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**Journal/Book Title:** Thamyris.

**Volume: 2 Issue: 2**

**Month/Year:** 1995-09-01

**Pages:** 177-

**Article Title:** Self-Definition, Community, and Resistance: Euripides' 'Medea' and Toni Morrison's 'Beloved'

**Article Author:** Haley, Shelley P.,

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# Self-Definition, Community and Resistance

*Euripides' "Medea" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved"*<sup>1</sup>

Shelley P. Haley

## I. Introduction

I undertake this comparison of a canonical piece of Western literature (Euripides' *Medea*) and a masterpiece of the literature of an oppressed people (Morrison's *Beloved*) with some unease. Morrison's own warning reverberates in my head:

"Finding or imposing Western influences in/on Afro-American literature has value, but when its sole purpose is to *place* value only where that influence is located it is pernicious."<sup>2</sup>

As a traditionally-trained classicist, it is tempting to do such comparative work and easy to slip into the trap Morrison describes. As a Black feminist it is a political act to resist the pernicious aspects of the work.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the anonymous reader for *Thamyris* and to editor Nanny de Vries for their insights and comments on an earlier version.

<sup>2</sup> Morrison (1989), 10.

At the root of Black feminist thought and literary achievements are the questions of identity, coalition politics/community, and resistance. Yet these same questions existed in the past and still exist for women. When women do achieve self-actualization and self-definition under patriarchal systems, we are confronted by a conundrum similar to the "chicken and egg" riddle: Do acts of resistance shape a woman's definition of herself or does the self shape the resistance?

My purpose, then, in comparing *Medea* and *Beloved* is not to demonstrate that *Beloved* has literary merit and value because it takes up the literary trope of the killing mother, just like the *Medea*. Rather, I hope to explicate through questions of self-definition, community and resistance the epistemological question of whether retelling this myth conveys a deeper understanding of women's reality in slavery. Drucilla Cornell (1991; 1992) suggests that this may be the case at the same time as she raises questions about imagining difference. Certainly we can read *Beloved* as a retelling of the Medea-myth, but to what extent is that necessary to understand the novel? Or is it Sethe, who, in problematizing the Medea with her attempt and success in killing her children, brings new understanding to Medea, especially if we imagine Medea as a woman of color?<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it will become evident that Morrison moves in and out of the Medea-myth, sometimes parallel and sometimes contrapuntal to it, as part of her complexly-patterned quilt, entitled *Beloved*.

## II. *Self-Definition*

"In someone else's eyes, I saw reflections of the girl I was  
Caught me by surprise, seeing a woman who's defined by you  
I suddenly realized I can't love you; I can't love me  
In someone's eyes..."  
*Someone Else's Eyes*, Aretha Franklin (recorded 1991)

Medea and the Medea-myth come down to us through the filter of male eyes and the rigid patriarchy of ancient Athens; modern readers know primarily the Euripidean version.<sup>4</sup> Yet other, possi-

<sup>3</sup> Susan Babbitt (1994) discusses Cornell's remarks and sees a close correlation between the ability to understand difference and the ability to work against racism.

<sup>4</sup> Another source for the myth of Medea, especially her life before Corinth, is the epic poem *Argonautica* composed by Apollonius of Rhodes. Apollonius wrote considerably

bly earlier, versions of the myth well known to Athenians (Euripides among them) and Corinthians reveal a Medea who is not a furiously scorned woman who kills her children, but rather a queen-priestess of divine ancestry with ambitions of immortality for her children by Jason. This earlier Medea is powerful; she is queen and ruler of Corinth; Jason is her consort. The context for achieving immortality for her children is firmly in the sphere of female spirituality. She is a priestess of Hecate; she leaves her children in the temple of Hera. Yet when Medea comes under the creative scrutiny of Euripides, these details of a strong political self and positive spirituality fall away. In the *Aegeus*, an earlier play, Euripides presents Medea as the stock character of the wicked stepmother. According to T.B.L. Webster (1967), "Medea herself is the brazen wife of a cowardly king, the second wife who hates his earlier children." In the *Medea*, the focus and emphasis fall on Medea's sexuality and its dangerous expression through "witchcraft". Consequently, in Euripides' eyes Medea's sexual self becomes the monolithic core of her self-definition.

Any vestiges of Medea's earlier political and spiritual power are transformed into sexual agency in both Euripides and Apollonius of Rhodes. Medea chose her sexual partner; she chose to help him in obtaining the Golden Fleece; she chose to aid him politically by murdering her brother Absyrtus and Jason's uncle Pelias. Her goal, as presented in lines 475ff, is power and success for her man, not herself. In keeping with this sublimation of her ambitions to those of her male sexual partner, Medea perceives herself as an outsider, a foreigner who has sacrificed her familial ties for the love of a man. In addition, she continually defines herself in relation to men: daughter of Aeetes, sister of Absyrtus, wife of Jason, mother of sons. Furthermore, Euripides' Medea has internalized the sexualized image that Jason had of her (and other women). When Medea speaks first to the Corinthian women, her remarks are a poignant critique of the compulsory heterosexuality inherent in patriarchy.<sup>5</sup>

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later than Euripides, in the Hellenistic period, when social and literary contexts were significantly different from 5th century Athens. The *Argonautica* presents another way of treating the story and another set of literary aims.

<sup>5</sup> Euripides, *Medea* 230-266. For an exegesis of compulsory heterosexuality in modern Western culture, see Adrienne Rich (1983), 139-168. The connection between compulsory heterosexuality and infanticide is clearest in the case of Susan Smith of South Carolina. Her self-definition and self-worth are so tied to relationships with men that she killed her *sons*, when a male lover broke off the relationship because he did not feel up to the responsibility of fatherhood.

Yet this critique is undermined by the acceptance of the sexualized stereotype:

“A woman is generally full of fear,  
And cowardly, when facing armed aggression;  
But when she’s harmed in anything touching sex  
No mind’s more homicidal than hers.” (263-266)

These lines serve to validate Jason’s position later when he nearly repeats Medea’s stereotype verbatim:

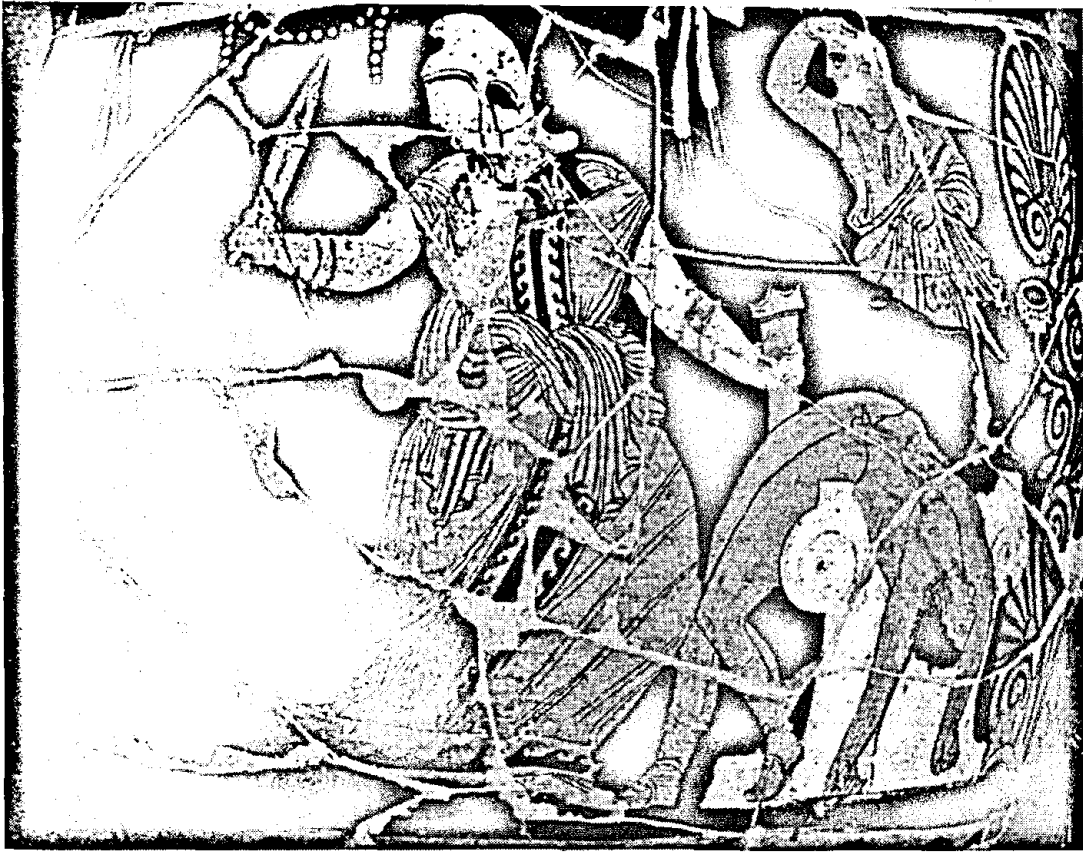
“If things go right in bed, you have everything;  
But if your sex life is suffering, then you become  
Vicious enemies of all your best and dearest.” (570-573)

