Guiding Light: Pilate's Dualism

Introduction

As stated in a previous essay, the Pilate of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* has considerable masculine and feminine influences on Milkman and contains "the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male" (Morrison 63). Her traits are deliberately mixed between our typical binary understanding of gender. However, I would like to propose that Pilate not only occupies what I am going to call a genderfluid role within the story, but that that elevates her influence on Milkman in such a way that people have read Pilate as a Shaman or two-spirit figure. In places other than the Western world (where gender is not depicted as a binary) not only are 3rd gendered or gender variant people not discriminated against to the degree that they are here, but are often heralded as containing a special kind of wisdom that cannot be found anywhere else. Rather than the old image of the local loon, those who are genderfluid are given a status closer to local healer because it is believed that their gender expression implies a connectedness and holism of the human experience that gives them knowledge that is desired and distinct from other kinds of knowledge.

It is also worth noting that many literary critics place Morrison's work in the field of "magical realism", which is where we shelve the books that contain mostly "usual" narrative elements, but then a ghost will appear out of nowhere or someone who has been established as fully and truly human spontaneously shapeshifts. In this fashion, I do not think Morrison would be upset with the contents of this analysis, mysticism and genderfluidity notwithstanding. Thus, I propose in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* that Pilate is not only "*the* ancestor", and "the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male" (Morrison 63), but that her fluidity gives her

Shaman-like qualities that allow her to teach Milkman about this world, and the next. My aim is to marry Juda Bennett's queer reading of Pilate, Morrison's assertion that her angle toward magical realism is simply "another way of knowing things" (Morrison 61), and Laura Davidson's reading of Pilate as the Shaman and her justification of the magical realism elements, this being that "magical realism presents a space in which all possible notions of reality are able to exist not only together, but as one. With magical realism, Morrison is able to portray a world where multiple identities can exist harmoniously, offering a freedom from oppression" (Davidson 7) in Morrison's *Song of Solomon.*

Establishing Pilate as magical/queer/spiritual mentor in *Song of Solomon*

Pilate is described as a very tall woman, with a commanding sort of presence. Ruth admits that she was afraid of her when they first met and is still somewhat spooked by her (Morrison 144). 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 (and Milkman, and Guitar, and the narrator) a lot of a tree: she is incredibly strong, even "almost as strong as Macon" (Morrison 178), which typically gets typed as a masculine trait, firmly rooted mentally and physically, and capable of giving life, which typically gets classified as a feminine trait (Morrison 38, 326). In fact, upon seeing the dead man the narrator said she "grew roots where she stood" (Morrison

177). 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.

Pilate seems pretty established among her peers as not a "typical" sort of woman for the era, but this idea is furthered when we consider the similarities between Pilate and other witch doctor type tropes. She cooks up a love potion for Ruth (Morrison 131) that causes Milkman to be conceived. When Macon discovers this and attempts to get Ruth to abort the child, Pilate steps in once again (Morrison 132). Thus, it is heavily implied that Pilate is the main reason why Milkman is alive, giving her literal and figurative guardian angel/spirit guide status. She encourages Milkman to think more about the world, and he cites his newfound ability to question everything on her "eagerness to interpret and catch every sound in the universe" (Morrison 80).

Pilate is a "natural healer" (Morrison 150), talks to ghosts (Morrison 150), and makes voodoo dolls (Morrison 132). Furthermore, her mouth is always moving: whether it is harmonizing haunting melodies with her daughters, chewing twigs, or whispering to herself (is she casting a spell?), Macon (and others in Virginia) find her (and her mouth) unsettling (Morrison 28).

Milkman is mystified when he first meets Pilate. He turns down her offer of a soft boiled egg, even though she waxes poetic about the perfect way she cooks them, but instead sits with Guitar "in a pleasant stupor, listening to her go on and on…" (Morrison 40). He nearly "gasps" when he realizes how tall she is, forgetting to be embarrassed of the "queer aunt whom his schoolmates teased him about" (Morrison 37). Without proper context, one could read their first interaction as Milkman being intimidated or intrigued by her statuesque qualities, but with the rest of the novel in place this moment emerges as if Milkman is first becoming aware of Pilate's strange charisma, or perhaps falling to her "spell," if you will.

