The Tale of Melibee
Geoffrey Chaucer

Here begins Chaucer's Tale of Melibee

A young man called Melibee, mighty and rich, had with his wife, who was called Prudence, a daughter, who was called Sophie. 967

One day it happened that he for his pastime went into the fields to enjoy himself. He had left his wife and his daughter within his house, the doors of which were shut fast. 969

Three of his longtime foes had seen this, set ladders to the walls of his house, and entered by windows. They beat his wife and wounded his daughter, leaving her with five mortal wounds in five different places, that is to say, in her feet, in her hands, in her ears, in her nose, and in her mouth. And they left her for dead and went away. 972

When Melibee returned to his house and saw all this mischief, he, like a madman, tearing his clothes, began to weep and cry. Prudence, his wife, as far as she dared, entreated him to stop his weeping. Despite that he went on to cry and weep ever longer. 975

This noble wife Prudence recalled the teaching of Ovid, in his book called The Remedies of Love, in which he says “One is a fool who disturbs a mother in her weeping for the death of her child until she has wept her fill for a certain time; at this time one would do his duty to comfort her with amiable words, and pray her to stop her weeping.” 978

For this reason this noble wife Prudence allowed her husband to weep and cry for a certain time; and when she found the right time, she spoke to him in this way: “Alas, my lord,” she said, “why do you permit yourself to act like such a fool? For truly it is not fitting to a wise man to make such sorrow. Your daughter, with the grace of God, will recover and escape death. And, even if it were so that she were dead right now, you should not destroy yourself on account of her death. Seneca says, ‘The wise man shall not take too great a discomfort for the death of his children; instead, he should suffer it in patience, in the same way that he awaits the death of his own proper self.’” 985

This Melibee answered right away and said, “What man,” he said, “who has so great a cause to weep could stop weeping? Jesus Christ, our Lord, himself wept for the death of his friend Lazarus.” 987

Prudence answered, “Surely, I know well that moderate weeping is not prohibited to him who is sorrowful among people in sorrow, but it is granted him to weep. The Apostle Paul writes to the Romans, ‘Man shall rejoice with those who make joy, and weep with those who weep.’ 989

“But though moderate weeping may be granted, excessive weeping surely is forbidden. Moderation in weeping should be understood with the wisdom that Seneca teaches us. ‘When your friend is dead,’ he said, ‘do not let your eyes be too moist with tears, nor too dry; although the tears come to your eyes, let them not fall. When you have lost your friend, work diligently to get another friend. This is greater wisdom than to weep for your friend that you have lost, for in this is no benefit.’ 993

“Therefore, if you govern yourself by wisdom, put away sorrow from your heart. Remember what Jesus Sirach says: ‘A man that is joyous and glad in heart may flourish in his age; but a truly sorrowful heart makes his bones dry.’ He also says that a sorrowful heart slays many. 996

“Solomon says that ‘Just as moths in the sheep’s fleece do injury to the clothes, and the small worms longest of the books of wisdom in the Old Testament. Please note that in The Tale of Melibee that there are several instances of ascribing to one author what was likely written by another.

1 Ovid. Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC – 17 AD), Roman poet, best known for The Metamorpheses.
2 Seneca. Seneca the Younger, influential First-Century Roman philosopher, whose plays were rediscovered and imitated in the Renaissance. Chaucer relies principally on his Epistolae (collection of letters to Lucilius).
3 Paul the Apostle. Author of several letters or epistles in the New Testament, one of which is to the converts to Christianity in Rome.
4 Jesus Sirach. Author of the Old Testament Book of Sirach, also known as The Book of Ecclesiasticus, the longest of the books of wisdom in the Old Testament.
5 Solomon. Hebrew ruler of the Tenth Century BC, best known for his wealth, many wives, and wisdom, whose life and influence are retold in the Old Testament 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles. He is also the reputed author of the Old Testament Proverbs.
to the tree, so too sorrow does injury to the heart. Therefore, in both the death of our children and in the loss of our temporal goods, we should have patience. 998

“Remember the patient Job. He lost his children and his temporal goods and had received and endured many grievous tribulations on his body, yet he said, ‘Our Lord has given to me; our Lord has taken away; just as our Lord has willed, so it is done. Blessed be the name of our Lord!’” 1000

To these things Melibee answered his wife Prudence: “All your words,” he said, “are true, and in that way profitable. But truly my heart is troubled with this sorrow so grievously that I know not what to do.” 1001

“Call,” said Prudence, “all your true friends, and those of your lineage who are wise. Set forth your case, and listen to what they say in counseling, and govern yourself according to their wisdom. Solomon says, ‘Act always by counsel, and you shall never repent.’” 1003

Then, by the counsel of his wife Prudence, this Melibee called together a great congregation of people, including surgeons, physicians, old people and young, and some of his old enemies reconciled as by her pretended to his love and into his grace; and therewithal there came some of his neighbors that paid him reverence more for fear than for love, as it often happens. There came also many subtle flatterers, and wise advocates learned in the law. 1007

And when these people were assembled together, this Melibee in sorrowful fashion explained to them his case. And by the manner of his speech it seemed that in heart he bore a cruel anger, ready to do vengeance upon his foes, and suddenly desired that the war should begin; but he nonetheless asked for her counsel on this matter. 1010

A surgeon, by license and assent of others who were as wise, rose up, and said to Melibee as you may hear: “Sire,” he said, “as to us surgeons pertains that we do to every creature the best that we know, where we are engaged by one, and to our patients that we do no damage; as such, it happens many times and often that when two men have wounded each other, the same surgeon heals them both; therefore in our art it is not pertinent to nourish war nor to support parties in it. But surely, as to the cure of your daughter, albeit that she may be perilously wounded, we should do such devoted business from day to night that with the grace of God she shall be whole and sound as soon as is possible.” 1015

Almost in the same way the physicians answered, except that they said a few words more: that just as maladies are cured by their contraries, so too should men cure war by vengeance. 1017

His neighbors full of envy, his feigned friends that seemed reconciled, and his flatterers made the semblance of weeping, made things worse and aggravated much of this matter in praising greatly Melibee of might, of power, of wealth, and of friends, despising the power of his adversaries, and said utterly that he should wreak himself on his foes immediately and begin war. 1020

Up rose then an advocate that was wise, by leave and by counsel of others who were wise, and said: “Lords, the need for which we have been assembled in this place is a very heavy thing and an important matter, because of the wrong and of the wickedness that has been done, and by reason also of the great damages that in the time coming are possible to occur for this same cause, and by reason as well of the great wealth and power of both of the parties; for these reasons it would be a great peril to err in this matter. 1025

“Therefore, Melibee, this is our advice: we counsel you above all things that right away you work diligently in protecting your proper person in such a fashion that you are not without a spy or watchman to keep you safe. And after that, we counsel that in your house you establish a sufficient garrison, so that they may defend your body as well as your house. But surely, to begin war, and to do so suddenly for the sake of vengeance, we may not judge in a short time that it would profitable. 1028

“Therefore we ask the opportunity and time to have deliberation in this case to judge. For the common proverb says thus: one who judges hastily soon shall repent. And people also say, that judge is wise that soon understands a matter and judges at leisure; for albeit that all tarrying may be annoying, it is, nevertheless, not to be disdained in giving of judgment nor in taking vengeance, when it is sufficient and reasonable. 1032

“And Lord Jesus Christ showed that by example; for when the woman that was taken in adultery was brought into his presence to know what should be done with her person, albeit so that he knew well himself what he would answer, yet he would not answer suddenly, but he wished to have deliberation,
and he wrote twice on the ground. And these causes increase deliberation, and we shall then, by the grace of God, counsel you in such a way that will be profitable. 1034

Up jumped then the young people at once, and the most part of that company had scorned this old wise man and began to make noise, and said that just as while the iron is hot, men should strike, so too men should avenge their wrongs while they are fresh and new; and with loud voice they cried “War! War!” 1036

Up rose then one of these old wise men, and with his hand made a sign that the people should hold themselves still and give him audience. “Lords,” he said, “there are many men who cry ‘War! War!’ who know very little what war amounts to. War at its beginning has so great an entry and so large that every creature may enter when it pleases him, and lightly find war; but surely what end that shall come of it, it is not easy to know. For truly, once that war has begun, there are many children unborn of his mother that shall die young because of this war, or else live in sorrow and die in wretchedness. And therefore, before any war might begin, people must have great counsel and great deliberation.” 1042

And when this old man began to enforce his tale by reasons, nearly all at once began to rise to break his tale, and bid him to abridge his words. For truly, he who preaches to those who wish not to hear his words annoys them with his sermon. For Jesus Sirach says that music in mourning is a troublesome thing; this is to say: it is as much use as speaking before people who are troubled by one’s speech, as it is to sing before one who mourns. 1044

And when this wise man saw that he lacked an audience, he sat down again filled with shame. For Solomon says: ‘Where you can not find an audience, do not insist that you are to speak.’ 1046

“I see well,” said this wise man, “that the common proverb is true, that ‘Good counsel is lacking when it is needed most.’” 1047

Yet this Melibee had in his counsel many people who counseled him a certain thing privately in his ear, and counseled him the opposite in general audience. When Melibee had heard that the greatest part of his counselors were in agreement that he should make war, at once he consented to their counsel and fully affirmed their wisdom. 1049

