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CELIE IN THE LOOKING GLASS: THE DESIRE FOR SELFHOOD IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Daniel W. Ross

For many readers the turning point of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* occurs when Celie, the principal character, asserts her freedom from her husband and proclaims her right to exist: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and can't cook. . . . But I'm here" (187). Celie's claim is startling because throughout her life she has been subjected to a cruel form of male dominance grounded in control over speech. The novel's very first words alert us to the prohibition against speech served on Celie by her father: "You'd better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." Thus, Celie writes, addressing her letters to God because she has no one else to write to and because she knows she must never tell no "body." But even then Celie addresses her letters to the orthodox Christian God, another version of the father. In short, Celie's language exists through much of the book without a body or audience, just as she exists without a self or identity.

Finding the courage to speak is a major theme of *The Color Purple*. But the novel also suggests that speech cannot come from the hollow shell of selfhood that Celie presents early on. Thus, I would like to focus on
the discovery that must necessarily precede Celie's discovery of speech: the discovery of desire—for selfhood, for other, for community, and for a meaningful place in the Creation. The process of discovering or developing desire begins, for Celie, with the reappropriation of her own body, which was taken from her by men—first by her brutal stepfather and then passed on to her husband, Albert. The repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language. During this process Celie learns to love herself and others and to address even her written language to a body, her sister Nettie, rather than to the disembodied God she has blindly inherited from white Christian mythology. The crucial scene, I will argue, in initiating this process is the mirror scene. In this scene Celie first comes to terms with her own body, thus changing her life forever.

I

One of the primary projects of modern feminism has been to restore women's bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture, to them. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even to hate their bodies. According to Adrienne Rich, women must overcome these negative attitudes if they are to achieve intellectual progress:

But fear and hatred of our bodies had often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies—hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellecction. (284)

Coming to terms with the body can be, for women, a painful experience. Alicia Ostriker, for example, notes that although among contemporary poets females are more likely to describe the body or to use it as a source of imagery than their male counterparts are, their images often focus on strangulation, cutting, mutilation, or depictions of "psychic hurt in somatic terms" (249). Consequently, women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented, a pattern evident in Walker's Celie. To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women's enslavement, this abuse represents for woman a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status.

As the subject of repeated rapes and beatings, Celie tries alternately to ignore and to annihilate her body. The latter is her strategy for defense against her husband's assaults:

He beat me like he beat the children... It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man. (30)

But Celie's ignorance of her body is even more shocking than her desire
to annihilate it, as her language makes clear. She describes her own hysterectomy in the words of a child: "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more" (15). Even this knowledge, personal as it is, comes to Celie second hand.

Celie has no desire to get to know her body until the arrival of her husband's lover, Shug Avery. While serving Shug in the traditional female capacity of nurse, Celie feels her first erotic stirrings and associates them with a new spirituality: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying" (53). Celie's stirrings foreshadow her discovery, under Shug's guidance, of a new God that allows her to love sexual pleasure guiltlessly. Shug introduces Celie to the mysteries of the body and sexual experience, making possible both Celie's discovery of speech and her freedom from masculine brutality. But the introduction requires that Celie see her body and feel its components first. For this a hand-held mirror is necessary, as is Shug's encouragement that there is something worth seeing.

When Shug urges her to look at herself, Celie reacts much like a child who fears being caught by a parent: she giggles and feels "like us been doing something wrong" (80). Even Shug, for all her promiscuity, talks like a child in preparing Celie for what she will find:

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It gets hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. (79; my emphasis)

The simplicity of Shug's language must certainly be designed in part to titillate Celie, but her uncharacteristic euphemism ("when you do you know what with somebody") suggests that even the free-spirited Shug has trouble speaking straightforwardly about sex or the body. While Celie looks in the mirror, Shug guards the door like a naughty schoolgirl, letting Celie know when the coast is clear.

