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“True Darkness and True Womanness” : A Study of Sisterhood in Marlon James’ The Book of Night Women

Jessica Schwartz
Montclair State University

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the obstacles to building sisterhood and community in Marlon James' novel *The Book of Night Women* (2009). I examine the acts of violence that the enslaved women at Montpelier Estate perform against one another and consider the influence the plantation environment has on these relationships. The violence that takes place among the enslaved women is especially prevalent within the group of "night women," which consists of Lilith, Homer, Pallas, Iphigenia, Hippolyta, Callisto, and Gorgon. Despite the biological and symbolic sisterhood between these women, they more frequently express feelings of enmity than ones of community. By highlighting the countless antagonisms that transpire between the enslaved women, James challenges traditional sentimental approaches to the subjects of slavery and sisterhood. In this paper, I use a feminist lens to explore the violent interactions between the women at Montpelier and argue that the plantation environment fosters an atmosphere of conflict, competition, and suspicion which undermines potential feelings of unity. Although the slave women at Montpelier unite to subvert the authority of their white oppressors, they fail to form an effective community of resistance because they prioritize individual rather than collective goals. By way of interpretive analysis, I examine the way that *The Book of Night Women* depicts the plantation and sisterhood – or the lack thereof – among the enslaved women at Montpelier Estate.

Keywords: slavery, violence, women, sisterhood, solidarity, resistance, Caribbean literature

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“True Darkness and True Womanness”: A Study of Sisterhood

in Marlon James’ *The Book of Night Women*

by

Jessica Schwartz

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

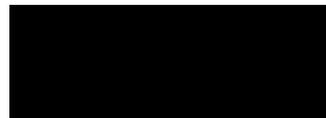
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Thesis Committee:



Dr. Johnny Lorenz
Thesis Sponsor



Dr. Lee Behlman
Committee Member



Dr. Melinda Knight
Committee Member

“TRUE DARKNESS AND TRUE WOMANNESS”: A STUDY OF SISTERHOOD
IN MARLON JAMES’ *THE BOOK OF NIGHT WOMEN*

A THESIS

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Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

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Marlon James' novel *The Book of Night Women* (2009) centers on a community of Black slave women working at Montpelier Estate, a sugar plantation in Jamaica at the turn of the nineteenth century. The novel's woman-centered approach depicts the day-to-day experiences of the enslaved women as they aim to survive the prevalent dangers and hardships present on the plantation. While recent scholarship surrounding this work focuses on the violence performed by slave women against their white owners, I am interested in the acts of violence that slave women perform against each other. As Markus Nehl observes, James focuses on the "conflicts, tensions, violence and acts of betrayal within the black community" (172). By highlighting the countless antagonisms that transpire between the enslaved women, James challenges traditional sentimental approaches to the subjects of slavery and sisterhood. Instead of expressing feelings of community toward one another, the enslaved women more frequently express enmity. This violence is most clearly demonstrated within the group of "night women," which consists of six women: Homer, Pallas, Iphigenia, Hippolyta, Callisto, and Gorgon. Lilith and the night women, all of whom are her half-sisters except Homer, physically and verbally attack each other much more frequently than they express solidarity. By using a feminist lens to explore the violent interactions between the women at Montpelier, I argue that the plantation environment fosters an atmosphere of conflict, competition, and suspicion which undermines the potential for unity. The constant threat of being betrayed or attacked by other women ultimately corrupts the potential for sisterhood and prevents the slave women at Montpelier from joining as an effective community of resistance.

1. The Community of Slave Women and Intragroup Violence

At Montpelier Estate, Black slave women are joined in their shared performance of manual labor. Work on the plantation is never finished, and the enslaved women in particular

“work round the sun and sleep round the moon and sometimes work round both, especially if it be crop time” (James 33). The shared duties and responsibilities of enslaved women fall into two categories that oftentimes overlap: the field and the great house. Homer and Lilith, who work in the great house, perform domestic tasks such as cooking, brewing tea, sweeping the cellar, and tending to their white owners. As Sandra A. Zagarell notes, the “collective life of the community” is portrayed in its “everyday aspects” and activities such as washing, gardening, churning butter, and dusting (502, 503, 511). While these everyday tasks might define the community of house slaves, it is important to recognize that the slave women in *The Book of Night Women* rarely view each other with feelings of community.

