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‘*SUGARMAN DONE FLY AWAY’:* KINDRED THREADS OF FEMALE MADNESS AND MALE FLIGHT IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON AND CLASSICAL GREEK MYTH

by

EBONY OLIVIA MCNEAL

Under the Direction of Kameelah Martin Samuel

ABSTRACT

Madness in women exists as a trope within the literature from the earliest of civilizations. This theme is evident and appears to possess a link with male dysfunction in several of Toni Morrison’s texts. Lack of maternal accountability has long served as a symptom of female mental instability as imposed by patriarchal thought. Mothers who have neglected or harmed their young across cultures and time periods have been forcibly branded with the mark of madness. Female characters in five of Morrison’s novels bear a striking resemblance to the female archetypes of ancient Greece. This paper will demonstrate the kindred strands of prescribed female madness in the women of the myths of ancient Greece and Morrison’s characters as it relates to neglectful mothering and male flight.

INDEX WORDS: Male flight, Female madness, Mothering, Filicide, Infanticide

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EBONY OLIVIA MCNEAL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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August 2010

DEDICATION

To my mother

Your love sustains me

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"She is a friend of my mind…the pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in the right order."

-Toni Morrison (Beloved)

I wanted to write this first…but I waited. Held out until I wrote the last word, placed the last punctuation, cried the last tear. There were so many tears, almost as many tears as words. Tears for all of the fabulously mad women who inspired this work. And the mothers. All the mothers who have been labeled and scarred. The mothers who mothered the best way they knew how. I cried for you all. And with you—unashamed of OUR madness. Your unapologetic portrayal of self guided me—Grandma Ora Nell, Mama, Kenya, Aunt Jackie, Big Mama Doris, Babygirl, Joni (Spesh), Dr. Billingslea, Cleta Ellington, Dr. Geneva Baxter, Dr. Michelle Hite—all of you—I speak your names. Ashé! May our madness outlive any docility we may possess. And Granddaddy Frazier—you taught me to be fearless, to challenge and fight, to repent and forgive—your wisdom lives.

Lastly, unyielding gratitude to each of my committee members. Dr. Kameelah Martin Samuel…you exude inspiration with every word, keystroke, and suggestion…truly supernatural…hoodoo indeed! Dr. Tanya Caldwell…always encouraging…always bright…I believe just a bit more in my ability thanks to you. Dr. Pearl McHaney…honorary Mississippian that you are…I am grateful for your guidance and wisdom. Thank you to each of you for supporting this project.

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INTRODUCTION

> *Naturally all of them have a sad story: too much notice, not enough, or the worst kind. Some tale about dragon daddies and false-hearted men, or mean mamas and friends who did them wrong. Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where that folded child is tucked.*
>
> (Toni Morrison, *Love* 4)

Female madness represents a theme within literature that can be traced as far back as the myths of ancient Greek tradition. As a construct of patriarchal thought, female madness provides an explanation for the actions of women that their male counterparts struggle to understand and define (Chesler 48). Paranoia exists as one of the psychiatric symptoms of madness—described in Freudian thought as a "technology of gender" and a "feminizing tool" (Melley 79). Freud's assertion speaks to the performative nature of gender within our society and the signs that have been assigned to create roles for men and women. Madness as a "feminizing tool" connotes weakness and frailty in its subject and the literary canon has countless examples of women being categorized as such and dismissed as the result. The shift from behavior that is considered normal to mad or demented serves as the sign for the onset of mental instability for the literary female characters that are branded with this label. This study explores the cause of the shift in behavior. A man in Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* (1997) wonders, "What […] could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children?" (8) Why do these women suddenly display symptoms of dementia,

depression, schizophrenia, and other mental incapacities? What triggers their transformation from acceptable behavior to outcast conduct?

Phyllis Chesler outlines the experiences of four women in the 19th century who were committed to insane asylums after their families (most commonly their husbands) confessed to noticing "various psychiatric symptoms" (45). The symptoms were described as "foolish" or "pathetic," and the women themselves were categorized as "mad" (Chesler 48). The notion that madness is an inherent trait of the female laces the texts of numerous societies and cultures. Hysteria, derived from the Greek word *hustera* for womb, serves as the root for hysterectomy, a procedure that is restricted to females—as it deals with the removal of the uterus—the very biological feature that denotes their sex. This obvious derivation alludes to the association that madness and femaleness have been given—even by the earliest scholars. *Love's Madness* author, Helen Small asserts "Tales of women driven to insanity and, in many cases, to suicide by the death or treachery of their lovers were more than just a free-standing literary convention. They were deeply ingrained in the culture's conception of femininity, as they had been for centuries" (5). Toni Morrison exhibits the thematic occurrence of female madness in several of her works and draws a distinct link between the onset of mental instability in several of her female characters and the unforeseen absence of a male. While this male is typically an object of the women's romantic affection, Morrison's female characters also display insanity at the loss or lack of male family members—normally a father figure. The absence of a male loved one is not only that of a physical nature such as death or abandonment; instances also occur of the male being physically present while the female feels ignored or denied affection by the male, or worse, becomes the victim of sexual, physical, or mental abuse at his hands. The women abiding in the abandoned convent of *Paradise* (1997) all possess memories of varied detrimental

experiences with men before they come together to live independently of the opposite sex. As a result of their assumed autonomy from men, the women are accused of being a "new and obscene breed of female" and undergo scrutiny, ambush, and attempted murder at the hands of the town's male citizens (Kakutani 1).

Scholars, authors, and theorists across disciplines have assigned their own sets of ideals to the cause of the common literary occurrence that is termed female insanity, madness, or derangement in literature. Renowned author and lecturer Alexander Morison makes definitive connections between madness and love in his series of lectures on mental diseases when stating to his audience that "love produces febrile symptoms, and increased sensibility, when hopeless—sometimes insanity" and defines "love-madness" as a "disease of young women" (qtd in Small 33). The loss of romantic love or the abandonment by a lover seems to surface as the most common reason for the onset of this female hysteria. Morrison's novels present a pattern of male characters who wander from place to place, not necessarily in search of any particular thing, but not held captive by the relationships they have fostered with women. In many of her works, Morrison's female characters are women reared in families that consist solely of females after the male has taken "flight." These women, who have become psychologically attached to the construct of family that calls for a male to be present in a healthy and nourishing capacity, lose their sanity at his failure to fill that space. These deserted women, on the contrary, become servants to the societal paradigm of what relationships between men and women (whether lovers, father/daughter, brother/sister) should resemble. As a result, they labor to serve and nurse the relationship back to societal normality in an effort to assure that it survives as the social order has deemed it should. When the relationships begin to resemble what is termed as unhealthy or off-balance due to a dysfunction brought on by male flight, the women are stripped of the

occupation that they have been chided to embrace. Consequently, their mental stability suffers. Morrison's female characters are literally driven mad because of the position into which they are forced by the absence of the male in a "nourishing way" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 344). Morrison's inclusion of mental ailments traditionally associated with the female gender—hysteria, insanity, and madness—continues a persistent literary tradition in which mental imbalance falls onto women in the wake of domestic unbalance representative of and initiated by the "flight" of their men.

In this study, I assert that in *Beloved, Song of Solomon, Paradise, Love,* and *A Mercy* female characters experience a jarring of their mental capacities as the result of a disturbance within the existing social structure of the family—the absence of a male figure within the world of the text. The circumstances of each woman's mental break render different symptoms and outcomes. Evading maternal responsibility has served as the perhaps the most telling symptom of female madness across centuries and cultures; this study will focus primarily on the women who display a distinct type of behavior in their mad states—behavior that results in the infliction of harm or neglect of their offspring. In order to display the longevity of the connection established between madness and femaleness and the deeply seeded roots of assigning diagnoses of insanity to women who failed to display conventional signs of mothering, this study will explore classical Greek female archetypes in conjunction with Morrison characters. Each section will draw connections between the female characters in the five Morrison texts selected for this study and their semblance to the female entities in ancient Greek myths as they relate to the causes and symptoms of their madness. I make specific connections from both canons of literature to the trope of female madness and explore the effects that prescribed societal roles for women across cultures have on the onset of apparent mental imbalance within women.

Helen Small's *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865* discusses various occurrences in literature of female madness as the result of love lost. She begins her work by exploring the suicide of deserted wife, Sarah Fletcher. Small denotes the many different ways that Fletcher's community documents her unfortunate death. This work provides extensive examples of the loss of female sanity at the hands of a male lover's absence throughout the literary canon. Valerie Pedlar reviews Small's work and makes a correlation between "the woman who has been deserted by her lover" and historical dramatic figures such as Ophelia. This work assists in the establishment of a "long tradition of love-mad women" that far exceeds the literary tradition of madness explored in Morrison's work. Shoshana Felman reviews such works as *Women and Madness* by Phyllis Chesler in "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy." Felman's piece gives voice to the idea that existence as a woman and the state of madness is presented as synonymous in much of modern literature. Numerous studies suggest that female madness is a cry of rebellion to patriarchal authority. The occurrences of female madness described in psychological studies attach a socially scientific explanation for similar episodes observed by anthropological studies. Anthropologist Todd Sanders illustrates the Zulu's portrayal of the occurrence of female madness as "rituals of rebellion" and asserts the existence of this ritual as "women's ritual response to everyday patriarchal structures" (469). Within the Zulu culture the "rituals of rebellion" are performed for various rites. The rain rite specifically "required obscene behaviour by the women and girls…at various stages of the ceremonies women and girls went naked, and sang lewd songs. Men and boys hid and might not go near" (Sanders 469). This description of the Zulu rain rite "rituals of rebellion" by women is markedly similar to the narrator's description of women in Morrison's *Love* (2003):

> Women began to straddle chairs and dance crotch out on television, when all the magazines started featuring behinds and inner thighs as though that's all there is to a woman, well, I shut up altogether. Before women agreed to spread in public, there used to be secrets—some to hold, some to tell. (3)

Scholar Tessa Roynon asserts that Morrison's work intentionally connects with its Greco-Roman mythological predecessors in her article "A New 'Romen' Empire: Toni Morrison's *Love* and the Classics" (31). Morrison's familiarity with classical tradition can be traced back to her classics minor while attending Howard University. I hope to use the above examples and others to display a consistent trend in academic disciplines (psychology, literary, and anthropological) of a discourse that pathologizes female actions that fall outside of the realm of prescribed normalcy as madness.

I intend to establish the link between the women from Morrison's literature and the female characters that appear in the myths of classical Greek tradition in this study. It occurs to me that the society, in which both sets of women find themselves, has provided finite strictures for what a normal family configuration should resemble. As long as these structures are upheld, the women perform within the gender roles dictated by their societies. Once the construct of the home and family is compromised by the "flight" of the male, the women resort to behaviors outside of their performative gender roles. It appears that this occurs in order for the women to gain control of an environment that had otherwise been controlled for them—by their society and their men. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison openly asserts that families that maintain a mono-gendered makeup, most often fall victim to producing emotionally imbalanced individuals. By creating failed matrilineally-structured families in her novels, Morrison demonstrates the premise for her assertion that "female who reproduces the female

who reproduces the female" is a "disability we must be on guard against" if balance is to be maintained within the family ("Rootedness" 344). By displaying the failure of the male characters to perform properly within their role and the connection that failure has to the collapse of what is termed as the female's sanity, I intend to display the necessity for a successful and consistent performance of gender by both sexes in order to achieve the desired balance dictated to be sufficient and healthy by societal standards. It is my hope that examples from the myths of ancient Greece will strengthen the illustration of such portrayals in Morrison's work and provide a view into the actions of women within her texts that surpasses a simple and superficial diagnosis of female madness. The Morrison female characters focused upon in this study connect across the worlds of the texts they inhabit. *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, *Love*, and *A Mercy* will provide the foundation for this study. The examination of characters in each of these novels will support the notion that the women in Morrison's work share a common bond in that they suffer loss of mental stability when the presence of both genders does not exist in the way that society has deemed necessary.

The connection between love and madness is apparent in classical tradition—consider the mythical couple Eros (love) and his beautiful wife, Psyche—love and madness personified and married at that! When Eros leaves Psyche, she is forced to undertake arduous tasks in order to regain her marital union and be granted the opportunity to bear his child. Psyche must perform in order to maintain the imposed female desires of love, marriage, and motherhood. This myth provides a vivid example of what feminist Judith Butler describes in her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" as gender performatives. Psyche must act within her role if she is to continue the performance of the female gender and achieve the rewards that society grants this performance. Ancient Greek society provided very little liberty for women. Although differing

classes of women existed (i.e. wives, concubines, hetaerae), the activities of all women were mostly relegated to subservient domesticity. Euripedes' Medea illustrated her detestation with the inferior roles of women in ancient Greek society proclaiming, "Of all creatures who live and have intelligence, we women are the most miserable […] People say that we women lead a life without danger inside our homes, while men fight in war; but they are wrong. I would rather serve three times in battle than give birth once" (cited in Pantziara 28).

Nineteenth-century psychological studies identified women who forewent their "wifely" or "motherly" duties as having been mad or mentally disturbed. The obligatory functions of women in nineteenth-century Europe draw striking resemblances to that of women within ancient Greek culture. The nineteenth-century madwomen "no longer cared how they looked," "refused to eat," no longer cared for or looked after their children and were accused of acting outside of the prescribed gender roles of the female (Chesler 45). In ancient Greek culture a woman's place was the *oikos* (household), and disregard for her domestic obligations was punishable by law, thus connoting such actions as contrary and intolerable by society (Pantziara 28). The marginalizing of women in Greek culture is echoed in myths (such as that of Psyche and Eros)—similar to the treatment of women in American culture and thus the American literary canon. Women in ancient Greek culture were expected to occupy the atmosphere of the home and act as mothers, lovers, and domestic figures without any objection just as nineteenth and mid-twentieth century Western culture called for its women to do. Penelope demonstrates ideal behavior for a woman of ancient Greece in maintaining fidelity during Odysseus' employment with the Greek army and during his ten year journey back to Ithaca as she is expected. Men of this ancient culture were called upon to display more concern for their societal duties of warfare and enterprise than that of their women and families. Evidence of this can be

found in Hector's trite dismissal of Andromache's pleading for him to forego his fatal spar with Achilles and consider his family (*The Iliad*). She admonishes Hector in saying "Too brave! Thy valour yet will cause thy death. Thou hast no pity on thy tender child, nor me, unhappy one, who soon must be thy widow" (cited in Guerber 286).

The male counterparts to these women often acted in ways that proved detrimental to the familial and societal structure the women had been compelled to accept and embody—denying these female characters the opportunity to do what was expected of them in their society and forcing them to revert to actions that cause them to be described and regarded as divergent and thus mad. Mythological character Electra acts as the aggressor in the plot to murder her mother, Clytemnestra, and preserve her brother's life placing her dangerously outside of the realm of the female in ancient Greek culture. Before her slaying, Clytemnestra encourages her lover, Aegisthus, to aid her in brutally murdering her husband, Agamemnon, who has sacrificed their daughter at sea and returned from war with a lover of his own. Medea provides yet another example of a female character in ancient Greek myth that performs outside of her prescribed societal gender role by taking the lives of her children in an act of revenge against her neglectful husband. There are several other female deities and mortals in classical Greek tradition that will serve to provide examples of madwomen for the purposes of this study.

