Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker’s Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*

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The ancient story of Philomela has resonated in the imaginations of women writers for several thousand years. The presence of this myth in contemporary texts by African American women writers marks the persistence of a powerful archetypal narrative explicitly connecting rape (a violent inscription of the female body), silencing, and the complete erasure of feminine subjectivity. For in most versions of this myth Philomela is not only raped—she is also silenced. In Ovid’s recounting, for example, Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, who then tears out her tongue. Philomela is finally transformed into a nightingale, doomed to chirp out the name of her rapist for eternity: *tereu, tereu*. The mythic narrative of Philomela therefore explicitly intertwines rape, silencing, and the destruction of feminine subjectivity.

Contemporary African American women’s fiction contains allusions to this archetypal rape narrative. In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, for example, Pecola Breedlove’s rape by her father Cholly causes a fragmentation of her psyche. Pecola’s attempts to tell of her rape are nullified by her disbelieving mother, and by the novel’s conclusion her voice is only exercised in internal colloquies with an imaginary friend. She flutters along the edges of society, a “winged but grounded bird” (158). Similarly, in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, after Lorraine is gagged and brutally gang raped, she becomes both insane and unable to speak of her rape. Finally, she is left with only one word, a word that echoes back to Philomela’s “*tereu, tereu,*” the word she attempted to use to stop her attackers: “Please. Please”
PHILOMELA SPEAKS

(the death of the characters and the loss of their human voices). The myth suggests that an assertion of alternative feminine voice merely imprisons women all the more exhaustively in pejorative mastertexts that make men, as Procne says, the "author of our evils."

Like the novels of Morrison and Naylor, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* invokes this archetypal rape narrative, but Walker is most interested in re-envisioning this myth through an alternative methodology of language. As Linda Abbandonato argues in her reading of the *The Color Purple*, it is important to consider how a woman can "define herself differently, disengage her self from the cultural scripts of sexuality and gender that produce her as feminine subject" (1107). Abbandonato argues that *The Color Purple* rewrites canonical male texts, but she does not discuss Walker's reconfiguration of linguistic elements of the myth of Philomela. Unlike the original mythic text, as well as the novels of Morrison and Naylor, Walker's text gives Philomela a voice that successfully resists the violent patriarchal inscription of male will onto a silent female body.

Yet Walker does more than simply allow Philomela to speak within the confines of patriarchal discourse. Walker's novel revises the myth of Philomela by creating a heroine's text that reconfigures the rhetorical situation of sender-receiver-message and articulates Celie's movement away from an existence as a victim in a patriarchal plot toward a linguistic and narratological presence as the author/subject of her own story. Walker's novel also rewrites the myth through its creation of an alternative discourse that allows for the expression of both masculine and feminine subjectivity—a language of the sewn that withdraws from the violence of patriarchal domination, of patriarchal discourse. Celie's skills as a seamstress both retrieve and refigure the myth of Philomela, for unlike Philomela's tapestry/text, Celie's sewing functions as an alternative methodology of language that moves her away from violence and victimization and into self-empowerment and subjectivity. The novel also deliberately con-
flates the pen and the needle, thereby deconstructing the binary oppositions between the masculine and the feminine, the spoken and the silenced, the lexical and the graphic. Walker’s reconfiguration of the myth of Philomela thus overturns the master discourse and the master narrative of patriarchal society. In Walker’s hands Philomela’s speech becomes the instrument for a radical metamorphosis of the individual as well as a subversive deconstruction of the power structures that undergird both patriarchal language and the patriarchal world itself.

Susan Griffin argues that “more than rape itself, the fear of rape permeates our lives. . . . and the best defense against this is not to be, to deny being in the body, as a self; . . . to avert your gaze, make yourself, as a presence in this world, less felt” (83). Certainly, when Celie speaks of turning herself into wood when she is beaten or raped (“I say to myself, Celie, you a tree” [30]), the response described by Griffin is apparent; to avoid pain Celie denies her body and her presence. Walker’s story begins in the familiar mythic way: Celie is told after her rape by her (presumed) father: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (11). Celie is silenced by an external source, and like Morrison’s and Naylor’s protagonists, she experiences the nullification of subjectivity and internal voice allied with rape by the myth of Philomela. Celie’s story starts with the fact that the one identity she has always known is no longer accessible: “I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl” (11). No longer a “good girl,” Celie has no present tense subjectivity, no present tense “I am.”