Then Lady Prudence, when she saw how her husband prepared to avenge himself on his foes and to begin war, she in very humble fashion, when she saw her time, said these words to him: “My lord,” she said, “I beseech you as heartily as I dare and know how to, do not make haste too quickly, and for all my service to you, please listen to me. For Petrus Alphonsus says, ‘No matter who does to you either good or harm, hasten you not to requite it; for in this fashion your friend will abide, and your enemy shall for a longer time live in dread.’ The proverb says, “One hastens well who can abide wisely,” and ‘In wicked haste is no profit.’” 1054

This Melibee answered unto his wife Prudence: “I purpose not,” he said, “to work by your counsel, for many causes and reasons. For surely, every creature would hold me then a fool; this is to say, if I, on account of your counsel, would change things that are ordained and affirmed by so many wise people. Secondly, I say that all women are wicked, and of all of them none are good. For ‘Of a thousand men,’ says Solomon, ‘I found one good man, but surely, of all women, I never found one good woman.’ And also, surely, if I governed myself by your counsel, it should seem that I had given to you the mastery over me; and God forbid that it were so! For Jesus Sirach says that ‘If the wife has mastery, she is contrary to her husband.’ And Solomon says: ‘Never in your life to your wife, nor to your child, nor to your friend, give any power over your self; for it would be better if your children were to ask of your person things that they need, than that you see yourself in the hands of your children.’ And also if I would work by your counseling, surely, my counsel must sometime be secret, until the time that it must be known, and this may not be. [For it is written, the jangling of women canonly hide those things that they do not know. Furthermore, the Philosopher says, in bad counsel the women vanquish the men; and for these reasons I ought not to use your advice8.]” 1063

6 Petrus Alphonsus. Petrus Alphonsi (1062-1110), Jewish Spanish writer, astronomer, and philosopher, later converted to Christianity. Physician to King Alfonso VI of Castile and author of Dialogus contra iudaeos (Dialogue against the Jews) and Disciplina Clericalis (The Education of Scholars).

7 The Philosopher says. I.e., Aristotle.

8 For it is written . . . your advice. This passage, which may be Chaucer’s direct transcription from his source, is in Old French. Renaud de Louens’ Livre de Melibee et de Dame Prudence.
When Lady Prudence, very debonairly and with great patience, had heard all that her husband liked to say, then she asked of him permission to speak, and said in this way: “My lord,” she said, “as to your first reason, surely it may be easily answered. For I say that it is no folly to change counsel when the thing is changed, or else when the thing seems otherwise than it was before. And moreover, I say that, though you have sworn and promised to perform your undertaking, and nonetheless you neglect to perform that same undertaking by just cause, men should not say therefore that you were a liar or a perjurer. For the Bible says that ‘The wise man makes no lies when he changes his mind.’ And albeit so that your undertaking be established and ordained by the great multitude of people, yet there is no need for you to carry out this ordinance, unless you like. For the truth of things and the profit are found rather in the few people who are wise and full of reason, than by great multitude of people of which every man cries and clatters whatever he pleases. Truthfully such a multitude is not worthy of respect. 1069

“And as to the second reason, by which you say that all women are wicked; with all due respect, surely you despise all women in this way, and ‘He who despises all, all displeases,’ as says the Bible. And Seneca says that, ‘He who will have wisdom shall dispaise no man, but he shall gladly teach the knowledge that he has without presumption or pride, and such things as he can not know, he shall not be ashamed to learn them, and learn from lesser people than himself.” And, sir, it may be easily proven that there have been many good women. For surely, sir, our Lord Jesus Christ would never have descended to be born of a woman, if all women had been wicked. And after that, for the great goodness that is in women, our Lord Jesus Christ, when he had risen from death to life, appeared rather to a woman than to his apostles. And though Solomon says that he never found a good woman, it follows not therefore that all women are wicked. For though he never found a good woman, surely, many other men have found many very good and true women. Or else, perhaps, the intent of Solomon was this: that he found no woman in supreme goodness; this is to say that there is no creature that has supreme goodness except God alone, as he himself records in his Gospel. For there is no creature so good that he is not lacking in some of the perfection of God, who is his maker. 1080

“Your third reason is this: you say that if you govern yourself by my counsel, it should seem that you had given me the mastery and the lordship over your person. Sir, except in your case, it is not so. For if we were so that no man should be counseled but only those that have lordship and mastery of his person, men would not be counseled so often. For truly that man that asks advice for a certain purpose still has free choice in whether he will work by that advice or not. 1083

“And as to your fourth reason, there you say that the babbling of women can hide things that they do not know, which is the same as those who say that a woman can not hide what she knows. sir, these words are understood of women who are babblers and wicked; of such women men say that three things drive a man out of his house -- that is to say, smoke, the falling of rain, and wicked wives, and of such women Solomon says that ‘It would be better to dwell in the desert than with a woman that is wanton.’ And sir, by your leave, that I am not; for you have very often tested my great silence and my great patience, and also how well that I can hide and conceal things that men ought to hide secretly. 1089

“And truly, as to your fifth reason, in which you say that in wicked counsel women vanquish men, God knows, that reason stands here on no ground. For understand now, you ask advice to do wickedness; and if you wish to do wickedness, and your wife restrains that wicked purpose, and overcomes you by reason and by good counsel, surely your wife ought rather to be praised than blamed. Thus should you understand the philosopher who says, ‘In wicked counsel women vanquish their husbands.’ And whereas you blame all women and their reasons, I shall show you by many examples that many women have been very good, and still are, and their counsels wholly healthful and profitable. Some men have also said that the counsel of women is either too costly, or else of too little value. But although many women are bad, and their counsel vile and worth nothing, yet have men found very many good women, and very discrete and wise in giving counsel. Lo, Jacob, by Good counsel of his mother Rebecca, won the blessing of Isaac his father, and the lordship over all his brothers. Judith, by her good counsel, delivered the city of Bethulie, in which she dwelled, out of the hands of Holofernes, who had besieged it and would

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9 The Bible says. In the several places where the text says “the book” this translation says “The Bible.” In a few of these instances, however, no reference to the Bible has been traced. These instances are noted here and below.

10 This quote is more likely from Seneca’s De beneficiis.

10 Presumably Aristotle.

11 Jacob . . . his brothers. The story is told in Genesis 27.
Prudence, he said thus: ‘I see well that the word of Solomon is truth. He says that ‘Words that are spoken discreetly in order are honeycombs, for they give sweetness to the soul and healthfulness to the body.’ And, wife, because of your sweet words, and also because I have tried and tested your great wisdom and your great truth, I will govern myself by your counsel in all things.’ 1111

When Melibee had heard the words of his wife Prudence, he said thus: ‘I see well that the word of Solomon is truth. He says that ‘Words that are spoken discreetly in order are honeycombs, for they give sweetness to the soul and healthfulness to the body.’ And, wife, because of your sweet words, and also because I have tried and tested your great wisdom and your great truth, I will govern myself by your counsel in all things.’ 1111

“Now, sir,” said Lady Prudence, “since you promise to been governed by my counsel, I will inform you how you should govern yourself in the choosing of your counselors. You should first in all your works meekly beseech to the high God that He will be your counselor; and prepare yourself to such an intention, so that he may give you counsel and comfort, as taught Tobias his son: ‘At all times you shall bless God, and pray to him to direct your ways, and see that all your counsels are in him forevermore.’ Saint James15 also says: ‘If any of you have need of wisdom, ask it of God.’ And afterward then should you taken counsel in yourself, and examine well your thoughts of such a thing as you think that is best for your profit. And then you should drive from your heart three things that are contrary to good counsel; that is to say, anger, covetousness, and rashness. 1121

“First, he who asks counsel of himself must surely be without anger, for many causes. The first is this: he that has great anger and wrath in himself thinks always that he may do a thing that he may not do. And secondly, he that is angry and wrathful may not judge well; and he who may not judge well, may not counsel well. The third is this, that he that is angry and wrathful, as says Seneca, may not speak but blameful things, and with his vicious words he stirs other people to wrath and to anger. And, sir, you also must drive covetousness out of your heart. For the Apostle says that covetousness is root of all harms. And trust well that a covetous man can not judge nor think, but only to fulfill the end of his covetousness; and surely, that may never been accomplished; for ever the more abundance that he has of wealth, the more he desires. And, sir, you must also drive out of your heart rashness; for surely, you may not judge for the best by a sudden thought that falls into your heart, but you must counsel yourself on it very often. For, as you heard before, the commune proverb is this: ‘He who soon judges, soon repents.’ sir, you are not always in the same disposition; for surely, something that at one time seems to you good to do, another time seems to you the contrary. 1137

“When you have taken counsel in yourself, and have deemed by good deliberation such thing as you seems bus, then I advise you that you keep it secret. Reveal your counsel to no person, unless it is so that you believe firmly that through your revelation your condition shall be more profitable to you. For Jesus Sirach says, ‘Neither to your foe, nor to your friend, reveal your secret nor your folly; for they will give you audience and attention and support in your presence, and scorn you in your absence.’ Another scholar says that ‘Scarcey shall you find any person that may keep counsel secretly’16. The Bible says, ‘While you keep your counsel in your heart, you keep it in your prison; and when you reveal your counsel to any creature, he holds you in his snare.’ And therefore you are better to hide your counsel in your heart than pray to one whom you have revealed your counsel that he will keep it close and silent. For Seneca says: ‘If it is so that you may not hide your own counsel, how dare you to ask any other creature your counsel to keep your counsel secretly?’ But nonetheless, if you believe firmly that the revealing of your counsel to a person will allow you to stand in

