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*The Knight and the Princess:  
The Structure of Courtly Love  
in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby*

PATRICIA MAGNESS

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THE STORIES WE TELL about ourselves are a powerful force in shaping our identities. Such stories have a two-fold function in our lives. They not only help us understand and identify our experiences; they actually take a role in determining what our decisions and thus our experiences will be. Even stories that seem remote from us in time and circumstance can provide a controlling structure for our lives. As C. S. Lewis observes in his description of courtly love, "Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations: being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still" (1).

Novelist Toni Morrison recognizes the power of the stories from our cultural heritage and frequently uses traditional fables, fairy tales, and legends to give a specific situation a universal or mythic feel. According to Cynthia Day, "The search for a myth adequate to experience is one of Morrison's central themes" (323). John Irving, reviewing her novel *Tar Baby*, notes that Morrison "mythologizes her characters almost as they're conceived, at least as they're born" (30). The characters in *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, are defined in contrast to the idealized world of the familiar Dick and Jane primers, just as the dominant image of "the bluest eye" comes from the fairy-tale stereotype of the beautiful princess who also lives in such an idealized world. Pecola internalizes these stories and is crushed in the contrast between the story of what life is envisioned to be and what her life is. Macon Dead, in *Song of Solomon*, searches for his origins and eventually finds both them and himself in the timeless lyrics of a children's game and the Afro-American legend of slaves who flew

back to Africa. "There is, then," according to Dorothy Lee, "a universal—indeed mythic pattern here. [Macon] journeys from spiritual death to rebirth, a direction symbolized by his discovery of the secret power of flight" (353).

One story that shapes the novel *Tar Baby* is explicit in the title: it is the story of the enticing but dangerous tar baby from black folk tradition. In an interview Morrison relates her intention to portray Jadine as the potentially dangerous tar baby made by the white man (Ruas 227). The use of a story from black folk tradition fits our expectations; what comes as a surprise is the presence of the courtly love model as a means of structuring and describing the central love relationship of the novel, the relationship between Son and Jadine. If the presence of the courtly love model can be demonstrated, a nagging question presents itself. Why does Morrison turn to a late medieval romantic ideal as a pattern for a twentieth-century relationship? Why use a pattern so clearly derived from the white cultural tradition for a relationship between the two black protagonists?

The courtly love structure was established in narrative form by Chrétien de Troyes in *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, often referred to simply as *Lancelot*. C. S. Lewis outlines and defines courtly love structures in terms of this work in *The Allegory of Love*. To determine whether this structure is present in *Tar Baby*, we will compare the two narratives in terms of characters, plot, setting, and class structure. Once the similarities have been demonstrated, we will confront the question of why Morrison would choose to use this pattern.

As Lewis outlines the pattern, the first requirement is an ideal, nearly unattainable woman, such as Guinevere, the Queen and wife of Arthur. Her elevated position at Camelot is clear from the opening scene of the narrative in which Arthur, unable to influence Sir Kay by his own pleas, turns to Guinevere with this request:

What he would not do for me  
He will do at once at your request,  
Go to him, my dear lady;  
Though he deign not stay for my sake,  
Pray him that he stay for yours. (lines 120-24)

Arthur believes that she will succeed where he has not. Repeated references to her beauty and majesty lead to the dramatic moment when Lancelot attempts to "cast himself / Down [through a window] to shatter his body below" (566-68) merely because Guinevere rides out of his sight. Her hair is "beautiful, light, shining" (1413-14), and

even the strands from a comb are "highly honored" (1461).

The beautiful, unattainable lady of *Tar Baby* is Jadine Childs. From the moment she enters the scene, we are impressed with her extraordinary beauty. Her aunt Ondine informs us that she modeled in Paris: "My face wasn't in every magazine in Paris. Yours was. Prettiest thing I ever saw" (40). Jadine is her "crown" (193). The fashion magazines call her "the copper Venus" (115). Jadine is further elevated through one magazine's description of her as a "graduate of the Sorbonne . . . an accomplished student of art history . . . an expert in cloisonné [with] a small but brilliantly executed role in a film" (116). The elegant clothes and the jewelry worth \$43,000 are her own. The pictured earrings, she tells Son, belonged to "Catherine the Great. . . . The Empress of all the Russias" (117). Son is so overwhelmed by her beauty that he cannot look at her unless she promises to sit perfectly still (119).

