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Matriarchal Mythopoesis: Naylor’s *Mama Day*

DAVID COWART

"J'entends donc par "femme" ce qui ne se représente pas, ce qui ne se dit pas, ce qui reste en dehors des nominations et des idéologies." — JULIA KRISTEVA

Like *Cat's Cradle*, *An American Dream*, *Fiscadoro*, *The Name of the Rose*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Vineland*, the novels of Gloria Naylor fall into a category of writing that naturally burgeons as the year 2000 approaches. Naylor’s linked fictions, a kind of millennial roman féuve, discover a startlingly original vision of the last days. One traces in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Bailey’s Cafe* (1992) the mythic chronicle of travail and purgatorial suffering. In the all-black real estate development that gives *Linden Hills* (1985) its title one sees a parody of white materialism conflated with the false vision of a New Black Jerusalem whose high priest, Luther Nedeed, perishes in apocalyptic flames. Only in *Mama Day*, however, with the year 1999 as its temporal frame, does the larger eschatological drama come fully into focus.

This novel’s end-of-millennium setting invites readers to reflect on the end of the drama that begins in Eden with the Fall and Original Sin, continues through the Incarnation and the fated sacrifice, and concludes with the Apocalypse and the second Coming. But neither the virgin birth of *Bailey's Cafe*, nor the pit that yawns for Luther Neded in *Linden Hills*, nor the millennial promise of *Mama Day* represents an exercise in Christian piety. Rather, Naylor proposes a radically feminist revision of traditional patriarchal narrative. In *Mama Day* she implies that humanity will achieve its redemption only by restoring the proper mythic/religious relations between the sexes. The larger vision here involves recognizing and re-embracing a mother-deity displaced, in remote antiquity, by a host of unhealthy patriarchal alternatives. As corollary to this restoration, she implies, the usurping son or consort of the goddess (the mythographers
“solar hero”) must accept the immolation of his rationality and return to his divinely subordinate role. Ultimately Naylor subverts the linear premises of Christian eschatology. In our end, she suggests, is our beginning.

Naylor became known when *The Women of Brewster Place* won the American Book Award. As her subsequent work has appeared, readers have seen the unfolding of an experimental project of no small magnitude—realization of the author’s dream of a quartet of interconnected novels. Though not so elaborately linked as, say, the fictions of William Faulkner, Naylor’s novels feature abundant cross-references and a modest version of what Balzac calls “retour de personnages.” Thus *Brewster Place* includes among its major characters Kiswana Browne and the lesbian couple Theresa and Lorraine—all refugees from Linden Hills. In the later novel named for that upscale development, a character briefly mentions Kiswana Browne as having gone off “to live in the slums of Brewster Place.” In *Linden Hills*, too, a desperate Willa Prescott Nedeed recalls “being so ashamed of her great-aunt, Miranda Day, when she pulled up in that cab each summer, calling from the curb at the top of her voice, ‘Y’all better be home. Mama Day done come to visit a spell with her Northern folks.’”

This character comes into her own in Naylor’s 1988 novel, *Mama Day*, which the author seems to have conceived as the nexus or center of her larger project. Cocoa, one of the major characters of this novel, is first cousin to the Willa of *Linden Hills*, and passing reference is twice made to the fire in which she dies. In addition to a redoubtable great-aunt, Cocoa and Willa share a grandmother, Abigail, and both claim descent from the legendary Sapphira Wade. In *Mama Day*, too, Cocoa and the man she will marry, George Andrews, go through an important reconciliation scene outside of Bailey’s Cafe, which gives its name to another Naylor novel, published later but set further back in time (indeed, *Bailey’s Cafe* concludes with George’s birth). The understated connections reveal that all of these characters exist in the same fictive world, the same historical space. They prompt the reader’s attention to some larger unfolding drama—not a *comédie humaine* but rather the comedy of millennial fulfillment.

In *Mama Day* Naylor reconfigures at least three Shakespearean models. *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, in particular, yield archetypes of character and situation for Naylor’s postmodern palimpsest.
Cocoa's real name, after all, is Ophelia, and if something is rotten in the state of Denmark, something is amiss in Willow Springs too. That something, moreover, stems from a usurpation that makes the time out of joint. In Shakespeare, the love of Hamlet and Ophelia dies aborning, as he must be about his father's business, and some such patriarchal imperative seems also to disturb the marriage of George and Cocoa. But most of the explicit allusions direct the reader to King Lear, and a number of situations and actions parallel similar elements in that bleak text. One observes, for example, both the drama of profound suffering and final reconciliation, and the centrality of a terrible storm, in which human frailty is starkly relieved (as Faulkner would say) against the violence of nature when untramelled by humanity's civilizing institutions. In introducing a bastard son into her narrative, and in examining the fate of three daughters in two different generations, Naylor invites further notice of a relationship between her story and King Lear. One sees in passing that Naylor's rewriting of Shakespeare seems to involve little of the anger encountered in, say, Jane Smiley's 1991 novel A Thousand Acres, in which the King Lear story, set now on an Iowa farm in the late 1970's, is told entirely from the point of view of the old patriarch's oppressed daughters, two of whom he has sexually abused. Naylor, too, may deploy deconstructive strategies (for certainly she resists the Shakespearean patriarchalism), but like Derek Walcott plundering Homer she disdains the role of cultural victim, preferring to challenge the literary past less in the name of a political grievance than in the name of that older, more essential (if less fashionable) thing: artistic autonomy.

