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SIGNIFYING CIRCE IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* shares with Homer's *Odyssey* a profound concern with naming. Names are obscured, replaced, and eventually revealed in both epic poem and novel.¹ They possess a transformative power at times: Odysseus does indeed become No Man, the name he uses to trick the Cyclops, when he arrives home as a nameless beggar; in Morrison's novel the man whose name is changed to Macon Dead is murdered, and his descendants transfixed in a spiritual death. Names in *Song of Solomon* are deeply implicated in issues of narrativity: this is a story about naming, and its characters frequently bear names which denote their narrative function, for example Pilate, who acts as a guide to the protagonist Milkman Dead, or Sweet, the woman he wins after completing his ordeal in Shalimar. Certain names allude to other stories: Hagar, Ruth, Rebecca, and First Corinthians have obvious biblical associations in keeping with the novel's title. The midwife, Circe, a pivotal figure in the puzzles of naming and narrative around which the novel is structured, is the only character to bear a name from Greek mythology. Yet while she so obviously signifies a Homeric intertext and the patrilineal literary history that is its legacy, Circe simultaneously subverts this tradition, sending the protagonist on a journey that resembles the master narrative, but is destabilized by other discourses. The integrity of the narrative is accordingly stretched between a system of dualities: men's and women's stories compete for authority, Western mythic traditions are contested by African folklore, and the myth of the catabasis, the descent to the Underworld, is challenged by a fantasy of ascent manifested in the folktale of the man who could fly.

In this essay I focus on how Morrison employs the figure of Circe to position her novel both within and beyond the classical tradition of the catabatic narrative. Toni Morrison graduated with a minor in classics from Howard University in 1953, and it is obvious that her academic training informed *Song of Solomon*.² This, her third novel, is distinguished from much of her other work, which explores the experience of black American women, by its focus on a central male character, Milkman Dead. Milkman, the son of a prosperous slumlord in an unnamed Michigan city, is set on a quest for his history and identity that leads him back to Virginia and the Gullah traditions of his ancestors. That *Song of Solomon* is structured as an archetypal heroic saga was immediately recog-

¹ On the implications of names in the *Odyssey* see J. Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey* (Princeton 1990). The significance of naming in *Song of Solomon* is discussed at length by M. S. Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge 1991) 102-8.

² Morrison herself has identified the influence of Classical Greek literature on her work. See Mobley (above, n.1) 41, n.119.

nized when it made its debut in the late 1970s. In an early essay on the novel, A. Leslie Harris identified a mythic structure that conforms to the male initiatory pattern. Harris' analysis was exclusively concerned with Milkman's role as an archetypal hero whose childhood is narrated as a series of events "resonating with symbolic and archetypal significance,"³ beginning with a miraculous birth (the first black baby to be born in Mercy Hospital), proceeding to a period of alienation from his family, and culminating in a quest ostensibly for gold, but also for his genealogy. Other characters in the novel can be mapped onto this mythic grid. Milkman's childhood friend and eventual antagonist, Guitar, functions as an alter ego, while women such as Pilate and Circe correspond to the positions of helpers and threshold guardians.⁴

This early literary criticism identified Milkman's quest as an exponent of a Rankian mythic structure, which valorizes the male initiation pattern. This is a completely legitimate reading of the text, but one with limitations. The resolution of the novel, which implicates a female oral tradition and African folktale, suggests a more subversive approach to the familiar mythic structure. Later scholarship posits that Morrison manipulates the male initiation theme to expose it as problematic. Gerry Brenner and Michael Awkward recognized that Morrison employs the mythic archetype to articulate a male narrative which allows women to function only as a supplement in the androcentric narrative of a hero's quest.⁵ I would like to expand upon this reading by providing a closer inspection of the novel's classical antecedents with special emphasis on Circe. My objective here is to facilitate a better understanding of how Morrison manipulates and subverts the catabatic traditions connected with coming of age or initiation narratives and how she situates the obligatory descent to the Underworld with relation to the story of flight.

The catabasis of Odysseus functions as a prototype for this narrative tradition, and as a model for Morrison's novel: the hero experiences a death of identity which is symbolized by his trip to Hades, where he encounters the shades of figures from the heroic past.⁶ He is symbolically reborn when he is cast ashore, naked and alone, at Scheria, and he works towards recuperating his identity

³ A. L. Harris, "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *MELUS* 7.3: *Ethnic Women Writers* 1 (1980) 70.

⁴ Accordingly, Milkman is like "Aeneas, like Ulysses" (Mobley [above, n.1] 74).