The appropriate response of the man in the courtly love structure has already been implied: he becomes a worshipper and his love takes on religious overtones. Thus Lancelot touched the strands of Guinevere's hair

To his eyes, his mouth,  
His forehead, and his cheeks.

.....  
He had no use for magic potions mixed with pearls,

.....  
No use for prayers to St. Martin and St. James! (1464-65,  
1474, 1476)

When he entered her bedroom at night,

Lancelot bowed and worshipped before her,  
For he did not have this much faith in any saint. (4652-53)

When he had to leave,

Indeed, he suffered a martyr's agony:  
.....  
On parting, he bowed low  
Before the room and behaved as though  
He were before an altar. (4691, 4716-18)

Lancelot is consistently presented as a humble worshipper of Guinevere.

The initial impulse would be to reject such a role for William Green, who is identified through most of the novel merely as Son. In his first meeting alone with Jadine he alienates her with extremely abusive words and gestures: "How much? . . . Dick. That you had to suck. Or was it pussy? . . . Why you little white girls always think someone's trying to rape you?" (120). However, we learn later that he resorted to this abuse in a desperate attempt to fight the adoration he already felt: "he had insulted [her] to keep her unhinging beauty from afflicting him" (168). Son's adoration is revealed in his behavior "when he used to slip into her room and wait hours, hardly breathing himself, for the predawn light to bring her face out of the shadows and show him her sleeping mouth" (119). At one point he reminisces about watching her sleep and being "gratified beyond belief to be sitting on the floor, his back against the wall. . . . His appetite for her so gargantuan it lost its focus and spread to his eyes, the oranges in his shirt, the curtains, the moonlight. Spread to everything everywhere around her, and let her be" (138). In spite of Jadine's open scorn of Son, he continues to express his love to the point of an open declaration, "I won't kill you. I love you" (177). Eventually they go on a picnic, and, as he sits at her feet, he begs first to be able to see her feet and then for permission to touch her foot (178-79). Jadine is conscious of the ridiculous nature of his request, but his quiet, admiring insistence leads her to comply. His adoration is summarized in a metaphor: she is "all the music he had ever wanted to play" (299), a metaphor made all the more significant because music represented to him the most meaningful part of his life (136-37).

The elevated position of the woman combined with the devout adoration of the knight forms a third requirement of the courtly love structure, the humiliation of the knight—the unifying theme of *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*. Lancelot's humiliation involves the near-loss of identity, mockery and scorn, rejection by the beloved, and the need to perform tasks to earn the right to love the lady. As the story opens, Lancelot is without a horse and, to learn of Guinevere's destination, he is forced to ride in a cart, a form of punishment signifying a crime such as theft or murder. Along the way people ask, "To what death / Will this knight be put?" (410-11) and "Of what is he guilty?" (415). He is continually ridiculed as "a man who has ridden in a cart," forbidden entrance where he must go, and told he would "be reproached forever for it" (2217, 2590-2615, *et passim*). Lancelot himself

. . . forgot his own identity;  
He was uncertain whether he truly existed or not;  
He was unable to recall his own name. (715-17)

Even after entering the enchanted land of Gorre and thus freeing Guinevere from her captivity, Lancelot suffers further, for when Guinevere

. . . saw the king  
Leading Lancelot by the hand,  
She stood up before the king  
And acted as if she were angered.  
She lowered her head and said not a word. (3937-41)

Questioned by the king, she finally speaks:

I have no interest in seeing him.  
.....  
Sir, in truth, he has wasted his effort,  
I shall always deny  
That I feel any gratitude toward him. (3946, 3957-59)

While Guinevere eventually demonstrates her love for Lancelot and accepts him as a lover, he finds himself again humiliated when ordered by her to "do his worst" in a great tournament, proving his obedience to her but allowing others to mock him as a coward (5636-5756).