By accepting this stereotype and defining the roles of daughter, sister, spouse and mother in relation to men, Medea reflects, at least in terms of gender relations and roles, the cultural norm of ancient Athenian society, a norm that has been transferred to Corinth. As such, it may not reflect Corinthian reality.<sup>6</sup>

The Athenian audience is being lured by Euripides to expect that Medea will also reflect and endorse the Athenian/patriarchal construct of motherhood. In this construct the role of the mother is that of a vessel. Other images of female passivity in Greek thought — field, furrow, oven, even wax — have been analyzed by Page duBois (1988). Such a construction of passivity limits female power in reproduction and as duBois states (1988, 110): “It minimizes...the possibility of parthenogenesis or autochthony, since in the representation of the woman’s body as an oven, there is an assumption of passivity, the passivity of a receptacle.”<sup>7</sup> She

<sup>6</sup> We do not know how Corinthian men treated their women. In general our evidence for gender relations is imbalanced and Athenocentric. Athens may have been unusual in its restricted treatment of women for various political and social ends. McDermott (1989, 44 and 129 n. 3) stresses that the divorce of Medea by Jason follows a fifth-century Athenian prescription. As she states in note 3: “There is necessarily a distinct element of anachronism here since the ‘times’ of Medea and Euripides are separated by approximately a thousand years, as well as a glossing over of the geographical/cultural distinction between Athens and Corinth.” Very often, Athenian dramatists set unpleasant stories in locations other than Athens. Zeitlin (1990) analyzes how Athens avoids pollution when such plays are set in Thebes.

<sup>7</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 58-61: “The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger she preserves a stranger’s seed, if no gods interfere.” Also see duBois (1988, *Sowing the Body*, 67) for a discussion of Medea as a furrow, particularly in Pindar, *Pythian Ode 4*.



Medea killing her two sons, from a Campanian amphora, Paris, Cabinet des Médailles.

had no legal rights regarding a child's destiny. Control over a child's fate including the right to life rested in the hands of the father. Yet a mother was expected to love her children and be concerned for their welfare.<sup>8</sup> As a killing mother Medea violates this basic societal assumption and alienates herself further from the Corinthian community. At the same time, she asserts her individuality and defines herself in her resistance to Greek societal expectations. Her self-definition is expressed in the motivation for murdering her children. It is not sex-gone-bad, rather it is pride, a masculinist heroic pride that drives her to murder her children.

At two places (536ff and 1339ff), Euripides has Jason accuse Medea of barbarism. Nearly every scholar who has done work on Euripides' *Medea* has described Medea as a "foreigner", a "stranger", a "barbarian" or in postmodern terminology, the "other". While scholars focus on Medea's foreignness, very few have examined the racial and cultural substance of that "otherness".

I first heard of Medea when I was eleven years old. The year before, at age ten, I had moved with my family to Hampton,

<sup>8</sup> Lysias 32.11-18 presents a portrait of the concerned mother.

Virginia, because my father had accepted a position at the then Hampton Institute, a historically Black college. As a consequence we moved from the northern, covertly-segregated city of Philadelphia to the southern, overtly-segregated city of Hampton. As an eleven-year old, I sat in an all Black audience as my younger brother played one of Medea's sons in an all Black production of a Black poet's translation of a Greek play.<sup>9</sup> But at the time, I did not know that the *Medea* was a Greek tragedy; what I saw, what I watched, what I was impressed by was an African Medea, a Black woman/mother who asserted "the law of the Mother" and killed her children to avenge a wrong done to her personhood by a man.<sup>10</sup> Even today, after reading *Medea* in its original language, reading translations by white authors, and seeing various white actresses play Medea, I always visualize Medea as a woman of African descent, always hear her speak with the poignant poetical voice of Countee Cullen. Gerald Early, the editor of a recent collection of Cullen's poetry remarked on his *Medea*: "...once again, [Cullen's] creative racial misreading made him think of *The Medea* in racial terms, a woman of color betrayed."<sup>11</sup>

However, Cullen's image (and mine) may not have been a "racial misreading". Just as Euripides knew the other variants of Medea's myth, he might well have been cognizant of the mythic racial history embedded in the Medea myth as well as the histori-

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<sup>9</sup> Countee Cullen (1935), *The Medea and Some Poems*. Surveys of post-classical treatments of the *Medea* often include Jean Anouilh's *Médée* (composed in 1943, first performed in 1956) and Robinson Jeffers' late 1940s rendering. Countee Cullen's rendering is rarely, if ever, included. Clearly this is an omission of ignorance created by the racism inherent in myopic Western scholarship.

<sup>10</sup> Hortense Spillers (1987, 80) elaborates on the importance of "mother law" in African American society: "The African American woman, the mother, the daughter becomes the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated — the law of the mother — [so that]...motherhood as female bloodrite is outraged, is denied at the very same time it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment.... In this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed."

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Early (1991, 67); Hall (1989, 35 n. 110) notes the similarity of Medea's name with that of the Medes and connects her to the *East* (i.e., Persia) but not to Africa. She also notes, after Webster (1967, 79) that Medea "was never portrayed in *oriental* (emphasis mine) costume until after the production of Euripides' *Medea* in 431, which strongly implies that it was this tragedian who first turned her into a barbarian." I thank the anonymous reader for *Thamyris* who pointed out an exception to the tradition of white women playing Medea: "In 1986 at the Lyric Theater in London, the distinguished Indian actress Madhur Jaffrey played Medea as an Indian in Indian dress, opposite the tall, blond, white English actor, Julian Glover. The production stressed her "otherness" as partly racial, and much play was made of the Asian vs. European contrast."

cally-documented racial heritage of the Colchians. Mythically, Aetes and Circe, Medea and Absyrtus as children and grandchildren of Helios were "Children of the Sun", an epithet people of African descent have used in pre-literate and literate texts to describe themselves. For example the ancient Ethiopians, beloved by and favorites of the Olympian gods, frequently referred to themselves as "children of the Sun". Only recently has the strong connection between ancient Africa and ancient Greece been substantiated in mainstream classical scholarship, yet the ancient authors do not seem to have been as squeamish about racial and cultural miscegenation as European and American scholars have been and still are.<sup>12</sup> Herodotus 2.103-104 states:

"...it is undoubtedly a fact that the Colchians are of Egyptian descent. My own idea on the subject was based first in the fact that they have black skins and woolly hair (not that that amounts to much as other nations have the same), and secondly, and more especially, on the fact that the Colchians, the Egyptians and the Ethiopians are the only races which from ancient times have practiced circumcision."

It is not implausible, then, to think of Medea as racially other as well as culturally and gender other.

