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ETHICS AS LANGUAGE IN *THE BOOK OF THE KNIGHT OF THE TOWER*

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ABSTRACT

In *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, the father-narrator teaches his daughters how to recognize cleverly disguised deceivers who speak both truly and falsely. In the course of the Knight's conduct manual for girls, it becomes clear that the words are divided into good and evil, depending on the speaker's intention, while the responsibility for discerning a true word from a false one lies with the respondent, most frequently a young lady. In my paper I will examine the writer's engagement with female speech against a socio-historical context, on the one hand, and against St. Thomas Aquinas's typology of sins presented in *Summa Theologica*, on the other. My aim is to show that the moral lessons imparted from parent to child, especially lessons on the use of speech, should be understood in terms of practical ethics in that they move beyond a concern for the individual's moral conscience and have wider implications for the family's good name within the community and indeed for society in general.

Keywords: Medieval conduct books; sins of the tongue; female agency; nine follies of Eve; flattery; discernment.

1. Introduction: The good word versus the bad word

Widely recognized in the Middle Ages, the importance of the word was emphasized by the early Church fathers, such as St. Augustine who said that "among men words have obtained far and away the chief place as a means of indicating the thoughts of the mind" (*CD* II, 3, p. 25).[2] When discussing signs perceived by the senses, such as nodding, shaking the head, and other gestures,

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2 Quoted from St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine, in Four Books* (2005), referred to as *CD* in brackets (I provide book, chapter and page numbers).

St. Augustine concludes that even though God himself uses non-verbal signs to communicate his will, such signs are very few in number when compared with the number of words. The primacy of words in the Middle Ages did not rest on their number alone, but also on their association with truth and the well-being of the soul, as noted by David Carr (2020), which assigned to them moral and spiritual connotations that were never neutral. In other words, in medieval culture there were no morally neutral words in the same way as there were no morally neutral actions, with every action being judged either good or bad.

Thomas Aquinas, for instance, holds that some actions may be deemed morally good (e.g. clothing the naked), some evil (e.g. taking what belongs to another), and some morally indifferent (e.g. picking up straw from the ground), but only when approached from a generic, theoretical perspective (*OE*, 111).[3] When approached from an individual perspective, each human act depends on certain circumstances and on the end it serves, which renders it either morally right or wrong. "For example", Aquinas says, "things done because of just necessity or pious utility are laudably done, and the acts are good, but things lacking just necessity or pious utility are considered idle" (*OE*, 112). Aquinas's argument applies not only to actions, but also to words, and even though he sees verbal trespasses as less grievous than those of the deeds as "they are apt to occur through a slip of the tongue, and without much forethought" (*ST*, II-II, Q. 73, Art. 3),[4] in certain circumstances these two kinds of transgression (sins of words and of deed) are on a par. For instance, occasionally the curser is as guilty as a murderer if he desires another person's death (*ST*, II-II, Q. 76, Art. 4) and a backbiter is even worse than a murderer, for "it is a graver matter to kill the soul than to kill the body", Aquinas argues (*ST*, II-II, Q. 73, Art. 3).[5]

In his discussion on the gravity of sin, Aquinas focuses on the effect of sin rather than its origin and does not see sins of the word as a distinct category, as earlier ethicists did who attributed verbal trespasses to "the wild and mobile nature of the tongue" (Baika 2014: 46). Medieval manuscripts often depict characters, human, animal, or human-animal hybrids, with protruding tongues,[6]

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3 Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil* (2003), henceforth abbreviated to *OE*.

4 Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, *Part II-II (Secunda Secundae)* (2006), abbreviated to *ST* in brackets.

5 According to Aquinas, the gravity of a sin depends on the injury it inflicts on an individual by depriving him of either the goods of the soul, which rank the highest, or the goods of the body, or – lowest in the hierarchy – external things. Therefore, murder, which injures the human body, ranks lower in seriousness than backbiting, which affects a man's reputation or good name. By the same token, among the sinful deeds that man commits against his neighbour, murder is more serious than theft because life ranks higher than wealth. See *ST*, II-II, Q. 73, Art. 3.

6 See, for instance, Princeton University Library, Taylor 1, fol. 52v (England, ca. 1280-1298) at The Index of Medieval Art (https://ima.princeton.edu/2019/02/); Psalter, MS G.43 fol. 18v (England, ca. 1180) at Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, The Morgan Library and

providing visual metaphors for the cruel, offensive or injurious capabilities of speech and testifying to the medieval preoccupation with *peccata oris*, "sins of the mouth", such as flattery, duplicity, evil counsel, and blasphemy. Verbal trespasses were blamed on the tongue, its anatomic mobility and natural propensity for sin, and were contrasted with evil deeds, which were believed to proceed from the human will. In the course of the thirteenth century, the distinction between thought and action or soul and body was replaced by a different taxonomy of sin which eliminated the physiological category of "péché de la bouche" (*peccatum oris*) and introduced the term "péché de parole" (*peccatum locutionis*). Referred to as "a great century of speech" and "the century of the sins of the tongue", the thirteenth century marks the apogee of the spoken word, which Jacques Le Goff relates to the revival of preaching, on the one hand, with its main architects being the mendicant friars, and to the promotion of lay speech, on the other (Le Goff 2007: 13). It was then that the preacher began to be seen as "God's mouthpiece" and the word was categorized according to whether it came from the Holy Spirit or an evil spirit. In a purely linguistic context, the fact that the focus was transferred from the act itself to the intention behind it was related to the concept of *locutio* (see Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 147). In the context of Christian spirituality, the focus on intentionality fostered the development of the concept of discernment, denoting the capacity to discriminate between the forces of good and those of evil.[7] In the context of late thirteenth-century medieval culture, in which the word was no longer seen as the bearer of religious truths, it meant that the sins of the tongue were treated with less apprehension and were judged according to the circumstances, especially those from which intent could be inferred. In the context of ethics, it involved re-thinking the categories of virtue and vice as well as sin and merit and classifying human acts based on the renewed categories (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 157). Relying on the Aristotelian notion of the end at which things aim,[8] the Thomistic ethical system gives expression to those changes, depriving words and deeds of intrinsic qualities, such as goodness or utility, and categorizing them according to the various intentions of the speakers and doers.

Museum (http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/7/76979); and Psalm, MS M.79 fol. 146r (France, 13th century) at Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, The Morgan Library and Museum (http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/84/77066).

7 On the discernment of spirits, see, among others, Barry (2002: 33–44) and Gallagher (2013). The relevance of this concept for *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* will be discussed in section 6 of this paper.

