Article from

The Stepping Stone

August 2015
Issue 59

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Chaucer on Choosing Advisers

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In a regular week, I commute over 700 miles by car; when I'm teaching evening classes, over 800 miles. As you can imagine, this means I have a lot of uninterrupted time as I cruise along I-84, and I have been choosing very long audiobooks to pass the time away. Often I pick works with which I am very well-acquainted, but sometimes I'm surprised by something I thought I knew well.

Specifically: *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer.

I got an excellent unabridged audiobook[1] version of *The Canterbury Tales*, based on my favorite modern English translation.[2] Usually when I read *The Canterbury Tales*, I do a "greatest hits" version, reading only those stories I find the most entertaining. But on a long car trip, with the audiobook being one, long, uninterrupted presentation (other than switching CDs, which rarely came at a break between tales), I had no choice but to listen to everything as it went by.

Most of the tales I skip in reading tend to be tedious, given the medieval approach to many things. The Parson's "Tale" that ends *The Canterbury Tales* is a very long sermon on the nature of sin. There are actually many amusing parts of that sermon, such as the complaints on lascivious clothing (the men's tights are too tight!), but it's not much of a tale.

And the tale I am about to convey, the Tale of Melibee, is of this unending medieval nature. In all its unending glory, it's quite a bore.

But there is a good deal of wise advice in the Tale of Melibee. It would make a very good PowerPoint presentation on choosing advisers.

THE CONTEXT OF CANTERBURY

While Chaucer is often considered the "Father of English Literature,"[3] he worked in multiple languages. He was a man of the 14th century, dying as the century ended in 1400. The primary literary languages in England at the time were French and Latin; Chaucer knew both (as well as other European languages) very well. Chaucer was known for translating popular Latin and French works into the English of the time—Middle English, the English of the post-Norman Invasion period, having heavy French influences.

Many of the original sources of *The Canterbury Tales* came from non-English origins, and the genius of Chaucer was not so much the invention of the stories, but the characterization of the pilgrims to Canterbury as well as how he told the tales.

As John Dryden wrote in the 17th century:[4]

> He must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature, because, as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his Canterbury Tales the various manners and humours (as we now call them) of the whole English nation, in his age. Not a single character has escaped him.

The point was that pilgrimages to Canterbury were popular at the time of Chaucer's writing, with people of all different stages of life making the trek for various purposes. The Parson and his brother, the Plowman, are of humble station; the Wife of Bath is exceedingly rich but of middling station even so; the clerical class has its own hierarchies with the Monk and the Prioress being at the height, and the Pardoner and the Summoner being very shady functionaries.

One of the main modes of entertainment at the time was storytelling (just as video is one of ours). The host of the pilgrimage, an innkeeper named Harry Bailer, proposes a tale-telling contest, which *The Canterbury Tales* is supposed to represent. The person of highest social station, the Knight, starts the tales off with a heightened classical era story.

Chaucer sets himself as a fictional pilgrim, and he even gets a chance to tell multiple tales … because his first one found little

favor. After the fictional Chaucer starts by telling an awful doggerel verse called the Tale of Sir Thopas, the host Harry Bailey interrupts him and tells Chaucer his verse, literally, "is nat worth a toord."[5]

At this point, the fictional Chaucer tells the prose Tale of Melibee, which is based on a French work based on a Latin original (how very medieval). It ran for over 1,000 lines in the original manuscript … much longer than the original sources.

MELIBEE AND A CALL TO WAR

The Chaucerian version of the Tale of Melibee is a story of a rich and powerful man whose wife and daughter were attacked by three of Melibee's enemies.[6] Melibee's wife is beaten, and his daughter has several very serious wounds. Melibee calls a counsel of men to advise whether he is to go to war.

The bulk of this 1,000-line-plus "tale" is the arguments for and against, much of which take a heavily medieval Christian flavor. But the most interesting parts are on **how** to pick advisers and **how** to take advice.

In the first counsel, these are the advisers and what they say (my summaries):

- Surgeons: We don't know about war, but we know about healing people and will immediately see to your daughter's wounds.
- Physicians: As illnesses are cured by essences opposed, men should cure wrongs via war.

But the most interesting parts are on **how** to pick advisers and **how** to take advice.

- Secret enemies: Oh, mighty Melibee, you are so powerful, you should bring your might down on your enemies.
- Wise advocates: War is very serious, and an error in choosing would be very dangerous. The most immediate action should be to protect yourself and your own, building up your defense, but taking time before deciding to go to war. Please give us time to give you better advice.
- Young men: WAR! WAR! WAR!
- Old wise men: These people calling for war do not have any experience of it, and do not realize how serious it is. Once war begins, it may last such a long time that children not yet born will die in the cause. Before choosing to begin, you must take your time.

The old man acting as a representative continues his counsels by giving reasons, but he is interrupted by multiple parties, and he realizes nobody opposed to his perspective is listening. As he sees his continuing argumentation only annoys his listeners, he sits down and stops talking.

Finally, the public counsel is followed up by private conversations, in which Melibee hears from people who give advice in private opposite from that they gave in public.