Though Hamlet and Lear figure prominently, critics rightly emphasize Naylor's engagement with The Tempest. As a romance, this play includes a number of fantastic elements and departs from a realistic portrayal of scene and character and action. At the same time, through the alchemy of art, it explores human and cultural reality on a vast scale, for at its heart lies a powerful vision of nature made serviceable to the Renaissance intellect and conformable to the Renaissance will. One of the play's less grandiose features, on the other hand, is the amorous relationship between Prospero's daughter Miranda and Prince Ferdinand. Their eventual marriage is the seal to Prospero's righting of ancient wrongs: the usurpation of his dukedom and his banishment to the island. In the end, having played his maieutic role
in the union of Ferdinand and Miranda and having restored familial and political harmony, Prospero reconciles with his brother and returns to his dukedom.

Naylor appropriates some of these elements and transmogrifies others. In her novel, also a romance, Prospero becomes Mama Day, Sycorax the vicious Ruby. Naylor reimagines Shakespeare's magical setting as Willow Springs, an island with a past that represents a strange eddy in the larger stream of African American history. When Mama Day wreaks her vengeance on Ruby by conjuring a lightning storm, one recognizes the borrowing and transformation of the tempest summoned by Prospero (it is the second, unconjured storm that comes from Lear—though of course Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God also features a hurricane as the oblique agent of a sympathetic husband's demise). Naylor's plot, like Shakespeare's, concerns a troubled family, with a history of ancient suffering that a benign sorcerer, fostering love in the younger generation, strives to reverse. In Naylor as in Shakespeare the magician demands the labor, a kind of courtly service, of the heroine's suitor. Ferdinand is presently released from servitude; George labors and dies. Thus the author of Mama Day, even more than Shakespeare, insists on a recognition of the role played by Eros—the relationships between men and women—in the larger drama of political and cultural travail. She insists, too, on a role for Thanatos.

Though her transformation of The Tempest has been well canvased, no prior discussion has explored this crux. Shakespeare is incidental to a set of ideas that swiftly move beyond the quarrel with Prospero's colonialism—his displacement, that is, of Sycorax and Caliban as rightful owners of the island. Rather, Naylor seeks to deconstruct a much older and more absolute patriarchalism, for Prospero represents a symbolic version of the male deity who usurps the ancient place of the goddess, here tendentiously disparaged as mere witch. The author therefore proposes a major reinterpretation of African American history and Judeo-Christian myth.

Naylor sets Mama Day largely on an island off the coast of the American southeast—an island to which neither Georgia nor South Carolina can lay claim. Offering a somewhat romanticized version of the topography, landscape, and culture of the barrier islands, she asks the reader to imagine a place exempt from certain of the concrete dimensions of actual history, a place in
which some kind of separate African-American identity might flourish. Though Willow Springs has hardly been exempt from poverty, it has led an existence largely untrammeled by the two centuries or so of oppression experienced by other African Americans. Not that Naylor goes so far as to imagine African Americans without the heritage of slavery—the exemption is from the more debilitating elements of post-emancipation misery. For in Willow Springs emancipation came (in “18 and 23”) two generations earlier than it did for the rest of the country’s slaves. It came, moreover, with a myth of the slaves’ appropriation of themselves and their erstwhile master’s other property—the land itself. In addition to this substantial patrimony, their community was exempt from the hegemony of the nearby Southern states because its first owner, Bascombe Wade, was “Norway-born or something, and the land had been sitting in his family over there in Europe since it got explored and claimed by the Vikings.”8 The Vikings, one recalls, arrived on American shores at the end of the previous millennium—a thousand years, more or less, before present time in Mama Day.

The internal dating here is meticulous, and even remote or casual dates point the reader towards epiphanies. Most of the story is told in flashbacks narrated by Cocoa and George, with sections told by an anonymous narrator, perhaps the same collective, communal voice heard in the prologue. The book covers the courtship of Cocoa and George in 1980, their marriage in 1981, and the disastrous events of 1985, when they finally visit Willow Springs. The hurricane, the poisoning of Cocoa by Ruby, Mama Day’s vengeance, and George’s sacrificial death (which saves Cocoa) all transpire in this past before Naylor, skipping forward in time again, concludes with a description of Candle Walk 1998 and, on the eve of Mama Day’s death at the age of 104, an August 1999 valedictory.

Though far more attractive than Linden Hills, Willow Springs remains, as an island, a not wholly positive conceit. One recognizes in isola, Latin for island, the root of the word “isolation.” Islands stand for separateness that is not always enabling, and from one point of view the inhabitants of Naylor’s imaginary community dwell in a condition of internal exile, cut off from their brothers and sisters on the mainland. More importantly, an island can symbolize the isolation that is the fate of every human being—a universal separateness that individuals seek to circum-
vent by such familiar blendings of self and other as friendship, sex, love, and marriage. In this recognition one begins to discern the true matter of Naylor's novel. *Mama Day* concerns what seems the difficulty—heightened in the course of modern times—that men and women face in attempting to come together. Setting her tale largely on an island, Naylor takes up, as theme, a kind of root estrangement between male and female.