8 See Book I in Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (2009).

2. Women as language users

If medieval words and deeds were situated on a good vs bad axis, the same applied to those who produced them, women in particular, who were construed as "forces for good as well as evil" (Ferrante 1985: 42). According to Sharon Farmer, "Spoken language, including that of women, could function either negatively or positively, as an agent of the material realm (of which it was a part) or as an agent of the spiritual and cultural realm (whose message it could convey)" (Farmer 1986: 541). We might say that the material attractions of speech are most visibly illustrated through Eve, the first inexperienced user of language, whereas its spiritual benefits emerge from Mary, the perfect mediator and intercessor to the divine on behalf of humans. Eve became the symbol of the human relation to language:

> [t]he first human words were spoken by a woman, in the Garden of Eden; woman is at the origin, the inception of language. A woman was the first to enter into relations with another human being; only the dialogue between Adam and God, that fundamental contractual exchange, preceded Eve's relation with Adam. Eve, Dante said in *De vulgari eloquentia*, was the institutor of language.
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> (Régnier-Bohler 1992: 427)

Mary, in turn, was the symbol of the human relation to the divine, which was mediated through her intercessory powers. The dichotomy between these two female speakers, which is also addressed in the Knight's book, was directly related to language use. While in early Christian commentaries on the Sacred Scripture the story of the Fall, including Eve's conversation with the serpent, was treated as either "a crisis of instruction" or "a crisis of signs and interpretation" (Jager 1993: 147), the story of the Annunciation, including Mary's conversation with the angel Gabriel, was construed as a moment of careful discernment. While Eve's speech "was an enticement, luring the soul away from its proper relationship to God", Mary's words, motivated by divine grace, "could change the soul, cultivating it and directing it towards God" (Farmer 1986: 542). Inasmuch as Mary was a pattern of chastity and virtue, Eve was the embodiment of sin – "The command came from the Lord through the man to the woman, but sin came from the Devil through the woman to the man" (Kendall 2008: 130) – a sin which in biblical commentaries and other patristic writings was divided into several separate transgressions commonly referred to as the follies of Eve, among them verbal follies (Jager 1993: 220). In this respect, Eve was associated with the threat of eternal damnation, the seeds of which were sown through speech, while Mary with the promise of salvation, which was also related to language, for it was through prayer that the early Christian supplicants petitioned Mary to offer their souls to her Son and it was through verbal means that her intercessory efforts were communicated.

The dichotomy between supernatural virtue and earthly vice as symbolized by Mary and Eve respectively was undermined in the thirteenth century when the urban culture was placed on a par with the clerical, enabling the positive assessment of the female voice and validating the assumption that the "alluring qualities of the woman and her speech could be spiritually beneficial" (Farmer 1986: 543). And yet even in the earlier, overwhelmingly misogynistic centuries, there were writers who recognized the potential of wives to exercise a positive influence over their husbands. Writing about the clerical images of medieval wives, Sharon Farmer notes that eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic writers developed the theme of persuasive wives who encouraged their husbands into supporting monastic causes, thereby exerting economic influence over them, which was later accompanied by the theme of the wives' moral influence (Farmer 1986: 521). Thomas of Chobham, for instance, an English theologian associated with the University of Paris, writes that "it should always be enjoined upon women to be preachers to their husbands, because no priest is able to soften the heart of a man the way his wife can" (qtd. in Farmer 1986: 517). By referring to women as "preachers", Thomas of Chobham associates them with evangelical language and the power of divine grace, both related to the spread of culture: "Through the cultural medium of spoken language, pious women, like evangelists, were agents of the civilizing process: they harnessed and brought under cultivation wild, savage men" (Farmer 1986: 541). This cast women in the role of spiritual guides ensuring the salvation of the couple (Vecchio 1992: 115–116).

The fact that women's influence over men was positively viewed, Farmer says, may also be related to their husband's political and social activity in the public sphere (Farmer 1986: 533), which often involved being absent from home and delegating some of the duties, including the management of household finances, to their wives. This was the case of a late medieval Norfolk family called the Pastons, as described by Ann S. Haskell: "The men lived in London, maintaining law practices well connected with legal circles and members of the court. The women lived on the land, overseeing the operation of the estates and maintaining alert and powerful defense against possible challengers" (Haskell 1973: 463). The epistolary evidence reveals communication within the Paston marriages and shows the Paston women capable of skillful language use. In the absence of their husbands, they were alert to hurtful gossip, rumour and hearsay and were able to recognize which verbal signals were of strategic importance for the family's fortunes and reputation before they passed them on in letters to their absent husbands.[9]

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[9] Margaret Paston, for instance, "reported to her husband everything that might affect his interests" (Gairdner 1904: 41), which means that she was able to see the intention behind the words spoken by others and the end to which they may lead. She was able to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources of information and was confident enough to make her own judgements. She considered it important to mention from hearsay the "*noise and … other*

3. *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* – the genre and the mood of the times

The skillful use of language is one of the key concepts in the ethical system created by the Knight of the Tower in his conduct book for girls entitled *Livre pour l'enseignement de ses filles du Chevalier de La Tour Landry* (1372).[10] The tradition of biblical and patristic teaching, on the one hand, and its practical application to ordinary human affairs, on the other, both mentioned above, provide an apt context for the interpretation of the French book, for it was written at a time when clerical discourse was no longer dominant in medieval pedagogical manuals while a good wife was construed as "an identity with positive effects in the world" (Burger 2018: 2). The Knight's book is an example of late medieval didactic writings which combine typical devotional and ethical advice with a more worldly and secular orientation, thereby crossing the generic distinction between the religious and the secular or the active and the contemplative. As noted by Glenn D. Burger,

> [u]nlike earlier romance and *fin'amor* poetry, or guides such as the *Ancrene Wisse* that are addressed explicitly to religious women living apart from the world, these new texts imagine female conduct primarily within the context of the married household and the social relations it makes possible. And they imagine their audience explicitly as daughters who will marry, women already married, or widows who once were wives.
>
> (Burger 2018: 3)

language that is had both in this town and in the country" about the movements of the Pastons' opponents, Sir Thomas Tuddenham and John Heydon (qtd. in Castor 2004: 75; italics are Castor's). While reporting calumnies spoken against her husband by a certain Will Lynys (see Letter 161 in Davis 2004: 268–269), Margaret distances herself from such an unreliable source of information and makes sure she is trusted as an objective witness of facts (Douglas 2009: 41). Similarly, informing her husband about a rebellion brewing in the area, she dismisses what she heard on the grapevine about Lord Clarence and the Duke of Suffolk coming to restore order: "I believe such talk comes from the dishonest villains who want to spread rumours around the district", she says (qtd. from Watt 2004: 67), and adds her own appraisal of the situation based on her understanding of the social mood and expectations (see Watt 2004: 67–68).

10 Written in French by Geoffroi de La Tour Landry, the book was made available to a fifteenth-century English readership through William Caxton's translation (1484) which – he states – was made "at the request of a noble lady which had brought forth many noble and fair daughters" (Childs 1976: 158). As expressed in these words, the context for the translation was as domestically didactic as that of the original work, written as it was for the instruction of the Knight of La Tour-Landry's daughters.

My aim in this essay is to show how the Knight[11] teaches his daughters to be skilled and agentive language users, proficient in reading the personal intentions of speakers and able to predict the possible social implications of their words. I will demonstrate how the girls' father tries to protect his daughters against evil words and the traps of language, paying particular attention to two narrative occasions, inspired by the clerical and courtly discourses respectively: first of all, the story of the nine follies of Eve, and secondly, the discussion between the Knight and his wife about love, which together contain the essence of the Knight's teaching about ethical and unethical uses of language. It will become clear that, similarly to St. Thomas Aquinas, Geoffroi de La Tour Landry shows that it is the intention of the speaker that makes the words either good or evil and that evil words are as harmful as evil deeds.