13 Abigail . . . good counsel. 1 Samuel 25.
14 Hester . . . Assuerus the king. Esther 7.
16 Another scholar says . . . secretly. Not identified.
a better condition, then you shall tell him your counsel in this way. First, you shall make no appearance whether you would prefer peace or war, or this or that, nor show him not your will and your intent. For trust well that commonly these counselors are flatterers, namely the counselors of great lords; for they try always rather to speak pleasant words, inclining to the lord’s desire, than words that are true or profitable. And therefore men say that the rich man seldom has good counsel, unless he has it from himself. 1153

“And after that you shall consider your friends and your enemies. And as concerning your friends, you shall consider which of them are most faithful, most wise, eldest, and most approved in giving counsel; and of them shall you ask your counsel, as the case requires. I say that first you should call to your counsel your friends that are true. For Solomon says that ‘Just as the heart of a man delights in savor that is sweet, so too the counsel of true friends gives sweetness to the soul.’ He says also, ‘Nothing may be likened to the true friend; for surely neither gold nor silver are not worth as much as the good will of a true friend.’ And he also says that ‘A true friend is a strong defense; whoever finds that surely finds a great treasure.’ Then you should also consider if your true friends are discreet and wise. For the Bible says, ‘Ask always your counsel from those who are wise.’ And by this same reason should you call to your counsel your friends that are of age, such as have advised and been expert in many things and been approved in advising matters. For the Bible says that ‘In old men is the wisdom, and in long time the prudence.’ And Tullius17 says that ‘Great things are never accomplished by strength, nor by dexterity of body, but by good counsel, by authority of persons, and by knowledge, all three of which do not become feeble by age, but surely grow stronger and increase day by day.’ And then you should keep this for a general rule: first you should call to your counsel a few of your friends that are very close to you; for Solomon says, ‘You have many friends, but among a thousand chose one to be your counselor.’ For although you first tell your counsel to only a few, you may afterward tell it to more people if it is necessary. But look always that your counselors have these three qualities that I have said before, that is to say, that they would be true, wise, and of old experience. And act not always in every situation by one counselor alone; for sometimes it is necessary to be counseled by many. For Solomon says, ‘There is safety where there are many counselors.’ 1171

“Now, since I have told you by which people you should be counseled, now I will teach you whose counsel you ought to avoid. First, you should eschew the counseling of fools; for Solomon says, ‘Take no counsel of a fool, for he can know no counsel but after his own lust and his affection.’ The Bible says that ‘The property of a fool is this: he believes lightly harm of every creature, and lightly believes all bounty in himself.’ You shall also eschew the counseling of all flatterers, such as enforce them rather to praise your person by flattery than to tell you the true condition of things. Therefore Cicero says, ‘Among all the pestilences that there are in friendship the greatest is flattery.’ And therefore it is more necessary that you avoid and fear flatterers than any other people. The Bible says, ‘You shall rather dread and flee from the sweet words of flattering praisers than from the eager words of your friend who tells you the truth.’ Solomon says that ‘The words of a flatterer are a snare to catch innocent ones.’ He says also that ‘One who speaks to his friend words of sweetness and of pleasure, sets a net before his feet to catch him.’ And therefore Cicero says, ‘Incline not your ears to flatterers, nor take no counsel in the words of flattery.’ And Cato18 says, ‘Advise you well, and avoid the words of sweetness and of pleasure.’ And eek you shall avoid the counseling of your old enemies who have been reconciled. The Bible says that ‘No creature returns safely into the grace of his old enemy.’ And Aesop says, ‘Neither trust in those to whom you have had some time at war or enmity, nor tell them your counsel.’ And Seneca tells the cause why: ‘It may not be’ he says, ‘that where great fire has endured for a long time, that there does not dwell some warm vapor.’ And therefore Solomon says, ‘Never trust in your old foe.’ For surely, though your enemy may be reconciled, and makes a show of humility to you, and bows to you with his head, never trust him. For surely he makes that feigned humility more for his profit than for any love of your person, because he intends to have victory over your person through such a feigned countenance, the which victory he might not have by strife or war. And Petrus Alphonsus says, ‘Make no fellowship with your old enemies; for if you do them good, they will pervert it into wickedness.’ 1189

17 Tullius. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC—43 BC), Roman statesman, lawyer, and philosopher. Though the text refers to him only as Tullius, he will be referred to herein as he is known nowadays, as Cicero.

18 Cato. Dionysius Cato, Fourth-Century author of the Disticha, the most popular collection of moral sayings in the Middle Ages.
“And you must also avoid the counsel of those who are your servants and bear you great reverence, for perhaps they would say it more for fear than for love. And therefore says a philosopher in this way: ‘There is no creature perfectly true to him that he fears too greatly.’ And Cicero says, ‘There is no might so great of any emperor that may endure long, unless he has more love of the people than fear.’ You shall also avoid the counsel of people who are addicted to drink, for they can hide no counsel. For Solomon says, ‘There is no privacy where drunkenness reigns.’ You should also hold in suspicion the counsel of such people as counsel you one thing privately, and counsel you the contrary openly. For Cassiodorus says that ‘It is a sleight of hand to hinder you, when he shows to do one thing openly and does the contrary privately.’ You shall also hold in suspicion the counsel of wicked people, for the Bible says: ‘There is no privacy where drunkenness reigns.’ And after this you shall consider if the counsel of wicked people is always full of fraud.’ And David says, ‘Blissful is that man that has not followed the counsel of scoundrels.’ You shall also avoid the counsel of young people, for their advice is not ripe. 1199

“Now, sir, since I have showed you of which people you should take your counsel, and of which people you should follow the counsel, now will I teach you how you shall examine your counsel, according to the teachings of Cicero. In the examining then of your counselor you should consider many things. First of all, you shall consider that in that thing that you set as your purpose, and upon that thing you wish to have counsel, that absolute truth be said and observed; this is to say, tell truly your tale. For he that speaks falsely may not well be counseled in the case of which he lies. And after this you shall consider if the things the things that you propose to do through the advice of your counselors are reasonable; and if your power may also attain it; and if the larger part and the better part of your counselors are in agreement with it, or not. Then shall you consider what thing shall follow from that advice, such as hate, peace, war, grace, profit, or damage, and many other things. And in all these things you shall choose the best and reject all other things. Then you shall consider from what root the matter is engendered from the advice given to you, and what fruit it may conceive and produce. You shall also consider all these causes, from whence they have sprung. And when you have examined your counsel, as I have said, and which part is better and more profitable, and have approved it by many wise and old people, then you shall consider if you may carry it out it and make a good end of it. For certainly, reason will not allow that any man should begin a thing, unless he might carry it out as he should; and no creature should take upon him so heavy a burden that he might not bear it. For the proverb says, ‘He that embraces too much, grasps little.’ And Cato says, ‘Attempt to do such things as you have the power to do, lest the burden should oppress you so sorely that it is necessary for you to abandon the thing that you have begun.’ And if it is so that you are in doubt whether you may carry out a thing or not, choose rather to wait than begin. And Piers Alphonce says, ‘If you have the might to do a thing for which you must repent, it is better to say ‘nay’ than ‘ye.’’ This is to say that you are better to hold your tongue still than to speak. 1219

“Then may you understand by stronger reasons that if you have the power to carry out a work of which you shall repent, then is it better that you wait than begin. Well say they that forbid every creature to attempt a thing of which he is in doubt whether he may carry it out or not. And after, when you have examined your purpose, as I have said before, and know well that you may carry out your undertaking, resolve to do it then firmly until it is brought to an end. 1222

“Now is it reason and time that I show you when and for what reason that you may change your counselors without reproaching yourself. Truly, a man may change his purpose and his intention if the cause ceases, or when a new situation arises. For the law says that ‘Upon things that newly arise new counsel is needed.’ And Seneca says, ‘If your counsel has come to the ears of your enemy, change your counsel.’ You may also change your counsel if it is so that you find that by error, or by another cause, harm or damage may arise. Also if your intention is dishonest, or else comes from a dishonest cause, change your intention. For the laws say that ‘All promises that are dishonest are of no value;’ and if it is so also that it is impossible, or may not be carried out or kept satisfactorily. 1230

“And take this for a general rule, that every intention that is affirmed so strongly that it may not be changed for any condition that may arise, I say that this counsel is wicked.” 1231

This Melibee, when he had heard the teaching of his wife Lady Prudence, answered in this fashion:

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19 The Bible says. This passage is attributed both to the Old Testament Book of Proverbs and to Publius Syrus’ *Sententiae*.
“Lady,” he said, “until this time you have well and properly taught me in general how I shall govern myself in the choosing and in the withholding of my counselors. But now would I be glad if you would condescend especially and tell me how you like, or what you think of, our counselors that we have chosen in our present need.” 1235

“My lord,” she said, “I beseech you in all humility that you will not willfully object against my reasons, nor be disturbed in your heart, though I may say something that displeases you. For God knows that, as in my intention, I speak it for your best, for your honor, and for your profit as well. And truly, I hope that your kindness will take it in patience. Trust me well,” she said, “that your counsel in this case should not, to speak properly, be called a counseling, but a motion or a gesture of folly, by which counsel you have erred in many and various ways. 1240