The book addresses an issue more subtle, then, than the lack of suitable black husbands that exercises news-magazine sociologists. More a condition of Western life than a racial matter, the difficulties of Cocoa and George lie close to the heart of things. D. H. Lawrence, one recalls, often takes up what he perceived as a fundamental breakdown in relations between the sexes in the Twentieth Century. Indeed, from *Sons and Lovers* to *St. Mawr* and *The Man Who Died*, this collapse of marriage was his gauge of all that had gone wrong in modern civilization. Naylor seems to address this same dysfunction, but from a feminist perspective. The single great source of disharmony, she intimates, lies in an overturning, centuries ago, of matriarchal authority and its divine counterpart. The world still reels from this displacement of the Goddess, the Great Mother.

The special distinction of Willow Springs is that a matriarchal order has re-emerged after the long patriarchal interregnum represented by two generations of seven sons each (Naylor glances at DuBois, who in *The Souls of Black Folk* calls "the Negro . . . a sort of seventh son" among the world's civilizations). The chief evidence for a matriarchal survival is in the character of Mama Day, the conjure woman who gives her name to the story, but one recognizes it also in the way that time is conceptualized on her island, notably at the cemetery. Here, in a number of scenes, the island's living inhabitants sustain relationships with their ancestors—indeed, worship them—in moments of tribal communion very much like those still common among the Dogon, the Yoruba, the Fon, and other peoples of West Africa. But George, the outsider, can only try to put the pieces into some kind of logocentric order:

The tombstones—some granite, some limestone—were of varying heights with no dates and only one name. You explained that they were all Days so there was no need for a surname. But what, as in your case, if a woman married? You live a Day and you die a Day. Early women's lib, I said with a smile. A bit more than that, you answered. You showed me how they were grouped by generations: the seven brothers and then the seven before them. The sizes of the headstones represented the missing dates—but only in relationship to each other. There was
a Peace who died younger than another Peace and so her stone was smaller. There was your mother’s stone—Grace—and she had obviously died younger than her sister Hope. Mama Day, you said, would have the tallest stone. She’d already lived longer than any Day before her. The closeness of all this awed me—people who could be this self-contained. Who had redefined time. No, totally disregarded it. (218)

Time in this graveyard is the cyclical and “women’s time” that Kristeva describes in one of her best known essays. One notes, indeed, that insofar as the individual components of Naylor’s roman fleuve appear out of temporal order, she herself subverts—or at least puts into play—the linear model of Fall/Incarnation/Sacrifice/Apocalypse/Millennium that she inherits from patriarchal Christianity. Naylor nevertheless realizes her parable about an island of matriarchy in the great sea of Western patriarchalism in terms that, ultimately focused on female temporality, remain accessible to those prepared to grasp only the temporal models of the dominant épistémè. Thus she translates, as it were, certain important elements in her story, allowing them their traditional expression, however phallocentric. For example, the scrupulous dating within the novel—especially the general orientation to 1999—makes an obvious obeisance to the familiar linear thinking of Christian eschatology. By the same token, she allows the reader knowledge of certain facts denied to the characters who live in the novel’s late twentieth-century present—facts regarding Sapphira’s name and original status as slave (the name is known properly only to the ancestors, the dead, whose collective, chorus-like voice the reader hears in the prologue and here and there elsewhere in the text).

One can advance further into the meaning of Willow Springs and its history by considering for a moment its countertype, Linden Hills, that monument to African American materialism. “The original 1820 surveys” of Linden Hills (1), which have passed to every successive descendant in the Neded line, reveal a temporal origin virtually identical to that of Willow Springs, which acquired its unique identity in 1819, when Bascombe Wade purchased the slave Sapphira, and 1823, when he emancipated the slaves and gave them the island. The mythic founder of Linden Hills had bought the land and sat looking at it for “exactly seven days” before setting his plan in motion (2). The same echo of Genesis figures in Mama Day when John-Paul, speaking from the grave, characterizes the godlike activity of the mythic Sapphira and explains the origin of the family surname:
“God rested on the seventh day . . . and she would too” (151). In Linden Hills, the Nedeeds explicitly court millennial expectation by offering their clients a standard “thousand-year-and-a-day lease—provided only that they passed their property on to their children” (7). In unpretentious Willow Springs, on the other hand, land is “always owned two generations down” (219) to preserve the integrity of a birthright that passed, at the moment of its realization, to the generation of 1863: emancipation by prolepsis.

Parallel at a number of points, Linden Hills and Willow Springs diverge in their destiny and moral symbolism, and in each the Judeo-Christian model undergoes meaningful alterations. What emerges in Linden Hills is an infernal rival of peaceful Willow Springs, for the Nedeeds are diabolical monsters of patriarchal ruthlessness. The fire that consumes Luther Nedeed and his wife is palpably apocalyptic, but this annihilation of a false messiah (indeed, the black Antichrist) represents only the penultimate phase of the promised end. The more spiritual community, Willow Springs, survives to await post-apocalyptic revelation. Whether the thousand years of peace will emerge in Willow Springs, however, depends on an altogether different messiah and the problematic resurgence of an altogether different deity.