Lilith again performs domestic household chores when she moves in with Robert Quinn, the white overseer at Montpelier with whom she has a romantic and sexual relationship. As soon as Lilith arrives to Robert’s house, she begins tending to his clothes, making his bed with new sheets and linen, dusting his room, and cleaning the entire house. With these preliminary tasks completed she then prepares dinner, “killing a chicken from the pen and cooking it down in salt, pepper, thyme, ginger and green pawpaw, a trick she learn from Homer” (James 268). The fact that Lilith uses cooking tips from Homer is significant, considering that these two women frequently argue and disagree with each other. Despite their turbulent relationship, Lilith nonetheless listens to and internalizes what Homer says because of her decades of knowledge and experience working in the great house. By using Homer’s tips and tricks in her own daily life, Lilith illustrates the way that slave women share useful information and advice with one another.

The depiction of slave women as sources of knowledge is underscored by the fact that Lilith wants to attend the night women’s meetings because she “want to learn” (James 101).

Lilith's desire to "learn" from the night women positions her as a student and the night women as her teachers. While turning to other women for advice can build community, Lilith's motives are more self-centered. Lilith wants to learn from her sisters not because she values their advice in any particular way, but because she wants to learn how to "put [herself] over other women" (James 102). In other words, Lilith aims to elevate herself above the enslaved women at Montpelier both in the eyes of the other slaves and her white owners. Lilith's focus on personal gain rather than notions of sisterhood emphasizes the way in which the plantation environment encourages slave women to pursue self-interested aims.

Lilith's individualistic actions, coupled with her lack of attachments to other women, make her a very dangerous individual. This dynamic is clearly demonstrated when she burns down the Coulibre house, which results in numerous deaths. After Lilith overpowers and kills Master and Mistress Roget, her owners at Coulibre, she attempts to hide the evidence and "the only thing she can think of hiding in is fire" (James 229). Lilith sets fire to the house which, in addition to destroying the evidence of her crime, takes additional lives. Among those who die in the fire are the Rogets' two young children and two house slaves – Matraca, who attempts to protect the children, and Bessy, who is too old and weak to escape the fire. Instead of evacuating the house before she sets it on fire, Lilith acts with thoughts of protecting herself only; whoever remains inside is left to either perish or save herself.

Lilith's decision to set the house on fire while Matraca and Bessy are still inside illustrates the way that on the slave plantation, survival frequently outweighs solidarity. While one might argue that Lilith betrays Matraca and Bessy by letting them burn to death, one can also argue that these women betray Lilith by siding with their white oppressors. For instance, Matraca attempts to save the Rogets' children from Lilith's murderous rampage despite the fact they will

eventually “grow up to kill nigger just like her” (James 283). In this sense, by protecting the white children who will grow up to be slave owners, Matraca betrays the broader slave community. Furthermore, even if Lilith had saved Matraca and Bessy from the fire, they would have then betrayed her by implicating her in the deaths of Master and Mistress Roget. In other words, just as Lilith betrays these women by killing them, they would have betrayed her by exposing her to the authorities. By killing these women, however, Lilith simultaneously conceals the evidence of her crime and removes any witnesses. The tragedy of this fire, in addition to its multiple casualties, is that it underscores the failed potential for solidarity among the enslaved women. Rather than community, the plantation environment instills an individualist mindset among the slaves that hinders feelings of unity.