Celie is astonished by what she sees in the mirror:

Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. (79)

After her initial revulsion Celie sees in succession three things: the hair that shielded her vagina from view, her black lips, and, finally, her feminine beauty, symbolized as a rose. When Shug asks her what she thinks, Celie's immediate response abnegates her previous annihilation and ignorance of her body: "It mine, I say" (80). In discovering and accepting with pride her own body, Celie initiates a desire for selfhood. Next she begins to find an identity through a network of female relationships with Shug, Nettie (whose letters she soon discovers), Sofia, and Mary Agnes. With her newfound identity, Celie is able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech and to join a community of women, thus freeing herself from dependence on and subjection to male brutality.
II

The hair, the lips, the rose. Each symbolizes an important aspect of Celie’s attitude toward her body, an attitude that must change if she is ever to be free of male brutality. The hair represents Celie’s old attitude of self-revulsion, evident in her spontaneous “Ugh.” The pubic hair no doubt arouses Celie’s memories of her stepfather’s raping her; he came to her with scissors in hand, ostensibly to have her cut his hair. But inside herself Celie finds the wet rose, a symbol of her new attitude, which includes not only love but also an entirely different attitude toward God and Creation. Shug teaches Celie to find God in herself, in nature, and in her own feelings, including erotic ones: “God loves all them feelings,” Shug tells her (178; my emphasis). In between are the lips, representing Celie’s present ambivalence. Although she is gradually learning, under Shug’s guidance, to discover her body, her lips are for the time being dry, indicative of her virginity (in Shug’s sense of the word) and her silence. Both orifices, vagina and mouth, need moistening if Celie is to replace sexual abuse with sexual pleasure and then to assert her independence from Albert. When she and Shug make love for the first time, their pleasure is purely oral. They “kiss and kiss until [they] can’t hardly kiss no more” (109). This scene culminates in an ecstasy that is both maternal and infantile for Celie:

Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth.

Way after while, I act like a lost baby too. (109)

Infantilism and maternity can provoke negative memories for Celie: her stepfather raped her because her mother did not satisfy him, and her mother died screaming and cursing at Celie, who, pregnant with her first child, could not move fast enough to be an efficient nurse. But Celie does effectively nurse Shug’s ills, and Shug, in turn, plays a maternal role by teaching Celie how to love. She sucks from Celie’s breast as Celie’s lost babies were never allowed to; we must recall here that Celie’s children were taken from her before she could “nurse” them, leaving her with “breasts full of milk running down [her]self” (13). Celie’s orgasm suggests a rebirth or perhaps an initial birth into a world of love, a reenactment of the primal pleasure of the child at the mother’s breast. In psychoanalytic terms this scene presents the inauguration of primary narcissism that, “as a psychical reality, can only be the primal myth of a return to the maternal breast” (Laplanche 72). In essence, the story of Celie’s life begins afresh here; as Terry Eagleton puts it, the desire to

1Lesbianism is an attempt to recapture or reexperience the mother-daughter bond. Sue Silvermarie describes the process as follows: “In loving another I discovered the deep urge to both be a mother and to find a mother in my mother. . . . When I kiss and stroke and enter my lover, I am also a child re-entering my mother” (quoted in Rich 232-233).
retrieve the mother’s body drives “the narrative of our lives, impelling us to pursue substitutes for this lost paradise in the endless metonymic movement of desire” (185). I turn now to psychoanalysis to show how theories of infantile development can help explain just how far Celie comes in her development of an ego and love for another. Psychoanalysis demonstrates the crucial role Shug Avery plays in her development, especially in reconciling Celie with her own body.2

III

Modern psychoanalysis assigns great importance to mirror scenes. Such scenes are crucial in the development of an ego, for, as Freud noted, “the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed” (“On Narcissism” 77). Jacques Lacan posited the beginning of that development in “the mirror stage,” which normally occurs between six and eighteen months of age. The mirror stage, a metaphor for Lacan, is literally enacted by Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*. Up until this stage a child has no perception of an external world, only of himself as, in Freud’s famous phrase, “His Majesty the Baby” (“On Narcissism” 91).