The subversion of familiar Christian elements in Linden Hills and Mama Day extends to parallel observances of the winter solstice. On December 22nd of every year, the people of Willow Springs celebrate Candle Walk which originated as a remembrance of the moral conscience of Bascombe Wade. In Linden Hills every Nedeed inheritor is born at the Winter solstice because every Nedeed progenitor copulates according to ancient precept: “There must be five days of penetration at the appearance of Aries, and the son is born when the sun has died.” Luther Nedeed follows this rule to the letter: “his seed was only released at the vernal equinox so the child would come during the sign of the Goat when the winter’s light was the weakest” (19). Luther’s light-skinned wife, however, gives birth to what seems “a white son” (18), a parody Jesus whom Luther takes for a bastard. “The child went unnamed and avoided by his father for the first five years of his life” (18). Nedeed’s hatred of his supposedly unfaithful wife grows, not least because the apparent discontinuity in the succession of coal-black Nedeeds threatens
his empire: “His fathers slaved to build Linden Hills ... and it would be a cold day in hell before he saw some woman tear it down” (20). At last he imprisons his wife and their son in the basement, where the child soon dies and where, in the six days preceding Christmas, 1979, she lives with the corpse and plots revenge.

A more authentic Jesus perishes in Willow Springs. As the pharmakos or sacrificial victim of Mama Day, George Andrews fulfills the destiny implicit in the miraculous circumstances of his birth, recounted in Bailey’s Cafe. There the reader learns that his fifteen-year-old mother, Mariam, was a Falasha or Ethiopian Jew. She was also a virgin. Because time and space are highly fluid in Bailey’s Cafe, the birth is somewhat difficult to date. Expected at one point “by next summer,” it seems actually to take place immediately after the New Year—perhaps on 7 January, when the Coptic Church celebrates the Nativity. Before the birth, a character says: “maybe it’s meant for this baby to bring in a whole new era” (160).

In revisiting and reshaping Judeo-Christian material, Naylor also explores and deconstructs the myth of primal transgression. Where Milton briefly compares Eve, stalked by Satan, to Persephone at a similar moment of innocence, Naylor gives the pre-Christian analogue more play, allowing the classical myth to resonate in both past and present. Like Willa Prescott Neeed, who suffers a literal below-ground imprisonment, Sapphira is a black Kore or Persephone, striving to escape the arms Plutonic. The grief of Bascombe Wade is archetypal, too—it figures the frustration of the chthonian deity, obliged to yield up his stolen bride. By the same token, one recognizes echoes of the Eleusinian mysteries (celebrated in September or October, these commemorate the passion of Persephone and Demeter) in the present-day action of Mama Day. In its climax, which takes place in late summer or early autumn, the title character becomes a grieving Demeter, Cocoa the resurrected Persephone, and George the divine Triptolemus.

But Naylor’s overt allusions are to that plinth of patriarchal Christianity, the Eden myth. Even to a rationalist like George, Willow Springs breathes an “atmosphere” straight out of Genesis: “This place was ... like a wild garden” (217), he says. “More than pure, it was primal” (185). At one point he imagines permanently living on the island with Cocoa and is moved to say, “Let’s play
Adam and Eve" (222). But in Willow Springs one recognizes a different Eden, with a different pair of "grand parents," a different Original Sin, and latter days that are differently flawed. Indeed, the book's great conundrum is its conceptualization of a sin so primal as to infect every succeeding generation—and with apparently incremental malignancy. Thus the reader learns of the accidental drowning, in childhood, of Peace, sister of Abigail and Miranda, and the subsequent suicide drowning of their mother (the first Ophelia) in the sound. All three of Abigail's daughters are dead, including Cocoa's mother Grace and the second Peace. Further back, one discovers the mysterious destiny of Bascombe Wade, who died pining for the extraordinary woman who seems to have transformed bondage into the erotic enslavement of her erstwhile master. Some of those in Willow Springs say this woman, with the Catheresque name of Sapphira, murdered Bascombe Wade after making him deed the island to his slaves; others aver that, in despair at the loss of love, he committed suicide. Contemplating the "other place," the house that Wade built for himself and Sapphira, George wonders, "What caused those two people to tear each other apart in this old house with a big garden?" (225). Unwittingly he anticipates his wife's similar question, after his death, about their own unsmooth relationship: "what really happened to us, George?" (311). These twinned questions mask another: why can't men and women overcome their differences and achieve love and peace?

The answer is that some primal transgression has poisoned the well of Hymen, leaving marriage itself perennially impaired. That primal transgression is not slavery, nor does Naylor invite the reader to see in Cocoa's mixed blood a curse that precludes her final fulfillment in this life—a curse that also hangs over the other inhabitants of the island. To be sure, Cocoa, as a schoolgirl, had nearly cut her finger off, "fearing she really had the white blood she was teased about at school" (47). But thematically this is a red herring. "No, there was something more, and something deeper than the old historical line about slave women and their white masters" (225). Though unsparing in her intimations that slavery leaves scars in generation after generation, Naylor repeatedly hints at something more insidious as the source of this community's woes.
Naylor's real energies here seem focused on an issue that transcends race—a simple question about the complexity and difficulty of love. Thus the author finds her subject and theme in the difficulties that men and women struggle with in attempting to achieve true marriage. One sees this emphasis from the level of isolated detail to fully elaborated subplot. Cocoa's embittered mother, Grace, for example, was abandoned by her husband when eight months pregnant. Similarly, Mama Day broods about unchosen spinsterhood in her own and subsequent generations: healthy, mutualistic love relationships were not to be had "in her time," she reflects, "and from what these young women tell her, it's rare to find it now. So a lot of 'em is waking up like me, except they're waking up young and alone" (203). On a larger scale, the one stable marriage in the story, that of Ambush and Bernice, is dogged by the infertility that they circumvent only to lose Little Caesar. One sees love at its least coherent, finally, in the sordid drama of jealousy and fecklessness that Frances, Ruby, and Junior Lee play out. These relationships provide a meaningful background to the marriage of Cocoa and George, itself threatened, like the union of Bascombe Wade and his quondam slave Sapphira, by something malevolent in the very air.