Pride in her self and her heritage is at the core of Medea's self-definition. It is this pride as well as her cultural and phenotypic difference that sets her apart, renders her other to the Corinthian/Greek women. Medea knows who she is and knows that whatever actions she has taken (and will take) she does by her own agency:

"I'll begin right back at the beginning.  
*I* (emphasis mine) rescued you...  
The serpent who never slept, his twisted coils,  
Protecting the fleece, *I* was the one who killed it...  
*I* betrayed both my father and my house...  
*I* put Pelias to death...*I* laid low his house." (475-487)

Here, motherhood figures very little in Medea's self-definition; her children's existence does not define who she believes she is. This isn't to say that Medea does not love her children, quite the

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<sup>12</sup> The most well-known now is Bernal (1987). In African and African American scholarship, this connection was posited as early as 1837 with Martin Delaney's *Origin of the Races*. Cheik Anta Diop's (1961) *The Cultural Unity of Negro Africa* provides cultural evidence that ancient Egypt was an African culture, noting in particular the cultural value and high esteem of women and the importance of motherhood.



contrary. P.E. Easterling has demonstrated effectively that Medea loved her children and was besieged by remorse over the future they would never have.<sup>13</sup> Medea does not kill her children because she hates them as markers of her oppression. It is true that temporarily she resents them as reminders of Jason and a happier time. Their murder can be read as an act of vengeance to punish her enemy, Jason. On the other hand, it can also be perceived as protection from the loss of their autonomy, as Drucilla Cornell (1991, 186-196, esp. 194) and Susan Babbitt (1994, 1-18, esp. 5) have argued. Within the Athenian context, the loss of a father's presence (whether caused by death or divorce) amounts to a loss of a child's autonomy. However, the extent of autonomy for children as young as those of Medea and Jason is far from clear. A more contextualized reading is that the murder was an act of resistance to prevent the shame brought upon Medea and her children by her repudiation by Jason and her banishment by Creon.

Although Euripides stereotypes Medea as the scorned woman and presents sexual jealousy as the etiology for her furious vengeance, Medea's characterizations and motivations belong to the traditionally male sphere. Given the patriarchal essence of the cultural norm, in Euripides' hands, Medea becomes an exemplum of the masculine ideal of the hero by the very assertion of her individuality. For Euripides can only conceive of individuality or self as masculine. Indeed, several commentators have remarked upon the "heroic" language and conduct of Medea.<sup>14</sup> She kills for revenge and honor, so simulating Achilles, Odysseus and Ajax. In addition, she fears the mockery of her enemies, a heroic impulse: "...Do I want to be laughed at for letting my enemies off with impunity?" (1050). B. Knox (1975) has noted that Medea has "the main characteristic of a hero — the determined resolve as expressed in lines 792, 1051 and 1078 ff."<sup>15</sup> She will not put up with injustice; and like the heroes mentioned previously she feels that she has been treated unjustly and disrespectfully. It is the intensity

<sup>13</sup> P.E. Easterling (1977), 187 ff.

<sup>14</sup> Noteworthy among them are E. Schlesinger (1968), Knox (1975) and Easterling (1977). Foley (1981, 151), duBois (1982, *Centaur and Amazons*, 116-119) and Hall (1989, 203) have also commented on the masculinization of the "transgressive" Medea. Medea, because of the lack of femaleness, is transformed to a female hero, a kind of barbarian monstrosity. If we accept the Euripidean *Alcestis* as the representation of the Athenian model-wife — a mute female, as passive as death — she is perceived as quite opposite to the barbarian, masculine, Medea.

<sup>15</sup> Knox (1975), 198; Knox is demonstrating how closely Medea parallels the Sophoclean hero.

of feeling against this injustice that spurs Medea to kill her children. It flows from her heroic drive for revenge and it stands in opposition to her maternal affection. This is clearest in the *agon* (1021-1080) where she struggles with herself and explores her alternatives. The speech, while revealing the intensity of her personality, also demonstrates how deeply her spirit is troubled; this is reminiscent of traditional West African spirituality. Medea's *agwu* or "personal spirit" is disturbed both from within and from without and that disturbance is articulated in this inner debate. At the same time, the speech stands as a model of "civilized" reason, although incongruously expressed by the barbarian other. Nonetheless, it reinforces Medea's heroic stature. Knox (1975, 202) rightly points out that on one level Euripides' play can be read as a duel between two (masculine) Greek heroes: Jason and Medea. Medea is a mother who loves her children, but she murders them out of revenge for wounded pride. Ultimately it is that revenge and pride, not her motherhood which defines Medea.

By contrast, Sethe, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's multi-layered novel *Beloved*, defines herself as a mother and in her children. She is a mother who "wouldn't draw a breath without [her] children" (203) and who would do anything, even murder, to save them from the horrors of slavery. Motherhood, at least motherhood on her terms, for Sethe is the mode to resist the construct of Black women's sexuality under slavery. Black women were (and still are) reified as sexual objects existing for the sole pleasure of men, especially white men.<sup>16</sup> Sethe stands contrapuntal to the impossibility of motherhood for Black women, especially if they are enslaved. Any children sired by a white master or by Black men chosen for slave women follow the status of their mother and are the literal property of the white master. They can be taken or sold away at any time whether at the whim of the master or mistress or from economic necessity. Often, the offspring of slave women and white masters were abused by the white mistress, who "read" them as proof of the licentiousness of Black women, rarely as outcome of the sexual freedom and patriarchal privilege of white men. The children were not the Black slave mother's to love or to protect.<sup>17</sup> This impossibility contrasted with the dominant cul-

<sup>16</sup> See Hazel V. Carby (1987), 20-39.

<sup>17</sup> The denial of rights to affection or emotional attachment to an infant highlights the "vessel-like" perception of Black slave women by white men (cf. Athenian male perceptions of women). Black women were carriers of a product and property; the value of Black women was often assessed according to their fertility, similar to soil.

ture's paradigm of motherhood as the true calling and vocation of the true woman — who can only be white. Evoking the stereotype of the sexual jealousy employed by Euripides, the True Woman (at least in the slave-holding states) would abuse the slave woman, thereby punishing her for her “sexual license” and for luring white men away.

Consequently, two definitions of motherhood co-existed at the same time: the glorified and the breeder. As a Black mother, Sethe mediates between the two and introduces a third definition of motherhood, an African one where motherhood is shared responsibility for caring. For Sethe motherhood is an idiom for freedom, not for oppression. Yet Morrison deliberately problematizes motherhood; a conflicting set of possibilities have to be negotiated in reading Black motherhood and this is the source of the beautiful-ugliness of its presentation in *Beloved*. *Beloved* simultaneously critiques exclusive mother-love as it asserts the necessity for Black women to claim something as theirs.

Sethe with her “too-thick” love stands in stark contrast to the experience of other Black slave mothers, both in the novel and historically. Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law) had eight children by different men, but through death or sale she ended up keeping only one, a son, Halle. Ella and a few other Black women who were raped by white masters refused to nourish infants conceived under these circumstances. Sethe's own mother allowed children conceived in rape to die. She raised Sethe because her father was a Black man and honored him by giving her baby girl his name. Given the intensity of Sethe's identification with the feminine realm of motherhood, her masculine name stands in sharp irony.<sup>18</sup>

Historical fact validates the experience of Morrison's fictional characters. Sethe is based on Margaret Garner who killed her four children in Cincinnati in the 1850s, when slave hunters caught them after they had run away. Sojourner Truth's “Ain't I a Woman” speech (1852) had asserted her specific experience of womanhood

<sup>18</sup> Samuels and Hudson-Weems (1990, 136) discuss the mythic and biblical nuances of “Sethe”: “Morrison's tendency to shatter conventional meanings and interpretations as she draws on more conventional myths and folk material is most visible in her use of Sethe's name, which she obviously borrows from Seth who was one of the major gods of ancient Egypt and the biblical Seth who was the child of Adam and Eve...”. Morrison's use of this name is ironic; the Egyptian Seth was the “bad” brother, antithesis to Osiris, the “good” brother. Their respective alignments with good and evil carry over to the afterlife.

which included motherhood, but motherhood as loss. Thereby, it was a critique of the experience assumed for white women: "I have born thirteen children and seen most all sold into slavery and when I called out a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me." Harriet Jacobs (1861; 1988, 16) describes the slave mother: "she may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that brutalized her from childhood, but she has a mother's instincts and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies."