Lacan believes that the mirror stage offers the child only an illusion of whole selfhood, when in fact the subject is always split. But Lacan’s view of the unattainableness of whole selfhood finds a more optimistic revision in Walker’s novel. *The Color Purple*, in fact, endorses another view prevalent in modern thought—that such illusions are not destructive but are positive accommodations that allow one to find meaning in life, far preferable to the desire for self-annihilation Celie voices early in the book. In Eagleton’s words, if we analyze our situations in the world rationally, we are bound to conclude that we lack centering, but most of us interpret ourselves otherwise, to assure ourselves of our life’s significance. Eagleton believes the relation of an individual to society, interpreted thus, resembles Lacan’s view of the small child’s image of itself in the mirror:

In both cases, the human subject is supplied with a satisfying unified image of selfhood by identifying with an object which reflects this image back to it in a closed, narcissistic circle. In both cases, too, this image involves a misrecognition, since it idealizes the subject’s real situation. (173)

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2The subject of the construction of selfhood or ego has a very complicated, uneven history in psychoanalysis. Depending on the theoretical model one adopts, many views are possible. As Steven Marcus says, “the notion of the self that we can construct out of contemporary psychoanalysis contains a new enlarged admixture in it of archaic, pre-Oedipal, prephallic, and preverbal components, pieces of psychic life that remain unintegrated, and of a self that is neither stable nor coherent in its earliest vital and formative phases” (318). This being the state of things, I must draw on a wide range of theorists whose ideas are not always compatible. In seeking to describe Celie’s construction of a self, I am concerned not with establishing the superiority of any school of psychoanalysis but with accurately tracing the development of her selfhood as Alice Walker dramatizes it. The terminology of psychoanalysis is extremely useful for this process, although the theorists I cite might not always agree with each other.
But this misrecognition, Lacan’s méconnaissance, says Eagleton, makes selfhood possible: “Duly enthralled by the image of myself I receive, I subject myself to it; and it is through this ‘subjection’ that I become a subject” (173). To put it another way, the misrecognition fuels the desire to construct selfhood, because “the first Desire of any human is the absolute one for recognition (the Desire to be desired), itself linked to the Desire to be a unity” (Ragland-Sullivan 58). Spurred by this desire, the subject begins looking to others for validation. The self is an imaginary construct; what the mirror offers, says Juliet Mitchell, is a chance for a child to grasp itself “for the first time as a perfect whole, not a mess of uncoordinated movements and feelings” (40). For Celie, the mirror opens the door of her imagination, helping her envision a world of new possibilities for herself.

The dangers of pursuing an illusory wholeness of selfhood are dwarfed by those of eliding the mirror stage. The child who experiences no normal passage through a mirror stage can be arrested, trapped in a very early stage of development. Such a child may become autistic, a sign of extreme disturbance in one’s sense of identity (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman 11). As I will show momentarily, this is Celie’s condition early in the novel, when she is arrested in the pre-mirror stage of development. Without a positive sense of him/herself as a body, and without an imago to replace the parental one, the child who does not pass through the mirror stage is left without an awareness of externality or otherness. This lack of an other is extremely critical, for Lacan links the discovery of the other to our becoming social beings: without it we become overattached to early fixations of identity, unable to adapt them as necessary to life’s demands (Ragland-Sullivan 43-44).

At least one other area of development is retarded if the mirror stage is elided: speech. For Lacan speech presupposes the existence of “the Other to whom it is addressed” (Sheridan viii). Thus, Celie’s inability to find a listening audience for herself is another sign of her autism, another result of her arrested development. Only Shug Avery is able to draw Celie out of her autism; Sofia’s early attempts to get Celie to speak for

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3For arguments that illusions such as the type constructed here are necessary in modern life, see Ernest Becker and my own “Lord Jim and the Saving Illusion,” forthcoming in Comradiana.

4I follow Mahler, Pine, and Bergman here in distinguishing Celie’s severe autism from the “normal autism” every child evinces during the early months of life. “Normal autism,” a stage of primary narcissism, gives way to an awareness that “need satisfaction cannot be provided by oneself; but comes from somewhere outside the self” (42).

5The distinction between the other (objet petit a) and the Other (grand Autre) is very complicated in Lacan. They represent algebraic signs that Lacan refused to translate. In particular, the Other does not represent, as some wrongly assume, a specific person who becomes an object of desire; Ragland-Sullivan comes closest to a definition when she says it designates “various external forces that structure a primary and secondary unconscious” (15-16). Because the lower case “other” more nearly represents a single imago or object of desire, I use it to refer to Shug’s relationship with Celie. See Lacan (19).