⁵ G. Brenner, "*Song of Solomon*: Morrison's Rejection of Rank's Monomyth and Feminism," *The New England Quarterly* 15.1 (1987) 13-24; M. Awkward, "'Unruly and Let Loose': Myth, Ideology and Gender in *Song of Solomon*," *Callaloo* 13 (1990) 482-98.

⁶ Odysseus of course does not descend into Hades like Aeneas, but his trip to the Underworld is clearly modeled on myths of the catabasis and functioned as a model for later versions. See A. Heubeck and A. Hoekstra, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey: V.II, Books IX-XVII* (Oxford 1989) 75-77.

when he finally arrives home in Ithaca.⁷ Circe plays an important role in Odysseus' visit to the Underworld. After spending a year of indolence on her island, the hero prepares to leave, only to be told by Circe that he must make the descent. She provides information about how to accomplish the catabasis, and is an integral part of the *Nekyia*.⁸ Although her role in *Song of Solomon* is obviously modeled on this Homeric tradition, Morrison scholars have not fully explored and accounted for her origins outside the novel.⁹ Essays which recognize the novel's mythical underpinnings seldom look to the classical texts themselves, but tend to rely on popular works by Robert Graves or Joseph Campbell, which provide generalized schemata of the "monomyth."¹⁰ Although Marilyn Sanders Mobley presents a compelling and informed analysis of how Morrison revises myth and folktale, even she designates Circe as "more like a prophetess or sibyl,"¹¹ without considering how her role in the development not only of Milkman, but also of his father, Macon Dead, and his aunt Pilate, resonates with her role in the *Odyssey*. Mobley, however, does make an important point when she cautions:

The temptation throughout the entire novel . . . is to make a series of one-to-one correspondences between [Morrison's] text and classical texts. But in the irony, complexity, and multiplicity of mythopoesis, this temptation is thwarted and the reader must acknowledge a variety of ways to interpret the names, to read the signs, to understand the rituals.¹²

⁷ For a reading of the birth symbolism in Odysseus' voyage from Calypso's island to the Phaeacians see R. M. Newton, "The Rebirth of Odysseus," *GRBS* 25 (1984) 5–20.

⁸ See D. Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (Princeton 2001) 139–41. Ogden records Circe as being the first of a line of female necromancers in literature. As he points out, her knowledge of Odysseus' consultation with Teiresias in the Underworld suggests that she accompanied him unseen. Furthermore, her association with the Underworld seems to predate the *Odyssey*. Siduri, a Circe-like figure in the Akkadian *Gilgamesh*, directs the hero to Utnapishtim (the land of the dead) through a forest and water. N. Marinatos ("Circe and Liminality: Ritual Background and Narrative Structure," in M. Dickie and O. Anderson, eds., *Homer's World: Fiction, Tradition, and Reality* [Bergen 1995] 133–40) draws comparisons with Babylonian Ishtar and Asherah. For further folktale parallels, discussion, and bibliography see Heubeck and Hoekstra (above, n.6) 50–52.

⁹ In her survey of the manifestations of Circe in literary history, Judith Yarnell (*Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress* [Urbana and Chicago, 1994] 183) devotes only a paragraph to *Song of Solomon* which aptly identifies her as "keeper of true names and pointer of true directions." For an excellent discussion of how Circe appears throughout classical literature including Apollonius, Vergil, Ovid, and Petronius, and her iconographic tradition in the plastic arts see R. Brilliant, "Kirke's Men: Swine and Sweethearts," in B. Cohen, ed., *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford 1995) 165–74.

¹⁰ P. Page (*Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* [Jackson, Miss., 1995] 98), for instance, relies on "the monomyth of the hero's quest as delineated by Joseph Campbell and Otto Rank."

¹¹ Mobley (above, n.1) 120.

¹² Mobley (above, n.1) 119.

Morrison's Circe is by no means simply a carbon copy of Homer's, but she does invite the reader to recall the traditional heroic saga from which she seems to be imported. It is by examining how she both signifies that narrative tradition and operates as an agent of its rupture that we understand the full implications of her presence and power.