Like Pecola Breedlove of Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, who ends the novel “flail[ing] her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly” (158), Celie appears to have been driven into semiotic collapse by the rape. Walker’s text also uses bird and blood imagery to connect Celie with her mythic prototype, Philomela as well as to revise the mythic prototext. In Metamorphoses, Ovid describes how Procne and Philomela are transformed, a change that silences them as humans but does not erase their bloody deeds: “One flew to the woods, the other to the roof-top, / And even so the red marks of the murder / Stayed on their breasts; the feathers were blood-colored” (151). Throughout The Color Purple, Celie is associated with both birds and blood. Celie tells Albert that she loves birds
(223), and Albert comments, “you use to remind me of a bird. Way back when you first come to live with me. . . . And the least little thing happen, you looked about to fly away” (223). Later in the novel, when Celie returns to confront her “Pa” (Alphonso) about his actions, she comments three times on how loudly the birds are singing around his house (164, 165, 167). The singing birds of the later scene recall Celie’s earlier victimization, the way she was raped, bloodied, impregnated, and deprived of voice by Alphonso’s statement that “she tell lies” (18).

Paradoxically, the birds of this scene are also a positive symbol to Celie of how nature persists in displaying its beauty despite the despoiling patterns of humanity. Similarly, Walker later transforms the blood symbolism of the early rape scene (“Seem like it all come back to me. . . . How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking” [108-9]) into something more positive, revising the symbolism of blood in the mythic text. When Shug abandons Celie, Celie describes her heart as “blooming blood” (229). Here, although blood is painful, it is also generative: it blooms. Blood comes from Celie during her rape. It also covers her in other key scenes in the novel, such as her first meeting with Mr. ___’s (Albert’s) family: “I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. . . . He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts” (21). Like Philomela, whose breast feathers are stained “blood-colored” with the “red marks of the murder” after she is transformed into a bird (Ovid 151), Celie’s breasts are stained with blood. However, Celie eventually transforms the blood of this attack into blooming blood, into a red that is creative and regenerative. A more mature Celie uses the color red as a positive element in her sewing, transforming it from a color of pain to a color of joy. She sews purple and red pants for Sofia (194), orange and red pants for Squeak (191), and blue and red pants for Shug (191). She paints her own room purple and red (248). The blood that marks Celie becomes a positive symbol of her artistic creativity, rather than (as in the myth) a negative symbol of how she is damned in perpetuity by her deed.5

Unlike the archetypal narrative, then, Walker’s novel uses bird and blood imagery to suggest Celie’s metamorphosis not from human to subhuman, but from victim to artist-heroine. The novel also differs from the mythic prototext, as well as from the novels
of Morrison and Naylor, in that it begins (rather than ends) with Celie’s rape, and in that the rape becomes not an instrument of silencing, but the catalyst to Celie’s search for voice. After Celie is told to be silent about the rape, she confides the details in her journal, structured at first as letters to God. In these letters Celie begins to create a resistant narratological version of events that ultimately preserves her subjectivity and voice:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold of my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don’t never git used to it. (11)

The horror of this experience is evident, but it is also apparent that Celie narrates these events to resist her father. Susan Brownmiller comments that “Rape by an authority figure can befuddle a victim . . . . Authority figures emanate an aura of rightness; their actions cannot easily be challenged. What else can the victim be but ‘wrong’”? (271). However, even the patent statement that “I don’t never git used to it” demonstrates that Celie knows her Pa’s actions are improper and that she refuses to live by his imperatives; she refuses to be the passive sheet upon which the father writes unalterable messages. By writing about her rape, Celie also externalizes her experiences so that they do not destroy her. Celie feels sorry for her mama because “Trying to believe his [the father’s] story kilt her” (15). Taking one’s place within a patriarchal text leads to the obliteration of feminine subjectivity. That Celie resists the father’s narratives through her own writing means that she survives.