Pilate's close friendship with Circe (Morrison 249) also tracks given Circe's own ghostly qualities. Circe is "colorless" (Morrison 248) and smells of ginger (Morrison 247), and her young, melodious voice does not match her face (Morrison 248).

Milkman's sense of proper reality begins to break down the farther he gets on his spiritual journey and the longer he knows Pilate, saying "Here he was walking around in the middle of the twentieth century trying to explain what a ghost had done. But why not? he thought. One fact was certain: Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true, anything could be, and why not ghosts as well?" (Morrison 305). Milkman concedes that he might not know everything and cites Pilate as the start of his questioning.

In addition to hearing her father's voice and following his guidance, her geography book seems to speak to her at times as well (Morrison 154), connecting her to the earth and to the

ancestors who want to supervise her footsteps. Furthermore, Pilate seems genuinely surprised when Ruth reminds her that no one can live forever (Morrison 146), which is strange and would lend itself to a reading that Pilate contains unforeseen knowledge and/or power.

In addition to constantly singing, Pilate also sings a mourning song at Hagar's funeral that enchants and frightens those who witness it (Morrison 329). She keeps repeating "mercy", and the repetition calls to mind images of church congregations while simultaneously standing in to call forth images of witches chanting. She once again shows her unknowable strength at the service when she "trumpets" like an elephant her message, that "she was loved!" (Morrison 330).

Milkman compares her to a crow at one point (Morrison 80), which has a long history as a pagan symbol. It is also hinted throughout the text that she might be able to shapeshift or change her appearance (Morrison 213). Pilate's thread is further complicated when we consider the bloody history (at least here in the states) of the witch hunts that targeted women who practiced various kinds of herbal medicines. She also lacks a navel, connecting her to Eve and suggesting that Pilate is "her own giver of life" (Davidson 13). Her lack of a navel disturbs many people she meets, as she "was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel" (Morrison 98). She is missing "that mark of primal connection" (Guth 321), and it frightens those around her. Perhaps this fear is not altogether unwarranted, given that she had to nearly drag *herself* from her mother's womb (Morrison 253), which haunts the text with more dualism, as Pilate is established as almost giver *and* taker of life.

Though her peers find her mostly disconcerting, she does also have an interesting reputation as someone who can help you out when needed, as she "didn't bother anyone and was helpful to everyone" (Morrison 98). In fact, she "woulda loved 'em all" (Morrison 347). She is

also just incredibly insightful and fair-minded, which follows mentor typology. She assures Ruth and Hagar that Milkman "wouldn't give a pile of swan shit for either of [them]" (Morrison 143), and she disciplines Hagar after every failed murder attempt (Morrison 135). Over the course of the novel Milkman slowly gets closer to learning just *how* smart she is and it all at once unnerves and humbles him (Morrison 341).

In crafting Pilate first like a walking conundrum and then slowly revealing the extent of her power and knowledge, Morrison forces her audience to challenge their own ideas about strength, freedom, rootedness, gender, and spirituality. Pilate is supposed to set us off-balance. She is reliable and does not contradict herself, but nonetheless we are still eagerly guessing what she will do next.

Bennett's thoughts

Juda Bennett describes Pilate's voice as "the queerest in the novel" (Bennett 88) and identifies the combined effects of music and mysticism that elevate her status beyond "a silly, selfish, queer, faintly obscene woman" (Morrison 123). Pilate

> wears a knit cap pulled down over her head, sells moonshine, and wields a knife like a man, but her noncompliance with gender norms is not as defining as her lack of a navel, a sign of her preternatural being. She is the Tiresian[1] prophet who sings throughout the novel, a figure that straddles worlds defined by gender, sexuality, and mortality, and when she sings, it is as if we are listening to the dead, her voice carrying not only the stories of ancestors but also a queer defiance of norms (Bennett 88).

[1] In Greek mythology, Tiresias was a blind prophet of Apollo in Thebes, famous for clairvoyance and for being transformed into a woman for seven years. He was turned back into a man after these seven years. He also acted as advisor to the King of Thebes for many years.

