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## FOR LOVE OF SOPHIA: THE MYTHIC TRADITION OF THE WISE WOMAN

by Sarah Beach

Many heroes in many stories encounter on their journey a woman who provides the hero with some special piece of wisdom or insight. These wise women can take many forms, although we most often recognize her in an older motherly type. Where does this woman come from and why are we drawn to her?

The Wise Woman in a story frequently supplies a bridge between hidden knowledge and information and the hero's needs. Even though she does not always present her wisdom in the simplest, easiest to grasp manner, the fact that she responds to a need inspires admiration for her, even love. That being so, it becomes ironic that the Greek phrase for "lover of wisdom" should be *philosophia*. Philosophy has come to be regarded as a highly rational discipline, and a seemingly male purview (given the high number of male philosophers, compared to female ones). Philosophy has been described as "any body of doctrine or opinion as to the nature and ultimate significance of human experience considered as a whole."<sup>1</sup> Another description says "the object of philosophy is to understand and explain the nature of the world around us."<sup>2</sup> We could also say that the study of philosophy is the attempt to make rational order out of intuitive knowledge.

In mythic terms, rationality and order tend to be represented by masculine figures. Intuitive knowledge, mastery of hidden knowledge, chaos and emotion tend to be represented by feminine figures.<sup>3</sup> That being so, there is a certain irony that the Greek divinity of wisdom and rational thought should be female, the goddess Athena. Woman she may be, but let us remember that she sprang full grown from the head of Zeus. She captures in her being both the sense of the unknown (to us) which she can impart to us when she chooses (a feminine quality), and also the rationality of order and logic (that single-minded masculine quality).

However, the figure of Athena does not completely fulfill all that we expect in a Wise Woman. Indeed, we also expect a Wise Woman to convey something of the nature of a Mother

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- 1: *The New American Desk Encyclopedia*, Third Edition (New York: Penguin Books (Signet), 1977, 1982, 1993), p. 959
  - 2: Stewart, F.H. and E.K. Rand; "The Life of Boethius", in *Boethius: The Theological Tractates, and the Consolation of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1918, 1973), p. xiii
  - 3: Cataloging cross-cultural instances of this pattern would require a rather more extensive presentation than is intended here.

Figure. And Athena is no mother. Joseph Campbell observes

The mythological figure of the Universal Mother imputes to the cosmos the feminine attributes of the first, nourishing and protecting presence. The fantasy is primarily spontaneous; for there exists a close and obvious correspondence between the attitude of the young child toward its mother and that of the adult toward the surrounding material world. But there has been also, in numerous religious traditions, a consciously controlled pedagogical utilization of this archetypal image for the purpose of the purging, balancing, and initiation of the mind into the nature of the visible world.<sup>4</sup>

Campbell asserts that the Mother Figure (or Wise Woman) provides the hero with a *material* connection to the world around him. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, we can see just that type of connection being made. Aeneas has landed on the shores of Northern Africa. But some of his ships have become separated, and he is depressed by the apparent loss of some of his company. While hunting for some food, he encounters what he takes to be a local young woman, who tells him of the city of Carthage and its widowed queen, Dido. As this young woman leaves, Aeneas suddenly recognizes his mother, the goddess Venus.

"Why do you mock your son -- so often and  
so cruelly -- with these lying apparitions?  
Why can't I ever join you, hand to hand,  
to hear, to answer you with honest words?"<sup>5</sup>

Venus has provided the hero with the means to gain material comfort - food, supplies, his lost companions (who are safe at Carthage), and even some romance (with Dido). These actions do indeed fit Campbell's description of the Universal Mother. But let us note the reaction of Aeneas: he is disappointed that she disguised herself, that she doesn't deal with him in "honest words." This indicates the hidden elements that Campbell apparently overlooks in his description. There is more going on here than just the material world connections.

Campbell does indeed look beyond his initial statement.

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she

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4: Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1949, 1968), p. 113. Hereafter HWTF.

5: Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translation by Allen Mandelbaum, (New York, Bantam Books, 1971), p.13-15, quote is l. 581-584

bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation. Woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure. By deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states; by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion, but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world. HWTF, p. 116.

