Outline of Chaucer’s “Tale of Melibee”

ll. 967-975: Introduction of Melibee, Prudence and Sophie; old foes come through windows, beat Prudence and Sophie, leave them for dead, and depart; Melibee returns, sees what has happened, and begins to weep.

ll. 976-985: Prudence reflects on weeping, urges Melibee to cease

ll. 986-987: Melibee responds in defense.

ll. 988-1000: Prudence cites more reasons why to stop weeping.

ll. 1001: Melibee responds that he can’t help it.

ll. 1002-1003: Prudence advises Melibee to take counsel.

ll. 1004-1009: Melibee calls together an assembly for counsel

ll. 1010-1015: Surgeon assures Melibee he and his colleagues will do their best to heal Sophie

ll. 1016-1020: Physicians advise toward war

ll. 1021-1033: wise advocate advises for deliberation

ll. 1034-1036: young folk advise for war!

ll. 1037-47: wise advocate pleads against war

ll. 1048-1049: Melibee has false counselors, and decides for war

ll. 1050-53: Prudence counsels against war

ll. 1054-63: Melibee replies, refusing her counsel in the name of changing counsel as a sign of supposed weakness, on account of the wickedness of women, on account of seeming to give her the mastery, and on account of having his counsel be secret, when he’d prefer it to be in the open.

ll. 1064-1110: Prudence replies to each of Melibee’s objections

ll. 1111-1113: Melibee agrees with Prudence, and gives her governance

ll. 1114-1231: Prudence’s ‘doctrine’ (1232) on good counsel

   ll. 1114-1136: keep yourself from ire, covetise, and hastiness
   ll. 1137-1152: keep your counsel in secret
   ll. 1153-1170: friends are good counselors
   ll. 1171-1198: enemies (fools, flatterers, former foes) are bad counselors
   ll. 1172-1221: how to take counsel and deliberate unto oneself
   ll. 1222-1231: how and when to change one’s counsel; the general rule that a counsel kept no matter the circumstances, is wicked

ll. 1232-1234: Melibee thanks Prudence for general advice; requests more specific counsel on the former counsel he has already received from the assembly
II. 1235-1259: Prudence on reasons Melibee’s prior counsel was bad: “ye han erred also,” etc.; essentially Melibee failed because he listened to false counselors and chose the opinion of the majority, or “hochepot” (1256)

II. 1260-1263: Melibee admits that Prudence is right, expresses willingness to change his counselors according to her advice

II. 1264-1277: Prudence speaks to the specific advice of the surgeons and physicians, and offers her first hermeneutic, asking Melibee how he would interpret the physicians claim that maladies are cured through contraries: “I wolde fayn knowe hou ye understonde thilke text, and what is youre sentence” (1277).

II. 1278-1281: Melibee offers his suggested interpretation

II. 1282-1331: Prudence’s deconstruction of Melibee’s interpretation, speaking of the importance of turning the other cheek, trusting in God, and not associating with troublemakers. She ends by posing hermeneutic #2: how Melibee interprets the counsel to guard his house.

II. 1332-1333: Prudence replies to Melibee’s interpretation, on good preparation, on counsel of neighbors, on “consentyng” (1360), on not taking vengeance without jurisdiction (a judge’s “proper auctoritee” (1385), on Cicero’s “consequent” (1386), on fourfold causality (“oriens/efficiens, or ‘far’ and ‘near’ causes; 1394), on conjecture (1402)

II. 1404-1425: Prudence on allegoresis; on Melibee’s name, on the three foes as flesh, fiend, and world, and on five windows as five wits.

II. 1426-1431: Melibee’s admission that while vengeance isn’t always good, it’s not always bad either.

II. 1432-1442: Prudence against vengeance, as the preemption of just judgment

II. 1443-1445: Melibee expresses distaste for the instances of vengeance that require consequent recourse to the judge whose jurisdiction the aforesaid vengeance transgressed.