Celia’s narration of these actions in her diary also enables the later moments in the novel when she speaks of her rape to Shug Avery: “While I trim his hair he look at me funny. He a little nervous too, but I don’t know why, till he grab hold of me and cram me up tween his legs. . . . It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big” (108). Ellen Rooney comments that scenes of sexual violence “may be privileged sites for investigating the construction of female subjectivity because they articulate
questions of desire, power, and agency with a special urgency and explicitly foreground the opposition between subject and object” (92). Walker twice narrates Celie’s violation in order to show how “Pa” attempts to deny Celie’s subjectivity as well as how Celie creates her own spoken and written version of events which emphasizes her cognizance and functions as a counterpoint to her own earlier erasure of body and identity. Walker thus revises the archetypal paradigm depicting rape as an event that encapsulates women in patriarchal plots as the site of silence, absence, and madness. In Walker’s text rape leads not to erasure, but rather to the start of a prolonged struggle toward subjectivity and voice.6

Celie’s movement out of silence occurs despite repeated rape by her husband, who in his demeanor and behavior exactly parallels her father. Multiple or repeated rape is an important element of the violation detailed in the archetypal myth of Philomela as well as in texts by contemporary African American women. In the mythic text, after Tereus cuts out Philomela’s tongue he rapes her again, perhaps more than once: “And even then—/ It seems too much to believe—even then, Tereus / Took her, and took her again, the injured body / Still giving satisfaction to his lust” (Ovid 147). In The Women of Brewster Place, Lorraine is repeatedly raped by six teenagers, while her “paralyzed vocal cords” cannot function because of the dirty paper bag that has been shoved in her mouth (170). In The Bluest Eye, Pecola’s internal monologue reveals that her father, Cholly, raped her at least twice (155, 156), but her mother does not believe that either incident occurred (155).

Celie, too, is repeatedly raped by her “Pa,” who impregnates her twice and then gives away her children. Celie is also raped, both actually and symbolically, by her husband, Mr. ____ (or Albert). Celie is quick to note the parallels between her husband and her father: “Mr. ____ say. . . . All women good for—he don’t finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa” (30). And Celie’s letters repeatedly emphasize that sex with Albert is the equivalent of rape: “He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (79; see also 109). In the imagery of Walker’s text father and husband are conflated: both are rapists who deny that women can be anything other than
objects of male abuse. This conflation echoes back to the myth of Philomela, for in Ovid’s telling of the myth, when Tereus sees Philomela kissing her father, Tereus thinks that “He would like to be / Her father, at that moment; and if he were / He would be as wicked a father as he is a husband” (144-45). Furthermore, as in the myth of Philomela, in Walker’s novel two women’s sororal status does not stop the father/husband from wanting to have sexual intercourse with both sisters. Pa rapes Celie and then casts lascivious eyes at Nettie (13); Albert has intercourse with Celie but also attempts to rape Nettie (119). Given these parallels to the repeated rape paradigm in the myth of Philomela, Celie’s resistance is all the more noteworthy.

Celie’s resistant voice is enabled by her creation of an alternative conception of her audience and by a reconfiguration of the rhetorical triangle of sender-receiver-message. Rape is once again the catalyst for Celie’s resistance. Albert’s physical attempt to rape Nettie fails, but he finds a discursive way of “raping” both women when he refuses to deliver any of Nettie’s letters to Celie. And indeed, this discursive rape is far more effective than his actual rape, as Celie’s response shows. When Celie learns that Albert has suppressed all of Nettie’s letters, her consciousness becomes a blank (116), and she feels “cold” and almost “dead” (115), “sickish” and “numb” (134). Moreover, as sometimes occurs in an actual rape, Celie’s sexual responses to her lover Shug are deadened by Albert’s symbolic rape (136). More than at any other point in the text, Celie seems on the verge of slipping into madness when she discovers Albert’s suppression of her sister’s letters.