“First and foremost, you have erred in the assembling of your counselors. For you should first have called a few people to your counsel, and afterward you might have shown it to more people, if it had been necessary. But surely, you have suddenly called to your counsel a great multitude of people, burdensome and tedious to hear. Also you have erred, for whereas you should only have called to your counsel your true friends old and wise, you have called strangers, young people, false flatterers, reconciled enemies, and people who do reverence to you without love. And you have also erred, for you have brought with you to your counsel anger, covetousness, and rashness, which three things are contrary to every honest and profitable counsel; which three things you have not annihilated or destroyed, neither in yourself, nor in your counselors, as you ought. You have erred also, for you have showed to your counselors your inclination and your desire to make war immediately, and to do vengeance. They have seen by your words to what things you are inclined; and therefore they have counseled you rather to your inclination than to your profit. You have erred also, for it seems that you are satisfied to have been advised by these counselors only, and with little advice, whereas in so great and so high a need more counselors and more deliberation were necessary to carry out your undertaking. You have erred also, for you have not examined your counsel in the foresaid manner, and not in due course, as the case requires. You have erred also, for you have made no distinction between your counselors; this is to say, between your true friends and your pretended counselors; you have also not known the will of your true friends old and wise; but you have cast all their words into an hotchpotch, and inclined your heart to the larger part and to the greater number, and there you have condescended. And since you know well that one shall always find a greater number of fools than of wise men, and for that reason in the counsels that are offered at gatherings and multitudes of people, where men give more regard to the number than to the wisdom of persons, you can see well that in such counsel fools have the mastery. 1260

Melibee answered again, and said, “I grant openly that I have erred; but since you have told me before that one is not to blame who changes counselors in certain case and for certain just causes, I am entirely ready to change my counselors just as you would suggest. The proverb says that ‘To do sin is human, but surely to persevere for a long time in sin is the work of the devil.’” 1264

To this opinion Lady Prudence answered then, and said: “Examine,” she said, “your counsel, and let us see which of them have spoken most reasonably and taught you the best counsel. And since this examination is necessary, let us begin at the surgeons and at the physicians, who first speak in this matter. I tell you that the surgeons and physicians have spoken to you in your counsel discreetly, as they should; and in their speech said very wisely that their duty is to do honor and profit to every creature, and to trouble no creature; and to do great diligence according to their skill for the cure of those who they have in their governance. And, sir, just as they have answered wisely and discreetly, so too I advise that they are highly and supremely rewarded for their noble speech; and for the fact that they should do the more attentive care in the curing of your dear daughter. For although they are your friends, you shall not allow that they serve you for nothing; you ought rather to reward them and show them your generosity. And regarding the proposition that the physicians advanced in this case, that is to say, that in maladies one contrary is cured by another contrary, I would gladly know how you understand this text, and what your opinion is.” 1278

“Surely,” Melibee said, “I understand it in this fashion: that just as they have done me a contrary, so too should I do them another. For just as they have avenged themselves on me and done me wrong, so too shall I avenge myself upon them and do them another. For just as they have done me a contrary, so too should I do them another. For just as they have answered wisely and discreetly, so too I advise that they are highly and supremely rewarded for their noble speech; and for the fact that they should do the more attentive care in the curing of your dear daughter. For although they are your friends, you shall not allow that they serve you for nothing; you ought rather to reward them and show them your generosity. And regarding the proposition that the physicians advanced in this case, that is to say, that in maladies one contrary is cured by another contrary, I would gladly know how you understand this text, and what your opinion is.” 1282

“Lo, lo,” said Lady Prudence, “how readily every man is inclined to his own desire and to his own pleasure! Surely,” she said, “the words of the
physicians should not have been understood in this manner. For surely, wickedness is not contrary to wickedness, nor is vengeance to vengeance, nor is wrong to wrong, but they are similar. And therefore one vengeance is not cured by another vengeance, nor one wrong by another wrong, but every one of them increases and aggravates the other. But for certain, the words of the physicians should be understood in this way: good and wickedness are two contraries, and peace and war, vengeance and long-suffering, discord and accord, and many other things. But certainly, wickedness shall be cured by goodness, discord by accord, war by peace, and so forth for other things. And Saint Paul the Apostle agrees with this in many places. He says: ‘Give not harm for harm, nor wicked speech for wicked speech; but do well to one who does you harm, and bless him that speaks to you harm. And in many other places he recommends peace and accord. 1294

‘But now will I speak to you of the counsel that was given to you by the men of law and the wise people, that said all in agreement, as you have heard before, that over all things you shall do your diligence to protect your person and to fortify your house; and said also that in this case you ought to work under much advisement and with great deliberation. And, sir, as to the first point, that pertains to the protection of your person, you should understand that he that has war shall evermore meekly and devoutly pray, before all things, that Jesus Christ of his mercy will keep him in his protection and be his highest help in his need. For surely, there is no creature in this world that may be counseled nor protected sufficiently without the protection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. With this opinion agrees the prophet David, who says, ‘If God protects not the city, he that guards it watches in vain.’ 1304

‘Now, sir, then you should commit the protection of your person to your true friends, who are approved and recognized, and you should ask help of them to protect your person. For Cato says: ‘If you have need of help, ask it of your friends; for there is no physician as good as your true friend.’ And after this then should you protect yourself from all strangers, and from liars, and always suspect their fellowship. For Petrus Alphonsus says, ‘Take no fellowship along the way of a stranger, but only if you have known him for a longer time. And if he should fall into your fellowship by chance, without your assent, inquire then as skillfully as you can of his behavior, and of his life before, and invent a story about your travels; say that you wish to go where you do not wish to go; and if he bears a spear, keep yourself on the right side, and if he bears a sword, keep yourself on the left side.’ And in this way then you should protect yourself wisely from all such people as I have noted before, and avoid them and their counsel. And after this then should you protect yourself in such a manner that, through any presumption of your strength, you neither despise nor underestimates the might of your adversary, to the extent that you neglect the protection of your person on account of your presumption; for every wise man fears his enemy. And Solomon says: ‘Happy is he who has fear of all; for surely, he who, through the hardness of his heart, and through the hardness of himself, has too much presumption, evil shall come upon him.’ Then you should evermore watch out for ambushes and espionage. For Seneca says that ‘The wise man that fears harms, avoids harms, and he that avoids perils does not fall into perils.’ And although it seems that you are in secure place, yet shall you always do your duty in protecting your person; this is to say, be not negligent in protecting your person, not only from your greatest enemies, but from your least enemy. Seneca says: ‘A man that is well advised dreads his least enemy.’ Ovid says that ‘The little weasel will slay the great bull and the wild stag.’ And the Bible says, ‘A little thorn may prick a king sorely, and a hound will capture the wild boor.’ But nonetheless, I am not saying that you should be such a coward that you fear where there is nothing to fear. The Bible says that ‘Some people have great desire to deceive, but yet they fear to be deceived themselves.’ Yet shall you fear to been empoisoned, and keep yourself from the company of scorners. For the Bible says, ‘With scorners make no company, but flee their words as venom.’ 1330

‘Now, as to the second point, whereas your wise counselors advised you to fortify your house with great diligence, I would gladly know how you understand these words and what your opinion is.” 1332

Melibee answered and said, “surely, I understand it in this way: that I shall fortify my house with towers, such as castles and other types of edifices have, and armor, and artilleries, by which I may maintain and defend my person and my house so that my enemies should approach my house in fear.” 1334

20 The Bible says. This quote is more likely from Seneca’s Epistolae. Likewise, the following quote is more likely from Albertanus’ De arte loquendi et tacendi.
To this opinion Prudence then answered: “Fortifying,” she said, “by high towers and great edifices is sometimes related to pride. And men also make high towers, and great edifices at great costs and with great travail; and when they have been accomplished, they are still not worth a straw unless they are defended by true friends that are old and wise. And understand well that the greatest and strongest garrison that a riche man may have, to protect both his person and his goods, is that he be loved by his subjects and by his neighbors. For thus says Cicero, that ‘There is a type of garrison that no man may vanquish nor overthrow, and that is a lord to be loved by his citizens and by his people.’ 1340

“Now, sir, as to the third point, whereas your old and wise counselors said that you ought not suddenly nor hastily proceed in this need, but that you ought to provide and prepare yourself in this case with great diligence and great deliberation; truly, I believe that they spoke very wisely and very truly. For Cicero says: ‘In every need, before you begin it, prepare yourself with great diligence.’ Then I say that in vengeance-taking, in war, in battle, and in fortifying, before you begin, I advise that you prepare yourself for it, and do it with great deliberation. For Cicero says that ‘Lengthy preparation before the battle makes swift victory.’ And Cassiodorus21 says, ‘The garrison is stronger, when it is long time considered.’ 1348

“But now let us speak of the counsel that was agreed upon by your neighbors, such as give you reverence without love, your old enemies reconciled, your flatterers, who counseled you certain things privately and openly counseled you the contrary; the young people also who counseled you to avenge yourself and make war immediately. And surely, sir, as I have said before, you have greatly erred to have called to your counsel such a manner of people who are sufficiently reproved by the reasons aforesaid. But nonetheless, let us now descend to the specifics. You shall first proceed according to the doctrine of Cicero. Certainly, the truth of this matter, or of this counsel, needs not be diligently investigated; for it is well known who they are who have done this crime and shameful deed to you, how many trespassers there were, and in what manner they have done all this wrong and all this shame to you. And after this, should you then examine the second condition that the same Cicero adds in this matter. For Cicero sets forth a term that he calls ‘Consenting’; this is to say, who they are, which they are and how many, that consent to your counsel in your stubborn resolve to do hasty vengeance. 1361