The power of the word to shape the surrounding reality is underlined in the book from the very beginning as is the deteriorating nature of this reality. Revealing his rationale for writing a series of ethical lessons for young ladies, the Knight confesses that he was motivated by an anxiety for his daughters' well-being, for the world in which they are living is a dangerous place. In that, he evokes the *deterioratio temporum* topos, which Anne Marie De Gendt relates to a crisis of mentalities affecting the French late medieval society, and a general crisis of truth, with Ockham's nominalist philosophy of language being simultaneously a witness and a driving force behind it (2003: 34). The moral universe created by the Chevalier is one in which words lose connection to reality and turn into lies. As presented in *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, men "doo no thyng but deceyue good ladyes/ and damoysellys. and bere ouerall the tydynges/ somme trewe/ and somme lesynges" (Prol., p. 12, ll. 12–14),[12] thus affecting the ladies' reputation. It used to be the case in the days of the Knight's own youth, when he rode with his "felauship and companyes" in Poitou and other places (Prol., p. 12, ll. 2–3), and some men are still like this in the days of his daughters' youth: they "lawgheth to fore yow/ whiche after youre back goo mockyng and lyeng" (Prol., p. 12, ll. 39–40). As shown in the prologue to the book, the deceiving word belongs to the knights while the decision whether to trust it – to the ladies. "[T]hroughout his daughters' book [Sir Geoffrey] makes it the responsibility of women to guard themselves against male treachery in order to protect their social and spiritual well-being" (Barnhouse 2006: 36). The treachery that the young ladies are warned

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11 The French book offers advice through the first-person account of the Knight who functions as a dramatized author and is distinct from the actual writer of the book. The rhetorical construction of the parent-narrator is inscribed in the dialogic relation that courtesy books, or conduct books, establish, "between a more experienced, wiser (and therefore usually older) narrator and a less mature, less knowing (and therefore usually younger) audience" (Vitto 2003: 93).

12 Unless indicated otherwise, I follow William Caxton's translation, edited by M. Y. Offord (1971). I provide the name of the section (with Prologue being abbreviated to Prol., while Capitulo to Cap.), together with page and line numbers.

against in the prologue is verbal treachery and the ability to distinguish good from evil, which they are encouraged to develop, refers to discerning the male speakers' intentions as expressed in their speech.

What is interesting is that the initial warning against evil words is contextualized in a typical courtly setting, with the Knight himself being cast in the role of a lovesick courtier who laments the death of his beloved lady in a springtime garden.[13] The fact that the Knight speaks as both a one-time courtly lover and a father protecting his daughters against such men as he once was introduces a level of ambivalence into the work (Vitto 2003: 98). To add to the book's ambivalence, the Knight introduces into the courtly setting clerical authorities on ethical matters. Even though the synthesis of the erotic and the didactic was not a new idea, dating back to Andreas Capellanus's twelfth-century text *De Amore* (*The Art of Courtly Love*), it gains a new significance when it comes from "a patriarchal lay author seeking moral authority" (Burger 2018: 95). The Knight's indebtedness to two priests and two clerks for the exemplary matter he relates to his daughters situates his book among those texts which "address the complexity and contradiction of reconciling moral behavior and noble behavior" (Burger 2018: 85). Describing the expected outcome of the instruction that his daughters are about to receive, the Knight assigns equal weights to "the sauacion of theyr sowles" and "thonoure of the body erthely" (Prol., p. 13, l. 20), conceiving moral teaching at the intersection of the active and contemplative. Written at a time when the moral and theological status of lay devotion was translated to secular conduct, *The Book of the Knight* shows "how to develop fully ethical identities for lay subjects active in the world" (Burger 2018: 13). Accordingly, in the two narrative occasions which were mentioned above and will be discussed below, women's conduct, just like women's speech, appears as a practical social concern.

4. Eve's verbal follies and the Fall

The garden setting of the prologue brings to mind the typology of the Fall and invests the Knight with an aura of divinity:

> The Middle Ages had inherited from patristic authors a notion of the Garden of Eden as the original place of instruction and as the ultimate source of the scriptures that compensate humans for their fall from divine knowledge. In placing the origin of his own "scripture" in a typological garden, and in stating that his book aims to teach his daughters to read, the Chevalier models himself on the divine Author.
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> (Jager 1993: 224)

[13] The deceased lady is not to be equated with the Knight's first wife and the girls' mother who was alive at the time of the book's composition. It is more likely that she represents a 'liege-lady' or the ideal of his youth. See Offord, ed. (1971a: 195, n. 11/15 ff).

This setting anticipates the story on Eve's nine follies, the first narrative occasion to be discussed, which is divided from the prologue by almost forty chapters, it belongs to a group of stories of the 'bad' women of the Bible, all of which are directly indebted to the *Miroir des bonnes femmes,* written in the last half of the thirteenth century, which John L. Grigsby has identified as the main source for the repertoire of *exempla* included in *The Book of the Knight*.[14] Even though Geoffrey of La Tour Landry follows the topical division used by the Franciscan author of the *Miroir des bonnes femmes* (and in many cases also the order of the stories) and divides his material into the stories of 'good' and 'bad' women, he introduces certain alterations with respect to his source. He devotes more attention to speech, including female speech,[15] and deepens the dichotomy between the two morally opposed groups of women. As noted by Grigsby: "The Chevalier cannot resist making the good women better and more amply rewarded just as he could not resist making the bad women worse and more severely punished" (Grigsby 1963: 194). The story of Eve is among the most representative examples of the author's method of altering his source to make the women's reputations more consistent, that is, either unequivocally good or evil. While the *Miroir des bonnes femmes* includes an exemplum on Eve in both sections: *les mauvaises femmes* and *les bonnes femmes*, the Knight omits the latter and passes in silence the Franciscan author's description of the honours Eve was granted by God.[16] His Eve is a *mauvaise femme*, "the prime example of 'bad women'" (Jager 1993: 224), who is guilty of several transgressions, commonly referred to as the nine follies, which the Franciscan author described as follows, in Grigsby's summary:

> Eve was guilty of nine follies: (1) keeping bad company, (2) answering the serpent without due consideration and consultation with her husband, (3) forgetting God's command, (4) looking at the tree of forbidden fruit, i.e., "fol regart", (5) touching the fruit, (6) eating the fruit, (7) acquiring death through her sin, (8) seeking the companionship of her husband in the act of sinning, (9) not taking the responsibility of the sin.
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> (Grigsby 1961: 469)

Similarly, in *The Book of the Knight*, Eve's first three sins refer to her communication with the serpent. She is described as holding a conversation with the serpent, falling prey to his flattering words, answering the serpent carelessly

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14 On the composition, authorship, date, analogue and sources of *Miroir des bonnes femmes*, see Grigsby (1961: 462–468).

15 Anne Marie De Gendt notes that most of the passages in the Knight's book that reveal an original perception of female speech (and the use of speech in general) have no corresponding passages in the *Mirror* (2003: 192, n. 37).

16 For a summary of the first *exemplum* of 'good women' from *Miroir des bonnes femmes*, which concerns Eve, see Grigsby (1962: 32). For an explanation of the Knight's decision to omit it, see Grigsby (1963: 205).