Across Toni Morrison's texts the reader encounters women who appear broken because of their existence as a contradiction to the characteristics of the prescribed societal gender role of the female within their community. These female characters occupy a space that does not provide the social construct for the home and thus they revert to behaviors that are not socially accepted. Within various Morrison texts, the family, as society has constructed it, is in disarray

and as these women work to mend what has been accepted as the natural order, they are forced to occupy roles that deviate from social parameters. This forced method of survival wears heavily upon the psyche of the female characters within Morrison's texts. It appears the author calls upon her knowledge of the women in classic Greek tradition to illustrate these occurrences and give them depth and life. When the female archetypes within Greek myths and the female characters in Morrison's work display traits that move away from socially acceptable female behavior, their actions are pathologized and the women are diagnosed as mad. The flight of the male, which appears to occur without consultation of the female or consideration of the affect it may have on her, serves as the impetus for female characters resorting to behavior that is socially unacceptable. The women adjust to their socially unbalanced space creating methods of survival that patriarchal society detests and negatively prescribes as mad. Women in each of the texts selected for this study serve to support the notion that dysfunction occurs within the community when an essential element has been removed or has become debilitating to its counterparts. Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, portrays a mad, abused Pecola and her distant, emotionally scarred mother, Mrs. Breedlove. The reader observes each woman becoming mentally fragmented at the hands of Cholly Breedlove's dysfunction. Mrs. Breedlove, Cholly, and Pecola are not unlike Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, and Electra in ancient Greek myth; although there are certain elements between the two stories that prove dissimilar (i.e. the rape of Pecola and the murder of Agamemnon), the familial dysfunction of the two families shares a striking resemblance. The same mental defragmenting that the female characters in *The Bluest Eye* experience also proves true of love-mad Hagar in *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*'s emotionally disturbed, hysteric Gigi, *Love*'s demented May, and *A Mercy*'s rejected Florens. This study will explore Pilate and Ruth (*Song of Solomon*), Sethe (*Beloved*), Mavis (*Paradise*), Christine and

May (*Love*), and Rebekka and Sorrow (*A Mercy*) as characters whose mental instability results in detrimental actions enacted by them towards their children. Classical Greek female archetypes such as Medea, Clytemnestra, and Electra will provide a connection between Morrison's characters' actions and those of the women represented in Greek myth. The similarities between Morrison's female characters within the five novels and their connections to ancient Greek female archetypes receive in-depth analysis in this study. I intend to support my assertions by providing specific examples between Morrison's texts and these myths.

Regardless of discipline and culture, femaleness and madness seem to coincide under the watchful patriarchal eye. Morrison's characters display a belief that sustainability in their respective worlds can be gained by reverting to a coping mechanism that provides an inner solace for the character but manifests as symptoms of mental instability outwardly. This study seeks to focus primarily on the intermingling of two thematic occurrences in separate arenas. Morrison forged a marriage between the trope of female madness—a constant within the traditional literary canon and the flight of the black male—a distinct element of African American literature and culture. This study allows for an in-depth analysis of the creation of Morrison's female characters and the situations in which they find themselves within the world of the texts. On the surface, these female characters appear (as they have been regarded by society) to be weak, victims of mistreatment, abandonment, and rejection. It is my hope that this study will redefine them as strong and resourceful despite circumstance and display Morrison's skill and knowledgeable blending of two canons that otherwise are considered dissimilar and unrelated. Other scholars, such as Tessa Roynon, have highlighted the correlation between Morrison's texts and classical Greek tradition, and I seek to do so in a way that is innovative as well as informative and useful.

CHAPTER I: "*CRAZY LIKE A FOX*": FEMALE MADNESS: MALADY, MOVEMENT, AND MORRISON

The discussion of female madness among classically trained physicians, theorists such as Elaine Showalter, writers such as Hélène Cixous, and even the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud continue to provoke discussion that merits our attention, its longevity, and variety of standpoints. Ponderings over the frequent occurrence of the loss of mental stability in women and the question of the cause of this phenomenon bear several different theories based upon their origin. Women became the focal point of studies in psychoanalysis, and the philosophy surrounding mental illness beginning in the late eighteenth century; however, men dominated these academic disciplines and were responsible for the diagnoses of mental illnesses in female patients. As early as the mid-1600s, statistics depicted women outnumbering their male counterparts in what was referred to as "public lunatic asylums" (Showalter 3). The increasing number of cases of madness in women (especially beginning in the eighteenth century) led to questions of the authenticity of these diagnoses. Were women susceptible to mental frailty as a biological curse? Had the dominance of a patriarchal society branded the disempowered sex as mad in order to sustain control? Or was there a message in it all? Had women begun to manipulate society and use madness as a means to strengthen their voice? Evidence exists to support each of the previous claims. Madness and femaleness has sustained a marriage from the ideals of the "male-dominated and possibly misogynistic psychiatric profession" of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to that of the more contemporary ideals of feminist philosophers, theorists, and writers. This chapter explores the ways and the reasons that madness has been relegated to the female gender. Madness in women as a biological inevitability and as a diagnosis for women or those who exhibit behavior of associated with the gender will undergo a

survey that relates to acts of resistance undertaken by women in order to possess and strengthen their silenced voice within society. I will also draw attention to the portrayal of both of these explanations for the coupling of women and mental instability in Toni Morrison's depiction of the female characters in her novels.

The female has not always been mad. Madness before the late eighteenth century was characterized as male although not masculine. Lunatics were considered lesser versions of males. Eighteenth century sculptor, Caius Gabriel Cibber created two distinct works that served to represent the popular perception of madness during his time—both male. Cibber's "Raving Madness" and "Melancholy Madness," both fashioned with saddened and troubled countenances, are nudes in positions of submission—both weak despite their dominant gender (Showalter 8). The two manacled structures both lay in nonthreatening and defenseless positions at the gates of the Bethlem Hospital[1]. This all but masculine depiction of the state of madness was over time displaced by the image of the mad woman. With female patients increasingly outnumbering male patients from century to century, mental illness took on a new agent—the woman. The mad female has come to be a cultural tradition that has evolved across centuries as medical and cultural studies have provided more falsely conclusive evidence in favor of the mentally-ill female archetype.

Although it has never been asserted that mental illness exists only in women, the statistics that support an overrepresentation of female psychiatric patients have remained consistent since

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[1] Bethlem Hospital is a psychiatric hospital in London. Bethlem is recognized as the world's first and oldest institution to specialize in the mentally ill. Although the hospital is now at the forefront of humane psychiatric treatment, for much of its history it was notorious for cruelty and inhumane treatment – the epitome of what the term "madhouse" connotes to the modern reader.

the late seventeenth century. Showalter contests such readings of statistics, arguing that "women's high rate of mental disorder is a product of their social situation, both their confining roles as daughters, wives, and mothers and their mistreatment by a male-dominated and possibly misogynistic psychiatric profession" (3). If a woman's mental instability is but a product of a patriarchal and oppressive environment and overbearing strictures of gender performance, her loss of mental facilities serves as a response to that particular milieu. Thus the notion of the female malady came into being. One would assume that the statistic regarding the overrepresentation of women in asylums could serve as proof that more women were indeed suffering from mental illnesses; however, the circumstances under which women were committed to asylums during the mid-to-late-eighteenth century and beyond were often biased by male opinion. Author Phyllis Chesler highlights the unjust imprisonment of women in asylums during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in both Europe and North America in stating,

> a man had the legal right to lock his perfectly sane wife or daughter away in a mental asylum…Authoritarian, violent, drunken, and/or insane husbands had their wives psychiatrically imprisoned, sometimes forever, as a way of punishing them for being too uppity. (4)

The lack of legal autonomy for women at that time resulted in women being frequently discarded into asylums by their male family members. Chesler states that "battering, drunken husbands also had their wives imprisoned in order to live or marry with other women" and tells the story of a young woman in the mid nineteenth century, Adriana Brinckle, who was forced by her father to spend twenty-eight years in a psychiatric hospital after she sold furniture for which she had not completed full payment (62). Although young Miss Brinckle's economic transaction was her

true crime, her psychiatric sentence was the result of her causing her father embarrassment in a community where he was highly revered, and it was believed that she must have been mad in order to do so. At that time and in years before, women were considered the property of their fathers until marriage, when they became their husband's property. Brinckle had also committed a social crime in assuming the position of one who would have complete sovereignty in relation to her finances. This scenario was commonplace during the mid-nineteenth century.

Suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote of the asylum system that mistreated women.

> Could the dark secrets of those insane asylums be brought to light…we would be shocked to know the countless number of rebellious wives, sisters and daughters that are thus annually sacrificed to false customs and conventionalisms, and barbarous laws made by men for women (qtd in Chesler 62).

Assigning a diagnosis of madness to a woman as a means of controlling and forcing her to fit into a prescribed societal role is a practice traceable throughout several pieces of literature written by women as well as in the lives of women who desired to produce such literature. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* character Bertha was confined to the attic of the home she shared with her husband due to behavior she exhibited—behavior that labeled her mad. The only evidence the reader receives of Bertha's ill mental state after her psychiatric quarantine is the agony-ridden lamenting that comes from attic asylum. What is revealed is that Bertha is a wife who is put away and is to be replaced in the near future. Like many of the women who populated asylums, Bertha was removed from her domestic space for no longer being suitable to her husband. The portrayal of Bertha idealized the notion that the madwoman was a "voracious, sexualized monster"—a concept that maintained popularity during the time period in which

Bronte produced her work (Caminero-Santangelo 5). Charlotte Perkins Gilman produced "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) forty-five years after Bronte's 1847 work. Gilman's story is of a wife whose needs and feelings were disregarded by her husband and other male family members who considered her to suffer only from a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (1). Gilman's heroine was forbidden by her physician husband to work (domestically or otherwise) or to write in her journal and was ordered to spend time with her child who, she contended, had added to the ill feelings she experienced. She writes into her journal that her child is "such a dear baby. And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous" (Gilman 4). It is the neglect of her husband in what perhaps was post partum depression or another legitimate illness that ultimately led to the mental demise of this heroine. Post partum depression had yet to be recognized as a justifiable illness by medical experts at the time that Gilman's story was written. Gilman's work provides an ideal example of a husband perpetuating the male-dominated philosophy of female social position and leading to the amplification of mental dysfunction in the life of the women they were to love. The trend of female madness spread ferociously into the works of women writers. This movement in women's writing provided an outlet for the release of frustrations associated with the role of women in their respective societies. Women were able to speak out against the labels that had been attached to their sex for centuries by creating characters and stories that highlighted the problematic nature of such gender cataloging. Ironically, these women writers were committing the very offenses that could yield their being considered mad. They were expressing themselves in a creative arena—one that was not incorporated into the gender roles prescribed for women during their times.

Wife of author F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda, provides a real life illustration of a woman stifled by her dominant husband and disregarded as mad. Zelda possessed prolific talent when it

came to her writing. She was successful in completing an autobiographical novel long before her husband had completed any work of that length. Scott's utter resentment for his wife's gifted literary ability is recorded in letters written to one of the number of male psychiatrists to whom she was a patient. In one of his letters, Scott wrote, "perhaps Zelda could have developed into a genius if they had never met" (qtd in Chesler 66). But Zelda had married Scott and insisted, despite her lesser societal position as a woman, upon having a career as an author. Scott believed that her doggedness in her pursuit of a writing career was harmful not only to their marriage but to their daughter's well being as well. Despite her resistance, Scott had Zelda committed into a psychiatric hospital to dissuade her urgings to write and encourage her to position herself as the wife and mother he desired.[2]

Although the desire to dispose of unwanted wives, sisters, and daughters played an important role in the influx of female mental patients, there was an arm of psychiatric study that based its correlation of females and madness on biology. Psychiatric practice within the nineteenth century borrowed its focus of attempting to control the sexual nature that women presumably inherited due to their biology from its Victorian predecessors, for "Victorian psychiatry defined its task with respect to women as the preservation of brain stability in the face of almost overwhelming physical odds" (Showalter 74). Showalter writes of the recorded correlation between the femaleness and insanity that existed, in stating, "both asylum doctors and male patients reported being shocked by the obscenity of female patients" (74). John Millar, the

[2] Coincidentally, I was a guest at the Grove Park resort in Asheville, North Carolina while researching the couples' relationship. The resort boasts of having renowned author F. Scott Fitzgerald as a guest while his wife was receiving treatment at a nearby hospital. There was no mention in the hotel literature of the type of medical facility in which Mrs. Fitzgerald had been placed or the nature of her illness. Scott was depicted as a caring husband who wanted to be near his ailing wife during her treatment. How ironic that he was responsible for her having to be hospitalized at all.

superintendent of a London asylum, is recorded as having "observed that nymphomaniac symptoms were 'constantly present' when young women were insane" (Showalter 75). Acknowledgement and assertion of sexuality were far from acceptable for women. These traits were common and supported in males, but any woman displaying sexual desire or prowess were marked as insane, hysterical, or mad. It became common practice in asylums to attempt to regulate women's menstrual cycles as a means of treatment for insanity further enforcing madness as a female malady (Showalter 75). Showalter explained the regulation of women's menstruation cycles during the Victorian era as an "effort to postpone or extirpate female sexuality" by male physicians such as Edward Tilt who believed that "delayed menstruation…was 'the principle cause of the pre-eminence of English women, in vigour of constitution, soundness of judgment, and…rectitude of moral principle" (75). Male psychologists and asylum workers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries operated under the notion that the loss of mental stability for the female sex was inevitable.