This is the context in which Sethe chooses to define herself as a mother, providing not just affection, but also nourishment as represented by "getting her milk to her baby girl." In a society in which the Black mother's rights and existence are already delimited, Sethe's persistent desire is to bring *her* milk to *her* children. This is particularly important given that poor/Black women's milk and breasts were appropriated in order to raise healthy, white, upper-class children. Morrison offers a variety of associations with motherhood in exploitative contexts. The core response of Sethe in *Beloved* is to the appropriation of her milk and therefore to her reduction to animal status that is entailed in appropriated motherhood. At the same time, however, Morrison does not overturn the symbolics of breasts. Beginning when Sethe allows Paul D the responsibility for her breasts, Morrison fails to free them from their negative and exploitative representations. In so doing Morrison shifts the responsibility away from Sethe herself and her daughters and leaves it to Paul D to define the final "Me? Me?" which Sethe is allowed in the text. This shift away from Sethe's self-identification with motherhood towards a man's identification of her (especially a man who knew her before she was so entangled by her status as mother) could be read as liberating. However what is installed in the process is heterosexual dominance, the woman operating without a certain clarity and agency in creating her own subjectivity. Clearly the need in Black cultures to affirm Black motherhood is a strategic response to racist constructs. Strategically valid on some fronts, on others this affirmation becomes too defining and limiting for women. Even a radical suggestion in Black mother theory that women mother cooperatively assumes that all African American women want to participate in this activity.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike Medea who identified with her paternal family, city and

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<sup>19</sup> For Black mother theory, see Patricia Hill Collins (1987) and Sally Keenan (1993).

heritage, Sethe identifies with the mother/daughter relationship. Her obsessive concern for her first-born daughter is directly related to her mother's inability to be a mother to Sethe, the daughter. Beloved becomes the daughter Sethe could not be; Sethe becomes the mother her mother could not be. Denver, the second-born daughter, identifies closely with her mother; she is possessive of her company and her affection. Denver represents the dialectical tension of the mother-daughter relationship. Denver loves her mother, is determined to protect her and yet fears her. After she returns from prison, Sethe would comb and braid Denver's hair each night.<sup>20</sup> Denver transforms that act of maternal love and female bonding into a decapitation and re-enactment of Beloved's murder. At the end of the novel it is Denver's maternal protection of her mother that leads to Sethe's rescue from herself/Beloved. In achieving her own self-actualization, daughter Denver finds herself the mother, warning Paul D about how he talks to her mother in the same way Sethe had done on her behalf.<sup>21</sup>

For Sethe, as for Medea, pride is a major aspect of her self-definition. But for Sethe the source of this pride is her children and her actions on their behalf: "I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own" (162). At the same time Sethe's pride causes her to be disliked and ostracized by the Black Community: "Just about everybody in town was longing for Sethe to come on difficult times. Her outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand it" (171). Sethe's pride in the exclusivity of her mother-love turns the Black women's community of Cincinnati against her. It appears to them that Sethe accepts the given paradigm of motherhood as the exclusive responsibility of the biological mother and in so doing rejects the communal notion of African/African American motherhood.

<sup>20</sup> Compare the importance of hair-braiding in Sherley Anne Williams' novel *Dessa Rose*, 257.

<sup>21</sup> Medea, Sethe and Beloved share the status of eldest daughter, a status very important in matrifocal and matrilineal societies. For the importance of eldest daughters in some Igbo societies, see Ifi Amadiume (1987). The mother-daughter relationship was very important in ancient Egypt. In Egyptian mythology, the roles of mother and daughter interact in the generative process, while duplicating one another in function.

### III. Community

The marginality of Medea and Sethe is reflected in the marginality of the city-state or city district where their stories unfold. Corinth, situated as it is on the edge, the margin of the Greek peninsula, is not marked as a cultural center in the same way fifth century Athens is, at least for modern readers.<sup>22</sup> While the social, gender and "family" values signified in the *Medea* are clearly Athenian, the Athenian audience was geographically distanced from Medea's marginality. The gender relations of Corinth are the gender relations of the Athenians; women exist to produce citizens and legitimate heirs in the role of wives; they exist as sexual objects in the role of slaves, concubines and hetaerae. As mothers, they did not expect legal rights regarding their children. Medea, on the other hand, is marked as different, not only as a geographical foreigner, but also as a cultural other, since she comes from a culture where she had intrinsic value as a woman, if we can assume Colchian culture followed a cultural stance of valuing women. It is important to stress how little evidence exists for the experience of fifth-century women outside Athens. Medea may well represent the reality of women in the other city-states of Greece, Asia Minor and Africa who perhaps had a slightly freer life than Athenian women. In that regard, Euripides' *Medea* would have found the Athenized Corinth restrictive.

Several commentators, Denys Page most notable among them, have remarked that it is Medea's "barbarian" status that makes the murder of her children plausible.<sup>23</sup> But because of Medea's foreign status, she has the double consciousness marginalized people often acquire. In Medea's case, she understands what it means to be "woman" in a woman-affirming culture and what it means in a woman-devaluing one. It is this double consciousness that enables her to talk and argue, like a Greek; she can then critique the status of women in Corinth and enter a coalition with the Corinthian women of the chorus (214-266). Her claim (in heroic language) that she would rather fight in battle three times than bear a child

<sup>22</sup> See discussion above, n. 5 and Hall (1989).

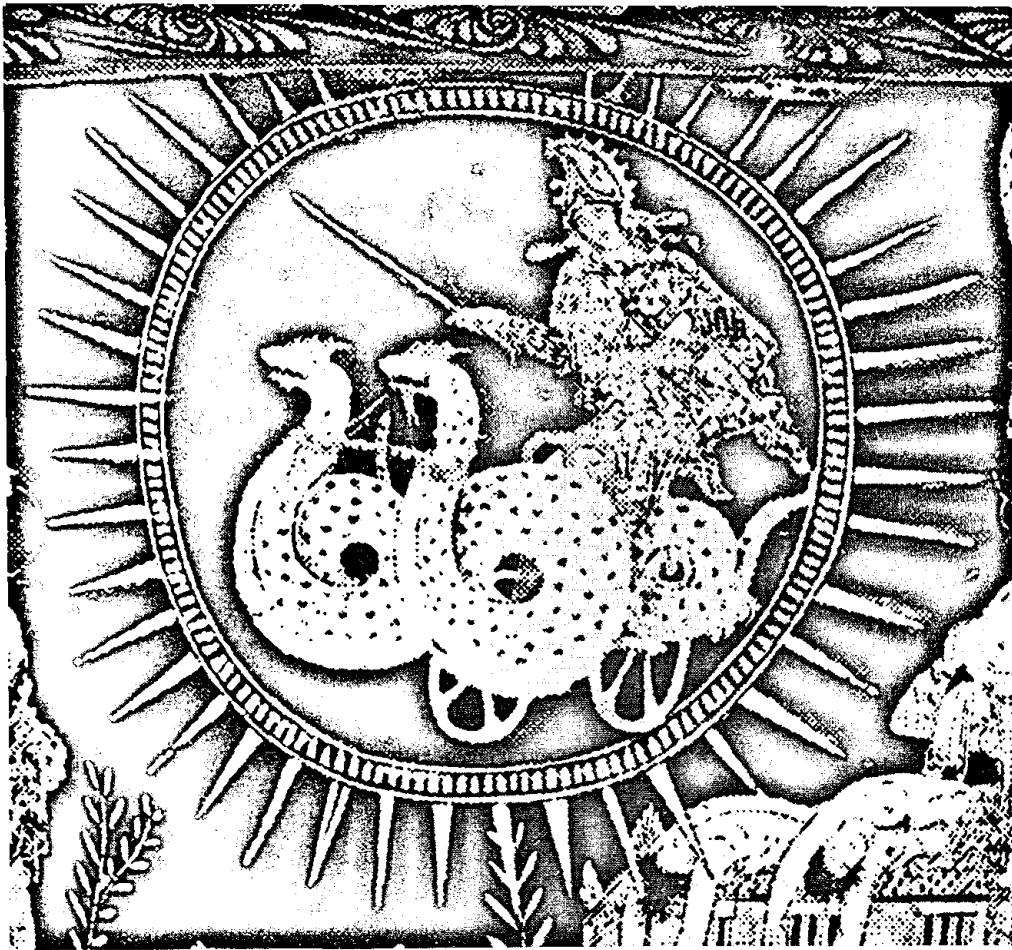
<sup>23</sup> Page (1938) xx, "Above all, the inhuman cruelty of the child-murderess was a typically foreign quality." Again, on xxi, "...because she was a foreigner, she could kill her children." Knox (1975, 217) disagrees, "There is no suggestion in the play that anyone regards Medea as a barbarian except, of course, in the end, Jason." Easterling (1977, 180) perceives Medea's foreignness as a way for Euripides to emphasize her "vulnerability and isolation".