(without her husband's advice) and – lastly – distorting God's words by adding "perhaps" to His warning as to what will happen if she and Adam decide to ignore His injunction not to eat of the tree of knowledge. The moral of the first folly is summed up in the following way: "And therfore, my fayre doughters/ It is not good to here folke/ that ben in theyr speche blandysshynge and castynge many flaterynge wordes/ For they bene fulle of decepcion" (Cap. xxxix, p. 63, ll. 6–9). While the story of the first folly of Eve alerts young ladies to the importance of seeing through the veil of words, the words of the flattering seducers in particular, the story of Eve's second folly advises them to protect themselves against unwelcome seducers using the cover of words, the words of their husbands in particular. Inasmuch as the fig leaves cover the naked body, the husband's words act as a shield that safeguards his wife's honour:

> Eve could have said that he would have to speak about it to her lord and not to her; thus she could have covered herself *[se … couverte]* and gotten away. Therefore, lovely daughters, you may learn from this example that if anyone asks folly of you or something that touches upon your honor, you can easily cover yourself *[vous … couvrir]* and say that you will speak of it to your lord. Thus you will defeat him and avoid into falling into the second folly of Eve, who answered without covering herself *[sans ce que elle s'en couvrist]* and without seeking her lord's advice.
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> (qtd. in Jager 1993: 228)[17]

Even though the lady's reference to her husband's opinion might have been nothing more than "just a ruse to scare off the would-be seducer", it nevertheless seems to serve a very useful and practical aim, especially when it concerns wives left alone to manage households during their husbands' absence, in which case – the Knight proposes – "Eve's daughter is to internalize the husband's voice of Adamic reason so that when he is absent and she is in need, she can articulate his authority herself" (Jager 1993: 229).

The story of Eve's third folly teaches the young ladies to preserve God's word in its original form and exposes verbal exchanges as particularly susceptible to error. Eve's addition of the word "perhaps" while reporting God's message not only corrupted it, but also encouraged the serpent to pursue his tempting strategy with a greater boldness, which brings to mind the strategy of the male conquest of women as it appears in medieval literature. Jager notes that the expression *par adventure*, used in Eve's response to Lucifer – "she told hym not playnly the trouthe/ but said yf we ete of it/ it myght fortune soo that *by aduenture* we shold dye" (Cap. xlj, p. 64, ll. 10–12; emphasis mine) – echoes sudden love or death in courtly romances (1993: 230). In fact, as the story continues Lucifer becomes a prototype of those who seek "fowle loue" (Cap. xlj, p. 64, l. 21) and who employ the devil's strategy

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[17] I am quoting from Jager's book because William Caxton's translation does not render closely the French *couvrir*. The French words as well as italics are Jager's.

in their conversations with women, namely that of flattery. Similarly to Eve, who is made to believe that when she eats the forbidden fruit she will be "as fayre as bryght shynyng and as myghty as [God] hym self is" (Cap. xlj, p. 64, ll. 27–28), foolish women are lured by their seducers into admiring their own beauty as reflected in the men's *belles paroles*. They "fall for a mere verbal fiction – a meretricious beauty whose body is language itself" (Jager 1993: 230).

The next three follies of Eve do not involve words, but the senses by means of which Eve foolishly, yet longingly, looked at the forbidden fruit before touching and consuming it. What the Knight is warning his daughters against in these three examples is not the deceptiveness of the senses as such but Eve's inability to govern them to her advantage. The final three follies of Eve are again verbal in nature and they concern doubting God's words, encouraging Adam to eat the apple, as well as excusing herself to God rather than taking the responsibility for her own deed. The last transgression, "puttyng the charge of the dede vpon other", made God "more angry thenne than he was before" (Cap. xlvij, p. 69, ll. 7–9).

The fact that Eve's verbal follies serve as a kind of frame for the sensory follies and are double in number highlights the primacy of the word in the Fall, which is also illustrated through the Knight's insistence that Eve's last folly – verbal in nature – is the worst (Jager 1993: 232). Eve's verbal transgressions "form a significant verbal prelude and aftermath to the main sin itself" (Jager 1993: 221), and are no more and no less serious than transgressions in deed. The greatest potential danger related to language use that the Knight's daughters should protect themselves against is represented by flattery, to which father-narrator devotes a significant amount of attention. It was flattery that led to the Fall in the past and it is flattery that might damage the women's reputations in the future.[18] The human propensity to flattery is related to the pleasure principle in language, which the Knight is aware of, for he shows how "language contains both the beginning and end (goal) of desire" (Jager 1993: 230), and which his daughters should also be aware of. They should never succumb to the vain desire of seeing their beauty reflected in the flatterers' words and never "consent and graunte to the fowle delyte" of those who – when they have accomplished their will – leave them shamefully defamed (Cap. xlj, p. 64, l. 36).

5. Sins of the tongue: The case of flattery

The relation between flattery and *le péché original*, which was firmly grounded in the medieval imagination, gave rise to a number of symbols and images associated with flatterers which might have originated in the Scripture.[19] It also

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18 On the idea that it was the *flatterie diabolique* that was the cause of the Fall, see Casagrande & Vecchio (2007: 262, n. 2).

19 Casagrande and Vecchio provide examples of flattery being compared to a meal offered by

assigned a specific gravity to the sin of flattery, which in medieval literature appeared alongside other kinds of transgressions, such as backbiting and even murder. Casagrande & Vecchio write about the close albeit surprising correlation between flattery and backbiting, comparing them to the two faces of Janus *bifrons*, one representing the cowardly duplicity of the defamer, who speaks ill of another behind his back, while the other – the devious wiles of the flatterer, who unjustifiably and insincerely praises the person in front of him (2007: 244).

It has already been mentioned how in the prologue to his book the Knight warns his daughters against trusting those that use fair language to win their love before they go mocking and lying behind their back. He refers to them as over-false men (Prol., p. 12, l. 19). The criterion of truth was the crucial factor in defining flattery until the beginning of the thirteenth century when it was replaced by the criterion of intention. Accordingly, the earlier understanding of *adulatio* as 'false praise' or 'praise that strays from the truth' was superseded by an 'intentional' understanding, in which the emphasis was placed on the speaker's motivation rather than the content of the praise. This understanding of flattery, based on the Thomistic idea that an evil word may be used for a good purpose while a good word for an evil end, [20] led to a different taxonomy of this sin, which was no longer based on the true/false division.[21] The words of praise, even if they are true, will be still considered flatterous when they are motivated by an illegitimate desire to please. The flatterer is a sinner primarily because he *wants* to please (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 256). He uses applauding rhetoric to make himself pleasing rather than to celebrate the works of God (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 257). And the flattered person is not without a fault either, for "[m]ost people seem, owing to love of honour, to wish to be loved rather than to love; which is why most people love flattery" (*NE*, VIII.8, p. 151).[22]

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the devil's cooks, a pile of mud covered with gold or a poisonous snake with a flower in its mouth (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 260).

20 According to St. Thomas Aquinas, backbiting, for instance, is evil when intended to damage a person's reputation, a point especially pertinent in the case of young ladies in need of good husbands, while it is an act of charity when aimed at humbling an individual and helping them amend their ways (*ST*, II-II, Q. 73, Art. 3–4). A similar point is being made about cursing, which may also be directed to good in two different ways: in terms of justice (when a judge curses a man condemned to a penalty in a similar way to when the Church curses by pronouncing anathema) and in terms of usefulness (when the intention of the speaker is to effect a reform on the part of the cursed man) (*ST*, II-II, Q. 76, Art. 1).