Let us turn now to the story. Like the *Odyssey* it features a complex narrative structure, with numerous embedded tales which fill in the past and which even sometimes contradict one another. The protagonist, nicknamed "Milkman," is the third in his line to carry the name of Macon Dead, his father's name, and his father's before him. Yet the first Macon Dead, an illiterate ex-slave, had another name (Jake Solomon), lost to his progeny, and it will be Milkman's project to recover the name and story of his forebears. As the second Macon Dead recounts, when his father registered with the Freedman's Bureau in Virginia, the man behind the desk was drunk:

He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, "He's dead." Asked him who owned him, Papa said, "I'm free." Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces . . . and in the space for his name the fool wrote, "Dead" comma "Macon."¹³

(53)

It is as if death displaces and thus conceals the name of Milkman's forefather, who kept this misnomer because his wife, Sing, "Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past" (54). It does indeed wipe out the past, but it also becomes a prediction of the untimely demise of Macon Dead, who is murdered right in front of his two young children by a white neighbor who covets his farm. Macon the second and his little sister Pilate hide until they see the smoke from a cook stove—just as the smoke from her cottage had signified Circe's presence to Odysseus and his companions (10.196–197). The children are concealed and fed by Circe; in this version she is a black woman who works for the wealthy white family who murdered Macon Dead. After several weeks in seclusion, yearning for fresh air and simple food, they return to the wild, and eventually hide in a cave where young Macon, surprised and frightened by an old prospector, stabs him in the back. Brother and sister part company here, permanently alienated with their characters firmly set. Macon wants to take the old man's gold, Pilate understands the danger and immorality of such an action. Macon is depicted as anything but heroic—the assault of the old man in the cave hardly seems justified, and his wrangle with his sister sets the tone for his future relationships with women. Pilate

¹³ All quotes from the novel are from T. Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York 1977).

spends the next night alone in the cave, and then sets out on her journeys. The process has been her initiation,¹⁴ and she will develop into a doublet of Circe, a griot or wise woman of the African folk tradition.

Pilate travels throughout the South collecting rocks and lovers along the way, until she settles with her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar outside the Michigan town where her brother has established himself. In contrast to his sister's life on the margins of society, Macon becomes an entrepreneur who marries respectably and has three children: two daughters, First Corinthians and Lena, and a son, Milkman. Spiritually annihilated by the trauma of his father's murder, Macon Dead the second is undone by his compensating lust for money and property. His family life is sterile and repressive, and he continues to ignore his sister. Pilate's life is more emotionally rich, but still she experiences tragedies and sorrows directly related to the fragmentation of family. As Philip Page observes: "Without their name (Solomon) and the wisdom it implies, the Deads are ignorant of their ancestry, and hence of themselves, and they are alienated from their community, each other, and themselves."¹⁵

Although he is the third man in his family to inherit the name of Macon Dead, his grandfather's misnomer, Milkman acquires his life name, which replaces his patronymic, through his protracted connection to his mother's body. The neurotic Ruth, starved for intimacy, breastfeeds her son long into his early boyhood, a secret which, when discovered, provides the child with his new name. The maternal body is thus imposed on the already displaced name of the father which is correlative with the story itself. This matronymic, as it were, contributes to the initiatory theme by pinioning Milkman in a maternal world from which he must break free, a common element in such narratives.¹⁶ Ruth even tries to appropriate the naming of her son more completely when she suggests that he become a doctor like her father, and adopt his name, becoming Dr. Macon Foster. But once he learns how he acquired his nickname, Milkman begins to move away from his suffocating mother, and starts his journey of self-discovery, which is unfortunately complicated and forestalled by Milkman's identification with his father. Milkman's quest for his true name is his story; it becomes a process that

¹⁴ See J. S. Bakerman, "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison," *American Literature* 52.4 (1981) 541-63. Bakerman does not discuss female initiation as a mythic pattern in *Song of Solomon*, but nonetheless makes some valuable observations about the initiatory themes in the novel. Hagar is an example of a failed initiation, First Corinthians, Milkman's sister, individuates from her father by seeking employment and taking a lover, but this is a delayed initiation (taking place when she is in her forties). Only Pilate goes through an initiation when she is an adolescent, "as is traditional." (554). As Bakerman points out, the device indicates "the extreme difficulty of the black woman's search for self-determination" (554).

¹⁵ Page (above, n.10) 86.

¹⁶ Telemachus must leave the home of his mother, or, to give a more trenchant example, Orestes must kill Clytemnestra.

involves considerable stripping away of his masculine ego and social identity, and a renunciation of his father's solipsism and materialism.