Despite the slave women’s frequently individualistic motives, there are nonetheless moments when they attempt to protect each other from harm. The Johnny-jumpers, who are a group of five to ten Black male slaves put “in charge of other slaves” by their white owners, are a threat the slave women must contend with (James 10). The Johnny-jumpers have a reputation for being particularly violent as they command other slaves, “work[ing] with whip and on some estate, knife and gun” (James 10). They also frequently abuse their position of power and “do as they please,” beating the field slaves, raiding the slave settlements, and sexually assaulting the slave women (James 10). The violent relationship between the Johnny-jumpers and other slaves highlights the way that the plantation environment enforces hostile relations among different groups of enslaved people. By subjecting slave women to horrific forms of violence and trauma, male slaves also hinder any efforts at building solidarity across gender lines. When the Johnny-jumpers begin targeting the house slaves, the enslaved women join together so that whenever one of them has “to go further than the flower house, they always travel in two and three and one of

the three was either Homer or Pallas” (James 46). Homer’s presence among these groups lends an extra layer of protection from the Johnny-jumpers because of her position as the head house slave who has close connections with their owner, Master Humphrey. The fact that the slave women form groups to ensure that none of them is harmed by the Johnny-jumpers, who pose as a common enemy, indicates the way in which they form an “interdependent network” (Zagarell 499).

The slave women harm each other, however, to a much greater extent than they protect each other. The environment of the plantation destroys feelings of solidarity by promoting a sense of competition, which positions women not as sisters but as rivals and, in some cases, enemies. For example, following an exchange of insults between Lilith and another house slave named Andromeda, Andromeda slaps Lilith in the face. In response, Lilith “snarl and leap on to” Andromeda, pulling out “clump after clump after clump” of her hair and “scratching her face and clawing into her nose and biting into her shoulder until her teeth come away with blood” (James 48). The ruthlessness of Lilith’s attack, which is so intense that the other house slaves have difficulty removing her from Andromeda, reveals the depth of animosity that exists between these two women. By understanding each other as competitors regarding their relationship to and treatment by their white owners, it is only natural that Lilith and Andromeda harbor feelings of anger and hostility toward one another. With the threat of this type of aggression lying beneath the surface of the slave women’s interactions, it becomes nearly impossible for them to foster feelings of intimacy and kinship.

Lilith also contributes to this competitive environment by using physical appearance to measure one’s worth. She consistently thinks of herself as superior to the other slave women both in mind and body and often admires her reflection in a silver tray, remarking numerous

times that she is “prettier than any other negro in the field or in the house” (James 86). Lilith most clearly admires her green eyes, which not only distinguish her from the other enslaved women but also feed her desire to associate with whiteness, as they are “the one thing that make her not black” (James 285). Because Lilith bases her sense of worth so strongly on her appearance – and more precisely, her white lineage – when she is not chosen to serve at the New Year’s Eve ball, she is insulted and jealous of the other women who were chosen. Andromeda, who is one of these women, fuels this sense of competition by taunting Lilith that even though she might smell, she “still get pick and not [Lilith]” (James 101). Instead of directing her anger at her oppressors who made this choice, however, Lilith directs it at the enslaved women who she views as competition. To make herself feel better, Lilith denigrates the other women, pointing out who has “too much wart, who too fat, who too skinny, who walk like duck, who lip too big, who smell like she don’t wash her cho-cho and who just look like any common nigger” (James 102). In other words, Lilith nurses her bruised ego by lashing out at those around her. Although slaves cannot mock or physically attack their white owners because they would be beaten to death or executed, they can still take out their anger and frustration on other slaves. In this sense, by insulting the other house slaves, Lilith demonstrates a desire to assert her dominance in the spaces available to her. It is in this way that while the plantation environment might at times build community, it more actively pits the enslaved women against each other.

In addition to criticizing and blatantly attacking others, the enslaved women resort to more furtive measures to inflict pain and suffering. One such method is Obeah, which is a set of religious beliefs and practices that Diana Paton claims had close associations with “poison, medicine, witchcraft, and sorcery” on Caribbean plantations (238). While Obeah has long been referred to as “witchcraft,” recent scholarship recognizes it as “a form of resistance, a religious

practice, a source of authority within communities of enslaved people, and a cosmological term for spiritual power” (Paton 237). Despite these broader scholarly understandings of Obeah, in the context of the novel, Obeah is harnessed by slave women for the purposes of black magic.