Women's biological makeup was the impetus of mental dysfunction for some nineteenth century male physicians such as Benjamin Rush, Henry Maudsley, Edward Tilt and Robert Brudenell Carter. Carter contended that females were more prone to lose proper use of their mental faculties as the result of their assumed overactive sexual desires and emotions while Tilt held that "menstruation was so disruptive to the female brain that it should not be hastened but rather be retarded as long as possible" (Showalter 75). Tilt went on to suggest that young girls should be forced to take cold baths or showers and deterred from reading novels or even consuming meat for he believed these remedies would slow the process of womanhood and thus combat or prolong the onset of mental illness. Maudsley described hysteria as a physical disorder that branded women as "morally perverted" (Russell 19). Maudsley argued that,

> menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause were important causes of mental derangement. Menstruation in all women is supposed to give rise to mental instability which may lead on to acute mania. Pregnancy gives rise to melancholia and sometimes moral perversion, perhaps an uncontrollable craving for stimulants. Childbirth may cause mania or melancholia. The problem that arises with menopause is that 'the age of pleasing is past, but not always the desire.' Menopause may result, then, in insane jealousy and a propensity to stimulants. (Russell 20)

Based on his claims, Maudsley strongly believed that many of his female patients who were diagnosed as hysterical or mad were prone to performing in ways that would result in their derogatory mental diagnosis. Maudsley documents instances of,

> young women believing or pretending that they cannot stand or walk, who lie down, sometimes for months receiving sympathy when their only paralysis is paralysis of the will which an opportune lover could cure. He said that the women acted the way they did for an audience, but he didn't believe they were entirely willful imposters. (Russell 19)

Their biological makeup was to blame. He alleged that women were innately dishonest, immoral, and willing to commit fraud and isolated them as prime candidates for the disease. While Carter asserted that the more intense sexual drive that women possessed over men led to their madness, Maudsley felt that this drive and other characteristics assigned to the female gender led women to use whatever faculty they could in order to manipulate—even pretending madness. He supposed that women were "governed by the disintegrate will" and that "when she recovers she has no shame" (Russell 19). Female madness as a response to circumstance

surfaced in several schools of thought on the subject. Both contemporary feminists of the twentieth century and traditional male scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have asserted that female madness exists as the result of displeasure with self—the female self. Traditional male scholars such as Richard Napier argued that women who exhibited signs of hysteria were victims of stress brought on by the pressure of fulfilling their proper societal roles as women (Russell 20). These women were oppressed as daughters, wives, and mothers, and as the result their mental stability had collapsed. Napier's thoughts and assertions on the surface would appear to support the notion that women were socially subjugated, and thus sought reciprocity through their forgone mental state; however, like many male scholars of his time, Napier contended that the female was too inherently weak to withstand any of the social functions she was assigned. Maudsley's derogatory views of the female gender and its inclination to use symptoms of madness for personal gain perhaps strangely connect to the argument crafted by feminist theorists—that madness in women exists as an act of protest against the constraints of patriarchal society.

Women who were considered to be too "aggressive" or "promiscuous"—traits that were only acceptable for men—were described as "depressed, ugly […], angry […] or incurable" by the psychotherapists that desired to provide them with treatment for their prescribed illnesses (Chesler 3). The roles and expectations of women in the domestic sphere became more defined during the Victorian Era. Cibber's works exhibited traits attributed with femininity, as madness was thought to be an illness that plagued the feeble or frail. If a male was found to be mad, he lacked sufficient masculinity; if it was discovered that a female had succumbed to mental illness, nature was taking its course. For many western cultures, women and traits associated with their sex represented the irrational and therefore any illness that was characterized as being out of

one's mind was inherently female. Men who received a diagnosis of madness were considered to possess female traits. French terminology illustrates this concept in that the word for a male dressed in drag is *la folle*—the madwoman. Showalter articulates the ideas that led to the belief that female traits were essentially mad in stating:

> Even when both men and women had similar symptoms of mental disorder, psychiatry differentiated between an English malady, associated with the intellectual and economic pressures on highly civilized men, and female malady, associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women. Women were believed to be more vulnerable to insanity than men, to experience it in specifically feminine ways, and to be differently affected by it in the conduct of their lives. (7)

Two very pertinent and popular beliefs that existed during the eighteenth century surface in Showalter's statement—1) that women were more susceptible to madness than men and were naturally prone to mental dysfunction and 2) that madness revealed itself in very distinctive ways in the female gender.

It took female scholars, such as Phyllis Chesler and Elaine Showalter, to bring a new kind of attention to the parallel that had been established between women and madness within their respective works. These female scholars delved deeply into the abyss of patriarchal thought and theory that has rendered femaleness and madness as interchangeable, interwoven, and inevitably coupled. Showalter argues, "women were first defined, and then confined, as mad" in her analysis of the pairing of mental illness and the female species (5). Chesler begins her study *Women and Madness* by describing how modern academia had contributed a great deal to the continuance of the ideal that supported madness as feminine. She wrote of being encouraged in

her studies to view “the normal female (and human) response to sexual violence, including incest, as a psychiatric illness” and declared that while operating under that thought pattern that she and others “blamed the woman as ‘seductive’ or ‘sick.’ We believed that women cried ‘incest’ or ‘rape’ in order to get sympathetic attention or revenge” (Chesler 1). In the eyes of modern science, women are still inherently, instinctively mad. Feminist thinkers began to challenge the traditional notions of madness during the nineteenth century. Theorists such as Cixous and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg asserted an innovative concept—that women’s madness was but a protest against the constraints of the prescribed gender role of the female (Caminero-Santangelo 3). The idea that women were exhibiting symptoms of hysteria and anorexia (conditions considered to be predominantly female) in order to regain control of their environment and person became quite popular in the nineteenth century, causing the female maladies to be viewed as an avenue to bring an end to the silence that women had endured up until that point. Some female writers and theorists rejected the notion that any power could be gained in assuming the façade of a madwoman. Showalter maintained that a faux power move such as becoming the madwoman could only lead to powerlessness—defeating the intended purpose suggested by other feminists. Social occurrences, such as World War II, challenged the role of the female in the patriarchal view as women were forced to not only be wives and mothers, but also heads of households and bread winners as well. Women needed to take on responsibilities that only fifty to sixty years earlier could and would have had them branded as mad and possibly thrown into an asylum. This paradigm shift paints for us the canvas of women assimilating into the roles that were necessary for their survival and the continued existence of their families.

Morrison's inclusion of disturbing mental ailments such as hysteria, insanity, and madness within her female characters—continues a persistent psychological and literary tradition. Her works join those of other female writers such as Bronte (*Jane Eyre*), Gilman ("The Yellow Wallpaper"), Eudora Welty ("June Recital"), Kate Millett (*The Loony-Bin Trip*), and various others who told the madwoman's story and gave validity to a figure that had in other works and history been discarded and forgotten. The female characters created by these canonical women writers share a common bond that connects them across the canon. Morrison's female characters possess similar traits to that of Gilman in reference to the affect that simulated madness has on the motherly role. Just as Gilman's heroine deems it necessary and vital to her sanity to be physically separated from her offspring, Morrison's female characters connect their survival to renegotiating their roles as mothers. Writer Maria Caminero-Santangelo refers to Morrison as a "founding figure" who invokes "madness to a degree surpassing that of any other twentieth-century American woman writer" (11). Morrison offers literary pictures of women surviving circumstances and situations that chip away at their willingness and/or ability to maintain the prescribed role for their gender. She introduces the twentieth century reader to female characters who yield to ostensibly psychotic behavior due to their broken and abusive relationships with male loved ones; when abandoned or neglected by the men in their lives, each woman discussed in this study appears to forego socially accepted practices of mothering. The connection between these Morrison characters and others from the five novels focused upon in this study and the facts surrounding the evolution of female madness is obvious in that each of the women appears overlooked and discarded by their environments and societies. Their actions share similarities to the female characters that grace the pages of other women writers and the women who were cast off into asylums of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

The most pertinent connection to this study is the relationship of Morrison's female characters with the female characters of ancient Greek myth. When discussing women and the gender's tie to madness, Chesler calls upon the ancient myth of the mother and daughter Demeter and Persephone. Like the many women who were branded as mad over centuries and like Morrison's characters, Demeter and Persephone "react—to rape or to the loss of a daughter or virgin self" (Chesler 89). The tradition of female madness maintains just as much longevity as the notion that women's actions are reactionary to wrongful treatment by a male-dominated society as illustrated in Chesler's mention of the rage demonstrated by Demeter after the rape of her daughter. Chesler's assertion that intimate and involved mother-daughter relationships foster "mothers who produce more mothers to nurture and sustain mankind with their miraculous biological gifts of crops and daughters" (Chesler 89) correlates to Morrison's "female who reproduces the female who reproduces the female" that Morrison speaks of in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (344). In the previous quotations, both authors allude to the concept that mothers inherently impart their mothering practices onto their daughters. Throughout history there appears to exist a distinct fear of the women who bear the badge of madness based upon their unconventional methods of mothering that contaminates their female offspring with their practices and most of all—with their madness. This study does not aim to pinpoint one main reason for woman's connection to the state of madness. All of the causes outlined by scholars (some feminists, others quite the opposite) maintain a certain air of validity for their time period. Each case of female madness is unique to the woman who is involved and should be considered as such as opposed to being cloaked into a sweeping generalization of how and why. The actions of certain female archetypes within Greek myths inform those of their literary successors in the centuries following their inception. Morrison admittedly incorporates elements

of Greek myth into several of her characters and the actions of her novels. One of the most evident incorporations of Greek classical myth in Morrison's texts materializes in her female characters and their apparent madness. For centuries, women have been tied to mental illness. Perhaps Morrison identified ancient Greece's depictions of its most familiar female archetypes as the documented beginning of this phenomenon of female madness. The similarities that exist between Morrison's female characters and the goddesses and mortal women of ancient Greece highlight the author's tendency to draw upon this early example to mold her characters.

CHAPTER II: "*A CLASSIC TYPE OF EVIL FORCE*": GODDESS MOTHERS

The onset of what was diagnosed as insanity in women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was often attributed to their defiance of what was deemed natural order, attempts to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives and additions to their maternal functions. Madness and its contrived correlation to femaleness possess a documented longevity traceable as far back as the myths of Ancient Greece. Author Phyllis Chesler begins her study *Women and Madness* by stating that she had "read novels and poems about sad, mad, bad women and devoured mythology and anthropology, especially about goddesses, matriarchies, and Amazon warrior women" (3). Mental frailness was believed to exist as an artifice of the evil spirits before the eighteenth century—"the mad were thought to be possessed by the Devil or other evil spirits, and they acquired special knowledge…forbidden, special knowledge" (Russell 4). As the result of the correlation of evilness and madness, the mad were cast out of their towns and villages—rejected by their surrounding society. Madness was thought to give its victims access to "forbidden wisdom," mental illness possessed a certain power that slowly faded in later centuries (Russell 4). The fourteenth century brought about a grouping of the mad with heretics, magicians, astrologers, and host of other factions who defied social conventions. Although it was not only women who suffered at the hands of the law for their proposed ailments and associations, they suffered the most as "it was believed that women, among all those possessed, were a greater source of evil" (Russell 5).

As madness came to be considered as "the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality" in the latter part of the eighteenth century, a connection was also drawn between mothers and their connections to their female descendants as it relates to madness. Insanity and its elements were believed to exist as a generational curse that could be

inherited from mother to daughter and so on. It was supposed that once madness appeared in female patients, mental disorder might be passed on to the next female generation endangering future daughters who were to becomes future mothers. Darwinian psychiatrists agreed that "the greater tendency of mothers to transmit insanity to their female children was among the chief causes for the predominance of women among asylum patients" (Showalter 123). The biological necessity of mothers is clear; however, centuries of societies have toiled over the extent of maternal influence that should be exercised by the female parent after childbirth. Nature calls for mothers to act as custodians of life for the period of time that it takes for a fetus to mature within the womb which lends to the notion that mothers should maintain some connection to that child and its life. When mothers throughout history have breached this belief by ending a life that was created inside of them, their actions have been deemed unnatural and undoubtedly the effect of a mental dysfunction within that woman. A portion of the diagnoses of madness in women throughout history has been attributed to the way in which they cared for or did not care for their children. Neglect of a child served as a tell-tale sign of a woman who was surely losing control of her mental faculties. The offenses of women who neglected their offspring in the most violent fashion—child murder—were greater than those who simply took the life of another adult, for they had killed their child and denied the womb. Depending upon the period in which these women lived, this offense was inconceivable and most certainly beyond forgiveness.

In Ancient Greece, children were considered chattel of their fathers and were at times offered as human sacrifices to the gods. Women were considered property of their fathers until marriage and after that, assets of their husbands. Just as women maintained no autonomy over their personal affairs, they also possessed no parental rights to their children. Children and their mothers were both the possessions of the father and husband of that family during the eighteenth

century—giving both mother and child lateral worth and position within the family. The denial of parental rights to mothers is documented across cultures in texts, customs, and beliefs systems. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman depicts a heroine who is suffering from a mental ailment and whose spouse believes that time with their child will mend her mental faculties. Gilman had experienced a similar occurrence when she suffered from "nervous depressions with a slight hysterical tendency" that she documented being rid of when she was away from her husband as well as her child (Russell 127). The nineteenth-century author claimed that her mental ailment returned when she was reunited with her family and her duties of motherhood. S. Weir Mitchell, the psychiatrist who was to treat Gilman, dismissed her claims of being in a state of hysteria as the result of her imposed maternal responsibility and ordered the author to "become more involved with her family and to give up writing" (Russell 128). Not only has socially-accepted mothering served as the litmus test to measure a woman's sanity, it has also been treated as a remedy to coax her back into her socially prescribed role. Female literary characters such as Mary Wollstonecraft's Maria and Charlotte Bronte's Bertha as well as women documented in medical studies as early as the seventeenth century were expected to return to a mental sanity by assuming prescribed societal roles for their sex—namely motherhood. Author Denise Russell remarks that "the reproductive function…defined the woman's nature" during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as far as science was concerned and notes a nineteenth century doctor stating, "It seems the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built a woman around it" (13). Some women were forcibly impregnated and others obligated to dote and coddle their young. These women were doomed to a label of madness and social exile if they fail at mothering. Russell elaborates on the use of the diagnoses of mental illness in women as a control tactic of patriarchy in stating,

> Women who tried to develop their creativity came in for psychiatric censure…women who tried to engage in political activity ran the risk of committal to a psychiatric institution, and women who pressed for greater educational opportunities found that doctors were leading the debate against them—claiming that the risk of insanity was too great. At this point it is clear that a link has been made between women and psychiatrists as moral guardians. The latter are needed by the patriarchal culture to keep women within their narrow role boundaries. (12)

Maintaining lineage has always been dependent upon the biology of a woman. Although the women of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries bore no right to dictate their children's welfare or lifestyle, they were still expected to play a specific role in the lives of their progeny. This role does not differ greatly from what is thought to be ideal for a mother in modern times. They were to provide nourishment for the child and attend their physical needs—assure the child was fed, clean, and well. Women who were cast away in mental institutions were stripped of this role of motherhood; some were placed in those very environments for presuming the right to decide what was best for their offspring in attempting to escape their marriage and take their children into their sole custody. Such an act was a blatant disregard for the acknowledged function of a mother. From Ancient Greece to eighteenth-century Europe to twentieth-century America, mothers have been expected to act as nurturers. Mothers are to be protectors of life while the child is in their womb and sustainers of that life once the child is beyond the birth canal. Any instance where a mother defies this prescribed role garners harsh and disdainful criticism from society.