Her description of Pilate as "Tiresian" stands out to me, as the Tiresias of Greek mythos was famous for being turned into a woman and back into a man. He was also blind and had extra-sensory perception. Since it is well-established that Morrison is a well-read individual who studied the originals, I think that the Pilate-as-Tiresian reading is both on brand for Morrison, but also just incredibly clever. This helps establish Pilate's gender expression as more flexible, and it starts to help build Pilate's mysticism and amorphous/ephemeral kind of power.

Bennett also calls Pilate "the spiritual center of the novel, the voice that lurks behind the narrator and the queer answer to conventional iterations, such as the homophobic discourse examined in the last chapter. As the queer center of the novel, Pilate sings of alternatives, her voice filled with prophecy and forbidden knowledge". Pilate "presents an alternative way of being, and her voice, laden with mystical meaning, is represented as otherworldly, hardly issuing from a live body but a spirit" (Bennett 89). Bennett also calls on Susan Neal Mayberry's assertion that Pilate is a shapeshifter and points to the passages in the novel that describe Pilate's countenance "like a mask" (Morrison 48), agreeing with Mayberry and building up her own queer/ghostly reading.

Bennett quotes another scholar (Rigney) who stated “[t]hroughout Morrison’s novels, women are the primary tale-tell-ers and the transmitters of history as well as the singing teachers; only they know the language of the occult and the occult of language and thus comprise what Morrison has called a ‘feminine subtext’” (Bennett 94). Bennett also pulls from *Moorings and Metaphors*, Karla Holloway’s study of myth, gender, and voice in the writings of contemporary black women. Holloway upholds that "*Song of Solomon* serves as one of several Morrison novels that 'make linguistic rituals in recursive, metaphoric layers that structure meaning and voice into a complex that eventually implicates the primal, mythic, and female community of its source'”

(Bennett 94). Thus, it is well established that Pilate is not only *the* ancestor in *Song of Solomon*, but she is also *the* guide (primarily for Milkman, but nearly everyone in the novel has an opportunity to learn from her). Perhaps also rather telling is the fact that the Song of Solomon of the Bible is the only book of the bible with a definite female voice, despite this being considered one of Morrison's more androcentric stories.

Bennett says lots of scholars read the narrator from Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as a griot or African American storyteller/oral historian, but says we should read it as all of those things simultaneously (Bennett 96). This dualism/multicultural holism is echoed by Davidson, who confirms *Song of Solomon* as a story that can and should be classified as magical realism, but also argues that it contains enough gothic elements (primarily through the hauntings that take place between Pilate and Macon Dead I) to be classified as such as well, simultaneously (Davidson 2).

Davidson's and Heinze's thoughts

Laura Davidson details the gothic and magical realism influences in *Song of Solomon* in her Honors capstone thesis. In it, she points to Pilate's "mobility" between the world of magic and the world of reality that the other characters inhabit as proof of her mystical power (Davidson 14). In addition, the word "mobility" speaks to adaptability or "fluidity", like Pilate's perceived gender expression. This mobility also speaks to the greater oxymoron that lies in the phrase "magical realism", once again supporting Morrison's assertion that she wants her fiction to prompt readers to meet her at the glass.

Heinze points out in the chapter of her dissertation called "distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers" how utterly backwards it is to compare black nuclear families to white nuclear families. How rarely does Morrison write about the "nuclear" or "stable" family; in fact,

"Pilate's feminine triad" is used as proof of Morrison's "dissatisfaction" with "the traditional nuclear family" or "any familial construct" (Heinze 58). This reminds readers to consider everything about Pilate with a careful eye, as any reader of Morrison knows that the deliberately strange is just that: deliberate.

Davidson upholds most everything established by Bennett and Heinze but takes it a step further by asserting that

> Through her connection to the past, supernatural powers, and uncanny physical form, Pilate is the embodiment of magical realism. She represents the temporal and physical border crossing and conscious retrieval of cultural memory and identity that allows for the opposing realms of the magic and the real to exist as one. Through Pilate, and Morrison's use of magical realism, Milkman is able to find his cultural past and fly towards a world where two realities can exist harmoniously (Davidson 17).