The dead must be named in order for the story to be put to rest. Yet the power of naming, despite the strong patrilineal surface narrative, resides to a very large extent within the bodies and knowledge of women: Sing, wife of the first Macon Dead, determines that he will keep his name; Circe and the women of Shalimar reveal the names of Milkman's ancestors. Responding to the ghost of her father (Macon Dead the first), Pilate and her family unknowingly enact the name of her mother. "Sing, Sing," says the ghost, and understanding his revelation to be a command, Pilate and her family do indeed sing. Their song about Sugarman contains the vestigial name of their forefather, Solomon or Shalimar, who flew away from slavery—and family. It will guide Milkman to the truth about his origins. The song, which recurs with variations throughout the narrative like a refrain, is first sung in the opening chapter by a shabby and eccentrically dressed woman (presumably Pilate) who is part of the crowd watching the insurance agent's failed attempt to fly from the roof of Mercy Hospital:

O Sugarman done fly away
 Sugarman done gone
 Sugarman cut across the sky
 Sugarman gone home. . . . (6)

Pilate's song contextualizes an apparently foolish suicide within a larger narrative framework, the folktale of the slave who flew back to Africa; her voice provides meaning and continuity for a death performed before an audience. The event corresponds with the birth of Milkman, who will later hear the song performed by his aunts and cousin, with Solomon replacing Sugarman, providing the key to his patrimony. Naming and narrativity are inextricably woven together in this instance, and it is the voices of women (and later children) who transmit this patrimony, and who contest its significance and meaning. For Milkman the tale is self-affirming and heroic, but the wise women of Shalimar read it differently. Susan Byrd (Milkman's great-aunt) focuses more on Ryna, Solomon's wife, and their twenty-one children, abandoned when Sugarman flew to freedom. It would seem that the discovery of Milkman's true name requires him to burrow through layers or distortions of names—Sugarman, Charlemagne, Solomon, Shalimar—that also signify an absence of narrative fixity or certitude; versions of stories change according to who tells them.

The relationship between names and narrative is established early in the novel by the subversive processes that bring about the designation of "Not Doctor Street." The black community had a different name for what was officially Main's Avenue. Since the only black doctor in town, Dr. Foster, lived there, it became Doctor Street; when city officials insisted that it was not Doctor Street,

the black population responded by calling it Not Doctor Street. This contest of naming and renaming is symbolic of "a conflict between two kinds of narrative authority"¹⁷ which prevails throughout the novel. There is a corresponding competition for narrative control between Milkman's mother and father. As I have noted, Ruth's inappropriate intimacy with her son challenges the patrilineal system of naming her son. Her attempt to make him adopt her father's name and profession is a pathetic attempt to revive her dead father. Ruth's obsession becomes the subject of her husband's confidence to Milkman, a version that she challenges. The tension between Macon and Ruth is most forcefully realized in their competing narratives regarding Ruth's relationship with her dead father. Ruth's morbid adulation of Dr. Foster (after whom Not Doctor Street was named) extinguishes any desire Macon ever felt for her. Explaining his contempt for and abuse of his wife to Milkman, Macon recounts a scene of incestuous necrophilia—his naked wife sucking the fingers of her father's corpse. But Ruth's account of the event differs substantially; although she admits to such a longing for her dead father that she surreptitiously visits his grave at night, she represents her yearning in more natural terms, and accuses Macon not only of trying to poison her father, but also of trying to cause a miscarriage of her unborn son, Milkman.

Milkman hears the contesting tales of both his parents, uncertain of the truth. Yet he chooses to privilege one particular story of his father: that after Macon and his sister Pilate, as children, spent the night in a cave, he left his sister with the corpse and three bags of gold. Convinced that Pilate has the gold in a bag tied to her ceiling, he sends Milkman and Guitar to steal it. The counter-narrative is told by Pilate to Ruth, in a story never circulated among the men: that the sack contains rocks from different places Pilate had visited, and, as Milkman finally discovers after he and Guitar are picked up by the police, human bones. But whose bones? For when the skin has melted from a body, it is impossible to tell if a man was black or white. The bones that Pilate carries with her are not those of a lost husband, Mr. Solomon, as she tells the police, or even those of the white prospector, as she believes, but those of her own father, whom she unconsciously names. The narrative without this missing name is incomplete. This search for a name and a story becomes Milkman's quest. It is his function to fill in the spaces of the form properly, to slide the elements of his grandfather's history into their original positions, and thus to discover the names of his forefathers and foremothers: Jake and Singing Bird, his grandparents, and his great-grandparents, Shalimar and Ryna. The momentum for this quest for knowledge, however, is his father's greed; Macon Dead still lusts for the prospector's

¹⁷ T. O. Mason, "The Novelist as Conservator: Stories and Comprehension in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," in H. Bloom, ed., *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon* (New York and Philadelphia, 1990) 177.