once is not so much about physical pain as the psychological pain of being a mother in a culture that does not recognize or value motherhood. The commonalities of abuse, exploitation and devaluation bring Medea and the Corinthian women together. But Medea fails to recognize the monoculturalism (as opposed to her double consciousness) of the Corinthian women. She reads their gender solidarity as a vehicle for their understanding her need for vengeance. Instead, Medea's murder of her children so violates their cultural code that the coalition between them breaks down. As a result, the Corinthian women indict Medea as a madwoman, and engage in selective mythic memory to liken her to the only other mother who murdered her children: Ino, "the maniac" (1280 ff).<sup>24</sup>

The role of patriarchy is crucial to the community response to Medea and her actions. The effect of the atrocity of Medea's actions is heightened by the seeming benevolence of the patriarchal figures in the play. Aegeus' drive to be a father blinds him to the implications of Medea's request for shelter. In contrast to Medea, Aegeus is benevolent, but intellectually dense. Creon (285ff; 319ff) signifies the distrust of women in general, but clever women in particular, under patriarchy. At the same time, he is the model father, doting, protective and concerned for his child's welfare. He claims his children mean everything to him. It is Creon's protective fathering that plants the germ of Medea's plan for revenge. Clearly children are important to Aegeus, Creon and Jason as property and markers of status; any affection, either given or received, is an added bonus. It is further evidence for Medea's masculinist subjectivity that she assimilates the patriarchal value system and perceives her children as a means to an end: the destruction of her enemies, in particular Jason. Jason himself is not only a signifier of patriarchy but also an exemplum of Greek masculinity under patriarchy. While he may claim (557) that his children by Medea are enough, he contradicts himself by noting that children by the princess of Corinth will increase his status and that of his sons by Medea (562-565).

Jason's actions in abandoning Medea are perceived as the actions of a *man*; other men — whether in the play or the audience

<sup>24</sup> Procne and Althea are two other Greek mythological mothers who murder their children. And, in fact, Procne is seemingly a better precedent, since she murdered her child as an act of vengeance against an unjust act of violence against her sister. But as a mythic Athenian, Procne as killing mother does bring to Athens the taint Euripides may have been trying to avoid by locating his play in Corinth.



Medea escaping from Corinth, detail from a Lucanian calyx-krater, Cleveland Museum of Art.

— may disapprove, but they do not question Jason's humanity. When Medea behaves like a man and usurps the life and death power of a patriarch over children, she loses her humanity and becomes an animal. Well before Medea decides to kill her sons, she is characterized as animalistic. She is described by the nurse as having the eyes of a mad bull (92); the image is repeated in 103. Note the gendered image; she is a bull, not a cow.<sup>25</sup> Bulls have further significance for the masculinization of Medea, Bulls (and Horses) are markers of uncontrolled male aggression and paradigms of frightening violence. Women are not usually pitted

<sup>25</sup> Unlike Sethe who is associated with cows by the white schoolteacher. Morrison, in keeping with her problematizing of breasts, aligns cows with women in *Beloved*. In the absence of women the Black men at Sweet Home plantation resorted to "fucking cows" (10-11). Although the less strong image of a cow is used for Sethe, all the images — bull, lioness, and cow — classify both women (Medea and Sethe) as non (or sub-)human. Cf. for Sethe in the role of nurturer and the image of great mother Samuels and Hudson-Weems (1990, 102-105). Helen and Clytaemnestra, both transgressive, "evil" women, are compared to lionesses in several choral odes of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.



against them in Greek myth, with the notable exception of Medea whose knowledge of rots and potions save Jason from the fiery breath of the bulls on Colchis. Medea is depicted as a lioness in 188 and as a child-murdering lioness in 1342 and 1407. It is an easy mental leap to go from barbarian to animal; cats in particular had the reputation for killing their young.<sup>26</sup> These animal images serve to isolate Medea from human society and highlight her otherness. Despite them, however, reason, calculation and justification place Medea's actions — however morally unthinkable and ethically untenable — very firmly in the realm of human psychology. The inner struggle Medea holds with herself as well as the ending of the play reflect both Euripides' unease with filicide and its impossibility in an Athenian (male) moral context. The community abandons Medea as mad, and inhuman, but woman.

Just as Medea's marginality is geographically marked by the location of Corinth, so the setting of *Beloved* reinforces the cultural marginality of Black lives in pre- and post-civil war times. 124 Bluestone Road is the address of the house where Sethe is twice reunited with her baby girl.<sup>27</sup> It is situated between the Ohio River, which marks the boundary between slave and free territory, and a stream marking the watery boundary African myth places between the worlds of the living and the dead. So situated, 124 is a point of intersection for powerful antithetical forces: North and South, Black and white, past and present, this world and the other. For Sethe, 124 provides a changing definition of her identity. During her month there in 1855, before the arrival of the slave hunters, 124 is a place of friendship and activity where she practices to being free. When she returns to the house after her imprisonment, the community withdraws in disapproval and 124 becomes a refuge.

The mythical Cincinnati where Morrison sets her narrative vibrates with the tensions of historical Cincinnati, Ohio. The increasing tension between North and South in the period before the civil war was especially acute in Cincinnati, the first free-soil

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<sup>26</sup> The connection between bestiality and maternal filicide still persists, e.g., Rheingold (1964, 37), "Men who become cognizant of the filicidal impulse of women ask, 'are women human?'" ; a work on the anthropology and phenomenology of filicide by Carloni and Nobili (1975) carries the title *La Mamma Cattiva*.

<sup>27</sup> The house number, 124, is a visual reminder of Sethe's repression of *Beloved*'s memory; 1, 2 represent Howard and Buglar, Sethe's sons who survived the woodshed; 4 represents Denver, the surviving daughter whom Sethe birthed while running away. 124 is a significant number for another reason; each digit doubles the one before it. This indicates, perhaps, a growing power and that the house is a locus of power. This, in turn, reinforces the idea of the house being a refuge.

station on the Underground Railway, across the Ohio River from the slave state of Kentucky, but closely tied by trade and kinship with the South. 124 Bluestone Road is the former home of the Bodwins, a Quaker brother and sister who befriend Baby Suggs, and later Denver. The house is located on the outskirts of Cincinnati in what has become the "Black" neighborhood of Cincinnati. In effect, Blacks are marginalized and 124 Bluestone is further marginalized because of community disapproval of Sethe's actions.