A distinctive antagonism exists and has existed for centuries against the type of holistic mothering that leads women to take charge of their child's welfare and well being in addition to nurturing and caring for their young. It is this type of mothering that eighteenth-century laws attempted to guard against by affording women no legal right to their children. Women were allowed and expected to care for children (as well as younger family members), but that is where their motherly duties were to cease. Eighteenth-century author, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote extensively of the disenfranchisement of women during her time. One of her most vivid works on this topic, *Maria* or *The Wrongs of Women*, gives a detailed account of the title character's struggle to maintain custody of her child after abandoning her physically abusive husband. Scholars of the time period have asserted that Wollstonecraft's creation of Maria was a direct depiction of the tragic experience of her younger sister, Eliza, who suffered from what has since been termed as post-partum depression. Wollstonecraft documented in letters that she encouraged Eliza to abandon her marriage and child for the benefit of her health. The practices of law within the eighteenth century would have not allowed Eliza to do either on her own accord; she would have been subjected to a sentence in a mental asylum which would have stripped her of her child, freed her husband of his marital obligations, and undoubtedly provided little to no medical treatment for her ailment. Wollstonecraft's sister and fictional character, Maria, were labeled in much the same way as female archetypes of Greek myths, Clytemnestra who is classically depicted as "adulterous, jealous, and murderous" and Medea who described as committing "the woman's unspeakable breach of her societally appointed role as wife and mother" (Komar 23; McDermott 7). These classical characters acquired a marker of madness that has followed them since their inception into the literary canon.

Mythical Greek characters such as Medea of Euripides' *Medea* and Clytemnestra of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* have become the historical representations of female anger and spousal retaliation. Author Kathleen Komar poignantly identifies the idea within Western culture that violence committed at the hands of classical female archetypes that were perhaps created to reify the ideal image of femininity proves unsettling in stating, "violence seems especially disturbing when it concentrates around women in the classical tradition" (1). These two female archetypes are the consummate examples of rage that leads to the murder of loved ones—namely children and husbands. Author Domnica Radulescu describes the universal view that Medea's myth has garnered for the character in stating,

> Medea, that terrifying name that conjures up in our minds all sorts of grisly scenes of blood, sorcery, and human devastation—Medea, the female figure who has haunted the Western imagination from at least as far back as the seventh century B.C.E. and has made her way through Greek and Roman antiquity into our own century. (87)

The horror that surrounds this mythical character is chiefly based upon her taking the lives of her children. It is further complicated and intensified by the motive identified for Medea's filicide[3]—spousal retaliation or revenge. Throughout the Euripidean drama, this female protagonist displays several actions and characteristics that contradict the ideal role of women as docile nurturers within ancient Greek culture on into modern societies. Author Emily A. McDermott describes Medea as "at once heroic, sympathetic, and morally repugnant…her actions in the play range from deceitful to utterly repellent" (1). Despite her feats of heroism in assisting her husband, Jason, in retrieving the Golden Fleece of Colchis, Medea is remembered

[3] Filicide—killing of a child older than one year of age by a parent (McKee 5)

primarily for her murderous crime against nature—the murder of her children. Prior to taking the lives of her offspring, the unconventional female character murders her brother in order to escape her father and homeland, and upon being discarded by Jason for a second wife kills this new bride as well as her own father. Medea shares a distinct similarity with the real women in history and fictional characters such as Charlotte Bronte's Bertha and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's female protagonist in having been cast away by her spouse who desired another woman; she breaks from them in deciding to avenge her dismissal with murder. Medea's nurse recounts her mistress's distress with Jason's indiscretion and betrayal in the lines of *Medea*.

> For Jason has become/ A traitor to his children and my mistress/ He abandons her, to lie in a royal bed/ He's marrying the king's daughter, Creon's child/ My poor Medea loses all her rights/ And honours, everything. "He swore an oath,"/ She cries, "He gave his word! I trusted him!" (Euripedes 21)

McDermott describes Medea's rage-filled act towards Jason as an "unspeakable breach of her societally appointed role as wife and mother" (7). At the point in her murderous rampage before she turns her rage towards the lives of her children, Medea embodies the stereotypical nature of women—jealousy. Medea's supposed jealousy serves as a direct correlation within patriarchal thought to the beliefs of physicians such as Henry Maudsley and Edward Tilt who theorized the possession of childish characteristics by women. Maudsley noted that "insane jealousy" existed in women as the result of menopause (Russell 20). Classical tradition and Greek tragedy specialist Emily McDermott describes the essential plot of the myth as having been "centered on the response of a wife to her husband's defection and betrayal of his pledged fidelity" and the title character as "a mother who will kill the children she loves, simply to devastate the husband

she hates" (7). Medea's feelings of disenfranchisement as a woman and a wife in the patriarchally-structured society in which she resides are clear throughout Euripedes' work.

> My husband, has turned out the worst of men/ Of all the creatures that have life and reason/ We women are the most unhappy kind/ First we must throw our money to the wind/ To buy a husband; and what's worse, we have to/ Accept him as the master of our body (Euripedes 28)

In her statements, McDermott highlights the story's lack of focus on Medea's other murders or Jason. Medea is undeniably the hero of her myth as Jason is less than admirable in his feats, and his most notable accomplishment (retrieval of the Golden Fleece) is partly attributed to Medea. The murder of her children is the final act in Medea's quest for revenge; it is this act that has gained the ancient Greek character the most notoriety. The break from prescribed human nature that is represented in maternal filicide and infanticide[4] has provided longevity for the discussion of Medea as a myth as well as a character. The character Medea is the "much-slandered woman" who represents the struggle between vindication and female obligation (McDermott 7). This unconventional characterization of woman has for centuries provided an image that is problematic and provocative. Much like the ancient Greek character, the story of Medea incites a culturally stimulating discourse. It is common belief that Euripides added the element of maternal child murder to the story of Medea, as there are other versions that depict the Corinthians as the murders of the children in an act to punish Medea's murder of her father, their king. Hellenic Studies scholar Bernard M. W. Knox asserts that perhaps Euripides sought "to produce this unsettling effect, which disturbed his contemporaries as it disturbs us" (qtd in

[4] Infanticide—killing of a child younger than one year of age by a parent (McKee 5)

McDermott 2). Child murder was a disconcerting element for the literature of ancient Greece just as it is within modern society. McDermott describes the unrest brought on by the inclusion of the murder by a maternal character in stating, "In Euripidean tragedy, old certainties are shattered; what seems solid cracks and melts, foundations are torn up, direction lost" (2). If we consider Medea the tragic hero within her myth, we must identify a tragic flaw to accompany this characterization. Critiques identify the lack of the "nuture" or *trophe*[5] as Medea's most tragic flaw. Medea is rarely, if ever, studied simply as a woman who succumbs to jealous fits of rage—she is read and remembered as a mother who murders her children.

Clytemnestra differs a great deal from her fellow classical mythic mother; however, the similarities shared between Medea and Clytemnestra provide a distinct framework by which Morrison's female characters can be examined. Clytemnestra diverges from Medea and a number of the Morrison mothers, in that, although she plots to kill her son, she does not literally commit the murder of any of her children. The character does experience the dysfunction of one or more male figures throughout her life that arguably leads her to enact "violence against her own children—or at least her estrangement from them"—the neglect of her daughter, Electra, and the exile of her son, Orestes, and plot to kill him (Komar 29). Much like Medea, Clytemnestra is labeled according to her murderous acts throughout the action of her myth—she is described as a "godless spirit preying on her children" within the lines of *The Libation Bearers*, the second play in *The Oresteia* trilogy (l. 192). Across history, she represents female violence, jealous rage, revenge, and very little else. Forced to bear the emotional repercussions

[5] *trophe*—Greek *trophe* is defined in classical Greek lexicon as nourishment

of the murder of her first husband, Tantalus[6], and their child at the hands of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra is stripped of any motherly right to her child and forced into a marriage with the very man who had taken their lives. Agamemnon's murder of the unnamed child of Tantalus and Clytemnestra assumes that the life of their child coincides with that of its father and not the mother. Agamemnon wanted full claim to Clytemnestra and in order to obtain it, he alleviates any remnants of her current marriage—including the child spawned from the union. Clytemnestra is disallowed any right to decide the fate of her child despite her blood and maternal connection to her offspring and as we read later in *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Euminedes*, children often avenged the deaths of their fathers, but not their mothers. In *Agamemnon*, the first play of *The Oresteia* trilogy, Agamemnon's mistress, Kassandra, foretells Clytemnestra's demise at the hands of her son in proclaiming, "There will come another to avenge us,/born to kill his mother, born/ his father's champion." (ll. 1302-1304) Clytemnestra's place within the trope of maternal murder is represented in her plot to kill her son, Orestes, after she has murdered Agamemnon and his mistress, Kassandra. By this time in the action, Clytemnestra has lost two children at the hands of Agamemnon—her child with Tantalus and Iphigenia who was sacrificed at sea in order to aid in Agamemnon's war-related petitions to the gods. This classical female archetype experiences unambiguous instances of male flight. She is abandoned in death by her first husband, her current husband is responsible for the death of her first as well as two of her children, and her son vows to avenge his father's murder with her very life. Although Clytemnestra has taken Aegisthus as a lover in her husband's absence, Agamemnon's return home with Kassandra as a spoil of war may or may not offer yet another

[6] Clytemnestra's first husband, Tantalus, shared his name with his grandfather who was a Lydian king and founder of the line of Pelops, Atreus, Agamemnon, and Orestes. He ruled over the city of Lydia as well and was slain by Agamemnon, King of Mycenae. (Aeschylus 334)

betrayal as Iphigenia should be the one returning home with her father. Komar makes this distinction in stating, "vengeance for the slain daughter far outweighs any jealousy over a new concubine" (23). Classical depictions of Clytemnestra paint the mythic female character as an "adulterous, jealous, and murderous wife;" she is rarely seen as a victim of her circumstances brought about by patriarchal rule and structure (Komar 23). Clytemnestra endures judgment at the hand of the motherless female deity Athena within the course of the action,

> It is Athena who casts the deciding vote in Orestes' favor and proclaims matricide to be of lesser importance than patricide. Orestes' mother kills her husband Agamemnon for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia. Orestes avenges his father's death by killing his mother and is acquitted of the crime. In Aeschylus' trilogy, Athena says…I cast this stone for Orestes, for I did not have a mother who bore me; no, all my heart praises the male, may Orestes win… (Chesler 84)

Athena confirms the time period's accepted societal notion that paternal figures possessed a heightened value in comparison to mothers; therefore, deeming Orestes' crime as negligible and undeserving of severe punishment. The murderous youth is vindicated for his offense while Clytemnestra is judged only as a mother who has neglected her role and her offspring.

Morrison provides a unique perspective into the intimate elements of maternal child murder with many of the female characters in her novels. Perhaps the most shocking and obvious illustration of a child coming to its death at the hands of its mother is in her novel *Beloved*. The grotesque description of the "crawling already" baby lying in her mother's arms with a partially severed head shocks readers and critics (*Beloved* 152). Much like Euripides' employment of an unsettling topic and depiction, Morrison incorporates a certain astonishing factor in order to display a much more unsettling episode within the society in the world of her

text. As a society, we maintain unease for mothers who put to death their young and "we are morbidly curious about how a mother could destroy this first and most fundamental relationship" (McKee 5). Although Sethe's child murder in *Beloved* most likely provides the most blatant inclusion of a mother taking the life of her child(ren), this study also explores mothers within the texts of *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*, *Love*, and *A Mercy* who provide examples within Morrison's fiction of the same disquieting occurrence.

Morrison provokes thought into what type of love should exist or is appropriate and necessary in terms of motherhood with each of the women discussed within this study. Their acts towards their children differ from character to character and story to story; however, they all bear a strong resemblance to their ancient Greek mythical predecessors. Medea first rebels against her father, but it is dismissal by her husband that leads to the killing spree that ultimately ends with the death of her children. Each woman not only becomes a pariah of their respective communities; she also has the capability of being a literary outcast and a model of misguided and dysfunctional mothering. Pilate, Ruth, Sethe, Mavis, May, Christine, Sorrow, Rebekka, and Floren's seemingly unsuccessful mothering is all connected to a debilitating component that indirectly or directly has affected their place within society—the male who has taken flight within the world of the text. This group of Morrison's female characters experiences similar occurrences to those of Medea and Clytemnestra. All of the women experience a physical absence of a male that is pivotal to their lives (fathers, lovers, husbands, and sons) that ultimately forces the women to take the continuance of their lives and the security of their children into their own hands. Society called for each woman to rely on the nuclear familial structure and the males who abandoned them, whether physically or emotionally. At the moment when that relationship with the male is no longer reliable, the women are left to balance their lives and the

lives of their children as they deem fit. Just as Demeter is forced to condone the seasonal rape of her daughter Persephone in order to allow the young girl any sort of existence outside of the underworld, these mothers negotiate their roles as nurturers in ways that defy customary statutes for maternity in order to provide their children with their adaptation of survival. The decisions made by each woman place their children in literal danger and lead to their neglect or death. Society deems such outcomes as negative and fruitless; however, the women discussed in this study appear to conceptualize the effects of their lack of conventional mothering in a much different way.

> Perhaps the angry and weeping women in mental asylums are Amazons returned to earth these many centuries later, each conducting a private and half-remembered search for her Motherland—a search we call madness. Or perhaps they are failed Goddess-Mothers, Demeters, eternally and miserably unable to find their daughters or their powers… (Chesler 61)

Throughout history women who write have produced works depicting the struggle to thwart the marriage of femaleness and madness that the dominant culture imposes.

CHAPTER 3: "*HER TOO THICK LOVE*": MOTHERING MADNESS & NATAL NEGLECT

> *Women are foolish, you know, and mamas are the most foolish of all. As you know how mamas are, don't you? You got a mama ain't you? Sure you have, so you know what I'm talking about. Mamas get hurt and nervous when somebody don't like they children. First real misery I ever had in my life was when I found out somebody—a little teeny tiny boy it was—didn't like my little girl.*
>
> *(Song of Solomon 94)*

The female protagonists portrayed in five of Toni Morrison's canonical works demonstrate what Elaine Showalter describes as "woman's escape from the bondage of femininity into an empowering and violent madness" (Showalter 14). Morrison scholar Laurie Vickery contends that Morrison is "concerned with the relation between social power and individual psychology" and works to "give voice to those who are traumatized by oppressive social and familial forces" (91). The behavior of the mothers of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, *Love*, and *A Mercy* directly correlate to the rifts in their relationships with male loved ones. These males are not husbands and lovers, but also brothers, fathers, and sons. Since the beginning of Western civilization, society has encouraged familial structures that include a male and a female and their offspring. Within this prescribed configuration, the female is theoretically able to depend upon her male counterpart for sanctuary, structure, and sustenance; the woman is to submit to and to supply the progeny of that union. Any exploits outside of the accepted conduct for women typically result in a classification of mad, depressed, or insane for that woman. Denial or rejection of motherhood has for centuries served as the primary telltale symptom of madness in women diagnosed with mental illness. Modern society

tends to mark women in a similar way when they distance themselves from their children or bring direct harm to their young. The fits, pains, and trials of Morrison's heroines parallel the actions of women historically labeled as depressed or insane. Just as the 19th century female asylum patients had done, these female characters succumb to safeguarding themselves against society's standards with actions that mimic the symptoms of prescribed mental ailments. As the result, their children endure vast neglect.