gold, so does Guitar, Sunday hit man for the Seven Days, and so at first does Milkman, who sees the gold as freedom from the overpowering unhappiness of his family. His quest, however, will evolve into a search for personal and cultural identity, an identity that individuates him from the father who bullies his wife and daughters, neglects and repudiates his only sister, and turns an old woman and her family out of her home. Given his father's misogyny, Milkman's treatment of women is hardly surprising. He callously dumps his cousin Hagar, after a long-term relationship, with a thank-you note and a gift, he interferes in his sister's love affair, and he robs his aunt. Milkman's quest for knowledge and identity, then, is a gradual movement toward a more decent relationship with women, and a value system more in line with that of Pilate rather than his father. The figure at the threshold of his development is the uncanny Circe.

Circe is first named by Macon when he starts to recount his history to Milkman. The narration is in response to Milkman's forbidden visit to Macon's estranged sister Pilate, and to her version of their shared childhood experience. The name of Circe surfaces like a specter, as Macon reminisces about life on his father's farm. He remembers the animals named after humans, and significantly, a pig named General Lee, who was delicious.

Circe made up the best pot of maws she ever cooked. Huh! I'd forgotten that woman's name. That was it, Circe. Worked at a big farm some white people owned in Danville, Pennsylvania. Funny how things get away from you. For years you can't remember nothing. Then just like that, it all comes back to you. (52)

In chapter 10 Milkman encounters Circe for himself when he visits Danville in search of the gold that he believes is in the prospector's cave. His investigations lead him to the Butler mansion, where Circe concealed Macon and Pilate. Although his grandfather's old friends have vivid memories of Circe, they assume she is dead, since she was "a hundred when I was a boy" (237). The accent on her extreme old age is suggestive of the antiquity of the tale from which Circe is imported (book 10 of the *Odyssey*). And even if her Homeric associations have not been emphasized at this point (although General Lee the pig should give us pause), Milkman's encounter with her will be infused with that ancient narrative. Her home, the decaying Butler mansion, is hidden behind bushes, much like the lush greenery of Aeaëa; indeed the inaccessibility of the place makes it a veritable island.

Circe is a strange combination of appalling decrepitude and sexual power. Like the ancient tale she is in decline, but still possessed of a compelling allure. As she embraces Milkman, mistaking him for his father, the young man finds himself simultaneously aroused and disgusted. Deathless she may be, but she is by no means age-

less. Nonetheless Milkman's first encounter with her is sexually charged; she is like a figure from a dream, a sexual power which is again reminiscent of the Homeric Circe who keeps Odysseus for a year as her lover. Like her epic predecessor, who supplicates the hero soon after meeting him (after failing to enchant him with her potions, *Od.* 10.323), Circe immediately makes close physical contact with Milkman. Their embrace is only interrupted by her throng of dogs. Circe is also mistress of the animals; her strange Weimaraners with human eyes recall the men turned into wolves, who fawned on Odysseus' companions "like dogs fawn on their masters" (*Od.* 10.215–216). Whether they are in fact her former masters is never specified. Reverend Cooper had advised Milkman that "any evening up left to do, Circe took care of" (233); readers are left to make their own conclusions about the full details of her retribution.

Circe's association with animals is suggestive of her origins as a fertility goddess.¹⁸ She is, after Odysseus has overpowered her, benevolent and nurturing, attributes she passes down to her twentieth-century counterpart who succors Macon and Pilate after the murder of their father. Associated with her fecundating qualities is her role as a midwife; she delivered most of the people in Denford, including Macon and Pilate. It is Circe to whom Odysseus returns after his visit to the Underworld, so in a sense she too functions as a midwife in his rebirth. Her nurturance extends to her tutelary capacity: she not only tells Odysseus that he must make his trip to Hades, but also, once he returns, explains what he must do for the remainder of his voyage. Milkman similarly learns important information from Circe: the names of his ancestors and their history. She directs the course of his journey to his ancestral home, Shalimar, a Gullah town on the coast of Virginia.