THE CONTEXT OF CHAUCER

We may know Chaucer best in his literary role now, but during his lifetime, he had many more roles. He had been in the English government since a youngster, starting out as page in the household of the Countess of Ulster in 1357. By adulthood, he had connections to the highest people in the court, including three successive English kings. Chaucer had great experience with war himself, as well as giving counsel, specifically with regard to the aptly named Hundred Years War. As that war did not end until over 50 years after Chaucer's death, he definitely understood that a war begun may not end for generations.

Chaucer held many important government positions, including comptroller for customs at the Port of London. He had been clerk of King's works—in charge of infrastructure projects, such as the repair of Westminster Palace, an important undertaking for the time.

So while many know Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales* for its sexual farces and fart jokes, as well as a representation of medieval English society, Chaucer well understood how to give and judge counsel in official matters. This may explain why his Tale of Melibee is so much longer than his original sources.

CHOOSING ONE'S ADVISERS

Back to the Tale of Melibee: After the initial fits, and Melibee's obvious desire to go to war, one gets an extended dispute between Melibee and his wife, Prudence.

I am definitely not detailing the whole exchange—with references to biblical and classical authorities, as well as Melibee stating he cannot possibly take advice from a lowly woman—but here is the heart of Prudence's advice:

- It is not foolish to change a decision if you determine circumstances are different from what you originally thought. [Think sunk costs!]
- Do not ask for advice while angry, as you will not judge the quality of advice well.
- If you have made a decision internally, and ask for counsel, do not let it be apparent what advice you want, because people will naturally change their advice to meet your preference as opposed to giving you new information and advice. Be open to other perspectives or just don't ask for advice.
- Ask for advice from people you trust. Do not seek advice

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from people you know to be your enemies.

- Stay away from advice of the foolish, inexperienced, flatterers, and people who say something different in private than in public.
- Don't ask for advice from servants—they may fear you more than give you useful advice.

Prudence then goes on to evaluate the advice Melibee had received in his original counsels. Unsurprisingly, she backs the old wise man who had been forced to sit down and be silent.

Ultimately, Prudence convinces her husband to take her own advice, and she brokers a peace between the two sides. It ends on a high Christian note, with Melibee forgiving his enemies, but only after they have shown they are repentant, willing to pay for their wrongs. And they live happily ever after!

CHAUCER'S RELEVANCE CENTURIES LATER

Chaucer has been dead for more than 600 years. What can we learn from his advice that is useful in our working lives today?

Even though it can be rough going through such a long and medieval tale, with multiple references to Cicero, Job, Jesus and Ovid (to name the most prominent), we can still use this advice, even if we're not going to war. I have boiled it down to two main principles:

> Don't ask for advice if you have already decided and are only looking for confirmation.

1. In asking advice, one needs to be in a proper emotional frame of mind. If one is too emotionally charged (in the case of Melibee, he was too angry), one may ignore unwanted advice and not rationally weigh that which would be valuable. Don't ask for advice if you have already decided and are only looking for confirmation.
2. Judge well those who give you advice. There are many reasons people may give you poor advice, and you need to be aware when judging the advice. Make sure those giving advice share your goals and have enough knowledge and experience to give you useful advice.

I was not expecting a master class in seeking and taking advice when I set out for work on the day I ran into this tale, which not only do I usually skip, but many compilers of *The Canterbury Tales* simply replace with a summary.

While I am not able to converse with my fellow pilgrims on I-84 between New York and Hartford, telling them what I have learned in my travels, I hope you, my fellow actuarial pilgrims, have gotten something useful out of Chaucer as well.

ASIDE: The Tale of Melibee *is* tedious. I listened to it only due to my insane commute.

If you want my "Best Hits of The Canterbury Tales" list it is:

- The Prologue
- The Miller's Tale
- The Sailor's Tale
- The Wife of Bath's Prologue & Tale (shorter than the prologue, I think)
- The Pardoner's Tale
- The Franklin's Tale.

To quote my own review of *The Canterbury Tales*:[7]

> Chaucer is so great, not because he comes up with original stories, or even original characters—but that he has selected well to show the variety of God's plenty, and gives each a fair shake. For all that Chaucer "retracts" his naughty stories at the end of the book, they are still in the book.

The naughty stories are the most fun, I will say. ■

ENDNOTES

1. *The Canterbury Tales*, unabridged, Blackstone Audio, 2008. *http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1433249723/ref%3Das_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1433249723&linkCode=as2&tag=junoandherpea2-20&linkId=QLYT42EBSZAVXXVO.*
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3. Geoffrey Chaucer. Wikipedia entry. *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Chaucer.* Accessed April 26, 2015.
4. John Dryden (1631–1700) on Chaucer. From Bartleby's Quotations. *http://www.bartleby.com/209/540.html.*
5. http://www.librarius.com/canttran/thopastale/thopastale239-252.htm.
6. eChaucer publication of Tale of Melibee. *https://machias.edu/faculty/necastro/chaucer/translation/ct/19mel.html.*
7. "Here is God's Plenty: The Canterbury Tales." *http://stump.marypat.org/article/185/here-is-god-s-plenty-the-canterbury-tales.*

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