Before Carl Gustav Jung and Erich Neumann recognized the Great Mother as a psychoanalytic archetype (to the occasional distress of feminists who see an historical reality denied or finessed), she was the subject, at least in part, of the pioneering work *Myth, Religion & Mother Right* (1861) by Johann Jakob Bachofen, whose birthday—22 December 1815—reveals another child of the winter solstice. Other studies include Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) and two books by Jane Harrison: *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1908) and *Themis* (1912). More recently, studies of the Great Mother have included *The Cult of the Mother Goddess* (1959), by E. O. James, and *The Great Cosmic Mother* (1987), by Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor. Still to be done is some definitive study of the Goddess in Africa, amid cultures perhaps irreparably altered by colonialism and modern political history. Thus any attempt to discuss Naylor's Black Goddess may seem to lean excessively on Eurocentric mythologies. In adducing certain white or male mythographers here (notably Robert Graves), I plead guilty to possible distortion. But at the same time I would suggest that Naylor's vision, however clearly rooted in African American
experience, values, and history, engages the entire cultural spectrum, and I find that, the wider the range of anthropologists, mythographers, and classical scholars brought to bear on her texts, the more they seem to expand and exfoliate.

Certainly the male scholars do not lack for enthusiasm and sympathy for the Goddess. Both Robert Graves and the more disinterested E. O. James explore pre-Olympian goddess worship, emphasizing the primacy of a cosmic female principle. James notes "the Mother-goddess was assigned a male partner, either in the capacity of her son and lover, or of brother and husband." This consort "occupied a subordinate position to her" and was "a secondary figure in the cultus." James thinks "a primeval system of matriarchal social organization ... by no means improbable" and emphasizes "that the Goddess at first had precedence over the Young God with whom she was associated." Graves, famous for the iconoclastic theory of Western cultural origins that he developed in his 1948 book *The White Goddess*, argues that the familiar deities of classical mythology, led by Zeus, Poseidon, Pluto, and the lesser gods of sky, sea, and underworld, were in ancient times usurpers of this much older divine figure. Basically the earth mother, the White Goddess, is a triple deity who also reigns, in various incarnations, over birth, death, and the mysterious springs of fecundity.

The goddess chooses a consort, often a mortal, who enjoys her favor for a certain period (usually a year) before yielding himself up for sacrifice. This is the solar hero or solar king, a mythic figure born at the winter solstice. His avatars include Apollo, Dionysus, Zeus, Hermes, Hercules, Osiris, Horus, the Egyptian sun-god, and of course the Christian savior, Jesus Christ. These avatars, in the reinscription of religious meanings carried out by the ancient displacers of the Mother, have come, in the body of patriarchal myth that dominates in the West, to outrank and displace her. "Our modern patriarchal society," observes Jane Harrison, "focusses its religious anthropomorphism on the relationship of the father and the son; the Roman Church with her wider humanity includes indeed the figure of the Mother who is both Mother and Maid, but she is still ... subordinate to the Father and the Son." In other words, Christians worship Jesus—the Virgin they merely honor.

But in the old dispensation, the solar hero’s sacrificial death was ordained as a means to the goddess’s great ends. This is the
burden of Graves's cryptic 1945 poem “To Juan at the Winter Solstice.” As poet and votary of the Goddess, Graves counsels Juan, his newborn son who may also become a poet, with regard to the true bardic subject matter. Juan, as a child of the winter solstice himself, must be especially mindful that “There is one story and one story only”—that of the Goddess and her marriage to the solar hero always born when the sun is at its weakest, a marriage of sun and earth, male and female, that fructifies the universe. The fate of the solar hero is at once noble and terrible, for he will witness and fulfill the power of the goddess, the power sketched in Graves’s portentous maxim: “Nothing promised that is not performed.”

Graves, who spent much of his life under the influence of the Sapphira–like Laura Riding, attributed the ills of modern civiliza­tion to its repudiation of the Goddess. Enlisting under her banner himself, he argued that the West could save itself only through a return to its ancient fealty. Unlike Bascombe Wade, then, Graves gets credit for recognizing and deferring to the goddess. But perhaps he errs in calling her the “white” goddess. After all, Hecate, one of her avatars, is in fact black—and if, as some have argued, the mythologies of the West had a sub-Mediterranean genesis, Graves’s deity must originally have been what Sjöö and Mor call “the Black Goddess,” the Great Mother of Africa.

Mama Day refers to Cocoa’s ancestor as “The great, grand Mother,” the “ancient mother of pure black” (48), and her words suggest at once Sapphira Wade and something older, more powerful, and truly divine. Cocoa herself passes this vision on to her baffled husband. “You told me,” he muses, “that woman had been your grandmother’s great-grandmother. But it was odd . . . the way you said it—she was the great, great, grand, Mother—as if you were listing the attributes of a goddess” (218).