From Circe he hears the strange history of his grandfather's corpse, which his father had buried in a shallow grave. The body had been dislodged, washed upstream, and eventually put in the cave, without a proper burial. The unburied corpse is a feature of *Odyssey* 11 and *Aeneid* 6. It is as if Elpinor and Palinurus open a portal for the heroes' trips to the Underworld. Milkman declares that he will bury the bones, unaware that they are in Pilate's possession. Circe, like her namesake, gives him instructions on how to locate the cave where he expects to find his grandfather's remains. Like Odysseus, Milkman must travel through water to arrive at his destination, struggling through a stream and a thicket of trees to reach the hill he must then climb. And here is where things start to go askew for the reader anticipating a hero's descent. Milkman

¹⁸ "So Homer's Circe, whose attributes of the *potnia theron* connect her in part with the Great Mother, goddess of sexuality, death, and rebirth in the cycles of vegetation, has both life-giving and destructive functions: she holds the key to both love and death" (C. Segal, "Circean Temptations: Homer, Virgil, Ovid," *TAPA* 99 [1968] 427). For her possible origins as a Near Eastern fertility goddess, e.g., Ishtar, see also D. Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973) 51–69.

sees the cave, but it is fifteen or twenty feet *upwards*. His climb to the cave's entrance is arduous; he rips his clothes and exhausts himself scrambling up the rocky slope. Once there he notices another path (perhaps implying alternate narrative possibilities), one that would have made this part of the trip far easier. Now inside the cave, he manages to find the pit, but it does not contain the gold that he set out to find, nor does it hold the bones that he claimed to want to bury. Frustrated and exhausted, Milkman emerges from this cavern with a ravenous hunger, as if his spiritual starvation has been physically manifested, and with a damaged watch, its hands twisted as if time has somehow become distorted.

Circe seems to be able to change the quality of time. Milkman's episode with her has been, despite his disappointed expectations, a transformative experience. She is a liminal figure who mediates between death and life, but she also sits at the portal between two stories, not only the two sections of the novel, but also the novel and the epic tradition. Under her direction time for Milkman has folded in on itself: he experiences a reversal of the birth process and is then reborn. Milkman has of course been in the Underworld all his life, existing as one of the dead under the control of a Hades figure, his father.¹⁹ He is climbing out of death into life.²⁰ Although the trip to the cave occupies the same position as the catabasis in the master narrative, it seems instead to be an *anodos*, a "going up." As he makes his difficult passage through the stream, another citation of mythic prototypes, he is like a newborn traveling through a birth canal. His destination, however, is curiously womb-like, a cave so dark that he is blinded by the absence of light. He has embarked on the hero's journey away from his mother but now crawls back symbolically into the maternal body—a striking variation of the traditional catabasis, and a decided temporal inversion.

If Milkman's damaged watch signifies a departure from linear chronology, it also announces his release from quotidian temporality. He has been sent forth from a mundane existence as his father's minion into an epic landscape where his identity will be transformed. And transformation is what Circe is all about. When she dispatches Milkman to the cave, she effectively sends him into a narrative matrix, a loaded symbol of other stories. The cave evokes the Odyssean tradition, which gave birth to Aeneas' descent to the Underworld (also through a cave, *Aen.* 6.237–242),²¹ and those of Dante and Milton. Milkman will emerge from the cave reborn into

¹⁹ Mobley (above, n.1) 102 points out the similarities between Macon Dead the second and Hades: his wealth in particular, symbolized by his black hearse-like car.

²⁰ In this respect Milkman differs from (but alludes to) the hero of another African-American novel. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) the protagonist remains underground. See the remarks of H. Bloom, "Two African-American Masters of the American Novel," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 28 (2000) 89–93.

²¹ See Ogden (above, n.8) 62–69 on the necromantic associations of the cave at Avernus.

a different world than the one he left behind; he will enter a mythic continuum in which his view of the world and of himself will be drastically changed. His voyage from here will be deeper south, which represents, as it so often does in Morrison's fiction, the past, correlative to his return to the womb. His encounter with Circe has emphasized a different sense of time, what Julia Kristeva has called "Women's Time," circular and eternal, a temporality which circumscribes a landscape strongly inflected as feminine but which is also deeply resonant of established mythology.²² In her revision of the catabasis Morrison has emphasized the strong connection between the midwife Circe and the womb-like earth, and set aside the wise old man, Teiresias, whom Odysseus had to consult.²³

As Mobley recognizes, the cave has ritualistic significance as "a turning point in Milkman's journey because it begins his series of encounters with life-threatening situations."²⁴ These initiatory tests appear to be sequenced as a linear "phallic" (to use Kristeva's terminology) temporal progression. Milkman's experience in Shalimar, the home and name of his great-grandparents, is represented as a continued citation of the *Odyssey*. He arrives in Shalimar without recognizing it, as Odysseus does in Ithaca. Yet like Odysseus, he has found his true home, where he encounters hostile males (first in Solomon's store) who insult and assault him. After his trials are over, and once he has achieved the self-knowledge that has been his true quest, he has a romantic affair with a Penelope-like woman named Sweet with whom he shares a mutually satisfying intimacy. This refashioning of the epic poem accentuates the initiatory aspects of Milkman's experience: his aggressive badinage with Saul in Solomon's store is a form of ritual insult or *aischrologia*, a frequent component of initiation rites. Other features include the change of clothing (his city suit for battle fatigues), his bath in the sea with Sweet, and most significantly, the nighttime hunting expedition with the elders of the town.²⁵ It is during the last that Milkman experiences his epiphany in the woods, and comes to understand how thoughtlessly he had treated various women in his

²² J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," in R. R. Warhol and D. Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1993) 445.