21 Casagrande and Vecchio enumerate four categories of flattery that supplemented the earlier division of the sin, which was based on the criterion of truth. They are: unworthy praise (*l'éloge indigne*), which extols unworthy goods (wealth, physical attributes) rather than virtues and good morals; harmful praise (*l'éloge nocif*), which praises individuals in their presence, thereby inciting pride even in those who are virtuous; untimely praise (*l'éloge intempestif*), which refers to praising someone who has just done good and who could thus be satisfied with the little he has done; and vain praise (*l'éloge vain*), which is motivated by a vain intention (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 255).

22 Quoted from Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (2009), abbreviated to *NE*.

In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas contrasts flattery and friendship, presenting the flatterer as a false friend and a pleasant enemy. Following the Aristotelian definition of friendship, Aquinas understands it in a broad sense of mutual relations between people, relations which should be based on affability, but which should never fear to displease when the situation demands it.[23] According to Aquinas, flatterers sin by excess: "the term 'flattery' is wont to be applied to all who wish to exceed the mode of virtue in pleasing others by word or deeds in their ordinary behaviour towards their fellows" (*ST*, II-II, Q. 115, Art. 1, Obj. 3). Situated within the wider context of human relations, in the thirteenth century flattery gains a social dimension. While friendliness is a virtue of social intercourse, flattery is referred to as a social vice, for the flatterer gives precedence to personal over social interests. Concerned with giving pleasure through words, flatterers – Aristotle says – do so in order that they may "get some advantage in the direction of money or the things that money buys" (*NE*, IV.6, p. 75). Motivated by vanity, envy, greed and a desire for personal and social approval, flatterers turn against their friends, neighbours, family and other members of society in order to gain favour or advantage. Consequently, flattery undermines the order of human relations, in that it not only changes friendship into its opposite, but also challenges the distribution of goods and power (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 258–259).

The insidious effects of flattery were not without political significance, too. In John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, for instance, flatterers – together with petitioners, informers, defamers, as well as the jealous, the ambitious, and the shameful – are referred to as the "enemies of the public welfare" (III.3, p. 18).[24] This is because they mislead the ruler, on whom they are financially dependent, and draw him into inappropriate choices by advising him to follow his own self-interest and ambitions rather than the common good, thereby fostering tyranny. "A diet of flattery is an important element in the creation of tyrants and abounds in an unjust society", as noted by Kate Langdon Forhan (1990: 401). The society described by John of Salisbury renders justice redundant and flattery morally defensible as well as necessary for survival, whereas "in a just, or even a fairly decent, society", as Forhan says, "flattery is an offence not only to virtue but also to good rule, since it obscures sometimes painful reality from the prince" (Forhan 1990: 400).

Even though the political dimension of flattery is not particularly strongly emphasized in the Knight's book for his daughters, its main aim being education in manners rather than statecraft, the author examines flattery in contexts which extend well beyond domestic boundaries, suggesting that he envisions various

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[23] Aristotle understands friendship as "a propensity to be civil in dealings with others". See Brown, ed. (2009: 225, n. 1126b).

[24] Quoted from John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers* (2007 [1990]).

roles for his female audiences. Of all the sins of the tongue exemplified in *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, it is flattery that best captures the essence of the ethical system underpinning the Knight's arguments. It is the *exempla* on flattery that – to a greater extent than other stories – illustrate how a good word may be used for an evil end and an evil word for a good end. Similarly to other medieval writers, the author of the Knight's book compares flatterers to jugglers, who can make a piece of coal seem like a fair thing in order to win love, gain social approval and prosper in the larger world.[25] Flatterers are envisioned as greedy and ambitious characters, both men and women, whose immoral actions are directed against the more affluent members of society, for – as Casagrande and Vecchio note – only poverty can keep the flatterer at bay (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 259). In the Knight's book, the theme of flattery appears in connection with other sins, such as covetousness, and in the context of various relations, including those between husband and wife, friends and neighbours as well as between the knights and their commander. Seen as the most egregious of verbal transgressions, the sin of flattery is also severely punished.[26]

The Knight writes about a lady called Susanna, who was made to believe that her son was alive while he was killed in battle and who nearly died for sorrow when she learned the truth (Cap. lxxiij, p. 104, ll. 3–7). He describes a cheese vendor whose wealth attracted those who praised her repulsive physiognomy in order to receive a piece of cheese and then denigrated her behind her back (Cap. lxxiij, p. 104, ll. 17–22). He refers to the duke of Normandy, who was praised by his knights for his shooting skills, which in fact left a lot to be desired (Cap. lxxiij, p. 104, ll. 23–38). The danger of flattery, as is shown, is that it not only enhances self-pride, but also undermines social trust and solidarity relationships between neighbours. In addition, it poses a threat to an individual's spiritual welfare. This is the case in the story about courtiers who flatter the dying Emperor into believing that he would get well again, while only his chamberlain is considerate enough to tell him the truth, thereby helping his lord prepare for a good death and salvation:

> Thenne beganne the chamberlayn to saye moche humbly/ Syre god hath gyuen to yow in this world alle worship & honour And also grete quantite of worldly goodes/ wherfor ye must thanke hym/ and ye shal doo wel/ And of suche goodes as god hath sente to yow ye must ordeyne and departe to the poure folke a parte of them/ In suche wyse that he haue no cause to repreue yow therof … .
>
> (Cap. lxxxxiij, p. 125, ll. 29–35)

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25 Among other images of flatterers to be found in medieval texts, there are also animalistic comparisons. Flatterers are likened to flies that seek honey and ants that seek wheat. They are compared to grasshoppers that sleep in winter to strike with more force in the summer and to chameleons whose skin changes colour in response to their surroundings. See Casagrande & Vecchio (2007: 259).

26 In contrast to his main source, in many of his *exempla* the author of the Knight's book provides justice for the wrongdoers, including female flatterers. See Grigsby (1963: 190).

While the Emperor's chamberlain shows a genuine concern for the well-being of his soul, other courtiers speak to the Emperor "of bodyly helthe" (Cap. lxxxxiij, p. 126, l. 2). In referring to the chamberlain as the Emperor's only true friend, the Knight once again reveals his indebtedness to St. Thomas Aquinas's discussion of flattery in opposition to friendship. "More worthe is the frend/ whiche prycketh than the flaterynge frend whiche enoynteth" (Cap. lxxxxiij, p. 125, l. 37 and p. 126, l. 1), he says, paraphrasing the words of Proverbs 27:6 – "Better are the wounds of a friend than the deceitful kisses of an enemy" – quoted by Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* (*ST*, II-II , Q. 115, Art. 2, Obj. 3). In Thomistic moral theology, flattery is not only opposed to friendship, but also to charity, while flatterers are injurers of the worst kind because they hinder an individual's spiritual progress when they offer praise immediately before death. In this, they may be said to be praising another's sin rather than encouraging repentance. "Flattery of this kind", Aquinas says, "is said to harm more than the sword of the persecutor, since it does harm to goods that are of greater consequence, namely, spiritual goods" (*ST*, II-II, Q. 115, Art. 2, Reply Obj.1). It is in this respect that flattery is not unlike murder and the injurious capacity of words is no lesser than that of deeds.[27]