In the absence of more information about the tribal origins of Sapphira Wade, one cannot particularize the goddess with whom she is associated, but many in West Africa (notably the Fon) recognize in Nana Buruku (or Buluku) a deity so ancient as to frustrate mythography. “She is,” observes Pierre Verger, “an archaic deity older than all others known among the Yoruba, and very little is known about her.” In Sapphira Naylor imagines a priestess or indeed an incarnation of Nana Buruku—or another of her many avatars. She imagines her as nothing less than
absolutely black: "the black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun" (48). This engulfed or swallowed light, one realizes, is the emblem at once of classical order (Zeus and Apollo, displacers of the mother goddess, are always resplendently clothed in light) and of Enlightenment logocentrism ("More light!", breathes the dying Goethe). The sun to be swallowed is also the hero who must serve, mate with, and be slain by or for the goddess. Naylor's story comes more sharply into focus.

The reader attuned to these elements draws nearer to understanding the primal trespass and solving the enigma of Willow Springs: Bascombe Wade never surrendered to the goddess in Sapphira, and thus his gestures of emancipation could never be more than half-measures, tragically guaranteed to fall short. The primal sin on this little coastal island, as elsewhere in the Western world, is displacement of the Great Mother by logocentrism—the casting out of Sycorax by Prospero. The male children of Sapphira Wade take the surname Day as if in homage to the new cosmic principle whereby the fecund darkness must give way to the light of masculine reason. Nevertheless, it was the goddess in Sapphira that created Willow Springs, and the reader sees her powerful survival in the conjure woman, Mama Day. The story allows hope for an eventual, millennial triumph of the Black Goddess.

On Willow Springs, then, one recognizes the symbolic stage on which certain great passages in the history of Western civilization are enacted and reenacted. Here one sees again the betrayal of the Goddess and her struggle with the white, rationalistic, Eurocentric order that Bascombe Wade represents. From the primal, unholy union of master and sometime slave descend fourteen sons in two generations, their very names evocative of Judeo-Christian patriarchy. In the first generation, the sons bear names from the Old Testament; in the second, names from the New Testament. The last of these is the father of Miranda and Abigail, and his name, John-Paul, reflects a significant shift from the apostolic to the patristic. But at this point the female principle reasserts itself in two generations of women, with names that, when not taken from Shakespearean romance and tragedy, hint at subtle modifications of Christianity's virtues and desiderata. Not Faith, Hope, and Charity, but Grace, Hope, and Peace. In
the distaff line, only Cocoa's grandmother, Abigail, has a biblical name. It means "source of joy," for she is the passer-on of Sapphira's blood.

A hundred and sixty or so years after Bascombe and Sapphira founded their troubled line, George Andrews strives blindly to connect with a woman who is the heir-designate of all the mysteries represented by this island of matriarchal power. This woman, Cocoa, is herself tragically blind to the precise dynamic that comes between herself and her husband, who, as engineer and Republican, is a man wholly committed to the Logos, impervious to the matrifocal wisdom of the island and its current matriarch.

"What do you do when someone starts telling you something that you just cannot believe?" (286), wonders George when confronted with what he attempts to dismiss as "mumbo-jumbo" (295). Mama Day offers him candor on a similar occasion: "you have a choice.... I can tell you the truth, which you won't believe, or I can invent a lie, which you would" (266).

Mama Day does not despise George. Rather, she recognizes his strength and seeks to convert it to her ends. That is, she asks him, in the name of his love for Cocoa, to suspend his skepticism and serve her. She knows that "he believes in himself," and she wants his belief and his "will." In short, she wants his hands, willingly given. With "his hand in hers" (285), she will prevail against the dark forces marshaled by the horrific Ruby. Thus the ancient conjure woman sends George on a strange mission to find and bring to her whatever might lie behind a certain baleful denizen of her henhouse. She knows that he will find there only his own hands, and she hopes he will return and put them at her disposal. When George does not return, she thinks that she has failed to persuade him, that "he went and did it his way" (302).

But in fact George has perished in the attempt to carry out his instructions, and Naylor seems to imply that his sacrifice is instrumental in Cocoa's recovery, that his act of faith is enough to tip the balance. He has become the half-conscious instrument of Mama Day's healing. She has managed to defeat the malevolence brought to bear on Cocoa, not to mention briefly to circumvent a rationalistic hegemony some thousands of years old. She becomes the conduit whereby some power of maternal, cosmic healing comes into play.

The darker side of this rescue, not desired or understood by Mama Day, is George's present death, which is nothing less than
sacrificial. Human and hence fallible, Mama Day surely errs to think this death avoidable. The strain of the day and the violence of the brood hen prove too much for a heart weak from childhood (the weakness of that heart, like the strength of his intellect and will, is obviously symbolic). Like Bascombe Wade before him, George is a classic solar hero. All those stories of the hero loved by the goddess yet doomed—Endymion, Attis, Adonis—are stories, more or less disguised by androcentric revisionism, of the ancient, matriarchal order and its ritual slaughter of the young and privileged king, consort to the goddess for one splendid year before his fated end. The boar that slays Adonis becomes the old and vicious red hen with which George does battle, only to stumble away with a complete set of stigmata: the ankle, the hands, the “stitch in my side” (301). George fulfills the destiny hinted at in his dream of walking on water (183-184). He becomes the local savior, undergoes the redemptive sacrifice.