Campbell's approach is, unfortunately, tainted by a patristic attitude. "The Hero" of the mythic tale is always a male. And the achievement of his goal means that the "goddess figure" becomes his mate. It is the Supernatural Marriage. Except, once that point is reached, the feminine figure is apparently no longer divine, but merely human, to be "the little wifey" whose world is completed in the hero. This irony is reflected in the oldest known epic, Gilgamesh, where the hero treats the divine feminine as if she was in fact merely human. When Ishtar offers to join with Gilgamesh in matrimony, he rejects this goddess of love and war rather rudely, reminding her of previous wanton ("love them and leave them") behavior in her relationships.

‘And if you and I should be lovers, should not I be served in the same fashion as all these others whom you loved once?’

When Ishtar heard this she fell into a bitter rage, she went up to high heaven to her father Anu and to Antum her mother. She said, 'My father, Gilgamesh has heaped insults on me; he has told over all my abominable behaviour, all my tainted acts.' Anu opened his mouth and said, 'You invited this rebuke yourself, because of this, Gilgamesh has related your abominable behaviour and your tainted acts.'<sup>6</sup>

Although there is a certain humor in treating the divine or supernatural feminine figure as if she were merely human, it also undercuts the powerful support and comfort that can be drawn from the Wise Woman. We need to look beyond human expectations of "what you see is what you get" when it comes to Wise Women in literature and myth.

What can we find beyond these expectations of the supernatural and spousal possibilities in the Wise Woman? To begin with there are the benefits of accumulated wisdom. As observed at the beginning of this paper, we frequently expect the Wise Woman in a story to be an older woman. And we have reason for that expectation. In their study of the stages in the life of woman, Cynthia and Robert Hicks describe the ultimate stage as that of the Woman of Strength.<sup>7</sup> This stage exemplifies maturity and wisdom in the growth of a female character. There's power in a Female who has gained this Stage, for she has mastered many skills. She continues to maintain a connection to the society around her, frequently addressing the needs of the community. But her strength does

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6: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; translation and introduction by N. K. Sandars, (London, Penguin Books, 1960, 1964), p. 85

7: Hicks, Cynthia & Robert; *The Feminine Journey: Understanding the Biblical Stages of a Woman's Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 1994)

not begin with her relationships. Instead it springs from deep inside herself. Thus, even though she may be an active participant in the society around her, she has no need to lean on anyone.

This Woman of Strength tells us many things about what we expect the Wise Woman to be in and of herself. But what about how she relates to the other characters in the story? This brings us back to the concept of the Mother Figure. The nurturing and comforting aspects of the Mother Figure, as Campbell mentioned, are obvious. But there is more to a Mother Figure than just that: Nurturer, Encourager, Relator, Comforter, Ruler - these are the complete aspects of the Mother Figure. Nurturer and Comforter we've mentioned. The Encourager aspect supplies a hero with the support to move forward in his or her quest. Unlike the duties of the Mentor, which instruct the hero on *how* to do something, the Encourager provides affirmation that the hero *is able* to complete his task. The Relator aspect, which teaches the hero how to interact with the people around him or her, reflects back on the connection with the material world Campbell spoke of. The Ruler aspect provides the sense of authority we give this figure, and the rules or guidelines she provides.

All these elements combine with the mythic feminine territory of darkness, the underground, mysterious or hidden knowledge, and the flow of emotions to create the Wise Woman figure. There is more to her that meets the eye, as many stories have tried to convey.

Objectivity, however, requires raising the question as to whether or not male characters can perform these duties. There are some similarities between what the Wise Woman brings to a story and the aspects of a mentor. And we do need to recall that the original Mentor in *The Odyssey* was the goddess Athena in disguise? She had taken on the likeness of Mentor in order to guide Telemachus in his search for his father. But in that role, she guides the young man in how to *perform* his task, rather than giving him wisdom and insight into the nature of his task. Are there no male purveyors of hidden knowledge? Actually, there is one such: Tiresias, the blind seer. But both origin stories about his abilities bring the matter of "hidden knowledge" back to the realm of the feminine. On one side, after he strikes two great serpents who were mating, he was transformed into a woman; seven years later he encountered the mating serpents again, and after striking them again, he was returned to his male nature. He was blinded by Hera for siding with Zeus in an argument with the goddess about which sex got more pleasure in the act of love (Zeus said women do). The other origin involved his accidentally seeing Athena naked; she blinded him for this, and then gave him his prophetic ability when his mother begged for some compensation. Either way, the access Tiresias has to hidden, special knowledge comes to him through the agency of the feminine.

Before looking at some Wise Women from J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams, let us consider two additional older presentations.