This is not the first time Sethe has been isolated; in fact, she has a history of being the "other". In terms of the broader dominant culture, just by virtue of being a Black woman she was other. More specifically, she was other among the slaves at Sweet Home plantation by virtue of her gender; she was the only female among the seven slaves there. She was young, being fourteen when she arrived at Sweet Home. There is a touching poignancy to her naiveté about "marrying" Halle. She has gleaned from the dominant culture that weddings mark marriages; she cannot see why she should not also have a wedding. When she asks her mistress, Mrs. Garner, if she is to have one, the white woman can only respond with a sympathetic chuckle. However, she acknowledges Sethe's right to mark this special occasion and enters into tacit solidarity with her by giving her a pair of cut-glass earrings. In keeping with her strong sense of self and strong will, Sethe steals material and makes herself a wedding dress, an image that will later haunt her. Sethe is further marginalized when she becomes a mother. As the only Black woman on the plantation, Sethe does not have the expertise or practical support of the extended family of community mothers found on other plantations to help her through childbirth and rearing her children. This leads to her self-sufficiency and contributes to the exclusivity of her mother-love.

Nearly every adult Black woman in *Beloved* has experienced sexual violence at the hands of white men. Ella was kept for a year by a father and son as a sex slave, until she ran away. She would refer to them only by the epithet, "the lowest yet"; Sethe's mother was repeatedly raped and eventually lynched by white men; Sethe herself suffered the "rape" of her breast milk by the nephews/sons of the schoolteacher, with his knowledge.<sup>28</sup> Later, Sethe is beaten

<sup>28</sup> Morrison problematizes male kinship terms. It is not clear if the young men who arrive with the schoolteacher to take over management of Sweet Home are the sons of the schoolteacher and so nephews to Mrs. Garner or if they are nephews to the schoolteacher whom he is raising. There is no indication that schoolteacher has or had a wife.

for telling her mistress by the same men who sexually violated her. In the theft of her breast milk, Sethe's self-identification as mother is erased by the mutilation of slavery. She is a marked woman, not just by physical abuse but also by societal inscriptions.

Sethe is defined and treated by the white schoolteacher as an animal, in particular a cow. When recounting the theft of her milk, Sethe says: "they handled me like a cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (149). She overheard the schoolteacher conducting a lesson in scientific observation and learns that she is the object of the exercises: "No, no, that's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right and don't forget to line them up" (193). The schoolteacher chastises the nephews for beating Sethe and his analogy is to his own horse and the family dogs Chipper and Samson (ironically a name frequently given to male slaves by whites). He later concludes that "you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success" (150). Even Paul D views Sethe as an animal and mad after he learns of the murder/attempted murder of her children, saying, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165); and "that woman is crazy. Crazy" (265). The women in the community read Sethe's actions more as madness than bestiality. For example Ella "understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it — which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected and Sethe herself too complicated" (256).

Here as in the *Medea*, civilization is uncertain as long as human emotions are involved. Easterling (1977, 191) noted that Euripides is analyzing the nature of civilization and barbarism in the *Medea*. She states:

"When he [Euripides] makes the insensitive Jason praise Greek society and values and when he gives the barbarian witch the ideals of the traditional Greek hero, he is surely suggesting that there is no safe dividing line: civilized life is always most precariously poised, continually threatened from within."

In *Beloved*, rational, civilized male society is represented by schoolteacher. Schoolteacher's educational method — his mode of transmitting knowledge and, hence, civilization — adopts the clarity of Manichaean oppositions and scientific discourse. The notebooks and neat lines verify his definitions as facts for his students. The social authority of the schoolteacher and the logical clarity of his methods give his words the power of "truth". Morrison

depicts schoolteacher's pedagogical and interpretative methods as morally bereft and through him she condemns not only slavery but also the United States' educational system. Schoolteacher's practices are basic to the institutional, educational system of the United States. This system may have gotten past the worst of schoolteacher's racial model, but still presents politically motivated versions of knowledge and history while masking these representations in a rhetoric of "facts" and scientific method.<sup>29</sup> Through schoolteacher, Morrison demonstrates that discourse, definitions and historical methods are neither arbitrary nor objective; they are tools in a system of power relations.

For Baby Suggs, primarily because of her treatment by whites and her experience of slavery, slavery exemplifies the connection between a lack of morality and a lack of limitations on the part of whites. Baby Suggs made this her last pronouncement before she died:

"the lesson she had learned from her sixty years as a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but white people. 'They don't know when to stop', she said." (104)

Double consciousness plays a role here and in a powerful description, Stamp Paid thinks "...it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them" (198). In both the *Medea* and in *Beloved*, there is an inversion: the "barbarians" are the "civilized" and the "civilized" are the "barbarians".

Although Baby Suggs' dying words of despair condemn white people, Morrison makes it clear that race is not an absolute division either. Clearly within the context of American slavery, racial oppression is inseparable from social domination and abuses of power. In *Beloved*, meaning is multiple; contradictions stand intact. For example, Black people and white people are essentially

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<sup>29</sup> Much of schoolteacher's racial model still exists among classicists in the US. The hostile reception of Bernal's work by mainstream classicists here is rooted in racism. Earlier works by African or African American scholars analyzing the influence of ancient Africa on ancient Mediterranean cultures were dismissed for "lack of evidence". I am reminded, too, of the experience of Black women classicists of the 19th century. Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) astounded Matthew Arnold with her pronunciation of ancient Greek. He believed "the tongue of the African was too thick to pronounce it correctly." My own experience in the profession has been marred by racist assumptions. An official at the National Endowment for the Humanities, a white man, upon learning that I taught at the historically Black Howard University, remarked: "It must be grim teaching classics to black people." This occurred in 1983. For more, see Haley (1993).

and irrevocably different; they are also essentially and eternally the same. Both statements are true at once, confounding the logical, objective ideology that forms the basis of Western culture. Therefore, the white “slave” Amy Denver helps Sethe to cross the river to freedom and acts as a midwife for the birth of Denver (Sethe’s daughter who is named after Amy Denver).<sup>30</sup> There is no abandonment of the tensions of gender identification. Amy Denver’s role in Sethe’s difficult delivery of her daughter is representative of the paradoxical separations and commonalties among women. This child of an indentured servant and a victim of abuse herself attains a dispossession parallel to Sethe (and to Medea). Her journey is in search of some softness (some velvet) and the North. The similarity between the two women’s situations supersedes their mutual, racially based mistrust, indicating that class relations (as well as differences in inherited cultural values) are central in shaping racial differences. Amy Denver is not relieved of her racial baggage, as is seen in her casual acceptance of racist constructions and difference. Nevertheless, in a society stratified along race, class and gender lines, the narrator asserts that there are a lot of “throw away people”. And while a “slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair” (85) may form a temporary alliance around the need to give birth, inevitably they take divergent paths to freedom. But the possibility for coalition always exists.

Shared experiences under slavery is what binds the Black women of Cincinnati. They share the commonalties of abuse, exploitation and devaluation and it is through communal, ritual healing led by Baby Suggs that they, along with the Black men of the community, are healed. Because of these shared experiences and commonalties, one might conclude that Black women could forge stronger coalitions among themselves than between themselves and white women. However Morrison problematizes the relationships Black women make with each other, echoing Audre Lorde’s essay “Eye to Eye” (1984) where she points out the difficulty Black women have loving, supporting and trusting each other under the oppression of internalized racism, sexism and classism. The Black women of Cincinnati disliked Sethe because of her pride in herself and her accomplishments. At the same time, they were jealous of the joy Sethe and Baby Suggs were experiencing through the reunion of their family. Baby Suggs internalized

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<sup>30</sup> This is a significant role reversal. Black women acted as midwives for white women, both during slavery and after. Here the roles are reversed.

this jealousy, as she blamed the murder of her granddaughter not on slavery but on herself — her excess of joy at being reunited with Sethe and her grandchildren.