Song of Solomon possesses one of the matrilineally structured households of Morrison's works. The family of Pilate, Reba, and Hagar is a group of communal outcasts at the onset of the action much like other women outlined in this chapter. In *Women and Madness* (1997), Chesler asserts that what is viewed in Western culture as psychological illness or madness "is shut away from understanding, respect—and from plain view…shut away from sight, shamed, brutalized, denied, feared, and drugged" (85). Not for a moment is the reader able to blend the actions and appearances of the grandmother, mother, and daughter in *Song of Solomon* with their surrounding community—they are set apart. Domestic space is often regarded as the center stone of a woman's rightful existence by many societies. Interestingly, Pilate, Reba, and Hagar occupy a domestic space that represents the opposite of all that is conventional and maternal:

> Pilate lived in a narrow single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground. She had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas. At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road. (*Song of Solomon* 27)

Pilate perhaps displays the oddest social behavior in comparison to her daughter and granddaughter. Due to the circumstances surrounding her birth and her affection for her father, brother, and nephew, Morrison's eccentric character Pilate is not unlike the Greek goddess Athena, who exclaims in the lines of *The Eumenides*, "No mother gave me birth/I honour the male, in all things but marriage/ Yes, with all my heart I am my Father's child" (ll. 751-753). Pilate was born "without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water" and with no navel—giving her no biological connection to the mother who was weak and had died shortly after her birth (*Song of Solomon* 27). She had only men to care for until the birth of her daughter Reba, whose father is never mentioned in the narrative. The first experience of male flight that Pilate experiences is her father's death. As a young child, her father was murdered while trying to protect the home and livelihood that allowed him to care for his two children—Pilate and her older brother, Macon. Macon inherently took charge of the care of his younger sister—becoming her surrogate father-figure— after their father's murder and regarded her as "the dearest thing in the world to him" (20). Macon's emotional flight from Pilate's life begins when the two separate during her early teen years. Pilate's unconventional style of adornment and rustic choice of lifestyle as an adult leads Macon to regard her as "odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt…a regular source of embarrassment" (20). Macon intentionally distances himself emotionally and then physically from his sister because of his disapproval for her way of life and outward appearance—dismissing her as mad. Pilate does not dress or present herself in a way that is socially acceptable for her time or community and Macon expresses annoyance for this exclaiming, "Why can't you dress like a woman? What's that sailor's cap doing on your head? Don't you have stockings?" when Pilate attempts to visit his family after the birth of his son, Milkman (20). Arguably, Pilate is marked as abnormal from birth as those in her community

who knew the story of her delivery remarked that "she had not come into this world through normal channels" (28). The story of her emerging from her mother's lifeless body had become an embellished legend not unlike that of Greece's goddesses and demigoddesses. Perhaps Pilate was destined to break from society's norms and mores at her conception; however, her peculiar idiosyncrasies surface for the reader after her father's abrupt and violent departure and Macon's blatant and apathetic exodus from her life. Macon evolved from a responsible brother carrying an infant Pilate in his arms to a neighbor's home while he and his father worked to a scornful adult regarding his younger sister as a snake who could be charmed but never changed into what he longed for her to be—normal.

Pilate's projection of her feelings of rejection (by her father and brother) abides in her daughter, Reba, who gives every item of value that she receives to man, and in her granddaughter, Hagar, who admits "some of my days were hungry ones" to her mother and grandmother (48). Hagar's hunger alludes to the lack of nourishment and neglect she experiences despite the constant presence of her maternal lineage. Her mother, Reba, exhibits no motherly connection to the young girl—regarding her as a sibling rather than an offspring. Reba is unable to comprehend Hagar's needs, conceivably because her nourishment is just as deficient. Although Pilate appears to possess complete understanding of what plagues her daughter and granddaughter, she is not positioned or equipped to address their lack. Pilate's response of "she don't mean food" to Hagar's profession of hunger triggers realization of a deficiency in Reba of which she is obviously all too aware. At the moment when Reba realizes that the child she had birthed longs for more, she and Pilate begin to sing, "O Sugarman don't leave me here" (49). Once they reach the chorus, Hagar joins her mother and grandmother in the hymn:

Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home. (49)

The women's song is one of longing. Each line of the chorus details the affectionately termed 'Sugarman' moving farther and farther from the lamenting singers. Heads raised, the women sing of the need to have him—Sugarman—stay. Macon's abandonment forces Pilate to assume a guardian role for herself and that role transcends into her relationship with Reba and Hagar. Throughout the action, Pilate volleys between two functions for Reba and Hagar—nurturer and protector. Modern psychology may attribute Pilate's unusual behavior, dress, and concepts to mental volatility; I argue that the most male-dominated concepts of the social science would label her assumed ownership of her offspring as the most inappropriate of her actions due to the pattern of patriarchal thought to render decisions regarding the wellbeing of children to the father. The protection of the home and property of a family has throughout centuries and cultures been deemed a male responsibility. As women and children were considered property by legal standards as late as the nineteenth century, their protection would also exist as a duty of the father or male relative and women were also not considered capable of fulfilling the task of guarding their home and offspring from harm. When one of Reba's male lovers splits her lip and bruises her cheek in a dispute, Pilate steps in to protect her by threatening the man and puncturing his chest with her knife. She comments to Reba's attacker, "You can't move a inch cause I might lose control" (93). The reader learns that Pilate's passionate defense of her daughter is quite calculated despite its seemingly irrational manifestation. The surrounding community within the text maintains notions of Pilate's erratic behavior and thought pattern in respect to her family and knew, "not to fool with anything that belonged to Pilate…who never

bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody, but who also was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire for fifty years, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga" (94).

Pilate works to provide for and protect Reba and Hagar, but is unable to guard them from being abused and disregarded by the men whom they long to please. Pilate's inability to nourish her daughter and granddaughter directly connects to the unresolved, breached relationships with her father and brother. She appears distracted by the loss of her father's presence and her brother's affection and struggles to regain a bond to her male family members by connecting to her nephew, Milkman. Her fascination with Milkman diverts her attention away from her immediate maternal responsibilities with Reba and Hagar—ultimately resulting in Hagar's death. Had Pilate never experienced care and nurturing from her father and brother, there may have never been a feeling of incompleteness and lack in her or her household once those relationships were voided. The loss that Pilate undergoes appears to alter her perception of the seeming stability that is derived from a traditional familial structure. She no longer places value in that prescribed arrangement and thus fashions her domestic space in a way that contradicts it entirely.

Psychologically-troubled writer Lara Jefferson eloquently describes the feelings of a women for whom domestication had proved maddening in stating, "…here I sit—mad as the hatter—with nothing to do but either become madder and madder or else recover enough of my sanity to be allowed to go back to the life which drove me mad" (qtd. in Chesler 61). Jefferson's statement provides an accurate portrayal of what Ruth Dead's existence had become in the home she shared with her husband and children—the home that she regarded as "more prison than palace" (*Song of Solomon* 10). Pilate and Ruth share common ground in both being neglected, abused, and dismissed by Macon Dead. On the surface, Ruth exudes and embodies all of the conventional requirements of a good wife and mother within her community; however, the

reader learns that she lacks domestic prowess and prepares meals that "her husband found impossible to eat" (11). She bears an uncanny likeness to the women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in that, she is practically passed from her father to her husband with little or no input of her own. Like the women who predate the temporal space of Ruth's character, she is also denied any autonomy in regards to decisions made about her children. Ruth's first experience with male flight surfaces with her marriage to Macon Dead. Her father, feeling that his only child had developed an unhealthy affinity for him, strongly encourages Ruth to marry Macon although she has no interest in leaving her childhood home. Macon gradually begins to resent Ruth's profound desire to share an awkward closeness with her father. Ruth's inappropriate adoration of her father leads her husband to wonder whether Ruth is his wife or her father's. Before being forced by marriage to leave the home of Dr. Foster, Ruth had long since made the old doctor uneasy with her outwardly improper loyalty towards him.

> Fond as he was of his only child, useful as she was in his house since his wife had died, lately he had begun to chafe under her devotion. Her steady beam of love was unsettling, and she had never dropped those expressions of affection that had been so lovable in her childhood. The good-night kiss was itself a masterpiece of slow-wittedness on her part and discomfort on his. At sixteen, she still insisted on having him come to her at night, sit on her bed, exchange a few pleasantries, and plant a kiss on the lips. Perhaps it was the loud silence of his dead wife, perhaps it was Ruth's disturbing resemblance to her mother. More probably it was the ecstasy that always seemed to be shining in Ruth's face when he bent to kiss her—an ecstasy he felt inappropriate to the occasion. (23)

Ruth's longing for her father's invariable affection became more evident in the narrative as she insists that he deliver each of her children despite her husband's detestation for such an act. Her actions to support the constant presence of the doctor in her life reify the notion that Ruth considers her life worthless without attachment and affiliation with her father. She undoubtedly associates her self-worth with having been her father's daughter. During a family meal, Ruth recounts a story of having been introduced by one of her father's few white patients, Anna Djvorak, as "Dr. Foster's daughter" and one of the woman's dearest companions (66). Ruth had been delighted to have been recognized as the doctor's daughter—counting the interaction as a moment of pride and privilege. Before resorting to striking Ruth's jaw with his fist, Macon quickly thwarted his wife's delight over Mrs. Djvorak's praise of the doctor by furiously exclaiming, "You by yourself ain't nobody. You your daddy's daughter!" (67). Ruth simply responds to her husband's insulting and angry protest with a smile and assured reply, "I certainly am my daddy's daughter"—emphasizing her infatuation with her paternal parent (67).

Macon's mistreatment of Ruth begins before the death of her father representing the second flight of a male loved-one for the character. His merciless harassment of her disposition and intellect physically affect Ruth's productivity and ability to be useful in her home and to her children,

> Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her…his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it. (11)

Throughout the text, Ruth searches for the stability that diminishes when she is separated from her father. Her longing for the comfort and solidity that her father's presence had provided is perhaps the most overt of all of the Morrison characters examined in this study. Macon imparts to his son that his mother's fondness for her father had been unnatural and improper. He recounts the day the old doctor died and how he was sent away by Ruth to make himself presentable to be in the same space with the deceased doctor, and returning and witnessing Ruth lying naked next to her father's corpse suckling his lifeless fingers—symbolizing her uncanny loyalty and longing to share a physical closeness with Dr. Foster even upon his physical demise.

> She was sitting in a chair next to his bed, and the minute she saw me she jumped up and screamed at me, 'You dare come in here like that? Clean yourself! Clean up before you come in here!' It vexed me some, but I do respect the dead. I went and washed up…In the bed. That's where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth. (73)

The watermark left by the perspiration from the vase of fresh flowers that had graced her dining table every day while her father lived served as an inanimate depiction of Ruth's need to maintain a bond with her father. Throughout the novel, Ruth appeared to require a tangible representation of her father—something she could feel and see—like the watermark. Amidst Macon's cruel treatment,

> Ruth looked for the watermark several times during the day. She knew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of the lighthouse and the prisoner, she regarded it as a mooring, a

> checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream. That she was alive somewhere, inside, which she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself. (11)

The breastfeeding of her son who was "old enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother's milk" undoubtedly presents Ruth's most bizarre act of defying her father and husband's flights. As Ruth realizes, despite her efforts, that she is unable to thwart or prevent severance from her father and abuse by her husband, she turns to her son for familial stability. It would seem that Ruth's nursing of Milkman well past his toddler years represents her wish to nourish and nurture her youngest child; however, her enthusiasm for this seemingly affectionate act bears no motherly fulfillment for Ruth (13). Milkman's mature age causes him to receive little to no nourishment from the thin streams of Ruth's mother's milk. The act is more ceremonial for Ruth than it is necessary for Milkman. We learn that Ruth stares down at Milkman during the feeding act "not so much from maternal joy" (13). She also chooses to nurse her son in her father's old study—a place that is reminiscent of the old doctor's life. Ruth's unsuitable esteem of her father transfers to her son upon her father's death. She made her desire to have Milkman pursue the same career as her father known to her son—encouraging the young boy to use his middle name (her maiden name) as his last and avoid being Dr. Dead. Had Milkman succumbed to his mother's professional ambitions for him, he would also be her proxy male dependent—a new Dr. Foster. Milkman analyzes his mother's behavior and connects her peculiar antics to her father—his grandfather in stating,

> My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk, stand up, and wear knickers, and somebody saw it and laughed and—and that is why they call me Milkman and that is why my father never does and that is why my mother never does, but everybody else does…And why? And if she did that to me when there was no reason for it, when I also drank milk and Ovaltine and everything else from a glass, then maybe she did other things with her father? (78)

Ruth's socially awkward and extensive nurturing of Milkman turns out to be quite the opposite for the young boy. As the result of being breastfed into an age deemed inappropriate within their immediate society, Milkman is subjected to ridicule by his peers and rejection by his father. Milkman felt that his mother "had been portrayed not as a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene child playing dirty games with whatever male was near—be it her father or her son" (79). Ruth's behavior is likened to that of a child just as the women of the eighteenth century who had been diagnosed with madness were regarded. The women whose mental and physical health was left in the charge of their husbands despite patterns of abuse were also described in ways that deemed them immature or juvenile. Despite her various attempts at mothering in a nourishing manner, by conventional standards, Ruth is also neglectful to her daughters, Lena and First Corinthians. Her lack of domestic competence is disadvantageous to the young women who are expected upon adulthood to marry quickly and have their own children—which neither daughter ever accomplishes. Macon and Ruth's contemptuous relationship provided the most problematic neglect for their two daughters. Macon's daily debasement of Ruth percolated down onto their daughters "like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices" (10). Ruth's response to her husband's brutal flight appears to be one of a helpless victim at the onset of the

action; however, it is her daughter who realizes that her mother plays an active role in her own maltreatment. Although Lena found her father's fits of rage and abuse inexplicable, First Corinthians took notice of a power struggle between her parents and "began to see a plan…to see how her mother had learned to bring her husband to a point, not of power…but of helplessness." (64). Ruth serves as an illustration of what Emma Goldman articulates in Chesler's *Women and Madness*, that "marriage makes a parasite of woman, an absolute dependent…incapacitates her for life's struggle, annihilates her social consciousness, paralyzes her imagination" (qtd. 81-82). Ruth visibly transfers her dependency from her father to her husband to her son in ways that prove dysfunctional to her own well-being and that of her children. She despises the abandonment she experiences on the part of the males upon which she places her reliance—going as far as professing a jealousy of death for serving as the agent of her father's flight. Despite Ruth's marriage and motherhood, her loyalty remained with her father even upon his death. She spends the duration of the action attempting to restore his essential presence and resenting his absence—suspecting that he had deserted her on his own accord and that "the doctor didn't have to die if he hadn't wanted to" (*Song of Solomon* 64).