*Tar Baby* offers no carts and no tournaments, but it does present a knight. That Son is a knight, a chevalier on the Isle des Chevaliers, is made explicit in a prophecy by Marie-Thérèse, the island woman who sees with "the eye of the mind" (152). According to Thérèse, "He's a horseman come down here to get her" (107). As the novel opens, this knight is in the degrading role of both runaway and stowaway. Lancelot travels in a cart, Son in a closet in a yacht. Sydney, Ondine, and Margaret provide a chorus of scornful questions and mocking comments. Sydney calls him a "wife-raper, . . . stinking ignorant swamp nigger, . . . wild-eyed pervert" (85-86). Ondine describes him as "a crazy hobo" (101), a "thieving Negro," and a "night prowler" (89); it is also Ondine who identifies Son as a criminal, telling Sydney to get a gun and offering to call the harbor police (79-80). To Margaret, Son is "literally a nigger in the wood-pile, . . . a bum that even Sydney wanted to shoot" (83), a "dope

addict ape" (87), and a "gorilla" (129). Son is dirty, starving, and barefooted, forced to hide by day and search for food by night. Like Lancelot, he has nearly forgotten his identity. Son recalls that "In eight years he'd had seven documented identities and before that a few undocumented ones, so he barely remembered his original name himself" (139). And, like Lancelot, Son has to face the disdain of his beloved. He washes, gets his hair cut, gets new clothes, apologizes, and even tries to play the piano for Jadine, yet she asserts her independence—"I can take care of myself" (158)—and sets him the task of winning over her aunt and uncle. Son willingly submits to her request and succeeds in charming them to such an extent that "Sydney was calling him Son" (164). He is rewarded for this effort by permission to go with Jadine to the beach and, then, to touch one finger to her foot (168-79).

The narrative model of courtly love also establishes certain requirements for the setting. A sense of enchantment and separation from the mundane is mandatory. In *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* Guinevere is held captive in the enchanted land of Gorre. It is

. . . the kingdom  
 From whence no foreigner returns,  
 But is forced to remain in that land  
 In servitude and exile. (640-43)

Lancelot is told that he can enter only

By two extremely perilous ways  
 And by two exceptionally treacherous passes.  
 One is named: The Underwater Bridge.

. . . . .  
 The other bridge is more difficult  
 And so much more dangerous  
 That it has never been crossed by man,  
 . . . The Sword Bridge. (645-56, 668-70, 673)

Guinevere is well-treated in Gorre, particularly by the king who sees to her every need, but she cannot leave until a brave knight gains entrance to the kingdom. Only Lancelot has the skill needed to break the enchantment of Gorre. Lancelot comes to her rescue by crossing the Sword Bridge over

. . . the treacherous water,  
 Black and gurgling, dark and thick,  
 As horrid and frightening  
 As if it were the Devil's river. (3009-12)

When Lancelot arrives at the castle, he is treated with great courtesy by the king, who offers him rest and lodging and orders attendants to see "to his every need" (3422). Lancelot achieves Guinevere's rescue from the enchantment of Gorre, but they return to Camelot separately.

