

Gendered Influence in *Song of Solomon*

Toni Morrison first begins her foray into what she called a more *androcentric* world in her novel *Song of Solomon*, first published in 1977. A young Black man by the name of Milkman Dead stands as her protagonist, and his interactions with the other men in the novel as they grapple with things like how to define success and masculinity drive much of the conflict. However, I want to discuss Milkman's relationships and interactions with women in the novel: mainly Hagar, Ruth, Circe, and Pilate. Each of these characters in turn function in the novel to teach Milkman something about motherhood, adulthood, young love, companionship, and the like. Many of these relationships are rather fraught, but in different ways. Furthermore, since Morrison has also stated that most of the decisions she makes in her fictional work are deliberate, I think it is safe to assume that in an androcentric world and story the women that Morrison allows the readers to interact with have premeditated functions.

Morrison herself says in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" that Pilate is *the* ancestor in this story, being "the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male", and claims that the "difficulty" Hagar faces comes from how far removed she is from positive masculine influence (Morrison 63). According to Morrison, the fierceness of Pilate's love comes from the nurturing relationships with her father and brother. Reba has had significantly less male influence in her life, and as a result "relates to men in a very shallow way" (Morrison 63). Hagar is even further removed and thus her ability to interact with men in a healthy way is diminished even more so, giving her something akin to the "manlove" described in *Sula* (Morrison 43). Given this and given what we know about the women in *Song of Solomon*, I propose the following: Ruth functions as hyperfeminine influence, Hagar as masculinized or emasculating

influence, Pilate contains both, and Circe's influence functions as a foil to all as it appears more genderless.

The first woman I want to discuss is Ruth, Milkman's mother. Not only is a mother typically the first woman that young boys know intimately, but she's the reason Milkman is named so. She breastfed Milkman until he was a toddler, and the narrator calls the act Ruth's "fantasy" (Morrison 13). Ruth feels as though her son is "pulling from her a thread of light", comparing the secrecy and thrill to the Rumpelstiltskin fable about the spinning of gold (Morrison 13). The use of "gold" complicates this already slightly problematic circumstance, as gold features prominently in the characterization of Macon Dead Jr. and Ruth's father, Dr. Foster. We learn from the narrator that Macon Jr. enjoyed untying Ruth's intricate corsetry more than any sexual act (Morrison 16), and that it is only via a love potion (given to her by Pilate) that Macon III is conceived (Morrison 138). The narrator also guides us through a flashback in which we discover that after Ruth's mother died, Ruth still insisted that her father put her to bed with a "kiss on her lips" and Dr. Foster is visibly uncomfortable, not only because of Ruth's "disturbing resemblance to her mother" but also because of the "ecstasy shining in Ruth's face when he went to kiss her," which he "felt inappropriate to the occasion" (Morrison 23).

We learn from Macon Jr. (after Milkman retaliates against him for hitting Ruth) that after Dr. Foster died Ruth curled up next to his corpse naked and sucked on his fingers (Morrison 73). Ruth later denies the validity of this claim, but the damage has already been done to Milkman and Ruth's relationship. Macon's assertions, coupled with the resurfacing of Milkman's blocked memories of being breastfed beyond infancy (Morrison 80), prompts him to confront his mother about her decisions. He follows her all the way to her father's gravestone, and the ensuing conversation reveals even more about his mother than he had planned on exposing. She does not

deny any of it, but she claims that she did everything that she did for love and in support of her duties as wife, mother, daughter, etc. She "prayed for [Milkman]. Every single night and every single day. On my knees" (Morrison 133), asking Milkman "What harm did I do to you on my knees?" (Morrison 134). She says loves her father (to such a degree that it worries the Macons) because he was the only one who really "cared whether and he cared how [she] lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did" (Morrison 132). Ruth also describes herself as a "small" woman (frankly I do not know if there was any other mainstream way to *be* a woman in this era), but she relies on the men in her life for her emotional and mental needs to such a degree that it impedes her interpersonal relationships.