On a more domestic note, the Knight's book includes a story of a greedy wife, referred to as Delilah in Wright's translation and Dalida in Caxton's translation and forward in this work, who gave her husband Samson over to his enemies by making him sleep in her lap and cutting his hair, a source of his strength, in return for "a good reward" (Cap. lxx, p. 100, ll. 22–23). The Knight uses the story of Samson's wife to condemn "this fals vyce of couetyse" (Cap. lxx, p. 101, l. 5), which turns wives against their husbands, children against their parents and noblemen against their subjects. The moral of the story is also directed at those who, like Judas, "selle theyr speche/ whiche god gaaf them to prouffyte with for the comyn wele" (Cap. lxx, p. 101, ll. 14–15). They deserve death as punishment, for they debase language, one of the divine gifts, thereby committing a sin against God himself. If Dalida had not sold her husband's secret that "al his myȝt was in the heerys of the heed" (Cap. lxx, p. 100, l. 20),[28] his enemies would not have lured her with the promise of "a grete quantite of gold and of gownes/ and as

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[27] Interestingly, in Dante's *Inferno* flattery is punished in circle eight, the second lowest circle of the Dantean Hell, whereas sins of violence such as murder are punished in the seventh circle, one circle higher. This may seem surprising to modern-day readers, but was not necessarily so to the medieval audience, for the corrupting influence of flattery, as shown in medieval poetry and political thought, was more prevalent within society than the loss of individual life through murder. See Canto 18 in Dante's *Inferno*, trans. by Robin Kirkpatrick (2013, p. 81, ll. 112–126).

[28] Grigsby notes that, in contrast to his main source, the author of the Knight's book assigns more agency and wickedness to the female figure by writing that Dalida "sent for the paynyms" [Cap. lxx, p. 100, l. 29], seeking her husband's enemies rather than being approached by them with their proposal (Grigsby 1963: 187–188).

many precious stones as she wold take of them" (Cap. lxx, p. 100, ll. 25–26) and God would not have "sente to the sayd dalida the deserte of her meryte and dede" (Cap. lxx, p. 101, ll. 17–18).

The example of 'selling' speech in order to obtain financial rewards is an interesting way of combining two ethical concepts: sins of the tongue and sins of deed, showing again that within the Knight's ethical system both sins are equal in gravity, especially – as is the case here – when the words and deeds are directed against God. Dalida is punished "of her euylle dede", the Knight says, and reiterates that it is for her "euyl doynge" that evil should befall her in return, emphasizing once again the agentive role of language (Cap. lxx, p. 101, ll. 28–29). As was mentioned before, 'selling' false words is the domain of flatterers, and what is interesting about the story of Dalida and Samson is how it does and does not address the theme of flattery, depending on how Dalida's deception tactics are described. While Caxton follows the French original closely and translates "Et celle, qui fust deceue par convoitise, fist endormir son seigneur en son giron et puis lui tondit ses cheveulx" (qtd. from Grigsby 1963: 186–187) as "And she that thorugh couetyse was deceyued/ made her lord to slepe in her lappe/ And whyle he fast slepte/ she cutte awey the heerys of his heede" (Cap. lxx, p. 100, ll. 26–29), Wright expands on Dalida's motivation, adding a reference to flattery alongside covetousness: "And she, that was gretly enfecte with couetise, / thorugh her large proferes, ouercame her husbonde with wyne / and *flatering langage*, that she made hym slepe in her lappe. / And, the mene while that he slepte, she share of and cut awey / the heres of his hede" (qtd. from Wright, chapter LXX, p. 92, ll. 12–16; emphasis mine). Having mentioned greed as Dalida's primary motivation, Wright proceeds to flattery, thereby associating Dalida's abuse of language almost by default with false praise. In his translation, flattery – which was sometimes used to cover up the real intention of greed – comes to the surface and attempts to re-enter the discussion on human motivation and intentionality, revealing a more complex kind of wickedness than one based solely on a lie.[29]

6. The debate between husband and wife

Even though the *exempla* illustrating the entire range of human behaviour, both vices and virtues, belong to the past, it is on many occasions in his book that the Knight emphasizes their relevance for "this tyme present" or "the world that is now present", evoking a moral crisis in his society (Prol., p. 12, l. 24 and p. 13, l. 1). How the present might be redeemed is shown not only through the *exempla*

[29] Casagrande & Vecchio note that in the Middle Ages flattery was regarded as a more serious offence than a mere lie in that it tended to strike more secretly and unexpectedly (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 262).

concerning good women,[30] but also through what the Knight presents as an autobiographical account of a debate he held with his wife (Burger 2018: 100). Construed as a recreation of a real domestic occasion, the debate is situated towards the end of the book and it offers a recapitulation of the Knight's moral teaching, reiterating many of the ideas presented in the preceding *exempla* and reinterpreting them from a female perspective. The focus on the dialogic way of processing information assigns equal weights to the masculine and the feminine voices and shows how the husband and wife work beside each other. This may be related to "a new, vital form of noble subject formation within the confines of the married family and household" (Burger 2018: 102).

The debate is also an interesting instance of combining the theme of love, the main preoccupation of the speakers, with that of language. The Knight's main argument is that their daughters should be allowed to "loue peramours" (Cap. xxij, p. 163, l. 20) because love brings out the best in both sides, serving as a spur to action for the male lover and arousing pity in the lady's heart. His wife responds that such arguments are nothing but empty words, especially when articulated by those who appeal for a young lady's favour. "In good feyth/ they done it only for to enhaunce them self/ and for to drawe vnto them the grace and vayne glory of the world", she says (Cap. xxiij, p. 164, ll. 20–22). She then proceeds to expose the strategies employed by deceivers and beguilers of ladies, who not only resort to theatrical gestures, such as feigned sighs and pensive, melancholy looks, but also to more ostentatious forms of rhetoric to achieve their ends: they flatter the ladies, swear to keep faith, in which they later fail, and – what is even worse – they invent lies about the ladies, telling others "al that cometh vpon theyr fals tongues" (Cap. cxxiij, p. 167, l. 2).[31] The words of the Lady of the Tower are not directed against love itself, but rather against love-talking, which may forfeit the young ladies' chances of a decent marriage and of "secure possession of the married estate" (Burger 2018: 100).

The arguments that the Lady of the Tower presents against courtly love reveal that despite the book's innovative approach to the relations between the spouses, based as they are on a dialogic cooperation, the ethical system it promotes is still deeply entrenched in medieval Christian theology, in which the only union between the sexes sanctioned by God is a sacramental marriage.[32] The greatest offences that men commit, in turn, regardless of whether they are categorized as sins of the word, thought or deed, are those against God.

The Lady's argument seems to be structured according to the three categories of sin distinguished by Aquinas.[33] She begins by referring to sinful thoughts,

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30 See Grigsby (1962: 30–51).