The setting of *Tar Baby* fits this pattern even to the presence of an enchanted island, a generous king, and a princess who needs to be rescued. Part of the enchantment of the Isle des Chevaliers lies in its legends. According to one legend it is the "Isle de le Chevalier. One French soldier on a horse" (47). Another legend speaks of a hundred blind horsemen, descendants of the slaves who went blind when they first saw the island (152). In either case, the island has mythical inhabitants and unique enchantments. "Bees have no sting on the Isle des Chevaliers, nor honey" (81). The emperor butterflies flutter outside windows listening to conversations and trying to see the things that "the angel trumpets had described to them" (87). On this island an avocado feels like "the tight-to-breaking breast of a pubescent girl three months pregnant" (135). Valerian, named for a Roman emperor (146), rules this realm. According to Sydney, the butler who has known him all his life, "He gets his way" (38). He has planned the island retreat as a place beyond change, even building a greenhouse in the tropics "as a place of controlled ever-flowering life" (53). He has been generous to Jadine, niece of his servants, providing for her education and now offering her a home and a salary in exchange for minimal duties as secretary and companion to his wife. However, for Jadine this enchanted island is a "wilderness. The island exaggerated everything. Too much light. Too much shadow. Too much rain. Too much foliage and much too much sleep" (68). She is indecisive, uncertain about her future, and so well-treated by Valerian that she needs to be rescued from this hothouse existence and freed from a life that is not really hers. Like Lancelot, who effects Guinevere's release simply by entering the land, Son achieves Jadine's rescue in what is overtly a very small gesture of defiance. When Valerian says to him, "You will leave this house. Now," Son's reply is merely "I don't think so." Yet Morrison places soldiers and battles in their minds as they speak. For Valerian the image is "one hundred French chevaliers . . . roaming the hills on horses. Their swords were



in their scabbards and their epaulets glittered in the sun" (206). At the same time, "Somewhere in the back of Son's mind one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses rode blind and naked through the hills" (206). Valerian immediately recognizes the threat to his authority and tells Margaret, his wife, "I am being questioned by these people, as if, as if I could be called into question" (206). He attempts to reassert his position by ordering Ondine to leave the room and by ordering someone to call the harbor police, but no one obeys his orders. Jadine and Son leave the room, and Jadine takes his hand as they go (209). At this moment Jadine becomes free to leave the island; Son has awakened the Sleeping Beauty. Remembering it later,

[Son] saw it all as a rescue: first tearing her mind away from that blinding awe. Then the physical escape from the plantation. . . . It would be his duty to keep the climate mild for her, to hold back with his hands if need be thunder, drought and all manner of winterkill. . . . The birdlike defenselessness he had loved while she slept and saw when she took his hand on the stairs was his to protect. . . . he thought of it not just as love, but as rescue. (219-21)

Son's entry into the enchanted world enables Jadine to escape.

Even after the adoring knight has rescued the beautiful woman, there is no easy resolution. The love relationship must be kept a secret. In *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* Lancelot and Guinevere create a perfect world of love with and for each other, but it is necessarily cut off from the rest of their lives, a secret because it is adulterous. Deceit is essential. When Lancelot returns safely (and separately from Guinevere) to Camelot, the entire court celebrates, including the queen. Yet she must be cautious, controlled, for fear of discovery:

Where then was her heart?  
 Welcoming Lancelot with kisses.  
 Why then was her body reticent?  
 . . . . .  
 . . . it was because the others present  
 (The king and his entourage,  
 Who were there to see everything)  
 Would quickly comprehend her love  
 If, before their eyes, she were to do  
 All that her heart desired.

. . . . .  
 [She was] Delaying her actions  
 Until she should see and discover  
 A better and more private place. (6830-32, 6836-41, 6849-51)

But when the lovers do find that "private place," then,

Her love-play seemed so gentle and good to him,  
 Both her kisses and caresses,  
 That in truth the two of them felt  
 A joy and wonder,  
 The equal of which had never  
 Yet been heard or known. (4674-79)

This love can be expressed only in secret.

*Tar Baby* does not present Son and Jadine in an adulterous relationship, but their world of love does have to be cut off from their family relationships and hidden from the watchful eyes of the Eloë community "who were there to see everything." Together in New York, Son and Jadine created a perfect world of love:

He cherished and safeguarded her. . . . He unorphaned her entirely. Gave her a new childhood. They were the last lovers in New York—the first in the world. . . . They didn't go to parties anymore—other people interfered with their view of each other. . . . They never looked at the sky or got up early to see a sunrise . . . together they could not concentrate on the given world. They reinvented it. (228-30)

However, to maintain this reinvented love world, Jadine has to write "misleading postcards to Ondine and Sydney" (225), her only family. Moreover, when Jadine and Son visit Son's hometown of Eloë, they have to stay in separate houses. Jadine calls the community standards "paleolithic" (257). Theirs is a secret world of love, as befits the model of courtly love: it is cut off from and cuts them off from the people they love the most.