This jealousy, along with the need for conformity as a form of safety and the suspicion toward pride are the demons of the Black community of Cincinnati. Before the community killed Baby Suggs' desire for peace and harmony through their backlash against Sethe, Baby Suggs would conduct a ritual, healing and cleansing for the community. Folks would come together and experience a catharsis of the demons that separated them. Yet they lose sight of this healing and out of a subconscious vindictiveness, fail in their communal responsibility to warn Baby Suggs and Sethe of the approach of the slave catchers. Stamp Paid describes the community succinctly, when he says, "Pride, well, that bothers them a bit. They can get messy when they think somebody's too proud, but when it comes right down to it, they good people..." (232). The women of the community redeem themselves and the community when they reclaim the ritual of healing and confront Beloved at the end of the novel, Sethe is re-integrated into the community, the community is made whole again and the possibility for renewed friendships among Black women is put in place.

The larger framework for slavery is white supremacist patriarchy and just as in the *Medea*, we find benevolent father-figures. Mr. Garner prides himself on treating his male slaves like men (not boys or animals) and takes a very paternalistic approach to their welfare. Mr. Bodwin, the Quaker, abhors slavery on moral grounds and stands in stark contrast to schoolteacher, who takes over the management of Sweet Home Plantation after Garner's death. Schoolteacher signifies the reproduction of patriarchal violence. In a passage reminiscent of the tale of the Spartan boy who stole a fox (Plut. *Lycurgus* 18) and structured like a Socratic dialogue, Sixo the African slave at Sweet Home, deftly talked his way out of charges of theft. Yet the narrator asserts, "...schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers — not the defined" (190). Later Sixo is burned alive at schoolteacher's orders. The schoolteacher and other white masters used historically accurate instruments of control and torture for slaves: bits, neck collars, burning, beating, rape and lynching. And knowledge, or more precisely, white supremacist education, is also engaged as a tool of oppression.

IV. *Resistance*

“momma  
 teach me how to hold a new life  
 momma  
 help me  
 turn the face of history  
 to your face.”

June Jordan (1977), *Things I Do in the Dark*, 37.

We have seen that through her actions Medea asserts her individuality and maintains her self-identification in her resistance to Greek societal expectations. Medea is not willing to yield to Jason's expectation of sexual freedom. She appears openly to negotiate with Aegeus for safe space in Athens, without the intervention of male kin. She resists the cultural norm that inscribes child-bearing as the only *raison d'être* of female existence. Medea loves her children, but like a man, her pride comes first. She will not allow herself to be the object of mockery and ridicule at the hands of her enemies. It is this masculinist pride that is at the root of Medea's fatal plotting.

One aspect of Medea's pride is her knowledge — spiritual as well as practical; Medea claims of and to herself, “You know how” (407). The power of her knowledge is the vehicle through which she exacts her revenge. Her control of the power of knowledge is what men fear most about her. The Corinthian women intuitively sense that Greek patriarchy has repressed much of women's history, life-experience and ways of processing knowledge. In the first choral ode (410-445), the Corinthian women give voice to the repression of their knowledge and standpoints on history. Yet never far from the surface is the male authorship of the play. The irony of the ode is that although the Corinthian women resist patriarchal assumptions about their history vicariously through Medea, nothing will change because of Medea's actions. Indeed, Medea's honor and pride may be redressed, but women will continue to be “victims of bad reports” — even more so because of the Euripidean Medea's actions.

Medea resists patriarchy by employing the independence and agency of her self-definition to manipulate older father figures. The scenes with Creon and Aegeus show how deftly a self-actualized woman can destabilize patriarchy. The passages also demonstrate why such a woman was feared. In both episodes

Medea carries a warning of the malicious power of the woman in control. Medea's second encounter with Jason reinforces the warning, just as the first points out the irrationality of women. The contradiction stands as the ultimate warning that women whether in control or out of control cannot be trusted.

Medea murders her children in resistance as well as in revenge against Jason who has damaged her pride and reduced her from a priestess-queen of divine ancestry to an ordinary Greek woman. While Morrison dealt with "a nurturing instinct that expressed itself in murder", Euripides was dealing with the heroic instinct to protect pride.<sup>31</sup> However, read another way, the filicide of Medea is resistance against patriarchy that values sons over daughters, men over women. In this light, it is especially significant that Medea kills male children (as opposed to Sethe who kills her daughter in the attempt to kill all her children).<sup>32</sup> A nurturing regard for her sons' welfare has little influence on Medea's decision to murder them. It is true that they are in a life-threatening situation; they will surely be punished by death for their role in the deaths of Creon and his daughter. But the inevitability of their death is not the motive for Medea's murder of them, for she has engineered the children's part in the destruction of the royal family of Corinth. Medea's goal is not to protect her sons from patriarchy, but rather to use them to wreak revenge on the system that has dishonored her. By using the rights of the patriarch against him, Medea strikes a blow against the whole system.

From the outset, Sethe resists the patriarchal construct that renders incompatible the roles of slave and mother. At the same time, Sethe resists her past, causing her to repress her memory of it. To be healed, Sethe must be reconciled with these painful memories. Beloved embodies these memories and compels all her "family" members to face the pain and shame of their memories. In short, "rememory" becomes an act of resistance — not just for Sethe, but also for us.

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<sup>31</sup> Susheila Nasta (1991/1992), 3-23; Sethe's nurturing "instinct" included a sort of resistance as well, since Black slave mothers were not allowed to be nurturing at all.

<sup>32</sup> Actually, in the Greek the sex of the children is unclear. The masculine is used as a generalizing plural, indicating the androcentricity of the language. Most moderns readers think that they are boys but that is our reading. In addition, Eva Keuls (1985, 135) remarks that all victims of infanticide are male: "The murder of girl children would be mythologically ineffectual since their fate was unimportant." This is quite different from the murder of a slave girl who already at an early age has an important economic value as future breeder for her master's household.



The attempt to construct Sethe as resisting mother is highly charged, but also problematic. We identify with her attempt to resist the appropriation of her body and its products for the slaveholding class's benefit. As we have seen, she shares this resistance with other Black mothers in the novel. In fact, the text deliberately centers the historical fact that there were Black women during slavery who terminated their babies' lives rather than allow them to be offered up to the destruction of slavery. What distinguished Sethe from the other slave mothers in the novel is the exclusivity, the "too thick"ness of her mother-love. There is no unquestioning endorsement of Sethe's action; that would not reveal the text's complexity. Rather, this reading of Black motherhood and its representation speaks to the need for feminists to racialize and historicize their definitions of motherhood.

However, we do need to account for the "thickness" of Sethe's love during a slave period designed to deny any family bonding. A slave mother is not supposed to demonstrate deep love for her children. Paul D and Baby Suggs both agree (at different points in the text) that such a love was dangerous. Sethe defies that injunction. Yet her heroic response to enslavement paradoxically becomes the kind of mother-love which the dominant society enforces for women. Sethe shuttles back and forth between enslavement and constraints, unable to be freed from both at once. She defines preservation as taking her children out of the reaches of slavery. But paradoxically, in her situation this means that she has to function as their executioner, effecting the opposite of growth.

Loving her children and killing Beloved are only two aspects of Sethe's resistance. Demonstrating her agency and independence by running away, feeling pride in accomplishing the escape of her children without the aid of men, defending her daughters against the patriarchal assumptions of Paul D, coming into her spiritual self and steadfastly rejecting the status of victim (like Medea) all come together to form Sethe's resistance. As Stamp Paid remarks, "She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out hurt the hurter" (234).