While white plantation owners perpetrated the narrative that slaves used Obeah to harm or kill their masters, Sasha Turner Bryson observes that slaves also used Obeah against each other in order to “obtain and maintain status and authority within Jamaica’s plantation communities” (68). James focuses specifically on the way that Obeah is used as a weapon by enslaved women at Montpelier Estate to attack other women. When Andromeda is chosen to serve at the New Year’s Eve ball, Lilith enlists the help of the night women so she can replace her. Lilith asks Gorgon to use Obeah against Andromeda and the next day she is found dead after bleeding profusely out of every orifice. Although Lilith claims she never intended for Andromeda to die, Gorgon informs her that the Obeah woman called upon Omolu, the spirit of sickness and healing, who “give you what you want in you heart” (James 126). In other words, Andromeda’s death proves that Lilith did in fact desire this outcome, even if not consciously. As Nehl observes, Lilith’s role in Andromeda’s death indicates her “willingness to turn against other slaves...to gain influence and power within the slave community” (181). Andromeda’s unfortunate and gruesome death illustrates the way in which Lilith’s obsessive drive for survival often has murderous consequences.

In addition to using Obeah against Andromeda, Lilith believes that she herself is a target of Obeah after moving into the great house at Montpelier. Lilith wakes up one night to learn from Homer that her adoptive mother, Circe, has set Sasabonsam against her which is the “wickedest Obeah, worse than poison” (James 50). Homer quickly rushes to Lilith’s aid, using

her knowledge of Obeah and Myal to prepare a potion made of gunpowder, rum, dirt, and blood.¹ She then spreads this mixture onto Lilith's back and chest and requires her to drink the remainder, which she claims will save her soul and reverse the Obeah back onto Circe. Following this ritual, Circe dies the same horrible death as Andromeda, bleeding "out of her pussyhole, arsehole, earhole and nosehole" (James 52). This intricate display of assistance that Homer provides Lilith, although it seems to display a close bond between the women, turns out to be entirely fabricated. While Homer's protective measures might seem genuine, they are actually part of an intricate web of deception to fulfill more secret motives. Homer not only lies to Lilith that Circe used Obeah against her, but also later admits that she intentionally killed Circe because she was "goin' be a turncoat nigger" and expose the night women's plans for the slave rebellion (James 302). Homer's use of black magic to kill Circe, who was a former member of the night women, reveals how the threat of betrayal prompts the women to turn on each other. The night women demonstrate on countless occasions that they are willing and able to kill each other if that is what it takes to ensure the success of the rebellion.

By framing Circe and then pretending to save Lilith, Homer not only conceals her involvement in Circe's death but also strengthens her relationship with Lilith. Lilith's increased attachment to Homer is evident almost immediately following what she believes to have been an attack on her life. Although Lilith "don't trust nobody" after Circe supposedly used Obeah against her, she still trusts Homer and even considers her to "be her only protector" (James 54). Because trusting other women is a luxury that most slave women cannot afford, Lilith's willingness to trust Homer places Homer in a position of influence over her.

¹ According to Bryson, the 1781 anti-obeah act in Jamaica outlawed a list of items considered "'Obeah paraphernalia'" including "blood, feathers, broken bottles, grave dirt, rum and eggshells" (65).