However, in a text where “[c]riss-crossed letters, letters written to an absence, letters received from the dead, hidden and confiscated letters, all of these point to the instability of language” (Wall 94), perhaps it is no surprise that Albert’s simplistic gesture of locking up Nettie’s voice in his trunk does not actually disrupt the “conversation” between Celie and Nettie. Although Nettie has never received a letter from Celie, Nettie still feels as if she is communicating with her sister: “I imagine that you really do get my letters and that you are writing back: Dear Nettie, this is what life is like for me” (144). Similarly, Celie discovers that she can converse with Nettie despite receiving no response, and even despite the possibility of Nettie’s physical death: “And I don’t
believe you dead. How can you be dead if I still feel you? Maybe, like God, you changed into something different that I’ll have to speak to in a different way, but you not dead to me Nettie. And never will be” (229-30). In a more positive version of the interchange between Philomela and Procne, Celie’s letters to Nettie create an imagined linguistic persona with whom she can speak “differently.” By doing so, Celie finds an alternative conception of the communicative process that allows her to bypass Albert’s invalidation of her discourse and enables her survival. In most rhetorical situations, after all, the sender expects that the receiver will actually receive the message and shapes the message accordingly. But Celie subversively reconfigures her audience so that an imagined, rather than actual, person is the receiver of the message, and this allows her to shape her message in such a way that it cannot be erased or silenced, in such a way that it can exist despite Albert’s attempt to deny both the communication and the communicator.

Walker also rewrites elements of the mythic paradigm of Philomela to emphasize a textual tradition in which women do more than simply defend themselves against male silencing: in Walker’s new textual tradition women become active and articulate heroines of their own stories. In the myth, when Philomela is denied traditional channels of self-expression she creates an alternative text:

... no power of speech
To help her tell her wrongs, ...
She had a loom to work with, and with purple
On a white background, wove her story in,
Her story in and out.... (148, my emphasis)

Walker’s title may be an allusion to Philomela’s text, woven in purple. However, in Ovid’s myth this alternative text leads only to Philomela’s further victimization by Tereus and to her silence. Celie, too, finds an alternative text, a text directed at a non-patriarchal audience, for in the second half of the novel she stops writing to God—whom she perceives as “just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown” (175)—and starts writing to Nettie.
While Philomela’s alternative text leads to her destruction, Celie’s alternative text, her letters to Nettie, leads to reconstruction, allowing Celie to craft an identity for herself as the heroine of her own story. Celie gets a house and a profession, and she describes both these events in heroic terms in her letters to Nettie. Both Procne and Philomela are taken away from their familial homes by Tereus. Similarly, both Nettie and Celie are driven away from their family’s home by the individual they call “Pa.” Unlike Procne and Philomela, both Celie and Nettie return. Celie’s letter to Nettie describes her triumphant homecoming and ends with the statement that “Now you [Nettie] can come home cause you have a home to come to!” (217). Signing this letter “Your loving sister, Celie” (217), Celie asserts both her right to this home and to this text in which she is no longer a displaced wife trapped within a patriarchal plot. Although Celie seldom signs her letters, she also signs the letter in which she describes her new profession to Nettie. These two signatures, “Your loving Sister, Celie” (217), and “Your Sister, Celie, Folkspants, Unlimited” (192) indicate the contours of the heroic role Celie has shaped for herself, and contrast sharply with her earlier inability to say “I am.” And only in the second half of the novel, when Celie stops writing to God and starts writing to Nettie, does she actively articulate an alternative identity for herself.

Celi’s insistence on her desire for Shug also formulates an alternative to being objectified as an absence in a male plot. If, as Catharine MacKinnon argues, “A woman is a being who identifies and is identified as one whose sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male” (533), then Celie’s insistence on her desire for Shug is crucial. Celie recounts her strong sexual response to Shug Avery (53), and even goes so far as to envision voicing her passion: “All the men got they eyes glued to Shug’s bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. . . . Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do” (82). This internal voicing of desire becomes external in the letter in which Celie tells Nettie of her love for Shug (221). Celie’s love for Shug and others is the fulcrum of her new brand of heroism, and her willingness to articulate it in letters to her sister indicates that she has crafted a textual tradition that allows for feminine heroism and desire.
Beyond giving Celie a resistant voice that allows her to reconfigure the rhetorical situation, recreate her audience, and enunciate a heroine’s text, Walker’s text also creates an alternative methodology of language. In the world Walker depicts, language is often an instrument of coercion and dominance, and it is often used by men to silence women. At first Celie merely turns the tables on Albert, using language to suppress him:

He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.

. . . Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, You better stop talking . . .

Shit, he say. I should have lock you up. Just let you out to work.
The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say.

(187)

In the mythic pattern, Tereus doubly silences Philomela, first by pulling out her tongue and then by imprisoning her in a tower, just as Albert doubly silences Celie, denying her voice (“you can’t curse nobody”) and presence (“I should have lock you up”). But Celie silences and imprisons the oppressor within her own narrative: “the jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot,” “You better stop talking.” Like Albert, Celie has learned how to use both physical and linguistic violence to erase others.

However, Walker is not content with showing Celie’s use of “the master’s tools” against the master. Celie must learn that language can be used to understand, rather than destroy, another’s subjectivity. Celie’s later comment about Albert that “He ain’t Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to” (241) is therefore revealing. Celie accepts that Albert is capable of using language in a constructive rather than destructive way, and she no longer denies his voice. In the end, Celie’s and Albert’s voices become agents for conversation rather than combat: “Now us [Albert and Celie] sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes” (238).

In this passage, sewing and conversation are allied and inseparable, part of the alternative methodology of speech Walker is explicating. Indeed, in this novel sewing often functions as a language, communicating far more effectively than lexical signs. Celie sews curtains to welcome Sofia, and when Sofia is angry at
Celie, she cuts down these same curtains and returns them (45). When they reconcile their differences, Celie and Sofia use the spoiled curtains as part of a quilt (47). Similarly, Celie’s and Corrine’s only conversation occurs in a store where Corrine buys material and thread to make a dress for her daughter. Nettie can only make Corrine remember this conversation by finding a quilt that has squares from the dress material Corrine purchased that day. Sewing is thus a key way individuals communicate with each other, signifying their friendship and interconnectedness. Commenting on Walker’s ubiquitous imagery of clothworking, M. Teresa Tavormina argues that in the novel “sewing is an act of union, of connecting pieces to make a useful whole. Furthermore, sewing with others is a comradely act, one that allows both speech and comfortable, supportive silence” (224). Yet sewing does more than enable conversation: sewing is conversation, a language that articulates relationships and connects and reconnects networks of individuals to create a community.

Moreover, Walker’s novel suggests that sewing is precisely the language that can replace the patriarchal discourse of Mr. , that can revise the mythic pattern of silence/violence/silence. Several critics have argued that the novel’s form is quilt-like, and Walker’s own comments have given strength to this interpretation.¹⁰ The structure of the novel can also be read as an embroidered tapestry such as the one Philomela creates; in Walker’s text, Celie’s pen is the shuttle/needle that creates a design out of separate narrative threads. Celie’s letters to God sometimes weave in quotes or threads from Nettie’s and Shug’s letters; for example, a short letter by Celie includes Nettie’s own words, removed from the letter they came in:

Dear God,

Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, When she come home us leave here . . . But I think bout Nettie.

It’s hot, here, Celie, she write. Hotter than July. Hotter than August and July. Hot like cooking dinner on a big stove in a little kitchen in August and July. Hot. (138; see also 235 and 238)

Furthermore, rather than allowing Nettie’s letters to remain as separate blocks of narrative “fabric,” Celie weaves them into her tapestry by interspersing her own voice into them: “Dear Celie, the
first letter say,” (119), “Next one said” (120), “Next one fat, dated two months later, say” (122). Celie’s narrative voice, then, is not just another square in a quilt, equal to all the other squares. Rather, in the text as a whole narrative voices are interwoven, imbricated, threaded together, and interconnected by the needle/pen of the spinner, Celie herself.