“And let us consider also who they are, how many they are, and what sort of people they are, that agreed with your adversaries. And surely, as to the first point, it is well known which people are they that consented to your rash stubbornness; for truly, all those who counseled you to make sudden war were not, and are not, your friends. Let us now consider who they are that you take as your personal friends. For although you may be mighty and rich, surely you are as good as alone, for surely you nor have no child but a daughter, and you have no brothers, nor first cousins, nor any other close family, on whose account your enemies for fear would desist from reasoning with you or destroying your person. You know also that your wealth might be divided into diverse parts, and when every creature has his share, they will find little reward in avenging your death. But you have three enemies, and they have many children, brothers, cousins, and other close family. And even if you were to slay two or three of them, there would still remain enough of them to avenge their death and to slay your person. And even if your family are more sure and steadfast than the family of your adversary, your family, nonetheless, is only a distant family; they are only slightly related to you, and the families of your enemies are closely related to them. And certainly, in this way, their condition is better than yours. Then let us consider also if the advice of those who counseled you to take sudden vengeance is in accord with reason. And surely, you know well it is “nay.” For, as by right and reason, no person may take vengeance on no creature except the judge that has the jurisdiction of it, when it is granted him to take such vengeance swiftly or temperately, as the law requires. And yet moreover of the term that Cicero calls “Consenting” you should consider if your might and your power may consent to and suffice for your stubbornness and your counselors. And surely you may well say “nay” to that. For surely, to speak properly, we may do nothing, except such thing as we may do rightfully. And surely you may take no vengeance rightfully on your own authority. Then might you see that your power neither consents nor accords with your stubbornness. 1386

“Let us now examine the third term, which Cicero calls ‘Consequent.’ You shall understand that the vengeance that you intend to take is the consequent; and from it follows further vengeance, peril, war, and

21 Cassiodorus. Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator, Sixth-Century Roman, statesman, and author, who served under Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths. Chaucer knows best his Vivarium.
other damages without number, of which we are not aware at this time. 1389

And concerning the fourth point, that Cicero calls ‘Engendering,’ you shall consider that this wrong that is done to you is engendered of the hate of your enemies, and of the vengeance-taking that would engender further vengeance, and much sorrow and wasting of wealth, as I said. 1392

‘Now, sir, as to the point that Cicero calls ‘Causes,’ which is the last point, you shall understand that the wrong that you have received has certain causes, which clerks call oriens and efficiens, and causa longinqua and causa propinquua, which is to say, the remote cause and the immediate cause. The remote cause is Almighty God, that is cause of all things. The immediate cause is your three enemies. The accidental cause was hate. The material cause would be the five wounds of your daughter. The formal cause is the manner of their working that brought ladders and climbed in at your windows. The final cause was to slay your daughter. They delayed in this no more than they could help. But to speak of the remote cause, to what end they should come, or what shall finally happen to them in this case, I can not judge except by conjecturing and by supposing. For we should suppose that they should come to a wicked end, because the Book of Decrees says, ‘Seldom, or with great pain, are causes brought to a good end when they are badly begun.’ 1403

‘Now, sir, if men would ask me why God allowed men to commit this crime against you, surely, I could not well answer, as I do not know the truth. For the Apostle says that ‘The knowledge and the judgments of our Lord God Almighty are very deep; no person may comprehend or penetrate them sufficiently.’ Nonetheless, by certain presumptions and conjectures, I hold and believe that God, who is full of justice and of righteousness, has allowed this to happen for a just and reasonable cause. 1409

‘Your name is Melibee, which is to say, ‘a man that drinks honey.’ You have drunk so much honey of sweet worldly riches, and delights and honors of this world, that you are drunk and have forgotten Jesus Christ your creator. You have not given to him such honor and reverence as you ought, nor have you heeded well the words of Ovid, who says, ‘Beneath the honey of the goods of the body is hidden the venom that slays the soul.’ And Solomon says, ‘If you have found honey, eat of it so that it suffices; for if you eat of it immoderately, you shall vomit,’ and be needy and poor. And perhaps Christ holds you in contempt and has turned away from you his face and his ears of mercy; and he has also allowed that you have been punished in the same manner that you have trespassed. You hast committed sin against our Lord Christ; for surely, the three enemies of mankind, that is to say, the flesh, the devil, and the world, you have allowed them to enter in to your heart willfully by the windows of your body, and have not defended yourself sufficiently against their assaults and their temptations, so that they have wounded your soul in five places; this is to say, the Deadly Sins that have entered into your heart through your five senses. And in the same manner our Lord Christ has willed and allowed that your three enemies have entered into your house by the windows, and have wounded your daughter in the aforesaid manner.’ 1426

[And to this Lady Prudence responds, “Certainly,” she said, ‘I grant you that from vengeance comes much evil and good; but vengeance does not appertain to each person but only to the judges and to those who have the jurisdiction over the malefactors22. And yet I say furthermore that just as a singular person sins in taking vengeance on another man, so too the judge sins if he should do no vengeance to those who have deserved it. For Seneca says thus: ‘That master,’ he says, ‘is good who puts scoundrels to the test.’ And as Cassiodorus says, ‘A man fears doing outrages when he understands and knows that it displeases the judges and the sovereigns.’ And another says, ‘The judge that fears to do right makes men scoundrels.’ And Saint Paul the Apostle says in his Epistle, when he writes to the Romans, that ‘The judges bear not the spear without cause, but they bear it to punish the scoundrels and mis-doers, and to defend the good men.’ If you wish then to take vengeance on your enemies, you should return or take your recourse in the judge who has the

22 And to this lady . . . malefactors. This passage, likely copied directly from Chaucer’s source, is in Old French.
Only to the judges. For when they allow too much the authori ties that you have quoted above are referring only to the judges, for they should avenge the villainies and injuries. And therefore those two authorities that you have quoted above are referring only to the judges. For when they allow too much the

“Al!” Melibee said, “This vengeance does not please me at all. I recollect now and take heed how Fortune has nourished me from my childhood and has helped me to pass through many difficult situations. Now will I test her, believing, with God’s help, that she shall help me to avenge my shame.” 1446

“Surely,” said Prudence, “if you will work by counsel, you should not test Fortune in any way, nor should you lean or bow to her, according to the word of Seneca; for ‘Things that are foolishly done, and that are in hope of Fortune, should never come to a good end.’ And, as the same Seneca says, ‘The more bright and the more shining that Fortune is, the more brittle and the sooner broken she is.’ Trust not in her, for she is not steadfast nor stable; for when you believe to be most sure or certain of her help, she will fail you and deceive you. And whereas you say that Fortune has nourished you from your childhood, I say that by the same token you should trust less in her and in her wisdom. For Seneca says, ‘The one who is nourished by Fortune, she makes a great fool.’ Now then, since you desire and ask vengeance, and the vengeance that is done according to the law and before the judge does not please you, and the vengeance that is done in hope of Fortune is perilous and uncertain, then you have no other remedy but to have your recourse in the Sovereign Judge that avenges all crimes and wrongs. And he shall avenge you as He Himself testifies, as he says, ‘Leave the vengeance to me, and I shall do it.’” 1460

Melibee answered, “If I do not avenge myself for the crimes that men have done to me, I summon or announce to those who have done that wrong to me, and to all others, to do another wrong to me. For it is written, ‘If you take no vengeance on an old wrong, you summon your adversaries to do you a new wrong.’ And also for my long-suffering men would do me so much wrong that I might neither bear nor endure it, and so I would be esteemed too lowly. For men say, ‘In much patient endurance many things might happen to you, which you will not be able to endure.’” 1466

“Surely,” said Prudence, “I grant you that too much patient endurance is not good. But it does not follow from this that every person to whom men do injury take vengeance for it; for all of that pertains and belongs only to the judges, for they should avenge the villainies and injuries. And therefore those two authorities that you have quoted above are referring only to the judges. For when they allow too much the wrongs and the crimes to be carried out without punishment, they not only summon a man to do new wrongs, but they also command it. Also a wise man says that ‘the judge that does not correct the sinner commands and bids him to sin.’ And the judges and sovereigns might in their land endure so much of the scoundrels and mis-doers that the wicked ones should, by such long-suffering, in process of time grow to such power and might that they should remove the judges and the sovereigns from their places, and at last make them lose their authority. 1476

“But let us now suppose that you have permission to avenge yourself. I say you are not at present of might and power to avenge yourself; for if you will compare your might to that of your adversaries, you should find in many things that I have showed you before this that their condition is better than yours. And therefore I say that it is good for now that you endure and be patient. 1480

“Furthermore, you know well that according to the common saying, ‘It is madness for a man to strive against a stronger or a more mighty man than he is himself; and to strive against a man of equal strength, that is to say, with a man as strong as he is a peril; and to strive with a weaker man is folly.’ And therefore a man should flee from strife as much as he can. For Solomon says, ‘It is a great honor to a man to keep himself from disturbance and strife.’ And if it should take place or happen that a man of greater might and strength than you does wrong to you, study and busy yourself rather to resolve the same wrong than to avenge yourself. For Seneca says that ‘He puts himself in great peril who strives against a greater man than he is himself.’ And Cato says, ‘If a man of higher estate or degree, or more mighty than you, does injury or wrong to you, allow him; for he that once has wronged you, may another time relieve and help you.’ 1490