II. 1446-1459: Prudence on Fortune’s instability, and on leaving vengeance to God

II. 1460-1465: Melibee expresses that without vengeance, further villainy will follow against him.

II. 1466-1516: Prudence agrees that too much sufferance isn’t good; but, she says, let’s say vengeance was good – you, Melibee, wouldn’t be strong enough anyway! (c. 1480); other disadvantages to vengeance, and reasons why patience is good (c. 1500-), since patience is “perdurable” (1509).

II. 1517-1525: Melibee agrees that perfect patience is good, but it’s too difficult

II. 1526-1538: Prudence stresses again that vengeance must happen in accordance with the law, contrasts defense with vengeance, and lauds patience once more.

II. 1539-1550: Melibee agrees that impatience is bad, but he also contrasts Prudence’s claim that he’s too weak to get vengeance, stressing his greatness and riches.
Prudence on the right use of riches, on the dangers of poverty and idleness, more on the right use of riches as requiring the spender to keep three things in mind: the Lord, conscience, and a good reputation (c. 1625)

Prudence against war, especially since “batailles been aventurouse and nothing certeyne” (1667)

Melibee acknowledges Prudence’s clear dislike of war – but what should he do?

Prudence replies that, since unity is the most sovereign, he should “purchacen pees” (1679).

In response to Prudence’s counsel for peace, Melibee pouts: “now se I wel that ye loven nat myn honour ne my worshipe’ (1680).

Prudence “maken semblant of wratthe” (1686) and scolds Melibee, effectively arguing that while dissension begins with others, reconciliation begins with you!

Melibee sees her wrath, and is apologetic, and promises to do what she wants. (cf. Wife of Bath?)

Prudence explains that her semblance of wrath was for Melibee’s profit.

Melibee once more explains his readiness to heed her advice.

Prudence counsels Melibee, once more, to make peace! She offers to speak with his foes and to come to an agreement with them for his sake.

Melibee claims to “putte me hoolly in youre disposicioun and ordinaunce” (1725).

When Prudence saw her time, she converses with Melibee’s adversaries in a private place.

Enemies of Melibee are won over by Prudence’s wise words, and put themselves wholly in her advisement, admitting with Solomon that “sweete words multiplen and encreesen freendes and maken shrews to be debonaire and meeke” (1740).

Prudence counsels the adversaries to come and meet with Melibee, explaining her confidence in his mercy (for her sake)

the adversaries put themselves wholly in Prudence’s will and disposition

Prudence returns to Melibee and explains the adversaries’ repentance

Melibee expresses a willingness to forgive and seek peace

Prudence is happy, and accounts Melibee’s former willingness for vengeance to the false counsel of his false friends

Prudence summons Melibee’s true friends for counsel in the matter of Melibee’s response to the repentant adversaries (thus fulfilling her earlier claim that only good counsel matters).
ll. 1791-1800: Prudence is glad that the good counselors approve of Melibee’s making peace.

ll. 1801-1815: The enemies arrive at Melibee’s court, and Melibee inquires of them about their willingness to submit to his and Prudence’s will.

ll. 1816-1825: The enemies agree to do this, and beseech Melibee’s mercy and goodness, which stretches farther, they say, than their wickedness.

ll. 1826-1830: Melibee acknowledges their reply, and sends them away until a certain day when they are to return for his judgment.

ll. 1831-1834: Prudence inquires of Melibee what his judgment will be, he says disinheriting them and exiling them;

ll. 1835-1868: Prudence responds to this by denouncing covetise, noting that the abuse of power justifies its loss, praises courtesy and mercy, and closes, significantly, by invoking the greater Judge, God, whose mercy is conditional upon human, finite mercy.

ll. 1869-1887: Melibee considers Prudence’s intention, his heart inclines to her, and he assents fully to her counsel; then, to the adversaries who return for their sentence, he forgives them, admitting that “it constreyneth me to doon yow grace and mercy,” and “to this ende, that God of his endeles mercy / wole at the tyme of oure diynge foryeven us oure giltes that we han trespassed to hym” (1882-1883).

l. 1887: Amen.

*Heere is ended Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee and of Dame Prudence*