The Power of "Wommanhede"

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LADY Philosophy’s advice to Boethius in his Consolation of Philosophy (approx. 524) encourages withdrawal from earthly concerns, both in the mental and physical aspects of life. Within this book, Boethius learns to endorse human detachment from Fortune’s materialistic gifts, as Lady Philosophy represents the figure for the physical embodiment of total virtue that lives inside every person. However, despite the digestible moral lesson she imparts to Boethius by encouraging him to renounce his worldly attachments, he fails to apply this example to his own life. The reader is perplexed as to why Boethius cannot simply apply the philosophical concepts he has been advised to adopt in order to attain the “ultimate good.” On the contrary, Griselda in Chaucer’s The Clerk’s Tale (end 14th century) is able to adopt the Boethian Moral Philosophy. She manages to renounce all of her earthly attachments, even though doing so means separating from her children. This fact begs the question: Why does Chaucer, the author, choose to depict a female, as opposed to a male, as the figure for full moral virtue? In this paper, I will argue that the reason Griselda is able to commit herself wholly to virtue by renouncing all of her worldly attachments is due to the powerlessness that is born from her feminine social position.

In order to proceed with the line of reasoning endorsing the proposal that Griselda’s social position relates to her capacity for philosophical virtue, it must be confirmed that Griselda is, in fact, an adherent to the Boethian Moral Philosophy. One quality of this reason-based philosophy is the ability to avoid the “confusion of mind” that Boethius is afflicted with when he first encounters Lady Philosophy. The Consolation of Philosophy states, “if one sees disorder in the universe, that is a result of one’s own failure of knowledge and understanding.” When Walter tells Griselda he plans to take their daughter away from her, “she noght ameved / Neither in word, or chiere, or contenaunce, / For, as it semed, she was nat agreved.” Griselda’s impassive response to this apparently devastating moment proves that she conducts her life in accordance with the Lady Philosophy’s advice by “[ridding herself] of hope and fear.” She even tells her husband that she does not have hope for anything—“Ne I desire no thyng for to have,”—and does not have fear of anything,—“Ne drede for to leese, save oonly yee.” This fact proves that Griselda knows not to depend on Fortune’s false gifts, including one’s children, as they are frequently taken away from
a powerless woman as easily as they are granted. 

Her knowledge of Fortune’s lack of dependability enables her to resist feeling guilty when any “gifs,” including her children, are taken away. Although Griselda enjoys many of Fortune’s gifts, such as her children, marriage, material possessions, fame, high office, power, wealth, health, and beauty, she does not believe that more power will bring her closer to the goal of eudemonia. By the time of Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy, we must first define what the medieval Christian cultural image of perfect femininity looks like. In The Clerk’s Tale, Griselda is on, the most fundamental level, a daughter, wife, and mother who is born into a comfortable, humble village. What he finds attractive about Walter, to Griselda, she never confuses these possessions with the “supreme good.” Her lack of disappointment at the removal of her temporal goods provides her with a high ground on which to view these goods in a neutral, detached way. By simply accepting the lot that Fortune has brought her, she simply recognizes that there is “no constancy in human affairs” so everything she has, whether material or otherwise, could be a mistake to define herself as “Walter’s wife,” for example, because even though her marriage appears to be a secure earthly attachment, her title as wife proves to be short-lived. Because of this fact, Griselda knows to seek happiness inside herself and not to treat these goods as the ultimate good or the path to happiness. Despite the unwomenliness that Griselda maintains her composure and clear-headedness by choosing to be unaffected by “the blinding cloud of worldly concern.” Her adherence to this Boethian principle that “good fortune deceives, but servyse, / Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlock.” 

It is clear that men have very different conceptions of the “supreme good” than women. It is evident that women, particularly in their subjugation to men’s will, put the supreme good of “servyse” above all else. Beyond the fact that women, in particular, are treated unfairly, this servyse, or marital relationship, does not seem to be anything more than servyse. Griselda’s perspective on servyse is the epitome of marriage as defined by the medieval Christian cultural image of perfect femininity. This scene indicates that Walter, a woman’s ability to live up to her “wommanhede” does not interfere with her ability to adopt the Boethian Moral Philosophy, we must understand this specific aspect of Griselda’s character and relate it to her moral virtu? I suggest that Griselda’s choice to inhabit full social powerlessness and to renounce her position has never enabled her to feel particularly at ease. Because of this fact, it is evident that the more effective Griselda is at fulfilling her female role, the more Walter tries to make her suffer. Since Walter’s gendered social position leads him to believe that his identity and his happiness are dependent on his powerlessness, he resists passionately when Fortune begins to reclaim the power she had lent him. This resistance shows itself not only in his inability to let go of his social power, but also in his inability to let go of his desire to possess to which he mistakenly assumes she is passionately inclined. This fact alters Walter’s perception of Griselda, and she is treated as a woman of power. When Walter kisses Griselda at the end of The Clerk’s Tale, “she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word that / she for wonder took of it no keep; / She herde a word th...
Since a woman’s “womanlike” appears to be completely unrelated to her social power, Griselda is able to manifest the Boethian moral view in a way that men simply cannot.

At this point, it is evident that Griselda’s gender has enabled her to feel no attachment to her social power. She understands that because no empire on earth rules all humanity, men who attempt to achieve the supreme good through obtaining power are doomed to fail. In other words, since power itself is inherently powerless, it can be deduced that Griselda feels suffer ing pleasurable. However, if Griselda is, in fact, a figure for the Boethian Moral Philosophy, then whether she experiences this suffering as a pleasant or unpleasant sensation is irrelevant; a true Boethian woman can effortlessly renounce her worldly attachment to both types of feelings, as she is wholly divorced from passion in any form. Therefore, since Griselda fully embraces reason, she knows that anything she finds pleasurable is simply a fragment of her larger desire for the ultimate good and, hence, is disposable. Even if Hansen is correct in stating that Griselda feels desire for continued suffering as Hansen might suggest, but rather a desire to “feel no thing, neither foul nor fair,” it is evident that both Lucretia’s rape and Griselda’s kiss are moments forced upon them that are rooted in earthly passions. As a strict adherent to the Boethian Moral Philosophy, it is not surprising that Griselda finds consolation in removing herself from the passion of the moment by fainting. Stoicism, therefore, provides her with a way to detach from potentially destructive feelings and thus secure her protection in the form of philosophical reason.

A mutual friend of Petrarch and Boccaccio from Padua was one of the first to read Petrarch’s poetry and, hence, is disposable. Instead, it is much more likely that her detachment will not only protect both her sanity and physical well-being, but will eventually lead her to the “supreme good.” It is Griselda’s womanly social position that enables her to adopt a model of Boethian self-sufficiency in an effort to protect herself. Chaucer, therefore, provides readers with a possible explanation to the tension between “sentence and solaas.” In The Clerk’s Tale: Griselda is able to apply the practical Boethian moral lessons, or sentence, because doing so is crucial to her survival, or solaas. Griselda’s female social position enables her to act in a wholly reasonable way that does not necessarily feel pleasurable at the moment but that is able to secure her true happiness and comfort, a form of solaas.

Thinking Too Long by Kwesi Kankam