“Yet I put forth in the case that you have both might and permission to avenge yourself, I say that there are very many things that ought to restrain you from vengeance-taking, to make you to incline to endure, and to have patience in the wrongs that have been done to you. First and foremost, if you will consider the faults that are in your own person, for which faults God has allowed you to have this tribulation, as
I have said you earlier. For the poet\(^{23}\) says that ‘We ought to take the tribulations that come to us patiently, when we think and consider that we have deserved to have them.’ And Saint Gregory\(^{24}\) says that ‘When a man considers well the number of his faults and of his sins, the pains and the tribulations that he suffers seem less to him; and inasmuch as it seems to him his sins are more heavy and grievous, his pain seem lighter and easier to him.’ Also you ought to incline and bow your heart to take the patience of Our Lord Jesus Christ,’ as Saint Peter\(^{25}\) in his Epistles says. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he says, ‘has suffered for us and given an example to every person to follow and imitate; for he never committed sin, nor never did an evil word come from his mouth. When men cursed him, he cursed them not; and when men beat him, he threatened them not.’ Also the great patience that the saints who are in paradise have had in tribulations that they have endured, undeservedly and innocently, ought to encourage you greatly to patience. Furthermore you should try to have patience, considering that the tribulations of this world endure for only a short time and are soon passed and gone, and the joy that a man seeks to have by patience in tribulations is eternal, in accordance with what the Apostle says in his Epistle. ‘The joy of God,’ he says, ‘is eternal, which is to say, everlasting.’ 1510

‘Also consider and believe steadfastly that one is not well nourished, nor well taught, who can not have patience or will not receive patience. For Solomon says that ‘The doctrine and the wit of a man are known by patience.’ And in another place he says that ‘He who is patient governs himself by great prudence.’ And the same Solomon says, ‘The angry and wrathful man makes noises, and the patient man moderates them and keeps silence.’ He says also, ‘It is more worthy to be patient than to be strong; and he that may have the authority over his own heart is more praiseworthy than he who by his force or strength conquers great cities.’ And therefore Saint James says in his epistle that ‘Patience is a great virtue of perfection.’’ 1517

“For certain,” Melibee said, “I grant you, Lady Prudence, that patience is a great virtue of perfection; but every man may not have the perfection that you seek; I am not among the number of perfect men, for my heart may never be in peace until the time it is avenged. And although it was a great peril to my enemies to do me a wrong in taking vengeance upon me, they took no heed of the peril, but fulfilled their wicked will and their desire. And therefore I think others ought not to reprove me, even if I put myself in a little peril to avenge myself, and even if I perform a great sin, that is to say, that I avenge one outrage by another.” 1525

“Ah,” said Lady Prudence, “you speak your mind and as you please, but in no circumstance in this world should a man commit an outrage or sin to avenge him. For Cassiodorus says that ‘He who avenges himself by outrage acts as evilly as he who does the outrage.’ And therefore you should avenge yourself according to righteousness, that is to say, by the law, and not by sin nor by outrage. And if you also wish to avenge yourself for the outrage of your adversaries in a manner other than what righteousness commands, you sin. And therefore Seneca says that ‘A man shall never avenge evil by evil.’ 1531

“And if you say that righteousness asks a man to defend violence by violence, and fighting by fighting, surely you speak truly, when the defense is done immediately without interval or without tarrying or delay, to defend himself and not to avenge himself. And it is necessary that a man defend himself with such temperance that others have no cause or reason to reproach him who defends himself from excess and outrage, for otherwise it would be against reason. By God, you know well that you make no defense for now to defend yourself, but to avenge yourself; and so it follows that you have no will to do your deed temperately. And therefore I think that patience is good; for Solomon says that ‘He who is not patient shall have great harm.’” 1539

“Surely,” Melibee said, “I grant you that when a man is impatient and angry about what does not affect or pertain to him, though it may harm him, it is no wonder. For the law says that ‘He who interferes or meddles with such things as do not pertain to him is guilty.’ And Solomon says that ‘One who interferes in the disturbance or strife of another is like another who takes a hound by the ears.’ For just as he who takes a unfamiliar dog by the ears is sometimes bitten

\(^{23}\) The poet. Some have conjectured that this may be Peter of Blois, a Twelfth-Century French poet and statesman.

\(^{24}\) Saint Gregory. Gregory the Great, 504-604, one of the Fathers of the Church, whose Pastoral Care was one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages. This passage, however, has not been found in Gregory’s works.

\(^{25}\) Saint Peter. One of the twelve original disciples of Christ and the first of the popes. Though authorship is disputed, he is the named author of two of the Epistles of the New Testament.
by the dog, in the same way is it logical that he will have harm who by his impatience meddles in the disturbance of another man, though it pertains not to him. But you know well that this deed, that is to say, my grief and my disease, touches me close to home. And therefore, though I may be angry and impatient, it is no marvel. And, except in your case, I can not see that it might greatly harm me if I took vengeance. For I am richer and more mighty than my enemies are; and you know well that by money and by having great possessions are all the things of this world governed. And Solomon says that ‘All things obey money.’

When Prudence had heard her husband boast of his wealth and of his money, disparaging the power of his adversaries, she spoke, and said this: ‘For certain, dear sir, I grant you that you are rich and mighty, and that the riches are good to those who have gotten them well and can use them well. For just as the body of a man may not live without the soul, so too it may not live more without worldly goods. And by riches may a man get himself great friends. And therefore Pamphilius says: ‘If a cowherd’s daughter,’ he says, ‘is rich, she may choose from a thousand men one whom she will take as a husband; for, of a thousand men, one will not forsake her nor refuse her. And this Pamphilius also says: ‘If you are happy—that is to say, if you are rich—you shall find a great number of fellows and friends. And if your fortune changes so that you grow poor, farewell friendship and fellowship; for you shall be alone without any company, unless it should be the company of poor people.’ And yet this Pamphilius says moreover that ‘Those who have been serfs by birth should be made worthy and noble by the riches.’

‘And just as by riches many goods come, so also by poverty many harms and evils come. For great poverty compels a man to do many evils. And therefore Cassiodorus calls poverty the mother of ruin, that is, the mother of destruction or falling down. And therefore Petrus Alphonsus says: ‘One of the greatest adversities of this world is when a free man by nature or by birth is compelled by poverty to eat the alms of his enemy.’ And the same says Innocent in one of his books. He says that ‘Sorrowful and unhappy is the condition of a poor beggar; for if he asks not for his food, he dies for hunger; and if he asks, he dies for shame; and in all ways necessity compels him to ask.’ And Solomon says that ‘It is better to die than to have such poverty.’ And as the same Solomon says, ‘It is better to die of bitter death than to live in such a fashion.’ By these reasons that I have related to you, and by many other reasons that I could say, I grant you that riches are good to those who gain them well, and to those who use those riches well. And therefore I will show you how you should behave yourself and how you should conduct yourself in gathering riches, and in what manner you should use them. 1575

‘First, you should get them without great desire, in a leisurely way, gradually and not too hastily. For a man who is too desirous to get riches abandons himself first to theft, and to all other evils; and therefore Solomon says, ‘He who makes haste too eagerly to grow rich shall not be innocent.’ He says also that ‘The riches that quickly come to a person, quickly and easily depart and pass away from a person; but that wealth that comes little by little, grows always and multiplies.’ 1580

‘And, sir, you shall gain riches by your intelligence and by your travail for your profit, and do so without doing wrong or harm to any other person. For the law says that ‘No man makes himself rich, if he does harm to another person.’ This is to say that nature prohibits and forbids by right that no man make himself rich to the harm of another person. And Cicero says that ‘No sorrow, nor no fear of death, nor no thing that may happen to a man, is so much against nature as a man to increase his own profit to the harm of another man. And though the great man and the mighty men get riches more easily than you, yet you shall not be idle or slow to work for your own profit, for you shall in all ways flee idleness.’ For Solomon says that ‘Idleness teaches a man to do many evils.’ And the same Solomon says that ‘He who travails and busies himself to till his land, shall eat bread; but he who is idle and casts himself to no business nor occupation, shall fall into poverty, and die for hunger.’ And he that is idle and slow can never find a suitable time to work for his profit. For there is a versifier who says that ‘The idle man excuses himself in winter because of the great cold, and in summer by reason of the great heat.’ For these causes Cato says, ‘Wake and incline not yourself too much to sleep, for too much rest nourishes and causes many vices.’ And therefore Saint Jerome says, ‘Do some good deeds so that the devil, who is our enemy, will not find you unoccupied.’ For the devil does not

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26 Pamphilius. The reference here is likely to Pamphilius, the hero of a popular Twelfth-Century Latin poetic dialogue on love. The following reference to Pamphilius has not been found.