In his two desperate trips on the path between the other place and the trailer, George brings on the bursting of his heart and reenacts the passion of the island’s first sacrifice, Bascombe Wade: “Up and down this path, somehow, a man dies from a broken heart” (118). The inhabitants of Willow Springs commemorate the island’s emancipator in the annual ritual of Candle Walk, which the people understand differently at different moments in their history—but which always takes place on December 22, the winter solstice. This is the point in the annual round at which the tide turns in the struggle between light and dark. The winter solstice marks the birth of the solar deity, for the sun waxes from this point in the year to furnish creation with more light and heat. But when summer ends—hurricane season in the American Southeast—the solar hero must undergo his inevitable sacrifice.

Candle Walk, like any other folk tradition, evolves and changes; yet all its versions are equally valid. In Miranda’s youth it seems linked to a matriarchal commemoration of Sapphira Wade’s departure in—or as—a mythic ball of fire. But Mama Day remembers accounts of other meanings from the days of her father, John-Paul, and grandfather, Jonah—meanings centered in the male ancestor. Twice in the story Miranda pauses in wonder at the realization that “the light wasn’t for her—it was for him” (118). George, she says,
done opened that memory for us. My daddy said that his daddy said when he was young, Candle Walk was different still. It weren’t about no candles, was about a light that burned in a man’s heart. And folks would go out and look up at the stars—they figured his spirit had to be there, it was the highest place they knew. And what took him that high was his belief in right, while what buried him in the ground was the lingering taste of ginger from the lips of a woman. (308)

One errs, however, to construe the meaning in terms of an either/or. Erich Neumann observes that “the winter solstice, when the Great Mother gives birth to the sun, stands at the center of the matriarchal mysteries.”20 All meanings of Candle Walk cohere in the matriarchal vision.

“Lead on with light.” The saying, like the candles, glances simultaneously at the flickering existence of the infant solar light on December 22nd—and at the principle of light that can come to dominate a logocentric épistémé rather than casting, as it ought, glory on the Goddess. Mama Day experiences this light as the climax to the mental struggle that follows her recovery of the ledger with the “slip of paper” (279) recording the sale of Sapphira to Bascombe Wade. The ink on this document has long since run, and the name of her great grandmother remains illegible. She can make out only a series of suggestive words: “Law. Knowledge. Witness. Inflicted. Nurse. Conditions. Tender. Kind” (280). These words contain, however, a complete gendering of psychology—from Lacan’s Symbolic Order (“Law,” “Knowledge”) to Kristeva’s chora (“Nurse,” “Tender,” “Kind”). The progression is at once backward and forward in time: from the law and knowledge implied in the Name of the Father backward to the tender condition of nursling, sheltered and nurtured by the body of the mother—and from the patriarchal hegemony of slavery forward to the progressive recovery, on Willow Springs, of an alternative, female order.

Why is the name known in the prologue yet unknown to Miranda, unspoken? Evidently Naylor wants to express something of the pathos of a community denied the name of its tutelary spirit. At the same time, Naylor knows that naming, as Adamic prerogative, is intensely logocentric. This particular name, she suggests, welters in the limbo of all that fails to register on the instruments of patriarchy. “Woman,” says Kristeva, is precisely “that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming and ideologies.”21 On the night Mama Day discovers the bill of sale, she puzzles over the obliterated name until she falls asleep, but
though “in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira” (280), she still does not learn her name. Instead, “in a vast space of glowing light,” she experiences an oneiric return to the prelinguistic chora and the mother’s body:

Daughter. The word comes to cradle what has gone past weariness. She can’t really hear it ‘cause she’s got no ears, or call out ‘cause she’s got no mouth. There’s only the sense of being. Daughter. Flooding through like fine streams of hot, liquid sugar to fill the spaces where there was never no arms to hold her up, no shoulders for her to lay her head down and cry on, no body to ever turn to for answers. Miranda. Sister. Little Mama. Mama Day. Melting, melting away under the sweet flood waters pouring down to lay bare a place she ain’t known existed: Daughter. And she opens the mouth that ain’t there to suckle at the full breasts, deep greedy swallows of a thickness like cream, seeping from the corners of her lips, spilling onto her chin. Full. Full and warm to rest between the mounds of softness, to feel the beating of a calm and steady heart. She sleeps within her sleep. (283)

At the end, Mama Day still has not recovered the lost name. In a reverie at the graveyard, she remarks to the dead George, “I can’t tell you her name, ‘cause it was never opened to me. That’s a door for the child of Grace to walk through.” Cocoa’s mother was named Grace, but the epithet also affirms Cocoa’s growing spiritual distinction—indeed, the inheritance of Mama Day’s own spiritual gifts. Cocoa will one day know even as she is known. It will perhaps be a day when naming and time and light will no longer be emblems of patriarchal, logocentric division—a proximate day, perhaps, when the gender of Cocoa’s children (two boys) will pose no threat to the spiritual condition of Willow Springs. When Mama Day adds that “there’ll be another time—that I won’t be here for—when she’ll learn about the beginning of the Days,” one recognizes, I think, the intimation of another, culminating stroke on Naylor’s great canvas. But like Cocoa, the reader must “go away to come back to that kind of knowledge” (308).

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**NOTES**

1 Naylor knows the Bible and Christian belief system well, having been involved, according to Virginia Fowler, with the Jehovah’s Witnesses from about 1963 until 1975. For the last seven years she was a minister/missionary. In *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne,
Fowler suggests that this denomination, with its apocalyptic expectations, had a “profound” effect on “Naylor’s identity and perhaps also the directions taken by her art” (6).