²³ Mobley (above, n.1) 121 over-interprets the blinding darkness of the cave as an allusion to Teiresias. The motif of blinding, and the suggestion of a return to the womb in the cave sequence, resonates with the Oedipal myth, especially since Milkman walks with a limp. The Oedipal imagery is beyond the scope of my essay, but for a nuanced psychoanalytical reading of the motif see E. Branch, "Through the Maze of the Oedipal: Milkman's Search for Self in Song of Solomon," *Literature and Psychology* 41 (1995) 52-84.

²⁴ Mobley (above, n.1) 121.

²⁵ See Page (above, n.10) 103, who synthesizes approaches which interpret the men's collective skinning of the bobcat, Milkman's initiation into the black male community, as an induction into "his racial identity and past." The hunting, flaying, and evisceration of the animal are reminiscent of the atrocities performed on black men. Milkman receives the heart of the bobcat, a symbol of his "new heart in communion with the natural world of the bobcat, and implying his rebirth as a new man and his penetration to the heart of himself, his ancestry, his community, and his universe."

life, and how valuable his cultural heritage is to his sense of identity. He comes of age, and anticipates a new sense of integration with his family which will include bringing Pilate back to Shalimar to give Jake's bones a proper burial.

While Milkman's experience is charted along a narrative axis that corresponds to a male *Bildungsroman*, there is a calculated twist in the narrative journey. We have noted how the encounter with Circe marks the landscape as feminine, the very landscape where Milkman will undergo his rite of passage as a hunter. His initial impression of Shalimar, an isolated coastal village, emphasizes the women who are unencumbered by pocketbooks, bags, or any baggage: "These women walked as if they were going somewhere, but they carried nothing in their hands" (259). Yet the chapter which begins with a description of women quickly turns to the archetypal myth in which a youth proves his masculinity by hunting with the men. While this tale is completed within the compass of chapter 11, the remainder of the novel contests this apparently heroic resolution. The mythic subtext is interleaved with the narratives of Hagar and Guitar. As Milkman is putting the pieces of his story together, the jilted Hagar dies of a broken heart. Unlike him she has not successfully completed her coming of age.²⁶ Instead she corresponds to Ryna, the woman whom Milkman's great-grandfather left behind when he flew away, and whose story offered by Susan Byrd serves to devalue Solomon's flight. It is during his visit with Susan that Milkman finally loses his watch; the reader is alerted that the linear time of the *Bildungsroman* is not what structures this tale after all.

The second to last chapter of the novel is permeated with the voices of women, Pilate in particular, who sings a song of lamentation at her granddaughter's funeral. This tragic turn of events intersects with the heroic resolution of Milkman's coming of age—and as it so often is in Classical Greek literature, women's lamentation is a disruptive energy.²⁷ Moreover, as Milkman is going through his initiation process, hunting with the elders at night and bathing in the sea with Sweet, he is being stalked by the murderous Guitar. The heroic resolution and citational practices that connect his story to European literary history are further compromised when Guitar's bullet misses Milkman and kills Pilate as they are burying Jake's remains. The novel ends with Milkman's revision of the Song of Solomon as he sings to Pilate, naming her as "Sugargirl" and then leaping off a cliff in a reenactment of his great-grandfather's flight. The linear tale with its teleology of the heroic quest is now circumscribed by a ring composition, suggesting eternal repetitions of flight and song. We can choose to think that Milkman

²⁶ Bakerman (above, n.14) 558.

²⁷ In this respect Pilate is aligned with Demeter. For the disruptive potential of women's lamentation throughout Greek culture see M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge 1974).

has plunged to his death, like Icarus and Robert Smith, whose suicide flight opened the novel, or that he has replicated the flight of his great-grandfather Shalimar, and flown away. However our imagination completes the tale for us, two related structural qualities are obvious: first, the story is a ring composition, coming back to where it began with a man leaping into the air; second, the story ends in mid-air, that is to say, it does not end.