6Behind the principal neuroses people suffer from, Freud found unresolved conflicts traceable to one’s early development. Lack of resolution leads to a point where one’s development becomes arrested or fixated. See Eagleton (158).
herself fail because Celie has developed no concept of otherness. Celie needs not only someone who will tell her how to act and what to say but also someone who will show her. She needs a sympathetic mentor and friend, a relationship that Sharon Hymer calls a "narcissistic friendship." In the earliest stage of such a friendship, the narcissistic friend serves as "the initiator of activities as well as the provider of a value system and lifestyle which the patient embraces as a germinating ego ideal" (433). Shug does initiate such activities for Celie, helping her through the mirror stage to a discovery of her own body, her capacity for speech, and her ability to love an other.

The early portions of the novel illustrate Celie's arrested development. Many girls "regress" during adolescence, returning to preoedipal or pre-mirror stage fantasies of fusion with the mother; a close friend is often the key to helping them out of such regression (Dalsimer 25-26). But Celie, fourteen and friendless at the beginning of The Color Purple, seems trapped in this infantile stage throughout her teenage years. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, says Ragland-Sullivan, the pre-mirror stage is "a period in which an infant experiences its body as fragmented parts and images." These images include "castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body, and . . . have a formative function in composing the human subject of identity and perception" (Ragland-Sullivan 18-19). Because of male brutality, Celie defines herself in terms of such images: her symbolic castration taking the form of her premature hysterectomy; her mutilation evident in her fear of the scissors her stepfather brings to her room with him; her dislocation symbolized in her being forced to take her mother's place; her feeling of dismemberment figured in the choking her father administers while raping her; the "bursting open of the body" imagined when Celie's "stomach started moving and then that little baby come out [her] pussy chewing on it fist" (Walker 12). Celie's fragmentation is most strongly reinforced by the way her stepfather presents her as less than a whole woman to her future husband, convincing him to marry her because "God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (18).

To make a desire for selfhood possible, Celie must take a new perspective on her own body. Rather than defining herself in terms of fragmentation or of lack, she must learn to define herself synecdochally, seeing part of her body, specifically her genitalia, as a sufficient symbol of herself.

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7Hymer finds similarities between the "narcissistic friendship" and many ancient views of friendship as described by Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, and Zeno (423). Also relevant here is Heinz Kohut's theory of "alter-ego transference" or "twinship" (115).

8In his forthcoming book on narcissism and the novel, Jeffrey Berman notes that developmental arrest can be the result of "parental empathic failure." This sort of arrest can produce "feelings of emptiness, depression, or dehumanization." I am grateful to Professor Berman for sharing the manuscript of his book with me.
as a whole. According to Ellen Forst Lowery, girls need a sublimation that "depends on the additional denial of the castrated state, or as some would protest, their intuition of an equally valuable sex organ/identity" (446; my emphasis). But such a radical reevaluation of the body is not likely for a woman living as Celie does. What she needs is the example of a woman who em-bodies sexual power; what she needs is Shug Avery.

Celia begins to fantasize about Shug before her own marriage. During the fantasy period Shug becomes Celia's ego ideal, an ideal self that "is aggrandized and exalted in the subject's mind" (Freud, "On Narcissism" 94), becoming "a model to which the subject attempts to conform" (Laplanche and Pontalis 144). Celia thinks of Shug while Albert rapes her on her wedding night, and, even though his lovemaking is as uncaring as her stepfather's, Celia begins to imagine the sexual act with some affection: "I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him" (21). Even as an imaginary construct, Shug stirs Celia's first erotic feelings. When the real Shug steps into Celia's life, these feelings become activated.