In the book of Proverbs in the Bible, a youth is recommended to seek Wisdom, and this quality is described metaphorically as a woman to be sought and desired.

Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!  
Do not forget nor turn away from the words of my mouth.  
"Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;  
Love her, and she will watch over you.

The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;  
 And with all your acquiring, get understanding.  
 Prize her, and she will exalt you;  
 She will honor you if you embrace her.  
 She will place on your head a garland of grace;  
 She will present you with a crown of beauty. Proverbs 4:5-9<sup>8</sup>

Here we find the promise of benefit for seeking after our lady of Wisdom. Wisdom will watch over and guard the seeker. But she's not without a sharp side.

Wisdom shouts in the street,  
 She lifts her voice in the square;  
 At the head of the noisy streets she cries out;  
 At the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings:  
 "How long, O naive ones, will you love simplicity?  
 And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing  
 And fools hate knowledge?  
 Turn to my reproof,  
 Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you;  
 I will make my words known to you.  
 Because I called and you refused,  
 I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention;  
 And you neglected all my counsel  
 And did not want my reproof;  
 I will even laugh at your calamity;  
 I will mock when your dread comes,  
 When your dread comes like a storm  
 And your calamity comes on like a whirlwind,  
 When distress and anguish come on you." Proverbs 1: 20-27

By this we can see that Wisdom, and by extension our Wise Women figures, is not likely to be very patient with folly.

For a second example of this sterner aspect of the Wise Woman, let us turn to Boethius. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius describes his narrative self as down-cast and depressed when he was imprisoned. He sought the comfort of the Muses, struggling to put his mourning into verse. While wallowing in these emotions, he has a visitation.

While I was thinking these thoughts to myself in silence, and set my pen to record  
 this tearful complaint, there seemed to stand above my head a woman. Her look  
 filled me with awe; her burning eyes penetrated more deeply than those of ordinary

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8: *The Bible*, Ryrie Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, 1995 update (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986, 1995)

men; her complexion was fresh with an ever-lively bloom, yet she seemed so ancient that none would think her of our time. It was difficult to say how tall she might be, for at one time she seemed to confine herself to the ordinary measure of man, and at another the crown of her head touched the heavens; and when she lifted her head higher yet, she penetrated the heavens themselves, and was lost to the sight of men.<sup>9</sup>

This is Philosophy, making a grand entrance. And she has little patience for any folly.

Now when she saw the Muses of Poetry standing by my bed, helping me to find words for my grief, she was disturbed for a moment, and then cried out with fiercely blazing eyes; "Who let these theatrical tarts in with this sick man? Not only have they no cures for his pain, but with their sweet poison they make it worse. These are they who choke the rich harvest of the fruits of reason with the barren thorns of passion. They accustom a man's mind to his ills, not rid him of them. CoP, p. 135.

She promptly kicks the Muses out of his room, and begins the process of bringing Boethius back to the wisdom and knowledge he had acquired earlier in his life. She chastises him for forgetting those things, and for forgetting her. This brings him to tears, and she proceeds to comfort him, wiping away his tears.

Just so the clouds of misery were dispelled, and I drank in the clear light, recovering enough to recognize my healer's face. So, when I looked on her clearly and steadily, I saw the nurse who brought me up, whose house I had from my youth frequented, the lady Philosophy. And I said: "Why have you come, Queen of all the virtues, why have you come down from your high seat in heaven to these wastes where I am banished? So that you too stand in the dock with me, falsely accused?" "Should I desert you, my pupil?" she replied; "Should I not share your labour and help to bear your burden, which you bear because my name is hated? It could not be right that Philosophy should leave an innocent man companionless on the road. Surely I should then be afraid that I should be charged myself; I should shudder with horror at such an unheard-of thing! Do you think that this is the first time that Wisdom has been attacked and endangered by a wicked society?" CoP, p. 141

In this work, Boethius dramatizes the benefits that should come to the hero of a story through his encounter with a Wise Woman. She comforts and consoles him, and provides him with an awareness he shall need as he continues. She brushes aside any folly he might be caught in, laying out clearly the wisdom that he needs. And if the hero loves her, is a *philos* of his *sophia*, he will have the means to complete the tasks ahead of him.

From the wealth of Wise Women in literature, let us consider their appearances in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and Williams' *The Greater Trumps*.

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9: Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 133. Hereafter, CoP.

Of the few female characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, we can quickly set to one side Arwen, Eowyn, and Rosie, for they are obviously destined for partnerships with certain of the heroes. This leaves us with Goldberry and Galadriel.

