

RESCUING THE DEAD GIRL:

TONI MORRISON AND GODDESS MYTHOLOGY

Michele Gyllenhammer Pessoni

B.A., Central Connecticut State University, 1987

M.A., The University of Connecticut, 1989

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at

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6/10/95 7

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Michele Gyllenhammer Pessoni, Ph.D.

The University of Connecticut, 1995

In New Dimensions of Spirituality, Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos define Morrison's works as a "thealogy" (Holloway 160). Demetrakopoulos in particular examines Morrison's fictional women as goddess figures with strong connections to nature and to the earth. Other critics (including Marianne Hirsch in The Mother/Daughter Plot and Madonne Miner in "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues") have also noted the presence of a Demeter figure in Morrison's novels, yet none to date have provided the details which I believe are crucial to understanding the extensive role the Demeter/Persephone myth plays in all of Morrison's novels. The Kore myth (the tale of the dead/buried Persephone whose only hope of reclamation lies in the love and remembrance of her mother Demeter) is the central and informing motif throughout Morrison's entire literary corpus. Rescuing this dead girl, the Kore figure, is not only a major project for Morrison: it is the driving force of her literature.

Morrison's mythico-political style allows her to reclaim African American history and to critique American culture within the medium of myth. The image of the Kore figure, the dead girl torn asunder from the maternal embrace

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of Demeter and of the archetypal mother's reclamation of this dead girl translates for Morrison into a political ideology of community and collectivism. Taking on the role of revisionist historiographer Morrison, like Demeter with the buried Kore, re-members a past that traditional historians have failed to take into account, that of the African experience in America. Each of her novels is well-informed, replete with images from actual historical times and events, and each one benefits us by allowing us to experience a more intimate knowledge of our own history, black and white alike.

Both personal and collective survival, Morrison's novels imply, depend upon a reconnection to community and the spirit of collectivism and interdependence, not only in and between the African American community but also between communities of all races. Such a spirit of collectivism is reflected in the Kore myth and the archetypal feminine which "is thought to 'hold the entire human race together'" (Kerenyi 12).

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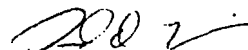
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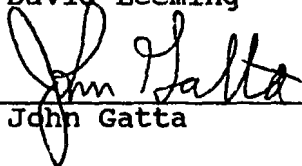
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The University of Connecticut

1995

ii.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the collective support of my colleagues, professors, family and friends, this work would not have been possible.

A special thanks goes out to the women and men of the University of Connecticut's English Department, especially to Brenda Murphy for her sound and ever reliable advice, and to John Gatta, David Leeming, Tom Riggio and Tom Recchio for the time they devoted to reading and critiquing each chapter.

Being blessed with strong family bonds also allowed me to begin and complete this work and I'd like to extend the following acknowledgements: to my parents, Ed and Doris Gyllenhammer, who bestowed on me the gifts of roots and wings; to Sharon Scaramella, a sister/self and fellow writer whose voice and creative talents continue to inspire me; to my brother, John Gyllenhammer, for his encouragement and the unselfish sharing of his computer printer.

I am also deeply indebted to Sharyn Cleveland-Nelson, a gifted writer and good friend who devoted countless hours discussing Morrison with me and whose deep insights helped to shape the work.

Most of all I wish to thank my beloved Paul, my best friend and husband, without whose quiet strength and consistent support this project would have never come to fruition.

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INTRODUCTION

When asked whether or not she considered herself a literary success after the publication of her fourth novel, Toni Morrison replied that she would feel truly successful only when she achieved "eminence . . . when you don't have to be on the cover of Newsweek and you don't have to go on a lecture tour"(Wilson). Two novels later (with a seventh nearly completed), Morrison is assured a place of literary eminence -- in the critical as well as the commercial arena. Her thematic concern with reclaiming the disremembered and unaccounted for in America combined with her mythicopolitical style have made her a success with both academics and the general reading public. Morrison has forged a place for herself and opened a space for other African-American women writers in the American literary canon with such works as The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved, and Jazz -- all of which are now standard fare in American and African-American literature classes across the country. Her accolades include a nomination for the National Book Award for Sula, the Fiction Award of the National Book Critics' Circle for Song of Solomon, and the Pulitzer Prize for Beloved. She reached a literary milestone in 1994 when she became the first African-American woman writer to be honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature.

One major critical approach to Morrison's novels has been to read them as critiques of American culture. Elliott

Butler Evans in Race, Gender and Desire, for example, explores Morrison's stance as a black feminist whose novels distance her "from a largely white feminist movement that she views as irrelevant to the historical condition of black women"(Evans 9). Barbara Hill Rigney in The Voices of Toni Morrison also views Morrison's novels as explorations of race and gender, but she sees in them a psychoanalytic study of "class distinctions"(Rigney 105) and of blackness as self and other. She argues that Morrison's novels open the possibility of moving "beyond the mirror of gender and race. . . to become more fully human, more moral, and more sane"(Rigney 3). In A World of Difference, Wendy Hardings and Jacky Martin accurately sum up the political nature of Morrison's work when they position her as effectively encompassing both the Western and the Afrocentric traditions: "she places herself as a creative artist on the divide between the two communities, tracing the origins, the evolution, and the consequences of the racial fracture in American society"(Hardings 171).