3 Kiswana, who has discarded the name of her grandmother, knows how to play the dozens, as one sees in the exchange with C. C. Baker, and in her sympathetic portrait one suspects Naylor of similarly playing the dozens with—that is, Signifying on—Alice Walker, so unsympathetic towards the central character in Everyday Use, Wangero Leewanika Kimanjo (nee Dee Johnson), who has also rejected the name that descended to her through her grandmother in favor of a cognomen more African, more authentic. Fowler suggests (Gloria Naylor, 166; n. 13) that the Seven Days, the black terrorists in Morrison’s Song of Solomon, provide a similar target for Naylor’s imagining of the seven Days born to Sapphira Wade. Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues that Naylor engages with and revises Morrison at a number of points. Indeed, her essay strikes an admirable balance of attention between the frequently noticed Shakespearean appropriations (see note 7 below) and the less exhaustively discussed debts to other African American writers, including Hurston, Ellison, Gaines, and Walker, as well as Morrison. See “Toward a New Order: Shakespeare, Morrison, and Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day,” MELUS 19 (Fall 1994): 75-90.


6 The literary antecedents notwithstanding, it is worth noting that the unnamed hurricane that provides the novel’s climax takes place in 1985, which was the year of a fierce category 4 storm named Hurricane Gloria (16 September-2 October).

7 See, for example, Elaine Showalter’s brief but insightful remarks in Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing ((New York: Oxford U. Press, 1991): “Naylor’s Miranda is created in the wake of the Third World Caliban, and is both a critique of the phallocentric Prospero-Caliban relation, and an effort to rewrite The Tempest as a revolutionary text for women” (38-39). Peter Erickson, who in Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1991) offers a more extended analysis, suggests that “by putting into play both positive and critical attitudes towards Shakespeare, Naylor’s work dramatizes with particular fullness the conflict between established and emergent traditions” (126). Valerie Traub concurs, noting in “Rainbows of Darkness: Deconstructing Shakespeare in the Work of Gloria Naylor and Zora Neale Hurston,” in Cross-Cultural Performances: Differences in Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare, ed. Marianne Novy (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1993), that the structural ambivalence with which Naylor relates to the Shakespearean repertoire—the mixture of admiration and resentment her novel reveals—maps the outlines of one possible strategy for negotiating the field of white Western aesthetic production.” She concludes that the “novel’s overall project (represented by the structural and thematic revision of The Tempest) is to educate us in reading for a diversity of historical and racial pasts” (161). Interestingly, Traub sees Sapphira as a sympathetic, more resourceful Sycorax and


12 Perhaps, to adduce yet another Shakespearean analogue, the influence of Sapphira on Bascombe Wade was something like that of Cleopatra on Antony. Like that earlier African temptress, Sapphira subsequently becomes the kind of pure legend of which E. M. Forster speaks in his lyrical gloss on Plutarch, Shakespeare, and Dryden: “It is almost impossible to think of the later Cleopatra as an ordinary person. She has joined the company of Helen and Iseult... Voluptuous but watchful, she treated her new lover as she had treated her old. She never bored him, and since grossness means monotony she sharpened his mind to those more delicate delights, where sense verges into spirit. Her infinite variety lay in that. She was the last of a secluded and subtle race, she was a flower that Alexandria had taken three hundred years to produce and that eternity cannot wither, and she unfolded herself to a simple but intelligent Roman soldier.” See E. M. Forster, Alexandria: A History and a Guide (1922), 2nd American ed., with revised afterword and notes by Michael Haag (Oxford U. Press, 1986), p. 28.


14 One of the most readable accounts of that displacement is Mary Renault’s 1958 novel The King Must Die, in which the Greek hero Theseus, born into a civilization dominated by the goddess, proves instrumental in overthrowing her in region after region of his Mediterranean world—from the Troezen of his birth to the Crete of his greatest triumph. The climactic sequence of his early adventures concerns his successful rebellion against the gynocratic order that first distinguishes him as royal consort for a year, then ordains his sacrifice.

For an account of Gilgamesh as a similar narrative of patriarchal aggression, see Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, The Great Cosmic Mother (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 246.

16 The Great Cosmic Mother, p. 21.

17 As Tucker points out ("Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day"), the Gullah culture of the sea islands that include Willow Springs seems to represent the survival of beliefs and customs originating in "the Kongo-Angolan area" and "the Windward coast" (180-81).


19 By the same token, Karla F. C. Holloway, in Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature (Rutgers U. Press, 1992), surely errs in saying that "Miranda (Mama) Day . . . must sacrifice George if she is to save her niece Cocoa" (139). Holloway is more helpful in her general emphasis on the goddess—literal or "figurative" (154)—that she sees as an element common to works by "twentieth-century West African writers" and "African-American women writers whose work focuses on the recovery of an ancestral figure" (2). In the work of the latter, "the idea and presence of the ancestor indicate two important concepts: first, the textual perseverance of a primary (African) culture where the ancestor and the deity can inhabit the same metaphysical space, and second, the belief that a spiritual metaphor can center the metaphysics of a creative literature. . . . The image of a goddess is a constant thread . . ." (149).


21 Julia Kristeva, "La femme, ce n'est jamais ça." Tel Quel 59 (Automne 1974): 31. My attention was directed to this remark by Toril Moi in Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 163. I have also used Moi's translation.