Can we consider Goldberry as an example of a Wise Woman? I believe we can. To be sure, the elemental quality of her nature limits the number of speeches she actually makes. And yet the few things she does say to our heroes, the hobbits, are actually of crucial importance to the overall quest.

Frodo takes an opportunity to ask Goldberry about the nature of Tom Bombadil, whom he is trying to understand. Goldberry says that Tom is the Master.

"Then all this strange land belongs to him?"

"No indeed!" she answered, and her smile faded. "That would indeed be a burden," she added in a low voice, as if to herself. "The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught old Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow. He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master."<sup>10</sup>

Goldberry's response draws a distinction between mastery and domination. It subtly focuses on the individual nature of creatures: each thing is its own. This outlook runs contrary to Sauron's intent to bring all things under his will. Sauron, and his Ring, seek domination, with or without the cooperation of the ruled. This is something quite distinct from mastery, which gains its control over people and things because of knowledge and skill. By implication, wisdom leads to mastery, rather than domination. But rather than give Goldberry a long speech which would be out of character for her, Tolkien places this important distinction within her apparently simple response to Frodo's question.

Goldberry also performs another of the Wise Woman's functions. She reminds the hobbits of their connectedness to the wide world around them.

After they had eaten, Goldberry sang many songs with them, songs that began merrily in the hills and fell softly down into silence; and in the silence they saw in their minds pools and waters wider than any they had known, and looking into them they saw the sky below them and the stars like jewels in the depths. Then once more she wished them each good night and left them by the fireside. FoR, p. 183-184

The fate of the wide world will soon rest upon the shoulders of these parochial and previously Shire-bound hobbits. The wisdom Goldberry conveys here, in the powerful emotive medium of music, will become important as the hobbits learn more about what is at stake in the quest. She has shown

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10: Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings*, 3 vols. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, (New York, Ballantine Books, 1965, 1973);, p. 174. Hereafter FoR.

them the precious quality of the world, the natural beauty that would be destroyed should Sauron succeed. We can assume that this vision of the world, combined with his own nature as a gardener, will sustain Sam in the terrible task of crossing Mordor.

The wisdom which Goldberry bestows on the hobbits lies not so much in straightforward knowledge, but in reinforcing their connectedness to the world around them. They represent a people who have been far more isolated from the other races of Middle-earth than any of the others they will encounter. Even the Ents are both more aware of and more interactive with other races (elves and orcs in particular) than the hobbits. With so much resting upon them, they need to be deeply connected to creation. Their visit with Tom and Goldberry provides the first of such lessons.

The more conscious lessons in Tolkien's tale come from the more obvious Wise Woman figure, Galadriel. When the Fellowship first encounters her, her credentials as a Wise Woman are swiftly established.

'It was who first summoned the White Council. And if my designs had not gone amiss, it would have been governed by Gandalf the Grey, and then mayhap things would have gone otherwise. But even now there is hope left. I will not give you counsel, saying do this, or do that. For not in doing or contriving, nor in choosing between this course and another, can I avail; but only in knowing what was and is, and in part also what shall be. But this I will say to you: your Quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains while all the Company is true.' FoR, p. 462.

By this point in the story, we already know that Saruman's leadership of the White Council had come close to allowing disaster. But rather than telling the company what they should do (which would be an act of domination), she tells them that knowledge is what is important. She then adds a piece of knowledge gained through her powers of insight: that the Fellowship has reached a crucial point. Disaster awaits on either side of them. Even though this is not exactly news to them, the voicing of the state of affairs reinforces the importance of what their next choices will be. Frodo and Sam, and to a certain degree Aragorn, are each aware of how troubled Boromir has been by the Ring. But Galadriel's warning applies to all the members of the company.

How do the members of the Fellowship respond to Galadriel's scrutiny? Sam says,

'If you want to know, I felt as if I hadn't got nothing on, and I didn't like it. She seemed to be looking inside me and asking me what I would do if she gave me the chance of flying back home to the Shire to a nice little hole with -- with a bit of garden of my own.' FoR, p. 463

Galadriel demonstrates that knowledge of hidden things that marks feminine Wisdom. The test of having desires apparently fulfilled is part of a self-knowledge which can combat dangerous folly. Galadriel's challenge to the Company involves their understanding and knowledge of themselves. Their lack of awareness of inner desires could make them susceptible to temptation. It is worth noting that the one member of the Company who denies the reality of the "desired end" that



Galadriel apparently offers is Boromir - he calls it lies. And he is the one that fails to resist temptation when it comes.

