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Woman on a Park Bench Study

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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.1 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.2 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.”3 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.”4 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.”5 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.”6 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 her.

OUT OF ALL THE CHARACTERS IN THE CANTERBURY TALES, GRISELDA IS THE ONLY PERSON WHO IS ABLE TO APPLY THE PRINCIPLES OF THE BOETHIAN PHILOSOPHICAL MODEL TO HER LIFE ON EARTH. THROUGH THE FIGURE FOR THE PHYSICAL EMBODIMENT OF TOTAL VIRTUE THAT LIVES INSIDE EVERY PERSON, ALSO KNOWN AS LADY PHILOSOPHY, BOETHIUS BEGINS TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE PHILOSOPHICAL MODEL ENCOURAGES ONE TO RENOUNCE WORLDLY ATTACHMENTS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THE “ULTIMATE GOOD.” GRISELDA, ABOVE ALL OTHER MEN AND WOMEN, IS ABLE TO ADOPT THIS PRINCIPLE FULLY ON ACCOUNT OF THE POWERLESSNESS THAT IS BORN FROM HER FEMININE SOCIAL POSITION. BY RELYING ON THIS MODEL AND RENOUNCING ALL ATTACHMENTS TO BOTH PEOPLE AND OBJECTS ON EARTH, GRISELDA BECOMES FULLY SELF-SUFFICIENT AND LIVES A LIFE THAT SHE BELIEVES WILL BRING HER COMFORT IN THE FUTURE.

The Power of “Wommahede” molly st. denis