After Lilith moves to Montpelier and after Circe's death specifically, Homer serves as a quasi-maternal figure to her. Lilith forms a strong attachment to Homer as she brings her food, teaches her to read, and informs her about the power dynamics on the plantation. The mother-daughter bond that Homer and Lilith form fills an absence in each other's lives; while Lilith lacks the proper love and nurturance of a mother, Homer desperately misses her two children who were sold away to different plantations and killed. Lilith expresses loyalty to Homer and confides in her at various moments, such as when she admits to setting the fire at Coulibre and seeks advice regarding her sex life with Robert Quinn. Similarly, Homer expresses a sense of favoritism toward Lilith and treats her like her own daughter. She not only defends Lilith from the other enslaved women who might want to harm her but also engages in physical affection, touching and "wiping things off Lilith face, even sweat" (James 59). While there is genuine potential for a successful mother-daughter relationship between Homer and Lilith, this possibility is destroyed by the end of the novel as Homer's obsessive desire for revenge against her white oppressors outweighs any closeness she feels toward Lilith.

Despite Homer's maternal performance toward Lilith, there are several moments when she physically attacks her. For example, when Homer confronts Lilith about her failure to attend the night women's meetings, Lilith spits in her face. In response, Homer slaps and pushes her so hard it causes bruises. As Lilith worries that Robert Quinn will see these bruises, Homer retorts, "[H]ow 'bout me make it that he see corpse?" (James 302). Homer's threat is also made more menacing in light of her extensive knowledge of Obeah; just as easily as Homer killed Circe, she can kill Lilith. Although Homer can act as a close confidant and source of support for Lilith and other slave women, she is nonetheless willing to attack and even kill anyone who threatens to hinder the rebellion, no matter their relationship. The physical attack and threat that Homer

directs toward Lilith underscore the way in which she prioritizes the rebellion over the individual lives of her female compatriots. While one might argue that Homer's commitment to the rebellion illustrates her commitment to sisterhood, her willingness to kill Lilith – a fellow night woman, “sister,” and surrogate daughter – complicates this idea. Homer is driven by revenge rather than by a genuine revolutionary agenda, and for this reason she ignores the immediate consequences of the rebellion that could befall her and the other women.

2. The Night Women as Victims and Perpetrators of Violence

At Montpelier Estate, similarly to other plantations in the Caribbean, the community of Black slave women is extraordinarily vulnerable to sexual violence. Enslaved women are threatened by men of all races and classes, including slave owners, overseers, slave drivers, Johnny-jumpers, and even male slaves. It is important to note that although Black men faced extremely horrific treatment on slave plantations, Black women had a uniquely oppressive experience as the victims of both racism and misogyny. Sangeeta S. notes that while slave men are “tortured and whipped” at Montpelier in an attempt to break down their bodies in humiliating and emasculating ways, slave women are “tortured, whipped, and raped” (14). Further, Hilary McD. Beckles, in his study *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*, observes that the institution of slavery legally provided white slave owners “unrestricted sexual access” to enslaved women (22). Through their sexual exploitation by white and Black men alike, enslaved women became commodified as sexual objects to be bought, sold, and used. Rape is such a defining feature of plantation life in *The Book of Night Women* that when a house slave at Coulibre named Dulcimena learns that Lilith has never been pregnant, she considers it both “mighty peculiar” and a “miracle” (James 186). The shared threat and experience of sexual

assault among the enslaved women not only unifies them against a common oppressor but also places them in a position with the potential to assist one another.

Enslaved women at Montpelier, even when they can avoid being sexually assaulted, are frequently viewed as sexual objects by white men. Although white women can also be sexualized under the white man's gaze, this dynamic has a different set of expectations and implications for enslaved women due to their status as property. Lilith notes that when Andromeda's daughter is sold to "a white man from Kingston," he "judge how plump her pussy be before he judge her face" (James 144). The inspection of the girl's body can be understood as a matter of assessing her ability to produce more slaves and as an object of sexual desire for the white man himself. In this regard, Barbara Bush-Slimani writes about the "dual burden" that slave women were tasked with, which combined the "hard labour in the plantation economy" with "childbearing and household production in the slave community" (83). In this way, slave women sustained the economy of slavery by producing goods through manual labor as well as by giving birth to more slaves.