Morrison certainly makes her political intentions clear in each novel: she explores racial, gender and class oppression, and she provides in her novels inspiring exemplars of survival and devastating portraits of those destroyed in the face of that oppression. Morrison herself corroborates those who note her political and racial stances when she writes that ours is a "genderized, sexualized,

wholly racialized world" (Playing in the Dark 4). Insisting upon the particularly Afro-centric nature of her work, Morrison writes, "A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (Playing in the Dark 12).

While these critical approaches to Morrison emphasize the political nature of her work, they differ in their interpretations about what, specifically, Morrison offers as the most effective means of surviving and combatting the oppressive conditions of America past and present. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, in Toni Morrison, argue that Morrison's thematic concern with the quest for wholeness exhibits a belief that the means for fighting oppression is a complete acceptance of responsibility for self. Dorothea Drummond Mbalia, in Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness, argues that Morrison advocates solidarity rather than personal responsibility. She insists that the novels show a developing awareness on Morrison's part that the solution to African oppression lies in an African solidarity against the real enemy: capitalism. Others, like Bruce Bawer in "All that Jazz," argue that it is not Morrison's agenda to offer solutions to oppression. Bawer claims that Morrison is ineffectual as a political writer because she seeks only "to be as good a

black writer as she can be, doing her best to heal blacks and not to transcend racial barriers"(Bawer 10).

Most of these approaches to Morrison use what Mbalia terms a "materialist" rather than an "idealist" perspective. That is, they argue that social change in America must occur externally rather than internally. Change the material conditions surrounding the individual, insists Mbalia, and the inner attitude will change as well. Mbalia belittles the idealist approach when she says, "an idealist, believing that the world was created and is guided by a supreme being, may feel unequipped to change conditions in society while the materialist, understanding that a change in the material conditions of society will bring about a change in one's thinking, may feel obligated to struggle for change"(Mbalia 15). While Mbalia is correct in asserting the need for a social corrective in America, perhaps the most effective means of overcoming racial, sexual, and class oppression (and the means I believe Morrison employs) lies in the simultaneous application of both socio-political and mythic approaches. Morrison certainly views American history from both perspectives. Much of her discourse is discourse from the inside out, discourse rooted as deeply in the collective unconscious and in myth and metaphor as it is polished with skillful and external rhetoric.

Those who study her use of myths and metaphors comprise the second major critical approach to Morrison. Marilyn

Sanders Mobley in Folk Roots and Mythic Wings, for example, argues that Morrison's novels are based upon the "mythic pattern of questing" and "classical mythology" (Mobley 94). Trudier Harris in Fiction and Folklore also notes the parallels between Morrison's fiction and traditional folklore such as the Fisher King legend, the trickster story, the Brer Rabbit tale, and Greek questing myths. Gay Wilentz focuses on Morrison's use of myths from the African diaspora in Binding Cultures, myths such as the Flying African, as well as African folklore regarding reincarnation and family structure. And Jacqueline de Weever in Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction argues that Morrison is a "mythographer" who speaks "with triple voice: that of the African-American/female/artist" (de Weever 1-2). She also notes the "three-pronged" (21) nature of Morrison's work, which combines Greek, Hebraic and African-American traditions.

Most notable, however, and most pertinent to this study, is the work by Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos. In New Dimensions of Spirituality, Demetrakopoulos calls Morrison's work a "thealogy" (Holloway and Demetrakopoulos 160). She examines Morrison's fictional women as ancient and mythic goddess figures with strong connections to nature and the earth. She sees the figure of a trapped Persephone in characters such as Pecola Breedlove, Lena and Corinthians Dead, and Hagar Dead; the Christian

Mary in Nel Wright and the Christian Eve in Sula Peace; the goddess Kali the destroyer as well as other goddess figures such as Hestia, Hecate, Sibyl and Demeter in women like Eva Peace and Sethe. Like Holloway and Demetrakopoulos, numerous other critics, including Marianne Hirsch in The Mother/Daughter Plot and Madonne Miner in "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues," have noted the presence of a Demeter figure in Morrison's works. Yet none to date have provided the exhaustive analysis which I believe is crucial to understanding the extensive role the Demeter/Persephone myth plays in all of Morrison's novels.

The Kore myth (the tale of the dead/buried Persephone whose only hope of reclamation lies in the love and remembrance of her mother Demeter) is the central and informing motif throughout Morrison's entire literary corpus. Rescuing this dead girl, the Kore figure, is not only a major project for Morrison; it is the driving force of her literature. In the Greek/Homeric version of the Kore myth, Demeter (the maternal aspect of the feminine archetype) mourns the loss of her daughter Persephone (the virginal aspect of the archetype). Persephone has been abducted by Hades and taken into the underworld where she will be ravished. In her anguish and rage over the abduction and loss of her daughter, Demeter causes the earth to be barren. But her love for and remembrance of Persephone allows for a reunion between the searching mother