There are in *Beloved* multiple layers of resistance. Beloved's reappearance/resurrection represents resistance against repression of memory and the past. As Amy Denver tells Sethe, "anything dead coming back to life hurts" (35). Beloved makes this maxim literal as the physical manifestation of suppressed memories. Beloved is both the pain and the cure. As an embodiment of the

repressed past she acts as an unconscious imp, stealing away the volition of the characters, and as a psychoanalytic urge she pries open suppressed memories and emotions.<sup>33</sup> Beloved is Sethe's ghost, the return of her repressed past, and she forces Sethe to confront the gap between her mother-love and the realities of motherhood in slavery. But Beloved is also everyone's ghost. She functions to spur Paul D to confront the powerlessness of a man in slavery and enables Denver to deal with her mother's history as a slave. Finally, Beloved is the reader's ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a living, vindictive presence.

Yet Beloved, as a character resists categorization and reduction to a symbol. The contradictions of her symbolic position along with her enigmatic personality, her thoughts and speech filled with fragmented and vague images of a baby as woman, and the once-dead as living, make Beloved a character too complex to be contained. Beloved embodies the suffering and guilt of the past but also the power and beauty of the past and the need to realize the past fully in order to bring forth the future pregnant with possibilities. As a beautiful pregnant woman, in her last moments, Beloved stands as a contradictory image, both as African ancestor, the beautiful African mother, connecting mothers and daughters of African descent to their pre-slavery heritage and power, and as the all-consuming devil-child.

Beloved also serves to problematize and restore the female bonding and coalitions not only of the women of her family, but also of the community. Beloved nearly chokes Sethe in "The Clearing" with her need for mother-love and female companionship. She is co-dependent on Denver for attention, affection and sweetness. And she serves as the catalyst to bring together the hostile members of the women's community for Sethe's salvation. Although they disapprove of Sethe's actions and had isolated and

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<sup>33</sup> In many ways, Beloved is reminiscent of one of the Furies/Eumenides. There is the same complex symbolism involved. She is the embodiment of the avenging Fury Jason prays for in 1389-90:

"May the children's avenging Fury and Justice  
For murder destroy you!"

See also Padel (1992, 102-103). Beloved also carries traits of the West African *abiku*, "the return of the repressed". In Yoruba cosmology, the *abiku* child eventually stays, after the fulfillment of certain rituals. This African mythological pretext may offer a more textured understanding, a sign of the mother possessed and dispossessed, than the vaporous context of the Western ghost. Idowu (1962) describes the phenomenon of the *abiku*.

ostracized her because of her pride and their jealousy, they understand the context within which she acted. They shared in many of her miseries. And so her fellow sufferers come to her aid to exorcise the ghost of her past preying on her life, because Beloved is, in some sense, their ghost too. When another local woman, Ella, who had also killed her child (although it was not out of love) found out about Beloved's presence, "there was...something very personal in her fury. Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (256). Ella brings the local women to Sethe's house to banish the ghost with ritual chanting. The voices of the women — reaching beyond meaning to the unconscious pains of the past — act as the chorus in *Beloved*. We, as readers, along with Sethe have gone through a ritual recovery of history and *from* history.

Perhaps more than *Beloved*, *Denver* represents the resisting daughter. Denver, finally, is able to break out of the narrowly-defined, self-destructive circle of family relationships of 124 Bluestone Road. In fact, we can read the entire narrative as Denver's reading of Sethe's stifling mother-love. Denver moves back a generation as she recalls her grandmother Baby Suggs' voice, and then forward as she allows the community to participate in nurturing her family and dismantling exclusive motherhood. Importantly, Denver makes the link to the community through writing which she had learned from the Black woman teacher, as well as by reading the notes left with the food. As this link is established, there is also a transformation of knowledge and the educational paradigm as well as a change in Denver's relationship to her mother and her mother's history.

Denver's favorite story is the story of her birth in which Sethe bears her into a nether world between freedom and slavery. This dual inheritance of freedom and slavery tears Denver apart. She drinks the blood of her murdered sister with her mother's milk, and she goes to jail with Sethe. A mirrored image of her mother's repressed past, Denver goes deaf when she is asked about her time in prison. In her lonely withdrawal from the world, due in part to Sethe's isolation, Denver is trapped by Sethe's past. Sethe intentionally keeps Denver in the dark about the past: "As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (42). But the unacknowledged past keeps Denver from moving into the future. She is jealous of her mother's past, and her exclusion from that past increases her

loneliness and bitterness. Beloved, on the other hand, thrives on stories of the past, on pulling from Sethe details of her past, and Denver's love for Beloved forces her to confront the past she hates. Without knowledge of her mother's past, Denver must remain in isolation from history and from her position in the world that can only be understood through history.

Denver decides she must leave the house to save her mother from madness and from the ravenous Beloved. In her last moment of fear as she reaches the door, Baby Suggs speaks to her. Baby's words conjure up the history of her family's struggle for survival and freedom. Denver speaks silently:

"But you said there was no defense.  
'There ain't.'  
Then what do I do?  
'Know it and go on out the yard. Go on.'  
(244)

Although Baby Suggs gave up struggling, at the end of her life, her knowledge and spirit, and the knowledge of the past make possible Denver's emergence in the world. With understanding comes the power to endure and to change.

Denver's position parallels the reader's in her historic relation to her mother's past. But Denver also takes on another role by the end of the novel — that of teacher and historian. In this role she transforms knowledge and history as a tool of oppression to a tool of liberation. Acquisition of knowledge becomes not a fact-based objective system, but a subjective and spiritual experience.

Denver will become a schoolteacher, taking up the educational task from her teacher Lady Jones, and Baby Suggs and taking over the tools of literacy and education from the white male schoolteacher. It is significant, in terms of community coalition and support, that Denver is encouraged to go to college by a white woman, Mrs. Bodwin. Yet Paul D worries when he hears who is supporting Denver's college intentions, silently cautioning her, "Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in this world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher" (266). But this is the very reason Denver must usurp schoolteacher's position; she must take away from him the power to define African Americans and to make our history in a way that steals our past, our souls, and our humanity. Denver points the way to a recovery of literacy, one that is suspicious of white definitions and discourse, and one that uses the African oral

and cultural heritage and African American values to take over the task of African American history making.

## V. Conclusion

Both Euripides' *Medea* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are works which deal with women struggling to define themselves within patriarchal cultures and to function as self-actualized members of a community. But *Medea*, in the male imagination of Euripides usurps the masculine ideal of the hero. For the predominantly male, Athenian audience, a woman who is acting like a man (i.e., murdering and making the decision about life and death — the exclusive privilege of men) represents the exemplum of all barbarism, bestiality and monstrosity; for Athenian women, she becomes a deterrent and a warning. In addition, such a woman is politically transgressive. The *Medea* reinforces the strict control men held over various aspects of women's lives: their freedom of movement, their economic autonomy, their sexuality. Thus the tragedy becomes a very political act. Furthermore, the *Medea* seems to have been affected by xenophobic law (Hall 1989, 176 n. 54). According to Hall (54-55), it can hardly be an accident that the emergence of the barbarian and tragedians' reinterpretation of myth from a radically ethnocentric viewpoint coincide with the consolidation of Athenian democracy and Athenian hegemony.

Morrison, by taking a Black feminist standpoint, problematizes Sethe's motherhood and contextualizes it and the murder of *Beloved* historically and culturally. In her imagination, the tale of the killing mother becomes a ritual engagement with history. Yet there is as little place for a feminine Sethe's humanity, dignity and pride in a slave society as for a masculine *Medea*'s in the Athenian city-state. Like the *Medea*, *Beloved* reflects political situations and actions; unlike the *Medea*, *Beloved* leaves behind the promise for an optimistic future, optimistic precisely because Denver, a Black woman, potential teacher, potential mother is the signifier of the future. Even after the death/erasure of *Beloved*, the mother-daughter relationship *will* continue through Denver.

Morrison ends her novel with a caution, "This is not a story to pass on" (275). This line recapitulates the tension between repression and rememory throughout the novel. As stories not to pass on, *Medea* and *Beloved* connect. For different reasons, to be sure, each

is not a story to pass over or to pass by; on the other hand, each is not a story to pass on, to hand down, and yet each must be. For Medea is Sethe and Sethe is Medea.

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