In addition to using structural features such as a knight and a lady, an enchanted island, a rescue, and a secret world of love, Morrison has woven into the texture of this novel place names, people's names, and images that are constant reminders of royalty, chivalry, and courtly life. The first lines of the novel suggest that there is safety in

the King's Garden (the name of the ship) and with the Queen of France (the name of the city). The book begins with these words: "He believed he was safe. He stood at the railing of H.M.S. *Stor Konigsgaarten* and sucked in great gulps of air, his heart pounding in sweet expectation as he stared at the harbor. Queen of France blushed a little in the lessening light and lowered her lashes before his gaze" (3). The first character introduced by name is Valerian, who eventually makes explicit that he was "named after an emperor" (146). He reminisces about his first sight of his wife, when she was the queen of the Snow Carnival Parade; true to the model of the courtly lover, "the moment he saw her something inside him knelt down" (16). Valerian is the "Candy King" (31) with a "head-of-a-coin profile" (202). Morrison provides empresses, too, first in the name of the island woman, Marie-Thérèse, and later in specifying that the earrings belonged to Catherine the Great. Even the butterflies are emperors on the Isle des Chevaliers.

An additional characteristic that *Tar Baby* shares with *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* is a rigid class structure. The language, roles, relationships, and settings of narratives such as *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* were developed in a specific historical and political context, the world of the feudal court. In this setting, each person was born into a clearly defined role, and the whole of society was organized to encourage and even force individuals to remain in that given place. Religion reinforced the class structure as God-given. The fabric of society would remain whole only as long as each person assumed his or her appropriate place in the great chain-of-being. This clear division of social classes is evident in a way that seems almost humorous today in that twelfth-century instruction manual for lovers, *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus. Andreas, writing in the same court setting and with the same patron as Chrétien, varies his advice to suit each specific situation. His method of defining the possible love relationships is by social class. He explains, for example, how "a nobleman speaks with a woman of the middle class" (62), or how "a man of the middle class speaks with a woman of the higher nobility" (53). If the woman were a peasant, Andreas advises the man of the middle class or nobility, "Do not hesitate to take what you seek and to embrace her by force" (150).

Morrison sets up a similarly class-conscious world in *Tar Baby*. Sydney is proud that he is "one of those industrious Philadelphia Negroes—the proudest people in the race" (61). He is proud, too, of his skill as a butler, and his work is described as if it were perfection: "unbidden but right on time"; "spotlessly white napkin"; "careful . . .

not to make a sound"; "proceeded to slice it into flawless, frothy wedges" (71). Sydney and Ondine, living in servant quarters, regard themselves as in a separate class from Valerian and Margaret, their employers, and as superior to the class represented by Son. Speaking to Son, Sydney describes himself as a "Phil-a-delphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other" (163). Son belongs to the underground class, "that great underclass of undocumented men. . . . They were an international legion of day laborers and musclemen, gamblers, sidewalk merchants, migrants . . ." (166). If Sydney and Ondine are scornfully aware of the chasm that separates their class from Son's, Son is equally scornful of them for acting "too shuffle-footed" (226). Scorn for others is also a trait of a third class of blacks, the island people, Gideon, Marie-Thérèse, and Alma Estee; the "natives of Dominique did not hide the contempt they felt in their hearts for everybody but themselves" (110). Close to the earth and to their heritage, they can scarcely imagine the abomination of "American women [who] kill their babies with their fingernails" (151). To Son, to Sydney and Ondine, and to the island people, Margaret and Valerian seem to belong together in one class, yet they themselves see a great difference. Valerian's family owned the candy factory, he was president of the company, he was raised in wealthy surroundings, and he was raised to rule. It was "'self-understood' that he would inherit the candy factory" (50). Margaret's family lived first in a trailer and then a cinder-block basement; she "married a man who had a house bigger than her elementary school" (57) where she "felt drowned" and "heard the afterboom" (58) as she left a room.