Ruth's biblical namesake (Ruth the Moabite) is the only woman listed in the genealogy of Christ in the first chapter of the book of Matthew. Ruth the Moabite is also known for her tight bond with her mother-in-law Naomi, famously repeating the "till death do us part" line that she recited only a few months prior while marrying Mahlon, Naomi's son.

By calling this character Ruth, Morrison has lengthened her expert characterization in ways that urge the reader to examine Ruth's relationships with the men in her life more closely. It becomes clear that Ruth does not pass the Bechdel test, or rather, Ruth's function is to illuminate for the other male characters in the novel what it means to be a man in this era. Milkman realizes this when he considers why he slapped his father after Macon hit Ruth, saying that "he would not pretend it was love for his mother. She was too insubstantial, too shadowy for love... it was her vaporishness that made her more needful of defense... Never had he thought of his mother as a person, a separate individual, with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own" (Morrison 75). Thus, Ruth's influence on Milkman and the other men she interacts with tends to be skewed in a heavily feminized manner.

Hagar functions as cousin and lover, though Pilate first introduces Milkman to her as "her brother", citing that the two are essentially the same "in the way you act toward them" (Morrison 45). However, the fact that they were cousins "did nothing to dim her passion" (Morrison 134). As their relationship progresses, Hagar grows more and more obsessed with Milkman, acting more like someone under the influence of infatuation or limerence than "actual" love. Milkman indulges her for a while and they create some happy memories together, but Milkman eventually grows bored (Morrison 96). When Hagar begins planning and (attempting) to enact her vengeance for her alleged broken heart, she makes several attempts on Milkman's life. Many of these attempts are done so through rather violent means, like attacking him with a kitchen knife and an icepick. Not only is this, again, rather brutal, but it has been long established (in the horror genre, at least) that choosing a knife as your murder weapon carries a degree of phallic interpretation. In this fashion, Hagar serves as an emasculating presence to contrast against Ruth.

Hagar's biblical namesake comes from the Egyptian maid-servant who served Abraham and Sarah. When Abraham is promised a multitude of ancestors and remarks back to the Lord that it is quite unlikely that he and his wife Sarah will be able to conceive children (because they are rather advanced in age), Sarah (in her *vast* wisdom), "offers" Hagar to Abraham. Hagar bears Ishmael, who goes on to function as the antithesis to Abraham and Sarah's legitimate son, Isaac (who becomes the "heir of nations" that the Lord mentioned). Sarah becomes jealous and begins to retaliate against Hagar physically, and Hagar flees to the wilderness. While lost, an angel guides her to a stream and instructs her to go home and raise her unborn child, who would grow into "a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers" (NIV Gen 16:12). As previously stated, the Hagar of *Solomon* is so broken by Milkman's absence because she's too far removed from a

healthy male ancestor, like Ishmael. Furthermore, she grew into a "wild" force of her own who lived in hostility and defiance regularly. As such, I propose that Milkman may have subconsciously interpreted Hagar's presence in his life as emasculating. He boots her out of his life with the same grace that he ends his kinship with Guitar, after all.

Pilate continues to observe and teaches him happiness and power. She is described as a very tall woman, with a commanding sort of presence. She wears a "knitted cap pulled down over her forehead" and mens shoes with the laces undone (Morrison 5). When she comes to her brother Macon's house to meet his son she eventually sits beside the crib and sings to the baby because she is deemed not fit for other more domestic tasks. Macon even says to her "why can't you dress like a woman?" (Morrison 20). However, one cannot deny that she takes adequate care of Reba and Hagar. Though she refused to pay for electricity or gas, she does continue to make and sell wine to feed them (Morrison 27). When Hagar admits that she has gone hungry before, Pilate is so upset and distraught that she nearly cries (Morrison 51). Pilate reminds me a lot of a tree: rooted and strong (masculine), but capable of giving life (feminine). Milkman starts to understand her incredible nature when he says as she dies "There must be another one like you...there's got to be at least one more woman like you" (Morrison 336).