The brutal reality of Lilith's sexual objectification is particularly evident in her relationship with her father, Jack Wilkins, who served as the former overseer at Montpelier. When Lilith visits Jack at his home, he looks at her "like a massa" rather than "a pappy" (James 173). Under his gaze, Lilith feels him "all over her like a man and she feel naked" (James 173). Even though Jack Wilkins is Lilith's father, this does not stop him from viewing her with the sexualized gaze that white men oftentimes set upon slave women. Lilith feels his eyes "testing her skin and prying apart her arse and grabbing to check how plump her pussy be" (James 173). The invasive language used to describe Jack's eyes upon Lilith's body – "testing," "prying," "grabbing" – also implies that the white man's gaze can serve as a form of violence against the

Black bodies it is set upon. Jack's incestuous desire for Lilith also adds another dimension to this instance of sexual objectification. Zanita E. Fenton claims that by engaging in sexual relationships with their Black children, white slave owners breached both "incest and miscegenation taboos" (323). While incestuous relationships were typically condemned by the public, they were nonetheless "tacitly accepted in a society that promoted the ownership of human beings" (Fenton 324). As an object of both sexual and incestuous desire, Lilith must contend with the threat of sexual violence not just from male slaves and white men, but from her own father.

Lilith experiences the threat of sexual violence at Montpelier firsthand when, only fifteen pages into the novel, a Johnny-jumper named Paris enters her hut and attempts to rape her. While Lilith successfully defends herself and kills Paris, her refusal to comply with "mute submission" is so out of the ordinary that "the other Johnny-jumpers see her as an aberration" and consequently attempt to kill her (S. 14). Although Lilith has been warned from a young age that being "uppity" and "spirited" will get her into trouble, it is precisely these qualities that allow her to fight back against Paris and protect herself from assault (James 4). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that Lilith does not simply kill Paris but derives a sense of satisfaction from it. As Paris screams and writhes in pain after Lilith pours a scalding pot of tea on his face, she "feel 'fraid and proud and wicked and she feel good" (James 17). Although Lilith resorts to violence to protect herself, the fact that she feels "proud" and "good" about committing murder suggests that her relationship with violence is more than just circumstantial.

Lilith's relationship with violence can be traced back as far as the moment she was born. The first description of Lilith is that of her as a "black baby wiggling in blood on the floor" next to her mother, who lays lifeless after having died in childbirth. Whereas the event of childbirth is

inherently violent because it involves “the inflicting of pain and the spilling of blood,” Lilith’s birth is exceptionally violent as it results in the death of her mother (S. 13). Lilith’s conception is also surrounded by violence; similarly to the other night women with the exception of Homer, Lilith was conceived as a result of her mother being “raped by the white overseer, Jack Wilkins” (S. 14). In this sense, Lilith not only engages in violence but is also a product of violence. While Lilith might be “born out of and into a climate of violence” on the slave plantation, where she witnesses countless atrocities such as torture, executions, and rape, James also suggests that she is born with an innate capacity for violence (S. 14). Even as a newborn, Lilith instills “fear and trembling” in the other enslaved women (James 3). While the women are unsettled by Lilith’s green eyes, which are a rare feature among the slaves, their fear stems from the way that her eyes “light up the room, but not like sunlight” (James 3). In other words, these women sense a certain darkness within Lilith which the night women also perceive and attempt to capitalize on. By identifying Lilith’s darkness as an inborn quality, James depicts violence as a role that Lilith was destined to perform rather than simply a condition she was born into.

The darkness that surrounds Lilith is also suggested by her name, which has biblical associations. Jack Wilkins named her after the ancient Jewish figure of Lilith, who is recognized in Jewish tradition as Adam’s first wife before Eve. Harry M. Geduld observes that in the Hebrew bible, the figure of Lilith is described as a kind of “female night-spirit” and in later post-biblical Hebrew literature, she is described as a female demon who seduces and preys upon men (58-59). Geduld also traces the figure of Lilith back to Assyrian legend, suggesting that “the origins of the Hebrew Lilith may be traced back to the Assyrian Lil,” a demonic “spirit of darkness also known as the ‘light-despoiler’” (58). In tracing the origins of Lilith’s name back to Jewish tradition and mythical literature, it becomes evident that it has clear associations with

darkness and violence. While Lilith's name does not necessarily determine that she will be a violent individual, James' decision to give her this name suggests that he wants the reader to consider these connections.

