



Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the Apotropaic Imagination

Kathleen Marks

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Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination investigates Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in light of ancient Greek influences, arguing that the African American experience depicted in the novel can be set in a broader context than is usually allowed. Kathleen Marks gives a history of the apotropaic from ancient to modern times, and shows the ways that *Beloved*'s protagonist, Sethe, and her community engage the apotropaic as a mode of dealing with their communal suffering.

Apotropaic, from the Greek, meaning "to turn away from," refers to rituals that were performed in ancient times to ward off evil deities. Modern scholars use the term to denote an action that, in attempting to prevent an evil, causes that very evil. Freud employed the apotropaic to explain his thought concerning Medusa and the castration complex, and Derrida found the apotropaic's logic of self-sabotage consonant with his own thought.

Marks draws on this critical history and argues that Morrison's heroine's effort to keep the past at bay is apotropaic: a series of gestures aimed at resisting a danger, a threat, an imperative. These gestures anticipate, mirror, and put into effect that which they seek to avoid—one does what one finds horrible so as to mitigate its horror. In *Beloved*, Sethe's killing of her baby reveals this dynamic: she kills the baby in order to save it. As do all great heroes, Sethe transgresses boundaries, and such transgressions bring with them terrific dangers: for example, the figure Beloved. Yet Sethe's action has ritualistic undertones that link it to the type of primal crimes that can bring relief to a petrified community. It is through these apotropaic gestures that the heroine and the community resist what Morrison calls "cultural amnesia" and engage in a shared past, finally inaugurating a new order of love.

Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination is eclectic in its approach—calling upon Greek religion, Greek mythology and underworld images, and psychology. Marks looks at the losses and benefits of the kind of self-damage/self-agency the apotropaic affords. Such an approach helps to frame the questions of the role of suffering in human life, the relation between humans and the underworld, and the uses of memory and history.

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