27 Saint Jerome. One of the Fathers of the Church and the translator of the Vulgate Bible. This quote, however, has not been traced to Jerome.
take easily into his work those whom he finds occupied in good works. 1596

“Then thus, in getting riches, you must flee idleness. And afterward, you should use the riches that you have gained by your intelligence and by your travail, in such a manner that men think you not too parsimonious, nor too sparing, nor too foolishly generous, that is to say, too great a spender. For just as men blame an avaricious man on account of his miserliness and stinginess, in the same way is he to blame who spends too freely. And therefore Cato says: ‘Use,’ he says, ‘your riches that you have gained in such a manner that others have no matter nor cause to call you neither wretch nor miser; for it is a great shame to a man to have a poor heart and a rich purse.’ He says also: ‘Use the goods that you have gained in moderation,’ which is to say, spend them moderately; for those who foolishly waste and spend the goods that they have, when they have no more property of their own, they scheme to take the goods of another. 1608

“I say then that you should flee from avarice; using your riches in such a manner that others will not say that your riches are buried, but that you have them in your might and in your control. For a wise man reproves the avaricious man, and says this in two verses: why and for what reason does a man bury his goods by his great avarice, and knows well that he must die? For death is the end of every man in this present life. And for what cause or reason does he join himself or knit himself so fast to his goods that others will not call him or part him from his goods, and know well, or ought to know, that when he is dead he shall bear nothing with him out of this world? And therefore Saint Augustine,28 says that ‘The avaricious man is likened to hell, in that the more it swallows, the more desire it has to swallow and devour.’ And just as you would avoid being called an avaricious man or miser, so too you should maintain and govern yourself in such a way that others will not call you foolishly generous. Therefore Cicero says: ‘The goods,’ he says, ‘of your house should not be hidden nor kept so secret, that they might not be freed by pity and gentleness;’ which is to say, to give part to those who have great need; ‘nor shall your goods be so free as to be every person’s goods.’ 1622

“Afterward, in the getting of your riches and in using them, you should always have three things in your heart, that is to say, our Lord God, conscience, and good name. First, you should have God in your heart, and for no wealth should you do no anything that may in any manner displease God, who is your creator and maker. For according to the word of Solomon, ‘It is better to have a few goods with the love of God than to have many goods and treasure and lose the love of the Lord God. And the prophet says that ‘Better it is to be a good man and have little good and treasure than to be held as a scoundrel and have great riches.’ And yet I say furthermore that you should always take pains to get yourself riches, so that you get them with good conscience. And the Apostle says that ‘There is nothing in this world of which we should have so great joy as when our conscience bears us good witness.’ And the wise man says, ‘The substance of a man is good when sin is not in man’s conscience.’ 1635

“Afterward, in getting your riches and in using them, you must exert yourself busily and diligently so that your good name may be always kept and preserved. For Solomon says that ‘It is better and profits a man more to have a good name than to have great riches.’ And therefore he says in another place, ‘Do exert yourself diligently,’ says Solomon, ‘in keeping of your friend and of your good name; for it shall remain with you longer than any treasure, matter how precious.’ 1640

“And surely he should not be called a gentleman that after God and good conscience, all other things left aside, does not work busily and diligently to keep his good name. And Cassiodorus says that ‘It is the sign of a gentle heart, when a man loves and desires to have a good name.’ And therefore Saint Augustine says that ‘There are two things that are necessary and needful, and they are good conscience and good reputation; that is to say, good conscience about your own inward person, and good reputation of your outward neighbor. And he who trusts so much in his good conscience that he displeases, and does not value his good name or reputation, and cares not at all that he keeps not his good name, is nothing but a cruel fellow. 1647

“Sire, now have I showed you how you should act in getting riches and how you should use them, and I see well that for the trust that you have in your riches you will begin war and battle. I counsel you that you begin no war in trust of your riches, for they will not suffice to maintain wars. And therefore a philosopher

28 Saint Augustine. Aurelius Augustinus, Augustine of Hippo, (354 – August 430), perhaps the most influential Christian writer in the Middle Ages, best known for his

Confessions, On Christian Doctrine, and The City of God. This quote may not belong to Augustine.
says, ‘That man who desires and wills at any price to have war shall never have sufficiency; for the richer that he is, the greater expenditure must he make, if he will have honor and victory.’ And Solomon says that ‘The greater riches that a man has, the more spenders he has.’ 1653

“And, dear sir, although for your riches you might have many people, yet it is not necessary, nor it is good, to begin war, seeing that you might in another manner have peace unto your honor and profit. For the victory by battles that are in this world lie not in great number or multitude of the people, nor in the virtue of man, but it lies in the will and in the hand of our Lord God Almighty. And therefore Judas Maccabeus, who was God’s knight, when he was to fight against his adversary that had a greater number and a greater multitude of people and was stronger than the people of Maccabee, he nonetheless encouraged his little company, and said in this very way: ‘As easily,’ he said, ‘may our Lord God Almighty give victory to a few people as to many people; for the victory of a battle comes not by the great number of people, but from our Lord God of Heaven.’ And, dear sir, because there is no man certain if he may be worthy that God will give him victory, [any more than he is certain if he is worthy of the love of God], or nothing, just as Solomon says, therefore, every man should greatly fear to begin wars. And because in battles many perils occur, and it happens sometimes that the great man is slain as soon as the little man; and as it is written in the Second Book of Kings, ‘The deeds of battles are filled with risk and nothing is certain, for one is hurt with a spear as easily as another;’ and because there is great peril in war; therefore one should flee from and avoid war, to the extent that he properly can. For Solomon says, ‘He who loves peril shall fall in peril.’ 1671

After Lady Prudence had spoken in this manner, Melibee answered and said: “I see well, Lady Prudence, that by your fair words and by your reasons that you have showed me, that war does not please you at all; but I have not yet heard your advice, how I shall act in this crisis.” 1674

“Certainly,” she said, “I counsel you that you reconcile with your adversaries and that you have peace with them. For Saint James says in his Epistle that ‘By concord and peace small riches grow great, and by strife and discord the great riches are depleted.’ And you know well that [two] of the greatest and most supreme things that are in this world is unity and peace. And therefore Our Lord Jesus Christ said to his Apostles in this way: ‘Very happy and blessed are those who love and promote peace, for they are called children of God.’” 1680

“A,” Melibee said, “now I see well that you love not my honor or my worship. You know well that my adversaries have begun this strife and contention by their outrage, and you see well that they neither beg nor ask me for peace, nor do they ask to be reconciled. Do you wish then that I should go and humble myself and be obedient to them, and cry to them for mercy? For truly, that would not be to my credit. For just as men say that ‘Over-great familiarity engenders contempt,’ so it also goes by too great humility or meekness. 1686

Then Lady Prudence began to make the appearance of wrath, and said: “Surely, sir, with all due respect, I love your honor and your profit as I do my own, and ever have done so; not you, nor no other, may ever say the contrary. And yet if I had said that you should have obtained the peace and the reconciliation, I had not been much mistaken, nor said amiss. For the wise man says, ‘The dissention begins with another, and the reconciliation begins with yourself.’ And the Prophet says, ‘Flee evil and do goodness; seek peace and follow it, as much as there is in you.’ Yet I do not say not that you should sooner appeal to your adversaries for peace than they should to you. For I know well that you are so hard-hearted that you will do nothing for me. And Solomon says, ‘He whose heart it too hard shall at last meet with misfortune and come to grief.’ 1696

When Melibee had heard Lady Prudence make the appearance of wrath, he said in this fashion: Lady, I pray you that you will not be not displeased with things that I say, for you know well that I am angry and wrathful, and that is no wonder; and those who are wrathful do not know well what they are doing or what they are saying. Therefore the prophet says that ‘Troubled eyes have no clear sight.’ But peak to me and advise me as it pleases you, for I am ready to do just as you will desire; and if you reprove me for my folly, I am more bound to love you and to praise you. For Solomon says that he who reproves another who

29 Judas Maccabeus. Hebrew warrior who led the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the Second Century BC.

30 Any more than . . . love of God. As in the two other instances above, this passage was likely copied directly from Chaucer’s Old French source.

31 The Prophet. I.e., David.
Then Lady Prudence said, “I make no appearance of wrath or anger, except for your great profit. For Solomon says, ‘He is more worthy who reproves or chides a fool for his folly, showing him the appearance of wrath, than he who supports him and praises him in his misdoing, and laughs at his folly.’ And this same Solomon says afterward that ‘By the sorrowful face of a man,’ which is to say by the sorry and heavy countenance of a man, ‘the fool corrects and amends himself.’” 1710

Then Melibee said, “I shall not be able to answer to so many fair reasons as you set forth and show to me. Tell me your will and your advice in brief, and I am prepared to fulfill it and carry it out.” 1712

Then Lady Prudence made all her will known to him, and said, “I advise you,” she said, “above all things, that you make peace between God and yourself; and be reconciled to him and to his grace. For, as I have told you earlier, God has permitted you to have this tribulation and misery because of your sins. And if you do as I say you, God will send your adversaries to you, and make them fall at your feet, ready to do your will and your commandments. For Solomon says, ‘When the condition of man is pleasant and liking to God, he changes the hearts of the man’s adversaries and compels them to beseech him for peace and grace.’ And I pray you to let me speak with your adversaries in a private place; for they should not know that it is of your will or of your intention. And then, when I know their will and their intention, I may counsel you more with more certainty.” 1723

“Lady,” Melibee said, “do your will and your liking; for I put myself wholly at your disposal and in your guidance. 1725

Then Lady Prudence, when she saw the good will of her husband, deliberated with herself, thinking how she might bring this crisis to a good conclusion and to a good conclusion. And when she saw her time, she sent for these adversaries to come to her to a secret place, and showed to them in a wise fashion the great goods that come from peace, and the great harms and perils that are in war; and said to them in a kindly manner how they should greatly repent the injury and wrong that they had done to Melibee her lord, to her, and to her daughter. 1732

And when they heard the kindly words of Lady Prudence, they were so surprised and enraptured, and had such great joy from her that it is a wonder to relate it. “Ah, lady,” they said, “you have shown to us the blessing of sweetness, according to the words of David the Prophet; for the reconciliation which we are not worthy to have in any manner, but which we ought to beg with great contrition and humility, you from your great goodness have presented to us. Now we see well that the knowledge and the wisdom of Solomon is very true. For he says that ‘Sweet words multiply and increase friends, and make the wicked to be gentle and meek.’” 1740