'To me it seemed exceedingly strange,' said Boromir. 'Maybe it was only a test, and she thought to read our thoughts for her own good purpose; but almost I should have said that she was tempting us, and offering what she pretended to have the power to give. It need not be said that I refused to listen. The Men of Minas Tirith are true to their word.' But what he thought that the Lady had offered him Boromir did not tell. FoR, p. 463-464

Boromir refuses to listen, reminding us of the statement in Proverbs of how “fools hate wisdom”. Rather than explore further the hidden knowledge that Galadriel has revealed, Boromir dismisses it as mere pretension.

Beyond the matter of possible futures that lingers in both this perception of their inner thoughts and the revelations of the Mirror of Galadriel, the elf queen does have one additional important piece of wisdom to convey. After he has gazed into the Mirror, Frodo asks Galadriel a crucial question.

'I would ask one thing before we go,' said Frodo, 'a thing which I often meant to ask Gandalf in Rivendell. I am permitted to wear the One Ring; why cannot I see all the others and know the thoughts of those that wear them?'

'You have not tried,' she said. 'Only thrice have you set the Ring upon your finger since you knew what you possessed. Do not try! It would destroy you. Did not Gandalf tell you that the rings give power according to the measure of each possessor? Before you could use that power you would need to become far stronger, and to train your will to the domination of others. Yet even so, as Ring-bearer and as one that had borne it on finger and seen that which is hidden, your sight is grown keener. You have perceived my thought more clearly than many that are accounted wise. You saw the Eye of him that holds the Seven and the Nine. And did you not see and recognize the ring upon my finger?' FoR, p. 474

Galadriel's response reflects back to Goldberry's comments about Tom Bombadil's mastery. To rule the One Ring, to use it the way its maker designed it, would require a commitment to domination, one which would completely ignore the individuality of all creatures of the world. Galadriel also communicates the encouragement that lies in the Wise Woman's power. She tells Frodo that he has already gained great insight, implying that this is an outgrowth of his own growing wisdom, not something given by the Ring. Indeed, her role as Encourager has been present from her first appearance, for she told the company that in spite of the loss of Gandalf, “there is hope left.”

There is considerable subtlety to the portraits of Goldberry and Galadriel, for it is clear that Tolkien did not view them as limited by or to their roles as Wise Women. Charles Williams, however, is very intentional in his portrait of Sybil Coningsby as the Wise Woman of *The Greater Tramps*.

From the beginning of the story, Williams establishes the calm, almost otherworldly nature of Sybil. When her niece and nephew have been behaving fretfully, Ralph asks, "Doesn't anyone ever annoy you, aunt?" Her reply establishes a constancy she will display through all the turmoil to come. "Hardly at all," Miss Coningsby said. "What extraordinary ideas you children have! Why should anyone annoy me?"<sup>11</sup> Like Boethius' Philosophy, Sybil is the nurse that had raised these two young people. It is her wisdom that will guide them, most particularly her niece Nancy.

Her wisdom begins with the seemingly simplest of things, knowing when not to speak.

One of the things about Sybil Coningsby that occasionally annoyed other people -- Ralph among them -- was her capacity for saying, quite simply, "Yes" or "No", and stopping there, rather as if at times she were literally following Christ's maxim about conversation. She would talk socially, if necessary, and sociably, if the chance arose, but she seemed to be able to manage without saying a lot of usual things. There was thus, to her acquaintances, a kind of blank about her; the world for a moment seemed with a shock to disappear and they were left in a distasteful void. GT, p. 9

This ability to stop leads the other characters to misjudge her character, her very nature.

Indeed, when Henry Lee first meets her and then describes her to his grandfather, he underestimates her greatly. After meeting Nancy's relatives, he observes

"Her aunt ... is just the opposite to her father. As serene and undisturbed as ... as *they* [ie, the figures of the Greater Trumps] are. Nothing puts her out; nothing disturbs her. Yet she isn't a fool. She'll be quite harmless, however: it won't matter whether she sees or not. She'll be interested, but not concerned." GT, p. 35

She certainly isn't a fool. When the family travel to visit Henry's grandfather, Henry begins to perceive that Sybil has far more to her than he imagined.