Pilate's biblical namesake becomes a bit of a running gag. When Milkman and Guitar are first introduced to her, they have to clarify her name, asking "like a riverboat pilot?" (Morrison 17). This gets riffed on when Milkman is looking for information on his hunting trip and one of the men from Shalimar says "Ha! Sound like a newspaper headline: Pilot Dead" (Morrison 294). When Pilate is born though, the midwife even says to Macon Dead I "You can't name the baby this...it's a man's name" (Morrison 18). However, the midwife's trepidation probably came more from the biblical namesake (Pilate was the governor who formally ordered the crucifixion of

Christ) than from the fact that it was a "man's name." Though the Pilate of the Bible is often remembered as simply the bloke who killed Christ, Pontius Pilate was only doing his job. He was the official who presided over the trial of Christ, and the angry mob chanting "crucify him! crucify him!" would not be assuaged. In this respect, I appreciate that Morrison's Pilate seems both down to earth and able to flow with whatever life throws her way, but also capable of immense power.

Up until Milkman meets Circe in person, he is under the impression that she has been dead for quite a while. In addition, when Milkman first enters the house that Circe still occupies he is again convinced that she is dead, as a "hairy animal smell, ripe, rife, suffocating" (Morrison 247) greets him when he opens the door. But then when Milkman witnesses her for the first time she is described as "old. So old she was colorless. So old only her mouth and eyes were distinguishable features in her face. Nose, chin, cheekbones, forehead, neck all had surrendered their identity to the pleats and crochetwork of skin" (Morrison 249).

Her apparent racelessness is a deviation from Morrison's usual work, even though she explained in *Playing in the Dark* that she makes effort to not follow the literary rules of her predecessors, the one she calls our attention to being the following: if a character's race isn't explicitly mentioned, they're white. She breaks down her assertions on whiteness as colorblindness or racelessness and the establishment of the white gaze only to examine and tamper with the Black gaze, but according to the basic premise Circe is then "removed", in a way, from her status as a Black woman. Her function in the story operates outside of Blackness and outside of femininity. Though Milkman recognizes her as Circe, (and thus as a Black woman who previously worked in this house as a maid), their interaction is nothing like Milkman's other interactions with the other women of the novel. Furthermore, the identifiers Morrison gives her

audience are facts like she smells like "ginger root" (Morrison 248) and that she has a "toothless mouth" but a "strong, mellifluous voice" (Morrison 249). Many of her characteristics seem to contradict each other or to be unlikely to coexist in the same space (she has "dainty habits" but "torn, filthy clothes" [Morrison 251]). In addition to existing outside of common time, I propose that Circe also exists outside of common gender.

Milkman uses Circe to glean information. Her tie to her namesake from Greek mythology (the "witch" who turned Odysseus' men into pigs) is not super apparent at first, as Morrison has admitted that she dislikes using allusions simply for the sake of shorthand. However, the Circe in *Solomon* does keep a pack of Weimaraner dogs as protection, and the dogs eyes are described as "sane, calm" and "appraising" (Morrison 248).

Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, like all her work, aims to illustrate a dynamic and novel picture of Black America. She stated in multiple essays the importance of reinventing and creating new canon as a Black writer in the United States, and most anyone can see the clarity of her mission in her work. She is constantly remaking the binaries and rules that so many old white men had (and have) taken for standard and taken for granted, so it would track that she would be talking about gender in new ways long before the LGBTQ+ movement was made mainstream. This projected image shows up in places beyond *Song of Solomon* (the ease with which the Peace women of *Sula* give and receive love from men (who aren't their husbands) strikes me as very self-secure and progressive, which probably would have been thought of as "masculine" or "unladylike" at the time of Morrison's early publications. Nevertheless, it's clear that Pilate is a powerful and driving force in Milkman's life and within the greater narrative.