“Surely,” they said, “we put our action and all our matter and cause entirely in your good will and are ready to obey the speech and commandment of my lord Melibee. And therefore, dear and benign lady, we pray you and beseech you as meekly as we possibly can, that it should please your great goodness to fulfill in deed your kindly words. For we consider and acknowledge that we have offended and grieved my lord Melibee to great excess, so far that we are not able to make amends with him. And therefore we oblige and bind ourselves and our friends to do all his will and his commandments. But perhaps he has such resentment and such wrath toward us, because of our offense, that he will lay such a penalty on us as we will not be able to bear or sustain. And therefore, noble lady, we beseech your womanly pity to take counsel in this extreme circumstance that neither we nor our friends be not disinherited nor destroyed through our folly.” 1751

“Certainly,” said Prudence, “it is a hard and very perilous thing that a man put himself utterly at the discretion, judgment, and the might and power of his enemies. For Solomon says, ‘Believe me, and give credence to what I shall say: I say,’ he said, ‘you people and governors of holy church, never give to your son, to your wife, your friend, or your brother the mastery of your body as long as you live.’ Now since he refutes that a man should give to his brother or his friend the might of his body, by a stronger reason he refutes and forbids a man to given himself to his enemy. And nonetheless I advise you that you do not mistrust my lord, for I know well and know truly that he is gentle and meek, generous, courteous, and not all desirous or covetous of goods or riches. For there is nothing in this world that he desires, except worship and honor alone. Furthermore, I know well and am very sure that he shall do nothing in this extreme situation without my counsel; and I shall so work in this cause that, by the grace of our Lord God, you should be reconciled with us. 1764

Then they said with one voice, “Worshipful lady, we put us and our goods entirely at your will and
disposition, and been redy to comen, what day that it like unto your nobility to lymyte us or assigne us, for to make our obligacioun and boond as strong as it liketh unto your goodness, that we might fulfille the wille of you and of my lord Melibee.” 1768

When Lady Prudence had heard the answers of these men, she bade them go again secretly. And she returned to her lord Melibee and told him how she found his adversaries entirely repentant, acknowledging very humbly their sins and trespasses, and how they were ready to suffer all pain, begging and praying him for mercy and pity. 1772

Then Melibee said, “He who does not excuse his own sin, but acknowledges, repents it, and asks indulgence, is well worthy to have pardon and forgiveness of his sin. For Seneca says, ‘There is the remission and forgiveness, where there is confession’; for confession is the neighbor to innocence. And he says in another place that ‘He who has shame for his sin and acknowledges it is worthy of remission.’ And therefore I consent, and I confirm myself to have peace. But it is good that we do it1805 then without the consent and will of our friends. 1778

Then Prudence was very glad and joyful, and said, “Surely, sir,” she said, “you have answered well and kindly. For just as by the counsel, consent, and help of your friends you have been moved to avenge yourself and make war, so too without their counsel you have reconciled yourself to have peace with your adversaries. For the law says: ‘There is nothing so good by way of nature as a thing to be undone by the one who did it.’ 1783

And then Lady Prudence, without delay or tarrying, sent her messages immediately for her family, and for her old friends that were true and wise, and told them by order in the presence of Melibee all this matter as it is expressed and declared above, and prayed them that they would give her advice and counsel what would be best to do in this time of need. And when Melibee’s friends had consulted and deliberated on the foresaid matter, and had examined it with great energy and diligence, they gave unanimous advice to have peace and rest, and that Melibee should receive with good heart his adversaries with forgiveness and mercy. 1790

And when Lady Prudence had heard the assent of her lord Melibee, and the counsel of his friends in agreement with her will and her intention, she was glad in her heart, and said, “There is an old proverb,” she said, “which says that ‘The goodness that you may do this day, do it, and do not wait or delay until tomorrow.’ And therefore I advise that you send your messages, ones that are discreet and wise, to your adversaries, telling them on your behalf that if they will discuss peace and accord, that they prepare themselves without delay or tarrying to come to us.” 1800

This thing was performed indeed. And when these offenders and repentants of their follies, that is, the adversaries of Melibee, had heard what these messengers said to them, they were very glad and joyful, and answered meekly and humbly, yielding graces and thanks to her lord Melibee and to all his company; and prepared themselves without delay to go with the messengers, and to obey the commandment of her lord Melibee. 1805

And swiftly they made their way to the court of Melibee, and took with them some of their true friends to swear their good faith for them and to stand as their surety. And when they had come into the presence of Melibee, he said these words to them: “It stands thus,” Melibee said, “and true it is, that you, without cause or rationale or reason, have done great injuries and wrongs to me, to my wife Prudence, and to my daughter also. For you have entered into my house by violence and have done such outrage that all men know well that you have deserved death. And therefore I wish to know and understand from you whether you wish to put the punishment, the chastisement, and the vengeance for this outrage in the will of me and of my wife Prudence, or do you wish not?” 1815

Then the wisest of the three answered for them all and said, “Sire,” he said, “we know well that we are unworthy to enter the court of so great and so worthy a lord as you are. For we have so greatly erred and have offended and sinned in such a way against your high honor, that truly we have deserved death. But yet, for the great goodness and gentility that all the world witnesses of your person, we submit ourselves to the excellence and kindness of your gracious lordship, and are ready to obey all your commandments; beseeching you that by your merciful pity you will consider our great repentance and humble submission, and grant us forgiveness for our outrageous trespass and offense. For well we know that your generous grace and mercy reach farther into goodness than do our outrageous sins and trespasses into wickedness, albeit that we have cursedly and damnably sinned against your high lordship.” 1826

Then Melibee took them up from the ground gently, and received their obligations and their bonds by
their oaths upon their pledges and sureties, and assigned them a certain day to return to his court, to accept and receive the sentence and judgment that Melibee would command to be done to them by the causes aforesaid. These things having been ordained, every man returned to his house. 1831

And when Lady Prudence saw her time, she inquired of and asked her lord Melibee what vengeance he thought to take on his adversaries. 1833

To this Melibee answered, and said: “Surely,” he said, “I think and intend fully to disinherit them of all that they ever should have, and to send them into exile for ever.” 1835

“When certainly,” said Lady Prudence, “this would be a cruel sentence and much against reason. For you are plenty rich and have no need of other men’s goods; and you might easily in this way get yourself a reputation for covetousness, which is a vicious thing and ought to be avoided by every good man. For according to the wisdom of the word of the Apostle32, ‘Covetousness is the root of all harms.’ And therefore it would be better for you to lose as much property of your own, than to take from their property in this manner; for it is better to lose property with honor than it is to gain property with villainy and shame. And every man ought to exert himself diligently and to get himself a good name. And yet shall he not only employ himself in keeping his good name, but he shall also endeavor always to do something by which he may renew his good name. For it is written that ‘The old good reputation or good name of a man is soon goon and passed, when it is not renewed or refashioned.’ 1846

“And regarding the fact that you say you will exile your adversaries, this seems to me much against reason and beyond moderation, considering the power that they have given you over themselves. And it is written that ‘He who misuses the might and the power that is given him deserves to lose his privilege.’ And I propose that you could impose such a penalty by right and by law, which I believe you might not do. I say you might not execute it perhaps, and then it would be likely to return to the war as it was before. 1854

“And therefore, if you wish that men will give you homage, you must judge more graciously; this is to say, you must give lighter sentences and judgments. For it is written that ‘He who most courteously commands, men will obey most.’ And therefore I pray you that in this extreme situation you decide to overcome your heart. For Seneca says that ‘He who overcomes his heart, overcomes twice.’ And Cicero says: ‘There is no thing so commendable in a great lord as when he is gentle and meek, and is easily appeased.’ And I pray you that you will refrain now from doing vengeance, in such a manner that your good name may be kept and preserved, and that men might have cause and matter to praise you for your pity and mercy, and that you have no cause to repent of things that you have done. For Seneca says, ‘He is a bad victor who repents his victory.’ For this reason I pray you, let mercy be in your heart, to the effect and intent that God Almighty may have mercy on you in his last judgment. For Saint James says in his epistle: ‘Judgment without mercy shall be done to him that has no mercy for another creature.’” 1869

When Melibee had heard the great arguments and reasons of Lady Prudence, and her wise instructions and teachings, his heart began to incline to the will of his wife, considering her true intent, and he soon conformed, agreed fully to work according to her counsel; and thanked God, from whom all virtue and all goodness proceeds, who sent him a wife of such great discretion. 1873

And when the day came that his adversaries were to appear in his presence, he spoke to them very kindly, and said in this way: “Although in your pride, great presumption and folly, and negligence and ignorance, you have misbehaved yourself and trespassed against me, yet because I see and behold your great humility, and that you are sorry for and repentant of your sins, it compels me to offer you grace and mercy. For these reasons I receive you into my grace, and forgive you utterly all the offenses, injuries, and wrongs that you have done against me and mine, to the effect and to the end that God of his endless mercy will at the time of our dying forgive us our sins that we have trespassed against him in this wretched world. 1884

“For doubtless, if we are sorry and repentant for the sins and crimes through which we have trespassed in the sight of our Lord God, he is so noble and so merciful that he will forgive us our sins and bring us to the bliss that has no end. Amen. 1888

Here is ended Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee and of Lady Prudence.

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32 The Apostle. Paul, in his Epistle to Timothy (though Paul’s authorship is in doubt).