Although Shug arrives ill and weak, she nonetheless exudes a sexual power that Celia has never before imagined in woman or man. Quickly, Celia reassesses Albert in light of Shug's sexuality:

I look at his face. It tired and sad and I notice his chin weak. Not much chin there at all. I have more chin, I think. And his clothes dirty, dirty. When he pull them off, dust rise. (52)

Celia's three-sentence fixation on Albert's chin is revealing: by comparing her chin with his, Celia gets her first inkling of an anatomical superiority. Typical of "narcissistic friends," Celia and Shug take turns playing the supporting or, in this case, maternal role, and, interestingly enough, Celia goes first, nursing Shug through her illness. Here at last Celia is allowed the nursing role her stepfather deprived her of when he took away Celia's babies and left her with milk running from her breasts. During this nursing process Celia connects her feelings for Shug to her lost daughter and her mother: "I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia—or like she mama" (57). The relation of the doll to the daughter and mother reflects a new development for Celia; as the psychoanalytic school of object relations would see it, the doll represents a transitional device that helps Celia come to grips with the complicated feelings of separation and ambivalence that characterize her thoughts of both Olivia and her mother. Celia, in other words, has begun to employ some typical mechanisms of psychic growth and development.

After Shug's recovery the roles shift, with Shug becoming Celia's nurse. Celia's illness, however, is not physical but psychological: Celia lacks an identity. Shug awakens Celia's desire for identity most explicitly when she sings a song she has written just for Celia. As Celia gratefully
notes, "first time somebody made something and name it after me" (75). The act of naming something after Celie assures the integrity of Celie herself; she must be somebody to be a subject of a song. This act is also Celie's first clue that language need not come under the jurisdiction of male authority.

This is the background Walker gives to prepare us for the mirror scene and, after that, the first lovemaking scene between Celie and Shug. The mirror scene takes on particular meaning because the desire for ego-formation has already been sparked. From the Celie who thinks of her body as fragmented and who tries to make herself as unfeeling as a tree, Walker has taken us to a Celie whose passions allow her to begin to think about her body differently and to conceive of a relationship beyond the self, with an other. The mirror scene expedites Celie's development through the stage of primary narcissism, in which two love-objects exist—the self and the mother (Freud, "On Narcissism" 88-89)—to the onset of secondary narcissism, the stage in which self-love is "displaced onto an-other" (Ragland-Sullivan 37). In the scene, Shug teaches Celie first to perceive her genitals as whole and beautiful and then to masturbate. That Celie and Shug act like children during this scene, giggling and running off to Celie's room "like two little prankish girls" (79), emphasizes the fact that they are engaged in an essentially juvenile drama that must be played through in order for Celie to reach a more mature stage of development.

This juvenile drama helps change Celie's perception of herself and her body. Celie's new appreciation for one part of her body allows her to revise her view of her entire body: to view her genitalia synecdochally rather than as a fragment. Celie's new synecdochal conception of her body allows her to regard her genitalia as "normal" symbols, appreciating the beauty of the part as symbol of the whole without allowing it to replace the whole completely (Laplanche 36-37). Celie's acceptance of her genitals ("It mine" [80]) clearly indicates that she no longer perceives her body as something to deny or annihilate but as a source of pleasure. Even if, as Lacan believes, the post-mirror stage forces the individual to confront again the fragmentation of the body and the self, this synecdochal process helps Celie adapt to that threat to her totality.

As part of the mirror-stage experience, the child should identify its unified image of self with the mother's body; this identification foregrounds the child's, especially the girl's, acceptance or nonacceptance of its sexual organs (Ragland-Sullivan 277-278). At the end of the mirror stage the father intervenes in the mother-child relationship, preventing total iden-

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9Freud believed that clitoral masturbation was a necessary response to penis envy. Without it the girl is likely to remain dissatisfied "with her inferior clitoris" ("Femininity" 127). Whether or not one thinks Freud is right, it seems clear that in The Color Purple Celie must come to accept her body as it is before she can share it with another. Masturbation is a natural means of coming to this acceptance.
tification or fusion with the mother and thus establishing boundaries necessary to the child’s individuation (Ragland-Sullivan 42, 55). This process seems clearly to have been aborted in Celie’s childhood, leaving an important gap in her development that Shug Avery fills. Shug, then, not only plays the role of Celie’s “narcissistic friend,” but first and foremost she represents a mother-surrogate or, in Lacanian terms, a (m)Other. Under this formulation “a subject first becomes aware of itself by identification with a person (object), usually the mother,” although the figure may be “any constant nurturer” (Ragland-Sullivan 16).