Weaving, embroidering, and sewing are thus important analogies for the novel’s form, but they are also important metaphors for the kind of conversation Walker envisions replacing patriarchal discourse. Of course, there is nothing inherently peaceful about a needle, as illustrated by one character’s comment that unlike Celie his wife would have taken a needle and sewn Shug’s nostrils together (60). And the pen, like the needle, has a phallic shape that can rip and rend, rather than mend and stitch. What is important for Walker, however, is the use to which the instrument is put. For example, when Celie makes pants for Nettie, her sewing is envisioned as a language of love and re-membering: “Nettie, I am making some pants for you to beat the heat in Africa. . . . Every stitch I sew will be a kiss” (192). Like Philomela’s tapestry, Celie’s sewing connects the two sisters.

But unlike Philomela’s tapestry, Celie’s sewn gift to her sister is an act of interconnection and rejuvenation. In Walker’s telling of the myth, then, brutal retaliation is actually replaced by creativity and by sewing itself. When Celie wants to react to Albert’s suppression of Nettie’s letters with violence, Shug tells her to sew pants instead. Celie understands and accepts this: “everyday we going to read Nettie’s letters and sew. A needle and not a razor in my hand, I think” (137). It is here that Walker’s text swerves most radically from the myth of Philomela and from the mythic paradigm. Nettie’s recovered letters are like Philomela’s tapestry: they speak the oppression of women, they incite the sister (or all sisters) to violence. But Walker suggests that violence will only end in more silence. An alternative must be found, and this alternative is sewing and conversation, sewing as conversation. Sewing is a language that explicates an alternative to the violence of patriarchal discourse.

In the novel as a whole, Celie’s pen stitches together the narrative fabric of the text, remaking individual relationships and roles, replacing the violence of patriarchal discourse with a language that
re-members and remakes. Celie’s pen becomes a needle, then. Yet Celie’s needle also becomes a pen. Celie embroiders “little stars and flowers” in her daughter Olivia’s diapers, but she also sews language: she sews her name for her daughter, “Olivia,” into the diaper (22). The needle is, quite literally, a pen, stitching a name that fits the child, that connects mother and daughter, that is both linguistic (written in letters) and sewn (embroidered). Tavormina notes that “in The Color Purple, both clothworking and language become media for self-definition, self-expression, and self-sharing,” but she also claims they have “distinct but similar processes and products” (229). I would suggest, however, that Walker deliberately confuses the processes and products of clothworking and language, of sewing and communication. Ann Bergren explains that Philomela “huphenasa en peploi grammata”: she weaves pictures/writing since “grammata” can mean either (72). Like Philomela’s tapestry, Celie’s embroidery deconstructs the barriers between the pictorial and the lexical.

In the end, the thread and the word cannot be separated, and sewing not only helps Celie achieve self-expression, it becomes an alternative methodology of language that resists other more standard or formal discourses. When Celie’s employee Darlene tries to convince Celie to speak “correctly,” Celie responds “only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind,” but she also notes that she is “busy making pants for Sofia,” and that she dreams of Sofia “jumping over the moon” in these pants (194). Sewing functions as an alternative methodology of speech that cannot be separated from Celie’s acquisition of an alternative spoken and written language. Walker’s language of the sewn denies binaries and hierarchies of the hegemonic world, such as those between oral and written language, between informal and formal diction, between art and language, and between discourse and “craft.”

Nor is this alternative language of the sewn limited to women. By the end of the novel, Albert is sewing, too. Indeed, sewing facilitates a retrieval of an earlier maternal conversation in which Albert once participated: “When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that’s what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me” (238). Through sewing, Albert becomes part of Celie’s community; when Nettie returns
from Africa, Celie introduces both Shug and Albert as “my people” (250). It is significant that Walker allows Albert, an image of Tereus, of the father/rapist, to participate in the conversation of sewing. His transformation and inclusion in Walker’s new version of the myth of Philomela shows that indeed the violence of the cycle can be broken. In Walker’s revision of the myth of Philomela, both the sisters and the rapist turn from the violence of patriarchal discourse and find alternative methodologies of language that speak their recapitulation of self rather than their deconstruction of self and other.