Sybil said: "Have I thanked you for taking us down, Henry?"  
 He answered, his voice vibrating with great expectation, "It's a delight, Aunt Sybil: mayn't I call you that too?"  
 She inclined her head to the courtesy, and her eyes danced at him as she said, "For Nancy's sake or mine?"  
 "For all our sakes," he answered. "But you're very difficult to know, aren't you? You never seem to move."  
 "Simeon Stylites?" she asked. "Do I crouch on a tall pillar in the sky? What an inhuman picture!"  
 "I think you are a little inhuman," he said. "You're everything that's nice, of course, but you're terrifying as well."

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11: Williams, Charles, *The Greater Trumps*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1932, 1976), p. 9. Hereafter GT.

"Alas, poor aunt!" she said. "But nowadays I thought maiden aunts were nothing uncommon?"

"A maiden aunt---" he began and stopped abruptly. Then he went on with a note of wonder in his voice, "That's it, you know; that's exactly it. You're strange, you're maiden, you're a mystery of self-possession."

She broke into a laugh, almost as delightful, even to him, as Nancy's. "Henry, *mon vieux*," she said, "what do you know about old women?"

"Enough to know you're not one," he said. "Aunt Sybil -- Sibyl -- your very name means you. You're the marvel of virginity that rides in the Zodiac."

"That", she said, "is a most marvellous compliment. If I wasn't in furs I'd curtsy. You'll make me wish myself Nancy's age -- for one evening."

"I think it's long", he said, "since you have wished yourself anything but what you are." GT, p. 53-54

Henry, of course, begins to recognize that Sybil closely resembles one of the Greater Trumps, the High Priestess. That alone should inform us of her nature as the Wise Woman of this story. However, her own actions will cement that identification as the story moves forward.

The morning after the family arrives at the Lees' home, Nancy wakes early and goes searching for someone to talk to. She ends up seeking her aunt.

Her aunt, providentially, was awake, contemplating nothing with a remote accuracy. Nancy looked at her.

"I suppose you do sleep?" she said. "Do you know, I've never found you asleep?"

"How fortunate!" Sybil said. "For after all I suppose you've generally wanted something -- if only conversation?" ....

[Nancy asks] "But is it true -- do I only come to you when I want something?"

"Why," said Sybil, "if you're asking seriously, my dear, then by and large the answer is yes." GT, p. 68

Here she is, then, the Wise Woman, always available with wisdom and comfort when needed, always ready to aid the hero (for Nancy *is* the hero of this novel). Now, since the hero has come to the Wise Woman, she labors to convey the knowledge that the hero will need to face the challenge lying ahead. Sybil instructs Nancy in the true nature of love, and how she should deal with this power. Nancy does not quite comprehend this lesson, but that too is normal for the initial reaction to the teachings of the Wise Woman. Sybil recommends that Nancy learn to love everyone the way she loves Henry, to give Love back to itself. "You've no idea what a lot it can do. I think you might find it worth trying." GT, p. 69

Nancy is initially skeptical of this. Yet when Henry tries to use the Trumps to kill her father, and the supernatural storm is unleashed, Sybil points out how crucial it is that Nancy learn to exercise her Love in the broadest way possible.

Sybil sat back on the bed. "Stand still and listen," she said. "Nancy, you said it yourself, there's death and there's you. Are you going to be part of death against

Henry and against your father? or are you going to be the life between them? You'll be power one way or another, don't doubt that; you've got to be. You've got to live in them or let them die in you. Make up your mind quickly, for the time's almost gone."

"I can't do anything," Nancy cried out.

Sybil stood up and went over to her. "Your father came back with me," she said. "Go and see if Henry still has any idea of going anywhere with you. Go and see what he wants, and if you can give it to him, do. I'll see to your father and you see to Henry. Do let's get on to important things." GT, p. 142-143

Again, as with Boethius' Lady, there comes a point where the soft comforting aspect of the Wise Woman must be set to one side. Not harshly, but firmly, kicking out the sentimental Muses, and getting down to the basics. By making Nancy deal with Love in its deepest nature, Sybil gives Nancy the ability to exercise that power, to bring the chaos that threatens them all back into the order of the Dance. Like Campbell's Universal Mother, Sybil's insight teaches Nancy her relationship to the creation around her, allowing her to see, as Sybil does, that the Fool in the Figures is not still, but rather the most important Dancer of them all.

So, when next a gentle, mild, seemingly obscure woman kindly gives a word of advice to the hero of a story, let us be awake: she may be conveying the key to the universe.

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