As (m)Other, Shug also plays a crucial role in resolving Celie’s Oedipal conflict. All such conflicts are grounded in ambivalence, Celie’s especially so, as Nettie’s narrative of their early life reveals (160-162). Celie’s father was hanged when she was two and her mother’s health ruined. Celie’s stepfather (whom she assumes to be her real “pa”) married her mother when Celie was three to four years old, the age when the Oedipal phase begins. Every year thereafter, Celie’s mother was pregnant, and her mental state gradually deteriorated. Celie’s stepfather turned his lust on her when she had just passed puberty, at a time when the Oedipal drama is “internally staged for a second time,” its outcome crucial in determining “adult sexuality and other vital activities and functions in later existence” (Marcus 313). Thus, Celie’s early life proves to be a perverse rewriting of the Oedipal script, with Celie aware of her mother’s ambivalence about yielding her wifely role to her daughter: “My marna fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now” (11). Celie’s guilt is augmented by her mother’s questioning her pregnancy and her cursing Celie on her deathbed. Given the profound guilt and confusion that Celie must have felt about replacing her mother, in addition to the disruption of her own psychic growth and the continued brutalization to follow, it is little wonder that Celie would seek to annihilate self. But the intervention of Shug as (m)Other and of Nettie’s revelation that “pa is not our pa!” (162) allows Celie to reimagine the possibilities of selfhood. By taking her back to the mirror stage, Shug helps Celie identify with her more positive perceptions of selfhood, sexuality, and body.

Furthermore, as (m)Other, Shug gives Celie an unusual form of identification, at least for a woman. One of Freud’s most controversial ideas is his suggestion that women tend to develop inferior object-choices to men’s: where men transfer their narcissism to an other, women tend to rechannel love back into the self.10 Such women love themselves more than anyone else, and they seek not to love but to be loved (“On Narcissism” 89). Man’s “superior” object-choice is “anaclitic,” in other words, based on the mother-imago; but, as we have seen, Celie also

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10 For a harsh critique of this view, see Kate Millett (196-197).
grounds her attachment in an other—Shug—who represents for her a mother-imago. As Laplanche notes, "even if one [analytic object-choice] is alleged to be more characteristic of men and the other [narcissistic object-choice] of women, they in fact represent two possibilities open to every human being" (77). Furthermore, if Celie's choice (both because it is based on the analytic model and because it is the choice of a woman) seems masculine, it is the first of several such choices she makes that help her to rise from passive submission and to develop independence and identity. Ultimately, Celie derives from her growth the power of speech that is crucial to her victory over male brutality.

IV

One sign of the mirror stage's end, for Lacan, is the coherent use of language (Ragland-Sullivan 29); another is the development of aggressivity (Lacan 19-20). Celie's progress toward gaining that coherent language in the form of speech is guided by Shug. As Elizabeth Fifer puts it, "each piece of Shug's advice changes Celie's language and becomes part of Celie's progress" (162). But aggressivity poses more sinister possibilities because Celie, once she develops her ego, cannot help but be driven to revenge against Albert. This drive peaks when she and Shug discover that Albert has been hiding Nettie's letters. Now sickened by Albert's cruelty to her, Celie believes she will feel better if she kills him. Celie gets her chance when Albert commands her to shave him, a command reminiscent of her stepfather's pretended desire for a haircut. Sharpening the razor, Celie contemplates murder, but Shug holds her back. Even after Shug takes the razor from her, Celie continues to fantasize her revenge:

All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr. ________ blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way. By time night come I can't even speak. Every time I open my mouth nothing come out but a little burp. (115)

What meager powers of speech Celie has at this time are overpowered by her desire for revenge.

Celic learns to take control over her aggressive desires by two means of sublimation: assertive speech and the substitution of one cutting instrument, the razor, for another, a needle. Lowery believes that the process of acquiring language may be an early form of sublimation for children, the word standing for the desired object (443). By telling Albert

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11 The latter strategy has also been identified by Teresa M. Tavormina (222). Her article promises intriguing parallels between language and sewing, but it finally says rather little about language. Tavormina's best point is that The Color Purple is itself a kind of quilt, a mosaic of patches from everyday life and memory "brought together so as to make a whole meaning from Celie's and Nettie's seemingly separate lives" (225).
that she, Nettie, and her children will "whup [his] ass" (181), Celie deflects the need to do so; speaking daggers, she need use none. Sofia has provided the lesson that only defeat can result from an attempt to quit violence with violence. Celie, in contrast, gains victory with speech. When she declares her independence from Albert, she feels almost possessed by a mysterious power: "Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words" (187). Through speech Celie establishes her freedom, breaking Albert’s hold on her. She further recognizes the power of speech when her curse on Albert sinks him into a life-threatening depression. That curse is lifted and Albert’s regeneration begun only when he does what Celie has demanded—return Nettie’s letters to her.