Through her depiction of Albert’s metamorphosis and inclusion in the conversation of sewing, Walker also elucidates broader possibilities for social amelioration. Once rape has been renounced as an instrument of male domination, once the rapist has been transformed and included in a new social order where he can engage in “feminine” activities and be part of “feminine” language, society can move toward a more equitable relationship between the sexes. Peggy Sanday has shown that in rape-free societies, “there is no symbol system by which males define their gender identity as the antithesis of the feminine” (98), and “silencing the feminine is not necessary for becoming a proud and independent male” (94). In rape-free societies, there is “sexual equality and complementarity” (93) between the genders. It is precisely this equality between the genders and validation of the “feminine” that Walker alludes to when she includes Albert in the sewing circle (238), when she shows Harpo feeding and bathing his father (200), and when she shows Sofia making shingles (67). Critics such as Keith Byerman (66) and bell hooks (222) argue that Walker’s feminization of Albert and Harpo reflects a movement away from historical and ideological conflicts. However, Sanday’s research demonstrates that Walker’s approach to social change is realistic. In Walker’s text, the “feminine” is not silenced and it belongs entirely to neither gender. The “feminine” functions as a language that both men and women can speak, a language that offers the possibility of radical social transformation.

The novel therefore indicates that alternative methodologies of language (whether spoken by men or women) need not perpetuate the mythic cycle of feminine destruction encapsulated within patriarchal discourse and patriarchal narrative. Celie’s letters allow
her to reconfigure the rhetorical situation and create a resistant heroine's text in which she has a narratological existence as the author/subject of her own story. The novel as a whole also creates an alternative methodology of language that replaces the phallic and destructive patriarchal discourse of the pen, which tears and rends, with a feminine (but not female) discourse of the needle, which remends, re-members, and remakes. This discourse, the language of the sewn rather than the rent, in turn becomes the cornerstone for a reconstruction of gender roles that undermines patriarchal subjugation itself. And yet in the end, these two discourses (the discourse of the pen and of the needle) are subversively conflated, and it is finally and most incisively through this conflation and confusion that Walker's text achieves its most radical aims. After all, the pen has typically been an instrument of male empowerment, a phallic substitute instantiating men's control over women, while the needle has typically been associated with femininity, demarcating the contours and limits of women's sphere.

When Walker's text conflates needle and pen, then, it undermines the most basic binary structures of patriarchal society: male versus female, public versus private, empowered versus disempowered, spoken versus silent. For if the needle has become the pen and the pen has become the needle, if the feminine and the masculine cannot in fact be separated, if patriarchal discourse has been replaced by a discourse that admits of both masculine and feminine subject positions, what pedestal remains for the subjugation of women and other "minorities" within culture? Thus Walker's novel engages in a wholesale revision of the archetypal rape narrative of Philomela as well as the dominant master narrative of patriarchal culture itself: the silencing and objectifying of women and "others" as the basis for male subjectivity.

Notes

1. Hartman defines archetype as a narrative whose suggestiveness is not explained by its parts or its context; archetype is a text "greater than the whole of which it is a part, a text that demands a context yet is not reducible to it" (337-38). Hartman (337), Joplin (39), and Rowe (53) view the myth of Philo-
mela as archetypal; however, Rowe and Joplin present more positive readings of this archetype than mine. The myth of Philomela also corroborates what many recent feminist critics have argued: that rape is more than just an act of physical or sexual violence: it is an attempt to stamp out or destroy a woman’s agency, and it is tied to perpetuation of gender inequality and denial of feminine subjectivity. See, for example, Brownmiller (287), Griffin (23), Sanday (85), and MacKinnon (532). For an important discussion of the treatment of rape as an archetype in contemporary women’s writing, see Froula.

2. Similarly, in Angelou’s autobiographical I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, after the young protagonist speaks in court about her rape, she almost seems to bite off her own tongue: “I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. I clamped my teeth shut, I’d hold it in” (72). However, unlike those of Morrison’s and Naylor’s texts, Angelou’s protagonist does eventually find her voice; as Froula argues, “Angelou’s powerful memoir, recovering the history that frames it, rescues the child’s voice. . . by telling the prohibited story” (637). The only study of the treatment of rape in African American fiction as a whole is that of Kubitschek; she examines different texts than I do and concludes that African American literature is most likely to portray “the strength which enables the rape victim to survive and recover” (44).