31 See also Casagrande & Vecchio (2007: 260).

32 On marriage and sacrament, see Cap. cxxix, p. 171, ll. 14–38 in Offord's edition (1971a).

33 Using the Aristotelian metaphor of the temple (see Brown, ed. 2009: 187–188), Aquinas compares sins of thought to the foundation of the building, sins of the word to the walls,

which revolve around "the Ioye and foule delytes of lechery" (Cap. cxxiij, p. 165, l. 30), before moving to an account of immoral deeds committed in the name of love – she evokes the story of two queens who together with their knights "took theyr fowle delytes and playsaunce within the Chirche/ duryng the seruyse dyuyne (Cap. cxxiij, p. 165, ll. 39–40), for which they were severely punished by God – only to conclude with the previously mentioned example of deceitful love-talking. It appears, therefore, that for the Lady of the Tower thinking evil thoughts in church is no different from doing evil deeds, with sinful words being no less moral than sinful thoughts and no more moral than sinful deeds. The criterion that the Lady uses for assessing the severity of sin is whether it is committed against God (more serious), or against a creature (less serious).[34]

The word of God, as manifested in his commandments, is the cornerstone of the ethical system evoked in the Knight's book while an important criterion for assessing human behaviour is how an individual responds to it. Interestingly, in the debate between the Knight and the Lady of the Tower, it is the wife that is the spokesperson for the divine message. She takes on the role that Thomas of Chobham wrote about and corrects her husband's view of love, also instructing their daughters on the use of speech. Evoking examples from her own life, which give an air of greater validity to her discourse, she advises the young ladies to be particularly cautious while responding to men's verbal advances. There are two main strategies of dealing with unwelcome suitors that the Lady of the Tower recommends to their daughters. The first is to ignore the suitors by turning a deaf ear to their words, while the second is to call trusted companions for help and to hide themselves behind their words and bodies (Cap. xxiiij, p. 167, ll. 15–24). This is what the Lady of the Tower herself did when approached by men in the days of her youth: "I haue many tymes perceyued how somme men were aboute to speke to me therof/ but euer I brake theyr wordes/ & called to me somme other/ wherby I dyd breke theyr faytte" (Cap. xxxj, p. 173, ll. 8–10).

She then recalls one particular response she gave to a man who declared his love for her. Instead of taking his declaration at its face value, the Lady began an inquiry into the duration of his lovesickness: "And I dyd demaunde and asked hym yf hit was long syn that sekenes & euylle had taken him" (Cap. xxxj, p. 173, ll. 13–15). The answer she receives is very unsatisfactory, for the man had been in love with her for merely two years, rather than the required minimum of seven years and a half, which does not qualify his 'sickness' as love but temptation only and as such it might be easily removed with the help of some holy water. What seems most important in this story is not the call to a patient service of the

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and sins of deed to the roof. "Consequently", he concludes, "these three differ in respect of the various degrees of sin. Nevertheless it is evident that these three belong to the one complete species, since they proceed from the same motive" (*ST*, I-II, Q. 72, Art. 7).

34 On different typologies of sin, see Bordwell (1999: 409).

lady that the man receives, but rather the encouragement the ladies themselves receive to question their suitors' words in the hope that this may bring them closer to the most singular model and exemplar for Christian women – the Virgin Mary. It was Mary who in the conversation with the angel Gabriel tried to verify his identity and the truthfulness of his announcement about the forthcoming birth of her son: "she dradde & was aferd as the Aungel salewed her/ Of whome she demaunded how it myght be that she shold conceyue a child that hadde neuer knowen man" (Cap. Cvij, p. 144, ll. 21–24). Mary's response represents an attempt to distinguish good guidance from harmful influence, or – in other words – to discern whether the message she receives comes from God or his enemy. In this respect, she becomes a symbol of a particular relationship with God, which is based on seeking after His will through "interrogative assent" based on discernment (Burger 2018: 100).

In the context of medieval discourse analysis, discernment appears, among other works, in Raoul Ardent's *Speculum universale* (c. 1199), in which it is one of the criteria for classifying words, the other criteria being: truth, usefulness, honesty as well as the end or aim the word serves (*directio*).[35] As Casagrande & Vecchio write:

> Après avoir surmonté les épreuves imposées par la vérite, l'utilité, l'honnêteté et le discernement, la parole, pour être vertueuse, doit répondre à une dérnière condition: la directio. Elle doit donc être orientée vers une fin nécessaire, avoir en soi une intention qui la porte vers une juste finalité. Cette juste finalité et cette fin nécessaire son évidentes: il s'agit de Dieu. En outre, l'intention doit être pure, sans aucune trace de vanité, et intègre, c'est-à-dire non partagée entre Dieu et le monde, mais entièrement tournée vers Dieu.
>
> (Casagrande & Vecchio 2007: 49)

> [After overcoming the tests of truth, usefulness, honesty and discernment, the word, to be virtuous, must meet one last condition: *directio*. It must therefore be oriented towards a necessary end, have in itself an intention which brings it towards a good aim. This good aim and necessary end are clear: they relate to God. Furthermore, the intention must be pure, without any trace of vanity, and self-contained, that is to say, not shared between God and the world, but turned entirely towards God.][36]

As presented in *The Book of the Knight*, Mary expresses reasonable doubt concerning the message that is revealed to her, her main concern being the *directio* of the holy announcement. While she "wold fyrst knowe how it myght be", Eve and many other "symple wymmen" believe too lightly in what they are told: "They enquere not ne behold not *the ende* to the whiche they shall come/ as

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[35] Casagrande & Vecchio note that out of the twenty-nine chapters dedicated to the particular criteria of classifying words in Ardent's *Speculum universale*, as many as nineteen are focused on discernment, which makes it the most complex and thoroughly analysed criterion (2007: 47).

[36] Translation from French is mine (DR).

dyd the gloryous and blessyd vyrgyn Marye/ whiche enquyred of the Aungel *the ende* of the faytte or dede/ the whiche he dyd announce to her" (Capitulo Cvij, p. 144, ll. 37–40; emphasis mine).

The fact that Mary's laudable example is set against its opposite evokes the perennial dichotomy between good and evil in the world, which goes back to the Scripture and offers a clear indication that the message of the Knight's book is aimed at Christian subjects. This dichotomy also underpins the structure of the book, in which the *exempla* about good women are intertwined with those about bad, "emphasizing how a woman's nature, like a man's, is both good and bad" (Burger 2018: 96). The fact that the story of the Annunciation is moved from the position it occupied in the book's direct source, the *Miroir des bonnes femmes*, to appear at "the climactic end point of the Chevalier's list of biblical women" further emphasizes its importance (Burger 2018: 98),[37] an importance which lies not only in conveying a lesson about discernment, but also about married love. This is because the story of Mary's conversation with the angel is preceded by the story of her marriage to "the holy man Ioseph" (Cap. Cvij, p. 143, l. 36), whom she chose for her husband in order for God to be born "vnder the shadowe of maryage for to obeye to the lawe and for to eschewe the euylle talkynge of the world" (Cap. Cvij, p. 144, ll. 1–2). Emphasizing the sacramental nature of a true Christian marriage, the *exemplum* about Mary provides an apt introduction to the debate between the Knight and the Lady of the Tower, which follows shortly after and which – as the argument progresses – moves away from loving in an erotic kind of way (*fin'amor*) to "loving in a marrying kind of way", asserting more and more pronouncedly the female agency and promoting "an affective rather than an erotic or feudal contract" between men and women (Burger 2018: 24). Since by the late Middle Ages married relations became a model for state relations,[38] the message the Chevalier conveys is applicable to various kinds of relations both within family, society and the state, relations whose success he sees as depending primarily on responsible language use.

