

BOOK REVIEW

Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition: Transforming American Culture. By TESSA ROYNON. Classical Presences. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 220. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-969868-4.

Tessa Roynon has written an important volume in Oxford's "Classical Presences" series, a valuable study not only for those interested in the reception of the Classics in American fiction but for any student of African-American literature, as well. For thirty years, scholars have noted Toni Morrison's use of classical mythological tropes, along with her allusions to Hebrew-Christian scriptures and her response to important writers such as Joyce and Faulkner. Roynon, however, goes far beyond collecting examples of intertextuality. Her meaty and penetrating analysis demonstrates Morrison's "ambivalent engagement" in rewriting, even inverting, conventional American history.

Rather than employing the predictable method of analyzing each of Morrison's novels separately and in chronological order, Roynon structures her work using the chronology of American history, beginning with the first contact of Europeans with the western hemisphere. In each chapter, two or more of Morrison's works are analyzed to illustrate her program of deconstruction. Roynon demonstrates that Morrison's classicism, with its "subversive potential", is an essential tool in her response to America's struggles over equality. In Roynon's words, "it is her radical employment of the classical tradition—from her canny uses of the generic conventions of tragedy or pastoralism to the palimpsest-like resonances with which she imbues a particular image or a specific word—that enable her rewriting of America's past" (4-5). Morrison transforms the classical tradition by transcending, rather than reinforcing, processes of categorization.

In her first chapter, Roynon shows how Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *Love* use the legend of Lucretia, as well as Ovid's *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*, to correct the use of the classical tradition in glorifying the conquest of the 'New World' and to show that colonization was less metamorphosis than destruction. Roynon's second chapter focuses on colonial New England and the founding of the United States. In *A Mercy*, *Paradise*, and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison "destabilizes" the use of the Classics in the dominant narrative, while making use of aspects of the Aristotelian

tragic vision. In all of her work, Morrison replaces hagiography of “founding fathers” with respect for ancestral experience and knowledge.

Chapter 3 analyzes the ways in which *Beloved* and *Jazz* respond to the “Old South’s” defense of slavery, to the Civil War, and to the Reconstruction. Morrison radically alters tragic, epic, and pastoral conventions as she re-envision the identification with ancient Athens common to both pro-slavery and abolitionist rhetoric. In her fourth chapter, Roynon looks at Morrison’s use of pastoral and epic, as well as allusions to Greek scapegoating ritual, to deal with African American experience in the first half of the twentieth century. After she discusses freedom and fate in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Roynon treats Morrison’s use of Homeric epic in *Home*. In this section, she also refers to Morrison’s personal biography and to the work of the psychiatrist, Jonathan Shea, on Homer’s relevance to American war veterans.

Roynon’s fifth chapter deals with the civil-rights years by analyzing Morrison’s engagement with Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and Euripides’ *Bacchae* in *Song of Solomon*, *Love*, and the “trilogy” of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. *Song of Solomon*, a profoundly complex novel, also engages Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (as well as the myths of Oedipus, Odysseus, Demeter, and Daedalus, though Roynon does not treat them in this section).

In her last chapter, Roynon grapples with the contentious contemporary argument over the influence of Africa on classical culture. She highlights Morrison’s sense of the affinity between Greek tragedy and African religious experience, her allusions to Ovid and African cultural forms, and her restoration of Africa to the Graeco-Roman tradition. Finally, she quite judiciously notes that critical polarization in the last quarter century has consigned Morrison to a political orientation that is much shallower than the depth of insight that her inversion of the classical tradition actually achieves. Roynon asserts that Morrison reconnects the classical tradition with its “origins” and affinities to Africa.

Roynon is a succinct writer. Every paragraph of this work contributes some insight that slows the reader down and causes one to ponder and rethink Morrison. I have taught some of Morrison’s books for thirty years, but Roynon has made me want to start again and reread them from the beginning. The fact that culture is “organic” is nowhere better demonstrated than in the work of Toni Morrison, a writer, who, like Joyce, engages the past to create a richer and healthier future. Patrice Rankine (*Ulysses in Black*, Wisconsin 2006) comments on “Morrison’s jazzlike riffs on tradition.” Roynon’s study of Morrison illustrates, as she says, “the radical potential inherent in the classical tradition” as well as the profound extent

to which Morrison is a significant player in that tradition, Cook and Tatum¹ to the contrary notwithstanding.

The work includes an extensive bibliography of nearly four-hundred entries (I could find only four omissions) and a helpful index.

WILLIAM K. FREIERT

Gustavus Adolphus College, wfreiert@gac.edu

¹William W. Cook and James Tatum, *African American Writers and Classical Tradition*, Chicago 2010.