3. I have found no published statements in which Walker comments on having read the myth of Philomela. However, Walker’s novel Meridian (1976) seems to refer even more directly to this myth than The Color Purple. One section of Meridian tells of an enslaved African American woman with an extremely powerful voice. She tells stories all the children love, but one day her stories frighten the master’s son to death. In punishment, the master cuts out her tongue. She buries her tongue next to a tiny tree, which eventually flourishes and grows, becoming a symbol of the master’s inability to completely erase women’s voice, women’s tongue. I believe the resonance between this story and the myth of Philomela is too strong to be coincidental.

4. Here I am arguing that Walker does more than simply allow her heroine to speak within the confines of patriarchal discourse. I use “patriarchal discourse” to mean a language system that grants men the right to be articulate subjects, while portraying women as silent objects. Such a discursive system is embodied in the novel by various male characters who believe that they should rule over women (Albert, Harpo), that women are objects of barter and exchange (Pa, Albert), and that women’s main function is to support male subjectivity (Pa, Albert, and Harpo). The idea that men have more power in language than women also is directly alluded to by comments such as Albert’s to Celie that “You can’t curse nobody. . . . You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman” (187) and by Harpo’s to Mary Agnes: “Shut up Squeak. . . . It bad luck for women to laugh at men” (182). Yet within the novel there are many language systems, and Celie struggles in her letters and sewing to find an alternative methodology of language in which her own subjectivity and voice are not denied. I am not arguing, then, that language is always patriarchal, or for that
matter, white; rather, I am arguing that it often gets \textit{configured} as such, and that Walker’s text is in larger measure about reconfiguring it.

5. In general, Greek myths do not offer raped women many options, as Zeitlin explains: “Whatever the outcome of the particular tale, and to whatever different uses it may be put, the repertory of Greek myth leaves us in no doubt that the female body is vulnerable to sexual assault. . . . Fleeing sexual violence only entails another kind of forcible change to the body [metamorphosis], while those who succumb, especially when gods are the desirers, become pregnant and produce a hero child” (122-23).

6. Squeak/Mary Agnes’s rape and movement towards voice can also be compared to Celie’s. Again, Walker may be rewriting the mythic text, for after her rape Squeak becomes vocal, insisting that Harpo call her by her real name. Her creativity also seems to be unleashed; six months later she begins to sing. I am not arguing that Walker thinks rape is somehow “good” for women, nor do I agree with bell hooks’s statement that Walker’s treatment of the rape of a black woman by a white man shows “a benevolent portrayal of the consequences of rape” (222). Rather, Walker suggests that given the ubiquity of rape in society, women need to learn how to move beyond its victimization into agency and voice. All but one of Walker’s central female characters have a rape (or an attempted rape) perpetrated against them. Celie and Squeak are actually raped, Nettie suffers an attempted rape, and even the strong-willed Sofia implies that she has learned to fight mainly to ward off unwanted sexual assaults by her male relatives (46).

7. Wall argues that in the novel, “the fact that no letters are ever exchanged (so that a running dialogue can occur) indicates a contemporary, solipsistic view of the absence within communication or, rather, of the continuous model of sender to receiver” (94).

8. Cheung also believes the title may be an allusion to the story of Philomela (172, n. 6) but does not discuss Walker’s revision of this myth. For other readings of the title, see Abbandonato (1113).

9. For a corroborating view, see Abbandonato’s statement that “in breaking the taboo against homosexuality, Celie symbolically exits the masternarrative of female sexuality and abandons the position ascribed to her within the symbolic order” (1111-12). But for an alternative view, see hooks’s argument that “Sexual desire, initially evoked in the novel as a subversive transformative force. . . . is suppressed and finally absent—a means to an end but not an end in itself (217). I would agree with hooks that desire itself is not, per se, subversive in this novel, but that Celie’s willingness to \textit{articulate} her desire both privately and publicly is subversive.

10. For critics who argue that the novel’s structure is quilt-like, see Abbandonato (1109), Wall (96), and Tavormina (225). Walker herself comments that she “wanted to do something like a crazy quilt. . . . A crazy-quilt story is one that can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels, and one that can include myth” (\textit{Black Women Writers at Work} 176).
Works Cited