7. Conclusion: On the power of language

> And in lyke wyse as the shafte is departed fro the bowe must take her flyght and cours/ and neuer cometh ageyne to the bowe/ tyll it haue smyte somme thynge/ Soo is the word whiche yssued oute of the mouthe lyke it/ For after that he is put out of the mouth it may neuer be put in to the mouthe ageyne/ but that it shal be herd be it good or euylle.
>
> (Cap. Cxliiiij, p. 191, ll. 17–22)

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[37] On the situatedness of the *exemplum* about Mary in the context of the *Livre*'s source, see Grigsby (1963: 199).

[38] See Burger (2018: 23).

The power of language is a theme that runs through many of the Knight's *exempla*, some of which were mentioned before. Others include, for instance, a story about a rope maker, who is deceived by his lecherous wife into believing that what he sees as "some body" coming out of their chamber at night is "nothynge but the day/ and the nyght" striving together (Cap., lxij, p. 88, ll. 28–31). Language has the power to transform the night into the day and day into the night, the story shows, undermining the norms of trust, solidarity and honesty between individuals as within a community and demonstrating that in the Middle Ages, as now, "[t]he question of untruthful language was … an issue of social ethics, for it threatened the validity of the social contract" (Régnier-Bohler 1992: 457). It also shows that the Knight's numerous lessons on the proper and improper uses of "langage", however paternalistic they might seem at times, may nevertheless be defended on the grounds of their social relevance. They highlight the contractual nature of language, its role in shaping the social reality and the connection between linguistic and moral agency, thereby preparing the young ladies for various social roles.

To be competent language users, the Knight's daughters are expected "to lerne to rede" (Prol., p. 13, l. 5), an ability which the Knight does not see as limited to the contents of the medieval primers, but which he takes to encompass an understanding of the whole visible world, which was imagined in the Middle Ages as a book written by the finger of God.[39] If the world is a book, there will always be true and false words written in it, for good and evil both have a place in the divine order of things. Accordingly, among the prospective suitors for the ladies' hands there will be those who "thynken but good and honeste" (Cap. Cxxv, p. 168, l. 1) as well as those who think the opposite; those who pay compliments to please, as their father did when suing for their mother's hand, and those who flatter to deceive, as many other knights still do. A successful understanding of the book of the world, then, often involves reading between the lines, that is reading for intentions and responding accordingly, and it is this knowledge that the Knight wants to instill in his daughters. He displays a clear confidence in women's ability to know moral truths and to choose an ethically permissible course of action, which he imagines as preceded by careful discernment and followed by a good end. Therefore, before they give counsel to their husbands, the wives should carefully consider the possible effect their words might bring: "For and she be wyse she ought to thynke to what ende other good or euylle/ her counceylle may come" (Cap. xlvj, p. 68, ll. 29–30). Thus, a proficient command of a "langage" extends beyond the meaning of individual words and involves the skills of selecting and filtering information. It also involves living up to the responsibility that comes with the use of words, which may be either true or false but should always be employed for a well-intentioned aim that upholds rather than undermines social trust.

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[39] On the idea of the world as a book full of signs and symbols, see Lerer (2009: 60).

The fact that women are envisioned not only as potentially responsive, but as actually responding subjects seems vital for the construction of gender roles in the book and for the understanding of the ethical system on which it is based. It is the women's response, the Knight seems to be saying, rather than their inner constitution, that determines whether they may be classed as *les bonnes femmes* or *les mauvaises femmes*, and the same applies to men, who are neither inherently good or bad, as well as to words spoken, for they too acquire a meaning depending on the context. In the case of the Thomistic ethics to which the book is indebted, the context in question is the speaker's intention or the end that their words are intended to serve. In other words, human speech, like human beings themselves, has no inherent moral value outside the situation and circumstances in which it appears.

The idea that there is an implicit relativity in actions and words is further validated in the *quasi*-real debate the Knight is reported to have had with the girls' mother. Even though both debaters are firm in their convictions, the Knight arguing in favour of courtly love while the Lady making a case for married love, they both acknowledge the plentiful variety, richness and singularity of human beings and encourage their daughters to move beyond the binary, dichotomous thinking in their understanding of the complexity of human motivation. Even though the girls are advised to be particularly cautious in their relations with men, they should remember that "al men ben not of one condycion/ ne of one manere/ for that thynge/ whiche pleseth to one is dyspleasyng to the other" (Cap. Cxxv, p. 167, ll. 33–35) – and that "there be many maners of loue" (Cap. Cxxxiij, p. 174, l. 28). The fact that the moral assessment of the characters presented in the book is often related to speech reveals an awareness of the potential dangers of language irresponsibly used, on the one hand, and a great confidence in the human ability to safeguard against the possible traps that language might set, on the other. This ability is one of the skills that the Knight expects his daughters to master with the aid of his manual.

The final *exempla* bring us back to reflect on the nature of parent-child relations with which the prologue began as much as they question the practicability or feasibility of the father's educational programme for his daughters. This is because they provide a negative example of a son who disobeyed his father's advice, which had nearly cost him his life. Instructed by his father Cato to be self-sufficient, the young Catonet nevertheless accepts office at court, which puts him at the emperor's mercy. Advised never to reprieve a man who deserves to die, he saves a thief from the gallows, who later nearly deprives him of life. Asked to test his wife if she can keep a secret, he entrusts her with an invented story of how he killed the emperor's son, the revelation of which greatly imperils his life.

How, then, can the Knight of the Tower trust that his daughters will follow his own advice if the examples he quotes show children getting their own way? Referring to how the Roman people reacted to the allegations against Cato,

concerning his reputed murder of the emperor's son, the Knight says that there "was grete talkynge amonge them" (Cap. Cxlj, p. 187, l. 38) and "Some byleued hit/ And somme sayd it was not so" (Cap. Cxlj, p. 188, l. 1). Likewise, some women "can wel kepe secretely what men saye to them" (Cap. Cxliij, p. 190, ll. 23–24), while others cannot. By analogy, some of the Knight's daughters may be willing to listen to his advice while others may not. An even more important analogy concerns the parents, some of whom act on their own advice while others do not. The fact that the moral of the Knight's teaching is also addressed to the teachers themselves becomes most clearly revealed when the emperor's son reproves his father for trusting too lightly in the false reports about his death and as a consequence almost destroying an innocent man. "Ha my lord wylle ye vse of so hasty Iustyce withoute makynge of none enqueste vpon the dede or faytte" (Cap. Cxlij, p. 189, ll. 6–7), the young man asks, suggesting that an inquiry into the reputed crime, which his father never commissioned, might have cleared the innocent man from the charge of murder.

It is quite telling that the final lesson that the Knight teaches his daughters is about the power of the word, which is not unlike an arrow that – once released – can never be recalled, "be it good or euylle" (Cap. Cxliiiij, p. 191, l. 22). It is the ineluctable finality and consequentiality of speech that emerges as an underlying theme in the Knight's concluding words to his daughters, which shows that his lessons apply equally well to those who give advice, be they parents, teachers or political leaders, as to those who receive it, be they children, students or political subjects. If the word is a weapon that may kill, the Knight says, prudent caution may save lives. In order to save lives, speech needs to be critically engaged with. This is the message that the Knight of the Tower tries to convey to his daughters, even at the cost of having his own words questioned and disobeyed.

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