Thus, Davidson's rendering seems to accomplish the most holistic view of Pilate so far.

Morrison's thoughts

Later in *Song of Solomon*, the audience discovers that "Pilate had learned, whenever she was asked her name, to give only her first name. The last name had a bad effect on people" (Morrison 152). Pilate would not be the first to shed a last name out of convenience, but when your last name is "Dead", I believe it offers Morrison another opportunity to convince us that Pilate exists slightly beyond reality. When someone as thoughtful as Morrison grants Pilate the ability to not be "Dead", it continues to imply and play with the idea that Pilate has supernatural ability and is able to communicate with the next world. Pilate also is not the first woman in a Morrison novel with the ability to seemingly communicate with other realms, as *Paradise* closes with Connie and Piedade in an ethereal embrace as ships with "crew and passengers, lost and

saved, atremble" come in on ghostly waves (Morrison 318). Pilate isn't "dead", she is *a* Dead. She has become something greater than herself.

One of the things that Morrison leaves unanswered about the novel is Pilate's comment that there "Ain't but three deads alive" (Morrison 38). Some have speculated that she means herself/Reba/Hagar. Others have wondered if she meant MaconII/herself/Milkman. She also could have meant Milkman/Lena/Corinthians. This statement becomes even more intriguing after Pilate has informally shed her last name.

Morrison's explanations in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" not only articulate that Pilate is *the* ancestor and "the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male", but also articulate where the "difficulty" Hagar faces comes from[2] (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). Though Pilate is a mother (and thus has bedded a man before), we do not see her act as irrationally as Reba or Hagar tend to around men presumably because of her strong relationships with her father and brother, but also because many find her fluidity intimidating.

Final thoughts and Conclusion

The reading of Pilate as (completely simultaneously) 2-spirit, spiritual guide, and spiritually powerful becomes even more apparent and substantially vital when we consider that Pilate has indigenous blood. Jake (Macon the first) married Sing(ing) Bird, which makes Pilate

[2] this being how far removed she is from positive masculine influence

half Black and half Native American[3]. Pilate's Blackness furthers Morrison's magical realism angle and complements her assertion in *Rootedness* that her people are "practical, down-to-earth, even shrewd" but also accepting of "superstition and magic." Morrison also reaffirms that drawing from both angles, both worlds, was "enhancing, not limiting" (Morrison 61). Likewise, Pilate's indigenous blood connects her[4] to a long history of oral storytelling, natural magic, and a continued presence of ancestral guidance that she both feels and appreciates; but *she* is the provider to the next generation (who comes in the form of Milkman in this story).

Perhaps given Pilate's indigenous blood we might be supposed to read the bird that flies away with her name at the close of the story as Pilate reincarnated? This could be supported by Milkman's realization at the close of the novel that "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (Morrison 348). The fact that Morrison chose a bird to represent her spirit also is not accidental or unexpected, given the freedom of Pilate's character and the repeated importance of flight that's established through the novel. However, flight usually only gets associated with men, primarily Milkman and Solomon. Allowing Pilate this "flight" elevates her beyond her financial status, gender, and human limitations.

Pilate gets to finish her own spiritual journey when she buries her father's bones back at Solomon's leap in Shalimar (Morrison 347). Pilate asks Milkman to sing as she dies, perhaps to help guide her spirit into the next realm? (Morrison 348). The narrative has now come full circle, and we are left to hope that Milkman learned enough from Pilate and grew enough roots during his time with Pilate that he is able to mature into the branch of his family tree that he needs to be.

I think it is safe to say that given the information available in the narrative, Morrison's own thoughts, and the history of maternal/feminine ghostliness in Morrison's own canon that

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[3] just like Morrison!
[4] grounds her, if you will

Pilate can (and should) be read as Milkman's genderfluid, magical, Black and Indigenous spirit-guide mentor. She's all at once so intriguing, confounding, and disquieting, which comes as no surprise to regular readers of Morrison. However, it is of great importance that we as her audience do our best to keep these intersectionalities in mind as we read to render the clearest image of the character and to give Morrison's work the thought, care, and energy that it is so deserved.

Works Cited

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