads, "in antiquis est sapientia, et in longo tempore prudentia" (p. 44, ll. 14-5, in Albertano's text, edited by Thor Sundby, Chaucer Society, 2nd Series, Vol. 8 [London, 1873]). Compare Ireland's text: "in sensibus viget sapiencia et in longo tempore addicitur prudencia." Likewise, Albertano cites from the *Digesta*, XLV, 1, 26: "turpes stipulationes nullius esse momenti" (p. 62, l. 23). Ireland's quotation is as follows: "in male [sic] promissis rescinde fidem in turpi voto muta decretum." This quotation, incidentally, has closer verbal parallels to the canon law version of the dictum: "In malis promissis fidem non expedit observari" (*Liber Sextus Decretalium*, "De regula juris," reg. lxix).

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