The male characters in Morrison's *Beloved* have a similar affect on the female characters as the male characters in *Song of Solomon*. *Beloved*'s male characters differ from Macon, Milkman, and Dr. Foster in that they are generally less physically present providing a more pronounced male flight scenario on the surface. *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* also share the kindred thread of mother's milk in motherly neglect. *Beloved* furnishes the most blatant and gruesome example of child murder at the hands of a mother within Morrison's canon. When the reader is introduced to Sethe, she has lost all but one of her children to infanticide or fear. In an attempt to shield her offspring from a tumultuous life of slavery, Sethe makes an effort to take

their lives before they can be forced back into captivity.[7] She is successful in this act with only her oldest daughter—her "Dearly Beloved" (*Beloved* 5). Her sons, Howard and Buglar, suffer life-threatening cuts their throats that do not lead to their deaths and her youngest child, Denver, is spared from the handsaw when captors enter and interrupt Sethe's planned sacrifice. At this time, Sethe's husband was absent from her and her children's lives. Halle was Sethe's husband on the Sweet Home plantation and represented all that she had known as family. From him she not only had four children but also a mother—his mother—who had cared for her as if she were her own daughter. To Sethe, "Halle was more like a brother than a husband…his care suggested a family relationship rather than a man's laying claim." (25) Halle's presence on Sweet Home had assured Sethe's safety from sexual violation or worse. His flight from Sethe's life comes at the hands of his owners whom he witnesses taking the milk from Sethe's breasts—milk meant for their child (later named Beloved). Halle is denied the opportunity to act as protector or provider for his wife and family and thus mandated into an involuntary flight of his presence in their lives. Sethe's unwilling neglect of her child (in giving away her nourishment—her milk) occurs as almost a direct result of Halle's inability to protect her. Had Halle been able to prevent the theft of Sethe's milk instead of being bound physically as well as by societal standards (due to his slave status), Sethe would not have been forced to give her child's milk to her oppressors. Halle's oppressor-imposed flight leads directly to Sethe's neglect of her nursing child. Her attempts to take the lives of her children seemed to be a response to the taking of her milk—her

[7] Africana critical theorist Teresa Washington explains Sethe's murderous act as a re-embodiment of Aje, "a Yoruba word describing a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in Africana women" (171). Washington states that "rather than subject their progeny to the financially motivated, sexually depraved, and morally bankrupt whims of their oppressions, some mothers of Aje [like Sethe] returned the creations of their wombs to the tomb-like 'wicked bag'" (174).

act of retribution and reclaiming of her motherly duties. Sethe was not given a choice as to who would receive the milk produced by her body; she was, however, empowered to decide that her children would not be subjected to the life that rendered her powerless in the theft of her milk. Interestingly, Beloved is the only child to die at Sethe's hand, and she is the baby for whom the stolen milk was meant, allowing Sethe to provide her version of safety to the child to whom she was unable to provide nourishment. She resolves her actions with the reasoning:

> I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be. Paul D ran her off so she had no choice but to come back to me in the flesh…I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her (200).

Sethe, like other mothers in this study, loathes the idea or actuality of her children's lives being taken at the hands of another. Her obsession with the loss of her milk and the fear that she may again be faced with an instance of denying her children protection leads Sethe to murder her baby and to attempt to end the lives of her other children. She believes this act will save her children not only from being slaves, but also from dying at the hand of someone who does not love them as she does. Perhaps the necks of the boys were too difficult to sever because of their size and age and she ran out of time to complete the act on her infant, but it is evident that Sethe felt she must vindicate herself by ending the life of her toddler—the one who went without her milk.

Sethe's murderous act completely consumes her to the point that she neglects the needs of her living children. The physical manifestation of the baby ghost is representative of Sethe's

preoccupation with the murder of her child. Her feelings of guilt become so thick and overwhelming that they overtake her domestic space and harass every aspect of her life as well as her living children. Howard and Buglar were unwillingly to remain in their mother's home to witness "another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill" or furniture being shifted from one side of a room to the other (3). The boys voluntarily leave their home in attempts to escape the antics of the baby ghost of their murdered sister. Their decisions to abandon their grandmother, mother, younger sister, and their home intermingles the notions of male flight, female sanity, and motherly neglect. The young boys' flight occurs largely in part to the fear and irritation they feel for the baby ghost that haunts their home. They are unsettled by the exploits of their murdered sister and decide to remove themselves from the space in which the ghost has focused its attention,

> …as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)…Each one fled at once—the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. (3)

Halle's flight indirectly leads to that of his sons. Halle's social inability to protect his family against the terrors of slavery led Sethe to protect her children from the institution in the best way she could negotiate—taking their lives. The death of Beloved brought forth feelings that materialized into the baby ghost haunting the home of her family. Howard and Buglar were unwilling to remain in the home to observe the ghost's deeds and thus decided to take flight from the only home they had known.

Sethe's female children experience a form of neglect that is not unlike the neglect of their brothers. Denver's stability is chipped away gradually as she loses members of her immediate

family. She is devoid of a relationship with a father she has never known, abandoned by her brothers—her only living siblings, and forced to grieve the loss of her only known grandparent—Baby Suggs—with a mother who has become emotionally distant. The young girl's turmoil over the abandonment by her family and her mother causes her to desire a connection with the ghost of her murdered sister:

> Hot, shy, now Denver was lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother—serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch railing. None that had mattered as long as her mother did not look away as she was doing now, making Denver long, downright long, for a sign of spite from the baby ghost (12).

Perhaps Denver's longing for the baby ghost is a longing for Sethe's intense motherly protection—protection that Beloved received with the handsaw and Denver did not. Denver never lived on Sweet Home and feels no connection with its memories—fond or otherwise. The bond demonstrated between Sethe and Paul D as they reminisce of their days as slaves and recollect memories of Halle further separates Denver from her mother. Her resentment for the disconnect she feels between herself and Sethe is also coupled with the affect that Halle's flight has had on Denver. The young girl details her feelings of abandonment by her mother upon Paul D's arrival and her longing to know and remember her father in claiming, "they were a twosome, saying 'Your Daddy' and 'Sweet Home' in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father's absence was not hers…only those who knew him ('knew him well') could claim his absence for themselves" (13). Denver may have been able to cope with the fears of abandonment that she displays if she were able to hold her father's memory as her own; however, her feelings of neglect expand beyond her father's absence to include her

mother's lack of focus on her needs. A threatened Denver attempts to break the new and intrusive bond between Paul D and her mother by mentioning her sister's ghost. She exhibits a reliance on the baby ghost as well as its physical manifestation, Beloved, in order to gain the attention and affection she lacks from her absent father and emotionally-distant mother. Denver possesses a longing for "a sign of spite from the baby ghost" (unlike her brothers) from very beginning of the action and her longing abounds as she cares for the fully grown and visibly-ill Beloved (12). The loneliness that completely consumed Denver's thoughts and "wore her out" ironically provides a connection to the sister whom she was too young to remember in life (29). She undoubtedly correlates her description of the baby ghost as "lonely and rebuked" to herself (13). Denver is not unlike Hagar of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in her hunger and loneliness despite the presence of her mother and grandmother. Although Denver loses Baby Suggs and Hagar dies before Pilate, her grandmother, both daughters suffer a deficiency as the result of a mother whose mothering lacks the nourishing quality on which society has placed a demand. The neglect that Denver suffers is the most explicit in the novel as she is the only child of Sethe and Halle's who remains throughout the action; however, the murder of Beloved and the flight of Howard and Buglar exist as symbols of conventional motherly neglect.

Sethe defends her murderous act by asserting that it was her duty as a mother to shield her children from what she knew would be harmful to them—slavery. The issue with her justification is that not all of her children benefit from her "safety with a handsaw" (164). Denver realizes that she is also the only child whose life was not threatened during Sethe's infamous act. She is not left with physical scars as are her brothers, and she cannot vie for Sethe's motherly attention with supernatural exploits as can the baby ghost. The potent love that Sethe professes to have felt for her children led to her feelings that she existed as their only

protection is directly spawned from the absence of Halle. While his inability to remain present in her life and the lives of their children manifested as the result of his status as a slave, his flight offsets the balance that Sethe had grown accustomed to relying upon for stability and safety. She possesses feelings of guilt that she has in some way neglected her baby after her milk is taken by Schoolteacher's sons, feelings that are apparent as she laments, "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby" (200). Sethe's love proves noxious to her children and herself throughout the course of the novel and she is criticized for assuming the luxury of being able to feel and exert such passion for her offspring by her community and especially Paul D. Paul D expresses his disapproval in stating, "For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (45). Paul D's claim mirrors that of the patriarchal society of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that condemned women who assumed an ownership (most likely fueled by motherly love) of their children that caused them to make decisions to take their children out of the home or commit another act that would be deemed unlawful as Sethe had. This callous criticism of Sethe by Paul D continues throughout their relationship—providing the final male flight she experiences in the novel.

Paul D's disruptive entry into Sethe and Denver's home life is first signified by Denver's longing for her supernatural sister to drive him out as the baby ghost had done her brothers. The presence of Paul D represents a tangible divide between Denver and Sethe that summons the physical manifestation of Beloved to emerge in the timing in which she appears. His interference between Sethe and her living daughter is just as potent as his opposition to Beloved's presence in Sethe's life. Upon his request for Sethe to divide her affection between

himself and her children (dead, alive, resurrected, or simply gone), Sethe denies his romantic petition and replies, “If I have to choose—well, it’s not even a choice” (45). Sethe possesses what Paul D describes as “too-thick love”—an affection that has driven her to acts that prove inconceivable and inhumane to the society in which she resides. Halle’s physical absence led to a range of events (including the murder of Beloved) that caused Sethe’s community to render her mad. Paul D’s absence is first emotional, as he reviles Sethe, and evolves into physicality when making his “exit not an escape” (165). The presence and absence of Beloved represents Sethe’s collapse of socially acceptable mental faculties. She spends the entire course of the action attempting to “lay all that mess down” (86).

The spite of *Beloved*’s 124 Bluestone Road possesses a grave similarity to the Convent in Morrison’s *Paradise*. Both homes had once been refuge for the members of their respective communities and had through the course of misfortune become stigmatized. Men ravaging the old convent that served as a home to nine women—female pariahs of the community—begin Morrison’s *Paradise*. These men thought that these women could not have wanted to live alone and in that place without men, and if they did desire this existence, the men decided that these women must be a nuisance to the society. Although most people of the small all-Black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, knew little to nothing about the women who inhabited the Convent, the suspicious men who ambushed their abode considered them “awful women who, when they came, one by one, were obviously not nuns, real or even pretend, but members, it was thought, of some other cult” (*Paradise* 11). Abnormal occurrences began to affect the women of Ruby, “a mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter…four damaged infants were born in one family…daughters refused to get out of bed…brides disappeared on their honeymoons,” and Ruby’s male citizens pointed towards the house of strange women—believing

that surely they were to blame for the issues that disrupted the town's women (11). The unusual episodes involving the women of Ruby dealt in violence, mother-daughter discord, maternal failure, depression, and the dismissal of marriage on the part of the women—all symptoms that feminist psychologists such as Chesler and Showalter have detailed as the patriarchal world's symptoms for female madness. Unwilling to consider their women as capable of dictating their own behavior, Ruby's men looked to the Convent women.

Before Mavis joined the sisterhood of the Convent, she had been a wife and a mother. Mavis, like Morrison's other female characters, had become a figurative exile of her community. Like Sethe, the death of her offspring led to her expulsion from her society—a community who had grown to resent the family's display of material prosperity. While Mavis' neighbors took the expected sympathetic measures for a family who had suffered a loss, they "seemed pleased when the babies smothered...the mint green Cadillac in which they died had annoyed them for some time…the shine of excitement in their eyes was clear" (21). Mavis's husband, Frank, takes an emotional flight that is made apparent in Mavis's account of the day she left her twins (admittedly accidentally) to suffocate in their car. The role of wife, mother, and homemaker took a toll on Mavis's peace of mind making her nervous and detached from her children. Her duties of preparing the family's meal had become obligatory and emotionally taxing for the twenty-seven year old mother of five. Morrison suggests Frank had been physically abusive to Mavis and that she had been admitted into the town's hospital time after time—"fifteen times she had been a patient there—four times for childbirth" (28). Although Mavis' eleven other hospital stays go unexplained, her neighbors noticed her wearing sunglasses on overcast days (perhaps hiding blackened eyes and facial abrasions) and that if Frank did not sleep in the problematic Cadillac, he would come home frequently to force himself onto his wife. Mavis was forbidden

from driving Frank's prized automobile. As Frank seemed to care for nothing, not his home or family, as he did for his Cadillac, the car became an idol representation for Frank's dysfunction and emotional flight.

Mavis failed horribly at motherhood by society's standards. The day of her twins' demise she struggled to prepare a meal that would please her husband. Even though the children would have enjoyed the meal, "he didn't want the Spam" (22). The journey to the market to retrieve a dinner item with which Frank would be satisfied is directly linked to the death of Mavis's children. She had not wanted to take Merle and Pearl with her, but "he said his head hurt" and "you can't expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in front of him" (23). The societal constraints that guide Mavis in her decisions and actions as a wife and mother are imposed and enforced by Frank's harmful treatment. Judgment surrounds Mavis until her escape from the home she inhabits with her husband and children. She is subjected to judgment by Frank who abuses her, the neighbors who shake their heads at her, and the reporter (the only female journalist in her town) who wants to know if she hurried in the Higgledy Piggledy while the twins sat in the hot, luxurious car. Like Ruth, Mavis felt imprisoned in her home. Morrison's language in detailing Mavis's departure is similar to that of a prison break. Paranoid that her living children wanted her dead and that her husband would oblige them if he awoke during her exit, Mavis "with her back exposed to that much danger…felt feverish—sweaty and cold together" (27). She leaves her family wearing a Daffy Duck sweatshirt, no panties, and her daughter's galoshes. Disheveled and delirious, Mavis freed herself from the obligations of Spam dinners, forced intercourse, and judgmental reporters. Ironically, Mavis chose to make her escape from marriage, motherhood, and domesticity in the Cadillac that had claimed her husband's attention

and the lives of her twins. While still in the possession of the vehicle that symbolizes her captivity, Mavis suffers constant thoughts of her neglect of her children and Frank's abusive behavior. Interestingly and like Morrison's other female characters, she never points to Frank as the source of her rage—believing quite the opposite that she was at fault and had failed in her prescribed societal role, having been

> too rattle-minded to open a car's window so babies could breathe….Frank was right. From the very beginning he had been absolutely right about her: she was the dumbest bitch on the planet. (37)

Mavis gradually grows to accept her unexplained yearning to be the opposite of what is expected of women. She most likely never desired to be what she had become to Frank and her children. At twenty-seven, she finds herself in both roles and miserable. As she invites various female hitchhikers into the Cadillac, Mavis becomes less of what she had been forced to be—less of a wife, less of a mother. The women that Mavis meets along her drive embody the traits that contradict traditional roles for the women of their time as well as previous time periods such as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They are not bound to their families (fathers, husbands, children, or otherwise) and move freely and at their will. Towards the end of the novel and before the masculine ambush, Mavis appears more confident and maternal than she had ever been. What she lacked with her husband and children exists with the women of the Convent. Contrasting the men of Ruby's opinions of the Convent and the women who inhabited it, Mavis describes it as "the most peaceful place on earth" (182). Perhaps peaceful because each woman of the Convent had chosen her own path and none of those paths were treaded upon by male counterparts. The dysfunction exhibited by Frank leads to Mavis's overt neglect of Merle, Pearl,

Sally, Frankie, and Billy James. While only two of her children lose their lives, the others are left without their mother due to Mavis's desertion. Sally suffers in a different way than do her brothers, having to fight off incestuous advances from her father. Despite her reunion with her daughter at the novel's end, Mavis's maternal connection with her children seems eternally severed. Having lived with the Convent women and making her own choices about her existence, she possessed no desire to nurture or look after her young—to mother. Mavis represents the first mother in this analysis who physically separates herself from her family and from the function of matriarch. Unlike Pilate, Ruth, and Sethe, Mavis actually takes leave of her children and her home to pursue the role that provides her with the solace she desires in her life.