The fabric of this class-categorized world unravels when class lines are crossed. Class lines are first crossed when Son is invited to eat at the dining room table and sleep upstairs. A class crisis occurs on Christmas Day when "nobody was in his proper place. Ondine was in the bathtub. Margaret was in the kitchen. Sydney was in the greenhouse . . . Jadine was in the washhouse . . . and Valerian was by the telephone" (194). Valerian only exacerbates the misplacement of people by insisting that they all eat in the dining room together. Such inappropriate togetherness can bring only chaos. Sydney and Ondine erupt in anger with Valerian, Son speaks his defiance, Ondine reveals Margaret's guilty secret; and when Valerian gives orders, "There was no one to do his bidding. He had played a silly game, and everything was out of place" (208). The island itself seems

to mimic this disruption: “the bricks that edged the courtyard were popping up out of the ground. . . . The ants . . . had already eaten through the loudspeaker wires . . . the trees were jumping up over night” (284-85). It must be noted, however, that unlike feudal society, Morrison does not mourn the loss of control or unraveling of this little society. Rather,

. . . you let go because you can. The world will always be there. . . . A dead hydrangea is as intricate and lovely as one in bloom. Bleak sky is as seductive as sunshine, miniature orange trees without blossom or fruit are not defective; they are that. So the windows of the greenhouse can be opened and the weather let in. The latch on the door can be left unhooked, the muslin removed, for the soldier ants are beautiful too and whatever they do will be part of it. (242)

This difference points us to the question of why Morrison has used the courtly love model.

Morrison’s use of the structure of courtly love for the central love relationship in *Tar Baby* is startling, forcing the reader to consider possible reasons for her choice of this narrative tool. It is instructive to reflect on the characters Jadine Childs and William Green (Son). Jadine is an educated, sophisticated, successful woman. She is wealthy and is pursued by wealthy men. Her independence is a combination of disposition and circumstances—she is an orphan. Options before her include a modeling career, an acting career, an academic career, or a leisured life as the wife of a millionaire. Enter Son. He has no money and no education, and he is wanted for murder in Florida. In addition, he is tied by strong bonds of love and imagination to a small and poor town in rural Florida. Options before him include odd jobs, “teenager’s work,” “pilfering money,” and “brute work” (227). Using stereotypes like the career woman and the macho man—or the damsel in distress and the knight errant—is a risk for a writer, but it is a risk Morrison takes deliberately. As Irving points out, “Like any ambitious writer, she’s unafraid to employ these stereotypes—she embraces the representative quality of her characters without embarrassment, then proceeds to make them individuals, too” (30). Morrison uses this approach not just with characters but with language and experience. Describing her writing to interviewer Tom LeClair, Morrison says, “I like to work on, to fret, the cliché, which is cliché because the experience expressed in it is

important. . . . I dust off these clichés, dust off the language, make them mean whatever they may have meant originally” (254). In a similar vein, Morrison tells interviewer Claudia Tate, “A good cliché can never be overwritten; it’s still mysterious” (120-21). The courtly love cliché is still mysterious, still capable of expressing important experience, and thus Morrison can appropriate it for her own purposes “without embarrassment” or apology.