Celia has previously seen the power a woman’s voice has to break male domination in the example of Mary Agnes. Here too is an example of the kind of sacrifice women must make in order to bind themselves together in a community that resists the pressure of male domination. Mary Agnes, once beaten up by Sofia, her rival for Harpo, helps free Sofia from prison by submitting to rape by the warden, her illegitimate father. This act of submission gives Mary Agnes a power of guilt over the warden that expedites Sofia’s release. Ironically, Mary Agnes the victim emerges from this encounter with a new power over men in general. Though she comes home with a limp, her dress torn, a heel from her shoe missing, she repudiates her derogatory nickname ("Squeak") and demands that she be called by her real name (95). Not only does Mary Agnes no longer "squeak," but she also begins to sing. Although Celie reports that "she got the kind of voice you never think of trying to sing a song" (96), Mary Agnes soon emulates Shug’s success, using her voice to give her a new freedom from, and power over, men. She begins to travel, choosing when to move in and out of Harpo’s life. Thus her story foreshadows the story of Celie’s freedom, both stories validating the theme that strength can come from enduring oppression with as much dignity as possible and then rising to denounce it. Ultimately, the victim gains moral power over the oppressor.

Celia’s aggressivity is further sublimated in the development of her own form of art: sewing. Freud of course maintained that artistic creation was a major source of sublimation. It is no small irony that Celie adopts a traditionally feminine form of art to complete her separation from the violent masculine world. By sewing, Celie narrows the gap between the sexes, making pants for both men and women. More important, sewing links Celie to woman’s primordial power that predates patriarchy. As Adrienne Rich describes it, sewing or weaving emphasizes woman’s “transformative power”:

12The ultimate symbol of such power, of course, is menstrual blood, “which was believed to be transformed into the infant” (Rich 101). In this light it is interesting that Walker parallels Celie’s development with the story of her daughter’s coming of age in Africa. In the latter story Nettie recounts how
the conversion of raw fibers into thread was connected with the power over life and death; the spider who spins thread out of her own body, Ariadne providing the clue to the labyrinth, the figures of the Fates or Norns or old spinning-women who cut the thread of life or spin it further, are all associated with this process. (101)

Freud's interpretation of this process is more fantastical and more sexist, but it also can be instructive. He regarded sewing or weaving as evidence of woman's shame, caused by her castrated genitals. Weaving, thus, is motivated by a desire to follow the pattern of Nature, who would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together. ("Femininity" 132)

For Celie sewing represents not a means of covering up her castrated genitals but of binding together the sexes so that both male and female can "wear the pants." Furthermore, Celie's sewing associates her with a select group of female characters in American literature who use their art not to reveal their shame, as Freud suggests, but to transplant it, placing it where it really belongs—on their male oppressors. The most prominent member of this set is Hawthorne's Hester Prynne. Forced by the patriarchs of Salem to wear the scarlet letter as an emblem of shame, Hester uses her art to create a letter that represents, to the narrator who discovers it two centuries later, a "mystic symbol" (28), giving evidence "of a now forgotten art" (27). Inspired by this symbol, Hawthorne creates a story in which the bearers of shame are the Puritan patriarchs who try to dehumanize and defeminize Hester for her refusal to submit to their code. Celie's art has a similar, although more immediate, effect. Rather than revealing the source of shame to a later generation, Celie's success in sewing helps Albert face his own shame and even begin a process of self-regeneration. At the end of the book Albert is a new man, capable of loving and sharing. The change in him is symbolized by his partaking, with Celie, in the traditionally feminine activity, sewing. Having had his lifelong view that "men spose to wear the pants" (238) corrected, Albert joins Celie in a communal act that, as Celie describes it, helps eradicate the differences that make for sexual domination: "Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes" (238).