May of Morrison's *Love* makes a departure from her motherly responsibility that is analogous to *Paradise*'s Mavis. The Cosey family in Morrison's *Love* is matrilineally-structured just as are the families in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved.* Heed, Christine, and May Cosey suffer from their own separate, disillusioned realities and although May is the only character who is recognized as being "crazy-like-a-fox," the other women display symptoms of paranoia, dementia, and other mental illnesses in the time leading up to and after the death of Bill Cosey, the most prominent male figure in the novel (*Love* 99). The loss of their respective marriages, relationships with lovers, and connections with their fathers also appear to serve as catalysts for their shifts in mental stability. The presence of symptoms of madness in May Cosey is more visible than in *Love*'s other female characters. May loses interest in her maternal duties to Christine when her husband, Billy Boy, suddenly dies. May categorization of Billy Boy's death (in the room that had been her father's study) as abandonment is apparent in their hotel cook L's recount of her lack of mournful emotion towards the incident—"May looked on Billy Boy's death as more of an insult than a tragedy. Dry-eyed as a turtle, she left Christine to me to raise"

(*Love* 137). Like Ruth, May felt her male loved one had possessed the option to choose death and he had chosen it over staying with her. After turning her attention and loyalty to her father-in-law and their family business, May is betrayed once more when, Bill Cosey, her father-in-law takes her daughter's playmate as his bride:

> The day Mr. Cosey told us who he was marrying was the opening day of May's personal December 7. In an eye blink she went from defense to war. And as any honest veteran can tell you, war is good for the lonely; an outright comfort to the daft. She wasn't always like that. (137)

Morrison illustrates the impact that Bill Cosey's actions have on the onset of May's madness by comparing the scenario to the bombing of Pearl Harbor (December 7) and its impact on the nation. This combative metaphor is consistent with the treatment of love-mad women used by Chesler. Chesler opens *Women and Madness* (1997) by describing a woman's frustration with male betrayal:

> The first time a boy hurt me…it was in school. I don't remember what I did. But I wept. And he laughed at me. Do you know what I did? I went home and dressed in my brother's suit. I tried to feel as the boy felt. Naturally as I put on the suit I felt I was putting on a costume of strength…I thought to be a boy meant one did not suffer. That it was being a girl that was responsible for the suffering…Then there was another thing…I discovered one relief, and that was action…I felt if only I could join the war, participate, I wouldn't feel the anguish and the fear…if only they would let me be Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc wore a suit of armor, she sat on a horse, she fought side by side with the men. She must have gained their strength. (44)

May's covering of hotel windows with red plywood, lighting of "lookout" fires on the beach, and attempted purchase of a firearm for protection all coincide with the war-like theme and substantiate her dementia and paranoia. Similar to the desire of the young love sick girl in Chesler's quote, May felt the need to arm herself—wearing an army helmet as "an authentic position and a powerful statement" (*Love* 97). May's paranoia that her daughter may try and take her life—"not sure if her daughter could be trusted with a pillow"—likens her to Mavis who expressed a similar fear of her children avenging their abandonment (141). This trepidation in both women is reminiscent of their classical Greek predecessor, Clytemnestra, who feared her surviving children would attempt to take her life. May, along with the other Cosey women, spends her life "fighting for the prince's smile" (37).

The affect of her father's death and her mother's mental absence and neglect weigh heavily on Christine Cosey.

> She was five when her father died. One Saturday he gave her a baseball cap, the following Monday they carried him down the stairs on a metal stretcher. His eyes were half closed and he didn't answer when she called him. People kept coming and coming to comfort the parent, the widow; kept whispering about how hard it was to lose a son, a husband, a friend. Nothing was said about the loss of a father. They simply patted her head and smiled. (170)

The loss her father forces her to look to her grandfather, Bill Cosey, as a father figure. Christine is denied nurturing and attention from everyone including her mother after losing her father, jilting her development. Yet as a young girl, Christine witnesses her grandfather, Bill Cosey, masturbating after having touched the breasts of her young friend, Heed. The reader is unaware as to whether or not Christine has any idea what or whom has sexually aroused her grandfather.

She experiences unsettling relationships with men throughout the course of her life. She hurls "six bottles of Spaten" at the head of her husband in a "jealous rage" after discovering his infidelity and immediately moves on to her next relationship with the militant, Fruit (162). Agreeing to accept the fact that Fruit takes part in sexual relationships with other women because "having men meant sharing them," Christine becomes happy to serve as Fruit's woman; however, her seven, self-inflicted abortions (encouraged by Fruit) begin to haunt her in the form of a profile she cannot distinctly identify (165). Author Elizabeth Rapaport describes infanticide as the "work of women who are victims of biology gone awry–the mad woman" (527). Although Christine gives birth to none of her children, the "form" she believes she sees in the "congealed red" of her last abortion has a resounding similarity to a mother who has committed infanticide and is haunted by the guilt and/or ghost of her child.

Christine spoke of the death of her grandfather, Bill Cosey, as if it were a relief to her. She appears to know all too well the affect his flight has had on her life and undoubtedly the lives of others:

> He was dead. The dirty one who introduced her to nasty and blamed it on her. He was dead. The powerful one who abandoned his own kin and transferred rule to her playmate. He was dead. Well, good. She would go and view the wreck he left behind. (165)

Christine's cycle of problematic relationships with the men she loves continues when her married lover ends their affair and forces her from his home. This dismissal of Christine sends her into a sadistic depressed state as she recounts her response to her rejection in saying "I was in a fancy apartment banging my head over some rat" (189). Billy Boy begins the ripple effect of male flight in the lives of May and Christine. May's immediate removal as a maternal figure

from Christine's life undoubtedly affects her development into adulthood—possibly thwarting any desire she has to be a mother herself. The conclusion of *Love*'s action leaves the reader to decipher whether the death of either Christine or Heed (Christine's childhood friend and grandfather's widow) has taken place. Although there is no certainty as to which woman is deceased, the belief that both women felt that their life's misfortune could be attributed to their "looking for Big Daddy everywhere" is made clear (189). *Love*'s female characters share the common thread of having been affected by the flight of one man.

The women of *A Mercy* also share a key male figure whose flight connects and affects them equally. Jacob plays a different role in the lives of each of *A Mercy*'s women; however, the women each react to his absence as a provider and later his physical absence. In Portuguese, *Minha Mae* is literally translated as 'my mother.' Throughout Morrison's *A Mercy*, the Portuguese term is used to refer to the mother of the young girl Florens. Florens speaks to her absent *minha mae* throughout the action of the text—questioning her for having suggested that she be sold away in place of her younger brother. The reader learns that Florens' *minha mae* made a decision to relinquish her motherly duties to Florens in order to protect her daughter from being raped by their owner, Senhor. She pleads with Florens' potential owner, "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter" (*A Mercy* 26). As the result of her mother's outward release of her, Florens grows to possess an abhorrence of mothering and is put off by the opportunity to nurture any child. She states, "Mothers nursing greedy babies scare me"—reminiscing of her younger brother of nursing age whom her mother kept. It is obvious at this point in the action that Florens felt her younger brother played a role in her mother's "leaving with no goodbye" (36). Florens' confusion with her mother's abandonment contributes to her infatuation and dependence on a man to re-create the family she feels she lacks. Although she is

part of the community on her new owner, Jacob's property, Florens feelings of being an "ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away" do not cease until she establishes a romantic relationship with the blacksmith (34). Morrison paints the young girl's displaced devotion to the blacksmith in a way that resembles mental illness, describing the change in her temperament after her interaction with the blacksmith had overtaken her emotionally, "Florens had been a quiet, timid version of herself…before destruction…before men" (61). The reader learns that she is "crippled with worship of him" and resorts to speaking her attachment and loyalty to him despite his absence; "you are my shaper…my world" (71). Florens is not a mother and does not become one throughout the course of the novel; she has, however, rejected the role of motherhood and resorted to violence against a child when she is given charge of him. Florens' repudiation of the role of a mother directly relates to her ill feelings towards being dejected by her own mother and is heightened by her dismissal by the blacksmith. Her mother's abandonment relates directly to the fear that she would be raped by her owner. Senhor cannot be considered as a male loved-one to Florens or her mother; however, he does exhibit a dysfunction that was never overtly acknowledged throughout racial slavery in America—the rape of slave women and children. Senhor's flight from morality causes a ripple effect of neglectful mothering and the denunciation of motherhood all together for Florens and her *minha mae*.

Like Floren's *minha mae,* Sorrow is separated from one of her children and maintains custody of the other. An eleven year old Sorrow arrives on Sir's property unaware of her pregnancy by the husband of her previous employer.

> The housewife told her it was monthly blood; that all females suffered it and Sorrow believed her until the next month and the next and the next when it did not return. Twin and she talked about it, about whether it was instead the result of the

> goings that took place behind the stack of clapboard, both brothers attending, instead of what the housewife said. (119-120)

Sorrow's having been impregnated against her will by her employer's husband serves as the second instance of male flight in the young girl's life; the first, is the untimely death of her father, the Captain, who commanded the ship on which she lived before it wrecked and landed her with the housewife and the sawyer. She does not commit the murder of her first child; her baby is taken away and drowned by Lina who "ruled and decided everything Sir and Mistress did not" (121). Lina informs the young, naïve Sorrow of her pregnancy and tells her that her baby was prematurely born and that although Sorrow "thought she saw her own newborn yawn," it had not survived the birth (123). Sorrow is haunted by the death of her first child much like Sethe had been by her baby's ghost and Christine by the congealed red of her abortions. Although Sorrow's hand was not the one that took her baby's life, she, like the previously mentioned Morrison characters, was forced to succumb to the society's suffocating hold on her ability to mother. She turns to her imaginary persona, Twin, for consolation to her grief as it "took years for Sorrow's steady thoughts of her baby breathing water under Lina's palm to recede" (123). Sorrow's agency as a mother is stripped from her by the circumstances of her life. Having been abandoned by her father and raped by the sawyer so soon after she had experienced her first menstruation cycle, Sorrow enters the action of the novel disenfranchised. The strange, displaced girl is positioned in a space where she is unable to make decisions about her child's life due to the instances of the male flight that shape her existence. Sorrow's preoccupation with the murder of her child affects her inaction with the others on the property and she retreats emotionally from life.

> …although Lina helped her through childbirth, Sorrow never forgot the baby breathing water every day, every night, down all the streams of the world…Sorrow behaved thereafter the way she always had—with placid indifference to anyone, except Twin. (124)

As the result of the loss of her child, Sorrow relies more on the presence of Twin and less on the women who live on the land, especially Lina. The third incident of male flight in Sorrow's life comes at the conception of her second child. With Jacob having been the only consistent male presence on the property, the reader is left to assume that he has impregnated the young girl despite her age and his marriage to Rebekka. It is never mentioned that Rebekka and Sorrow carry siblings simultaneously. Ironically, Sorrow gives birth to her daughter soon after Sir's death—his final flight. Despite his distance from moral character, Sir still provided stability for all of the women on his land with the profits from his business dealings. None of the women, except Rebekka, had any cause to believe they would be taken care of after his death. Having grown distrustful of her circumstance and surroundings, Sorrow took the birth of her second child into her own hands and delivered her daughter on her terms.

> …Sorrow's water broke, unleashing her panic. Mistress was not well enough to help her, and remembering the yawn, she did not trust Lina. Forbidden to enter the village, she had no choice. Twin was absent, strangely silent or hostile when Sorrow tried to discuss what to do, where to go. With a frail hope…she took a knife and a blanket to the riverbank the moment the first pain hit. She stayed there, alone, screeching when she had to, sleeping in between, until the next brute tear of body and breath…Blood swirled down to the river attracting young cod.

> When the baby, a girl, whimpered Scully [who had appeared along with Will at the riverbank to assist Sorrow in childbirth] knifed the cord, then handed her to the mother who rinsed her, dabbing her mouth, ears, and unfocused eyes. The men [Will and Scully] congratulated themselves and offered to carry mother and child back to the farmhouse. Sorrow, repeating "thank you" with every breath, declined. She wanted to rest and would make her own way. (132-133)

Determined that her second baby would not be taken by anyone else or by death, Sorrow denied her child certain necessities during the birth. Like the mothers who took away their children's breath to shield them from a lifetime of suffering, Sorrow guards her baby girl from aspects of child birth and life that were customary for the time period when she refuses to deliver in the farmhouse and dares to begin the childbirth process with no help. Sorrow hides herself at the point of her daughter's birth. She strongly rejects assistance from anyone and is resolved to bring her child into the world under the conditions which she chooses. A judgmental Lina deems Sorrow's strange ways proof of her possession of a "natural curse" (55)—believing the quiet, detached girl to be quite mad and unfit for motherhood or any other duty required of women of the time. Interestingly, Florens, who rejects motherhood and all of its elements, provides a conflicting commentary on Sorrow's unconventional mothering, "Sorrow is a mother. Nothing more nothing less. I like her devotion to her baby girl" (159). Florens sees the affection and dedication that Sorrow shows for her child as nourishing and much the opposite of what she receives from her own mother. She approves of Sorrow's methods although they could prove harmful and are contrary to societal norms.

Although her plantation companions know very little about Sorrow, the reader is given a look into Sorrow's tumultuous experiences with men who were to care for her and contribute to

her well-being. Sorrow has traveled the seas with her father, the ship's captain, dressed as a boy—the only way to assure she would not be molested by the other males at sea. She is separated from her father during ship wreck and is taken in and employed by a family whose patriarch repeatedly rapes the young girl. At this point in the text, Sorrow is fatherless and is passed as a sexual pleasure, noted by the "side smile" on the sawyer's face during the exchange of the young girl, from the sawyer to Jacob (120). As the result of having been rejected at every stage of her life and abandoned by the one person who had cared for her—the Captain, Sorrow resorts to acts of mothering that by the standards of her community and our modern conventions would be deemed neglectful and could possibly lead to the death of her child. In turn, she is labeled as strange, evil, mad, and cursed. The young girl is juxtaposed to Rebekka, the mistress of the property on which she gives birth to both of her children. The two mother in opposing ways. Rebekka chooses a more conformist manner of motherhood while Sorrow negotiates alternative methods for her child(ren).