There remains, however, an even more significant reason for Morrison’s adaptation of the courtly love model. Stories are powerful, especially the stories that are told and retold by whole groups of people until they come to assume the explanatory power of myth. The mythical stories of the blind horsemen and the swamp women, for example, combine the hopes and fears of the natives of Dominique. In *Tar Baby* the black world and the white world clash resoundingly in word and in action, and the clash is subsumed into the mythic structure. Morrison presents the conflict in verbal duels between Son and Jadine, between Son and Valerian, and between Jadine and Michael (in Jadine’s memory). The contrast is also present in action. Jadine pursues education, achievement, success, and wealth. Son values fraternity and relationship. The clash of these two worlds gains its sense of universal reverberation in the conflict between structures of mythic proportion.

The black mythic world is a very powerful presence throughout the novel. Jadine’s vision of the black woman in yellow holding aloft three “chalk-white eggs,” the woman with “eyes too beautiful for lashes” (45), was enough to make her question everything: her career, her education, her wedding plans. Son is also possessed by a dream of a street of “yellow houses with white doors, the ladies at the pie table at Good Shepherd” (295). The island myths, too, have power over Son and Jadine. The women of Son’s dream, the swamp women, and the woman in yellow combine to haunt Jadine, to cause her to question the life she has chosen. They come at night, crowding her room and her life, revealing their bare breasts and the three eggs of the woman in yellow (258-59):

The night women were not merely against her . . . , not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folding stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab off the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits. (262)

They call her to a life of "fertility," "nurturing," and "wifely competence" (269). As Jadine returns to Paris, the night women of the vision are transformed into a line of soldier ants, "Bearing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying. No time for dreaming" (291). Son enters the mythic world of Isle des Chevaliers, the land of the hundred blind, naked, black horsemen who were "waiting in the hills for [him]" (306). As Son walks onto the island even "the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split" (306).

This powerful and sweeping black mythic structure does not exist in isolation. Rather it exists in contrast to and in tension with the white myth of the courtly love tradition. The relationship of Jadine and Son is patterned on the white myth of the knight rescuing the princess, and this pattern, like the white world, fails them. Jadine, educated by a white man and living in a white world, has "forgotten her ancient properties." Son is forced to choose between the "tar baby side-of-the-road-whore trap" (220)—"seduced, corrupted by cloisonné and raw silk" (299)—and the fraternity and community represented by the pie ladies and the hundred horsemen. The myth of romantic love is not big enough to encompass both their worlds, and it shatters, leaving them to their separate choices and their separate lives.

Morrison uses the courtly love model not to endorse it as a pattern for life but to show its inadequacy. For too long, women—white and black—have been lulled by the vision of the pampered princess, posing on a pedestal, relishing the spotlight, benefiting from beauty. Morrison writes of her own personal anger at this myth, stating that "The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious, and destructive ideas of the Western world" ("Behind" 89). In *Tar Baby*, Morrison endows Son and Jadine with overwhelming physical beauty and gives them the favored roles as knight and princess, yet she strips away the myths that would portray such beauty as evidence of or reason for virtue and love.

A less rigorous writer than Morrison would have been tempted to reject the class-structured myth of courtly love for the communal myth of the pie ladies. Morrison refuses to make this substitution. Instead she uses the contrast between the two mythic systems to force the reader to see beyond the conflicts within and between Son and Jadine to the greater conflict between opposing worlds. They each desire to rescue the other: "She thought she was rescuing him from the night women. . . . He thought he was rescuing her from . . . them, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had

killed a world millions of years old" (269). Morrison's language and imagery invite us into magic worlds of intimacy and love, but she does not let herself or her readers off easily. Her clear-sightedness refuses to let her leave these magic kingdoms alone until she has exposed their flaws and illusions. The innocent pie ladies become screaming night women, there is child abuse at the heart of the candy kingdom, and true love is not enough to bridge the chasm between worlds. Morrison makes it clear that we cannot let our lives be shaped by stories that distort reality. The comfortable cliché of courtly love is no comfort in the realities of life. Morrison conjures up for us worlds in which we would like to believe, only to remind us that they are not for us. She offers no comforting conclusion in this clash of values, dreams, and goals, only hard choices—choices she makes clear to the reader not only through dialogue and plot but also through the contrast of underlying mythic structures.

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