V

Very late in *The Color Purple* Celie stands before a mirror, full-length

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13The *Color Purple* strongly reinforces the feminist complaint against Freud's belief that girls resolve their Oedipal crises through a fantasy of having the father's child. Celie lives out this fantasy (until her rapist's true identity is revealed), and it proves to be a nightmare.
this time, again. At this time Shug has left her for a nineteen-year-old fling. This scene provides the test that proves Celie's psychic growth has continued unchecked, that she will not regress in a crisis. Standing naked before the glass, Celie asks herself, "What would she love? . . . Nothing special here for nobody to love" (229). That Celie comes through this depression signifies that she has broken free of Shug, further establishing her independence and identity. Ultimately, says Hymer, a person who relies on a narcissistic friend must "develop an identity apart from the friend" (433), just as one must split oneself from the (m)Other. Celie does develop her identity and, in the process, finds a network of friends "matrifocal" in structure but open to men who can put aside their desire to dominate.14

Matrifocality dissolves the hierarchies that perpetuate dominance and oppression. The loss of such hierarchies changes one's perception of the self in society and even in relation to God. Thus, it is only a short step from a belief in woman's independence from man to Shug's concept of a nonracial, genderless God: "People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back" (178). Shug carefully notes here that one must live in the world to get to know God; merely surviving and waiting for a reward in heaven, as Celie did earlier, is the patriarchal way. Shug's version of God deconstructs the fountainhead of patriarchy, the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father who is the source of law and power, replacing it with a belief that one must become engaged in the Creation as Celie does, creating one's own self, art, and community. Demonstrating a parallel commitment to matrifocality, Sofia and Mary Agnes, former rivals, learn to share Harpo and the responsibility of raising each other's children as a means of maintaining freedom while avoiding the permanent dependence on one man that perpetuates masculine power. And, in Africa, Nettie first assists Corinne in raising Adam and Olivia and, after Corrine's death, replaces her as wife and mother before yielding the children to their true mother, Celie.15

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14Dianne Sadoff, who calls such matrifocal structures "adaptive strategies," gives a superb account of how they grew out of slavery (10-11). Nancy Tanner explains that although matrifocal structures tend to center on the mother, they also promote sexual egalitarianism: in matrifocal societies men and women share important economic and emotional roles. Flexibility, which is assured by the "network" of kinships, is the great advantage of matrifocality, allowing its members to live together and take turns caring for each other's children (Tanner 131, 151). Although less happy with the term "matrifocality," Carol B. Stack describes the structure similarly, adding that the network may be composed of kin or non-kin, as Celie's are. Because of great social, economic, and other hardships, Stack notes, black women turn to such networks to strengthen the family, even if they threaten "any particular male-female tie" (115).

15Corinne's suspicions of Nettie indicate her own inability to accept matrifocality. Besides reflecting her guilt for not having borne her own children, this suspiciousness seems to be a critique of Corinne's education at Spelman, which has indoctrinated her in the white, patriarchal set of mind. Walker further exploits this theme by portraying the limitations of the patriarchal perspective in Africa.
As I have shown, one of the climaxes in the novel is Celie's first lovemaking scene, when she and Shug reexperience the primal pleasure of the child at the mother's breast. The Color Purple suggests that for one who develops a sense of self and then of other, similar kinds of primal experiences can be recaptured at points throughout life and not just in sexual encounters. One kind is recaptured again at novel's end when Celie and Nettie are reunited (with Celie's children) in a fairy-tale ending:16

Then us both start to moan and cry. Us totter toward one nother like us use to do when us was babies. Then us feel so weak when we touch, us knock each other down. But what us care? Us sit and lay there on the porch inside each other's arms. (250)

Such childlike joy depends on staying alive, constructing one's ego, and learning to invest love in the other. Only after that process has been completed can we, in the words of Harpo (a man), "spend the day celebrating each other" (250).

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16On the Cinderella parallels to The Color Purple see Margaret Walsh's article. The weakness of her reading is its reduction of Shug Avery to a "fairy godmother" or "magic helper."