Having been sold into marriage by her father, Rebekka's arrival in the New World comes at the end of a lengthy sea journey with other "women of and for men" (85). The men who take flight of their expected societal roles and duties within Rebekka's life range from her family and employers to her husband. She expresses hurt and disappointment at being "dismissed by the brothers she raised" and fear of being raped at the hands of a male employer before her father resolves to sell her into marriage (78). As with other female characters in the text and actual women during the early seventeenth century setting of the novel, Rebekka felt her future and well-being "depended on the character of the man in charge" and looked forward to the prospect of being loved by her children as opposed to a future husband (78). Rebekka appears socially flawless to her husband as a wife and mother on the surface. Upon retrieving his wife from the

docks, Jacob recounts, “the young woman who answered his shout in the crowd was plump, comely, and capable…Rebekka was ideal” (20). Her disposition and actions during the life of her husband mirror socially prescribed norms for women of her class and era. Rebekka “never raised her voice” and possessed “not a shrewish bone in her body” (20). Her affinity to domesticity is also noted in the text as the reader learns that she, “made the tenderest dumplings” and “took to chores…with enthusiasm” (20). Rebekka’s one dysfunction is revealed at the death of her four children. One by one, Jacob and Rebekka’s children die within months of birth with the exception of their one daughter who suffers a fatal head injury at the age of five. Rebekka’s ideal domestic behavior begins to wane at the point when Jacob begins to take more frequent trips to conduct business. Jacob and Rebekka’s land loses its fertility and profitability, rendering fewer and fewer crops, seemingly as they bury each child on the land. It is at this juncture, when his wife and land appear fruitless, that Jacob’s journeys become more recurrent and he takes leave of his obligations to Rebekka. Jacob’s absence for months at a time allows for Rebekka’s thoughts to focus on Sorrow and the undeniable link her husband has to the strange girl’s unborn child. Rebekka also begins to question her ability to mother as her children meet their mortality one by one. After the death of Patrician, her only child to live past infancy, Rebekka “could not decide if Patrician’s accident by a cloven hoof was rebuke or proof of the pudding” (81). Notably Patrician is the first of Jacob and Rebekka’s children. She is conceived and born at the height of the success of the couple’s relationship. Their land yielded enough to sustain those who lived on it and they maintained a comfortable, simple existence at the birth of the couple’s firstborn. Like many women within the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even well into the nineteenth century, Rebekka’s duties as a wife were the summation of her life. At the beginning

of their marriage, she becomes solely dependent on Jacob so much so that she is literally incapable of providing nourishment for the benefit of her children's lives:

> They leaned on each other root and crown. Needing no one outside their sufficiency. Or so they believed. For there would be children, of course. And there were. Following Patrician, each time Rebekka gave birth, she forgot the previous nursing interrupted long before weaning time. Forgot breasts still leaking, of nipples prematurely caked and too tender for underclothes. Forgot, too, how rapid the trip from crib to coffin could be. As sons died and the years passed, Jacob became convinced the farm was sustainable but not profitable. He began to trade and travel. (87)

Jacob's trade and travel signify the onset of his flight as the sufficiency Rebekka had come to rely upon. Rebekka's inability to mother (as she saw it) coincides with her husband's insistence on leaving her and their land physically in an effort to sustain his family financially. As her husband's trips became more habitual (his flight more solidified), Rebekka is mentally hurled back into the tumultuous world she feared before they were wed. Although "tales of his journeys excited her," Rebekka is jolted by his frequent absence and despite the pleasure Rebekka feels at hearing stories of Jacob's escapades, her "view of a disorderly, threatening world out there, protection from which he alone could provide" is heightened (88). Rebekka's first born is the last of her children to die. Before the Patrician's death, Rebekka and Jacob discuss the new, opulent home that he desires to have built. Rebekka feels that the erection of such a property not only represents everything that she has known her husband not to be, but somehow could lead to the end of her family. Although she attempts to persuade her husband not to go forward with the plans for their new home, he is stalwart and she ultimately gives in

and supports his desires to the detriment of her last living child. Her premonition proves correct as Patrician suffers a fatal blow to the head by one of the very horses brought onto their property by Jacob to assist in the construction of the new elaborate state house. Jacob's death from fever (undoubtedly brought to their land by the outside materials for the construction) follows shortly after the young girl, leaving Rebekka abandoned by the last man in her life.

The community in *Song of Solomon* "had seen women pull their dresses over their heads and howl like dogs for lost love"–alluding to the notion that sanity lost because of love was not considered an uncommon occurrence, especially for women (128). Each of the characters discussed in this chapter undergo the loss of a male loved one. Some of the women experience this loss by way of their mothers' experiences—inheriting the pain, desertion, and emotional strain.[8] The balance of the home to which each woman had become accustomed—the space that society told them was necessary—was unsettled by the removal of a vital element in their foundation. In the case of this study, that element is the male. It stands to reason that with the deficiency of the male factor of a conventional family structure that other aspects of this prescribed arrangement would also become insufficient. Within each mother exists an undeviating feeling of betrayal and disregard by the male who has taken flight from her world. Their trust in what society has dictated as necessary and normal is broken causing each woman to resort to self-preservation, in turn, denying their children of their protective care and guidance. The shift in each woman's behavior defies societal norms and standards for femininity—

[8] American Literature Critic and Author Paula Gallant Eckard expounds upon Morrison's frequent depiction of mothers passing their depression, oppression, and madness onto their daughters in her book entitled *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison*. About *The Bluest Eye*'s Pecola and her mother Pauline Breedlove, Eckard writes, "with her [Pecola] madness, she becomes the living embodiment of her mother's silence, relegated forever to the realm of the silent Other." (50)

allowing for the label of madness to be placed on each woman as it had been in women who displayed similar lack of maternal obligation in centuries past. Morrison writes in *What Moves at the Margin* that what is considered as "ladyhood" or ladylike was "softness, helplessness, and modesty," which she interpreted as "a willingness to let others do their labor and their thinking" (18). The author's ideals coincide with thoughts of femininity that span across cultures and time periods—that woman should be silent, soft, and sympathetic. Morrison challenges this notion in the creation of each of the female characters discussed in this chapter. The women react to the instances of male flight to which they are subjected in the ways they have deemed necessary for their own survival not allowing others to "do their labor or their thinking" (18). They do for themselves and think for themselves—traits that have been objectionable for womankind since the earliest of civilizations. These characters are subjected to ridicule by their respective communities for having ostensibly relinquished their motherly duties. Their unconventional motherhood exists as the result of each of them taking their own thoughts, feelings, and emotions into consideration before those of others—even their young. These women act in their maternal roles on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

"Beauty shops always had curtains or shades up. Barbershops didn't. The women didn't want anybody on the street to be able to see them getting their hair done. They were ashamed."

(Song of Solomon 62)

This study possesses a deliberate purpose. I do not assert that any woman throughout the course of historical myth or literary characterization requires the presence of male loved ones in order to function as a beneficial citizen or parent. On the contrary, I contend that the accepted familial structure adopted by patriarchal society has been impressed upon women of varying cultures and at the upset (male flight in the case of this study) of this imposed configuration, women resort to frenetic measures of sustaining their own lives and the lives of their offspring. Abrupt male absence from domestic spaces causes an imbalance within the prescribed familial order, thus disassembling the mental facility of the women left to make sense of a societal structure gone awry. The actions of these women include murder, abandonment, and neglect, and all represent behaviors that society has long since detested and considered maddening in its female citizens. The lack of a male presence that has been prescribed as necessary and normal by society jars what appears to be the stability of the women's mental stamina. Modern culture has handed down a mandate of normative femininity that proves impractical without acceptance of the suitable performatives conjured up by humanity. This is what the women (mortal and immortal) documented in Ancient Greek culture and Morrison's texts were up against—a norm that did not provide for itself and thus led to a chain reaction of unacceptable behaviors and occurrences. The established role of mother in any society is clearly defined and rarely ever performed within the exact parameters of that description. Morrison's female characters and their seeming mental volatility due to their male counterparts not fulfilling their intended or prescribed function within domestic spaces is consistent with the portrayal of women throughout

literature and history. Regardless of discipline, femaleness and madness seem to coincide through the watchful patriarchal eye. While it appears that there are several elements that contribute to the devastating unbalancing act within the community for which Morrison writes, the lack of traditional structure (by Western standards) within the home seems to be the most prevalent. She creates matrilineally structured families in several of her novels and each group of women is presented to the reader as fragmented, torn, and dysfunctional on the surface. The characters attempt to live lives that are centered on a core consciousness that is intrinsically Western which cause them to be identified as a contradiction of the space they inhabit if they exist as descendants from cultures outside of Eurocentric West. The women adjust their behavior to accommodate the situations that they are placed into by this struggle between their community and the constraints of their society—literary tradition and psychological study would have us categorize them as mad as this study has shown. Morrison scholar and author Andrea O'Reilly asserts that through her recurrent and inimitable depiction of mothering, Morrison "develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and tole, radically different than the motherhood practised and prescribed in the dominant culture" (1). O'Reilly also states that Morrison "positions maternal identity as a site of power for black women"[9] (1). In my opinion, they are not at all mad, but like the *id*—described as such because they appear chaotic and unorganized when they have merely reverted to the most pure forms of themselves in enlisting their defenses to maintain what they know to be true. Morrison's

[9] In her work, O'Reilly focuses heavily upon Morrison's conceptualization of motherhood and its significance in the Black community in America. Although the mothers in this study appear to reject motherhood, they are practicing unconventional ways of protecting themselves and their children: "Motherwork, in Morrison, is concerned with how mothers, raising black children in a racist and sexist world, can best protect their children, instruct them in how to protect themselves, challenge racism, and, for daughters, the sexism that seeks to harm them" (O'Reilly 1)

inclusion of such a traditional trope as female madness intermingled with inclusion of an element that is distinctive to the community for which she writes–black male flight–functions as the "Africanist" presence that abides alongside its Eurocentric counterpart (*Playing in the Dark* 6).

According to scholar Carolyn Dennard, Morrison produces work that interprets and reveals "the large and small of Black life" and uses artifacts of the community that assist her in "revealing an essential truth about the lives of Black people in this country" (qtd. in *What Moves at the Margin* xiv). The role of black women within their families and communities and the tendency for the black male to wander and be in movement provide two focal themes within African American life and literature, as stated by Morrison. The characterization within the majority, if not all, of her novels depicts these two thematic occurrences. When questioned about the regularity of her male character's propensity to leave or flee their families and surroundings, Morrison references a classic Greek male archetype, Ulysses, in saying,

> The big scene is the traveling Ulysses scene, for black men. They are moving…And, boy, you know, they spread their seed all over the world. They are really moving! Perhaps it's because they don't have a land, they don't have a dominion. You can trace that historically, and one never knows what would have been the case if we'd never been tampered with at all. But that going from town to town of going place to place or looking out and over and beyond and changing and so on—that, it seems to me, is one of the monumental themes in black literature about men (Taylor-Guthrie 26).

While wielding her knowledge of Greco-Roman mythology, Morrison provides a profound explanation of her conceptualization of the existence of male flight within the African American community. She goes on to refer to the occurrence of flight carried out by black males as one of

the elements of black male life that she finds most attractive. Morrison's distinctive understanding and explanation of black male flight derives from her notion that the process of moving assists in the black male in finding himself despite losing others. She asserts that in addition to moving and finding themselves, "they are also making themselves" (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 26). The theme of male flight holds a whimsical, almost mythical component when explicated by Morrison perhaps contributing to its frequent presence in the author's work.

Morrison clearly acknowledges male flight as one of the major topics existing in African American life as well as its canon of literature; the author also points to mothering or "the black woman as parent, not as a mother or father, but as a parent…culture bearer" as a dominant trope in the community (Taylor-Guthrie 27). The description of black mothers as parent (devoid of the definite article "the") relates interestingly to the notion of disturbed or altered mothering within this study. The inclusion of mother-figures in the Black community who are overtly dissimilar from the ideal paradigm of female parents blankets Morrison's fictional work in much the same way as male flight. These two frequently employed thematic occurrences, described by Morrison as "part and parcel of this canon," connect in that the act of one undoubtedly leads to the other within her novels (27).

American culture and history possesses a great deal of influence from the classics of ancient societies. Works of authors from ancient Greece and Rome occupy the anthologies of our curriculums and texts of our classrooms. As an American author, Morrison intentionally emphasizes the classics' influence on not only American life and culture but that of its citizens of African descent as well. Tessa Roynon describes the tie between Toni Morrison's work and the classic literature of Greece and Rome as an "ambivalent relationship" (31). Roynon asserts that Morrison's work intentionally connects with its Greco-Roman mythological predecessors.

The link drawn by Morrison between female Greek archetypes and the creation of the characters of her action provides a universal gaze, relatable to diverse audiences, into the canon for which she writes—the African American literary canon—and the community that it most dominantly represents. The author speaks to a private space created by women with their mad acts and exploits across cultures and time periods by embracing the traits and tales of the actions of classical and mythical women and allowing the slave women, housewives, modern-day mothers, and troubled daughters in her twentieth century writings to embody these acts. The women in the pages of Morrison's narratives share and connect with the labels of evil, mad, and depressed that their mythical Greek predecessors were given for acting outside of the role of women that has been used to determine women's sanity and worth—the role of motherhood. Sethe struggles with Paul D's judgments of her method of guarding her children from slavery. Ruth works to please her father even after his mortal demise and is publicly humiliated by her husband for her inadequacies as a wife and mother. Pilate abides under the disapproving gaze of her brother, the male that was to care for her after the death of both of their parents and her children remain hungry. Mavis undergoes pressures to reside in a role that will sustain her husband and five children; she is abused by Frank throughout her efforts to master responsibilities she has never desired. May and Christine are abandoned and rejected by Billy Boy and Bill Cosey leading to the emotional and physical separation of the mother/daughter pair. Rebekka becomes physically ill and futile after the death of her children as the result of the intense demands of Sir to keep the home and produce a strong boy for him. Each of these women is forced to reveal their disappointments and weaknesses in the public just as Clytemnestra and Medea had done in their communities in classical literature. The affairs of their private spaces were dragged into the streets and squares of their societies where they were

regarded by their neighbors and other onlookers in much the same way that history views the mad mothers/wives written about by Aeschylus and Euripides. In this chapter's epigraph, Morrison speaks of the personal and private space that beauty shops provide for women—a space where their hair can be undone, their secrets shared without the intrusion of the outside world, without the infringement of men. The author summons this comforting, confidential space for women through her connection of modern characters to women who shared their aggravation and pain, centuries earlier. Morrison states that, "somewhere there is, or will be, an in-depth portrait of the black woman" (*What Moves as the Margin* 102). The relationship of female struggle across cultures and centuries, the motivated acts of mothering, and calculated cries of revolt lie within Morrison's pages enhanced by their kinship with the literature of their classical ancestors.

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