This circularity, identified by Cedric Gael Bryant as a "trope of resistance,"²⁸ obviates the concept of a linear conclusion. Bryant observes that Morrison uses the circle as a "unifying principle of closure" in much of her fiction, and that this circularity "informs Morrison's method of interconnecting narrative elements by reversing causality."²⁹ I have already identified this cyclical temporality as "Women's Time," described by Kristeva as "a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations . . . cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm."³⁰ This brings us back to the midwife Circe, who stood at the threshold of this part of the story, and whose name relates her to this cyclical quality.³¹ In his optimistic reading of her role Page suggests that Milkman "reaches the womb of his family (the cave) by embracing the terrifying but guiding Circe who models Milkman's quest by fusing Western and African-American cultural traditions, life and death, and present and past."³² From Page's critical perspective Milkman is able to fuse and integrate his fragmented family, his position in the diaspora and the two cultural traditions, African and European, which are in harmony at the end of the tale. But from the perspective of a feminist classicist, the synthesis is perhaps not so well knit. There are significant fissures in the text which remain unresolved at its conclusion, fissures which are opened by Circe, who signifies the mythic narrative of the hero's quest, but who simultaneously deconstructs it. On one level of meaning, as the careful citations of the sojourn on Aeaëa make clear, Circe

²⁸ C. G. Bryant, "'Every Goodbye Ain't Gone': The Semiotics of Death, Mourning, and Closures Practice in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *MELUS* 24 (1999) 98.

²⁹ Bryant (above, n.28) 99.

³⁰ Kristeva (above, n.22) 445.

³¹ The usual etymology of her name associates her with the hawk or falcon, *kirkos*. Douglas Frame (*The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* [New Haven and London, 1978] 50), however, makes the very appealing suggestion that associates her name with the Greek word for "ring," *krikos*, which is also attested as *kirkos*. Frame notes that Hesiod and other authors situate Circe in the west (*Theog.* 744), but Odysseus and his crew meet her in the east after their visit to the Underworld (*Od.* 12.1-4). As a child of Helios, she is associated with the sun, and her role in the *Odyssey* is "both to usher the hero into the underworld and to receive him back again from it. When Odysseus and his men 'return to life and light,' she is naturally equated with the dawn. The complement to this would be that she is equated with sunset when Odysseus and his companions venture into 'death and darkness'" (48).

³² Page (above, n.10) 100.

functions as she does in the *Odyssey*: she is an initiatrix who sets the hero on his path to symbolic rebirth—but not death, for he is already dead. Her name alone, singular in its Homeric allusion, denotes the male heroic pattern with its linear androcentric emphasis. Yet because she has existed in other narratives, including epics, poetry, and novels, she also represents a never-ending cycle of stories. Within the compass of the novel Circe is linked with other female voices who convey Milkman's history: Pilate who sings the Song of Solomon and recounts her family history, and Susan Byrd who completes the tale. Circe's position in this respect is dually coded. Her name denotes the androcentric myth, yet she is an agent who allows the hero to seek for something more than his masculine identity, his place in the parade of heroes who make the necessary trip to the Underworld with the help of female guardians. This dualism is connoted in part by her gorgeous voice, the voice of a sexy young woman. As narrator, Odysseus mentions Circe's voice several times; she sings in a sweet or clear voice as she goes about her weaving (*Od.* 10.221 and 254). Correspondingly, Morrison's Circe is possessed of a "strong young cultivated voice" (242), the "mellifluous voice of a twenty year old girl" (240). In the Homeric context female voices denote danger; the Sirens are the most obvious example of this.³³ But in a novel that reverberates with the voices of women, Circe's voice has a different timbre. One way of accounting for the discrepancy between her corpse-like appearance and youthful tones might be that her seductive voice betokens a new story enclosed within an ancient tradition.

Circe's activities in the Butler mansion contribute to the sense that the old must be disassembled before the new can take its place. It had been her job to clean and maintain the opulent household with its priceless tapestries and imported marble. Now that the family is extinct, and she alone survives, her self-appointed task has been to dismantle and tear apart the edifice room by room. This deconstruction of the master's house is a fitting symbol for Circe's function in the story. Her name suggests that she will maintain the master narrative, and to a certain extent she does, but she also disrupts that narrative, which is replaced by deconstructive reading of a literary edifice, the hero's quest.

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³³ For further discussion on the baneful effects of women's voices in the *Odyssey*, see V. Wohl, "Standing by the Stathmos: The Creation of Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*," *Arethusa* 26 (1993) 19–50.