In contrast with Lilith, who is named after an ancient Jewish figure, many of the slaves at Montpelier – including each of the night women – are named after figures from classical Greek mythology. Barbara Bush observes that it was common practice in the West Indies for slaves to be “given ludicrous and demeaning classical names...which stripped them of their African identity” (qtd. in Nehl 173). Slave owners often named slaves after an “ancient deity or great personage” as “a kind of comic jest,” the irony being that “the most insignificant” was bestowed with “the greatest of name” (Nehl 173). This tradition is so deeply ingrained at Montpelier that before Robert Quinn met Lilith, he “thought every negro had a Greek name” (James 94). Robert attributes naming the slaves after Greek figures to the fact that Jack Wilkins' father “had a certain predilection for tragedy” (James 94). This element of tragedy, which is alluded to by the Greek names the slaves are given, foreshadows the tragic fate of the night women and other slaves at the end of the novel.

After Lilith murders Paris, it is Homer, Pallas, and Gorgon who help dispose of his body to protect Lilith from the repercussions. In contrast with the night women, who assist Lilith, Circe not only refuses to lend a hand but, as it is later revealed in the story, orchestrated the entire assault. Circe, who never wanted to be a mother, betrays Lilith's trust and intentionally exposes her to sexual violence in an effort to “cut her down a notch” (James 18). Even though Circe does not attack Lilith directly, her role in scheming the attack implicates her in the violence that ensues. Moreover, the night women's intention to assist Lilith in this moment is more selfish than it is generous. Homer later admits that she wanted Lilith to join the night

women ever since the day Lilith killed Paris; once she learned that Lilith was capable of bloodshed and saw her “blood-up face,” she knew she would be an invaluable asset to the slave rebellion (James 303). Upon recognizing a certain darkness within Lilith that can be harnessed and channeled against their white owners, Homer and the night women act within their power to protect her. This is to say that the night women help Lilith dispose of Paris’ body not out of genuine kindness or a sense of community, but because they have something to gain from her. Nehl also emphasizes the significance of Homer’s decision-making process, arguing that the violence Lilith exerts upon Paris “foreshadows the night women’s and Lilith’s (further) acts of violence against white masters and fellow slaves in the course of the narrative” (174).

Homer also aims to protect Lilith following the fire at Coulibre. As British soldiers search for the slave who set the fire, Homer falsely accuses Francine, a house slave at Coulibre who served Mistress Roget. Despite the fact that Homer knows Francine did not commit this crime, she blames her and has her hanged. While Homer might save Lilith in part because she feels a level of closeness to her, it is clear that the overriding reason is because she believes Lilith will be a key actor in the slave rebellion. Unlike Francine, who Homer refers to as an “idiot,” Lilith is fierce and opportunistic, “kill[ing] four white people” at Coulibre “just like that” (James 303, 304). With an awareness of the advantage Lilith can bring the night women in the rebellion, Homer does not hesitate to sacrifice Francine.

By accusing Francine of a crime she did not commit, Homer is also directly responsible for the horrific forms of torture that Francine is subjected to. The soldiers whip Francine with cowhide, scrape “burnin’ bits” of corn husk onto her “belly, face, and titties,” and use a hot poker to “brand all over her body” (James 235). The soldiers also use these methods of torture on a group of male slaves who are suspected of assisting Francine in setting the fire. After the

soldiers obtain false confessions from Francine and the male slaves, they are all hanged, stoned, and set on fire. Instead of expressing guilt for falsely accusing Francine, Homer coldly notes that her death was “the best she could do for the struggle” as she was “not cut out for anything else” (James 304). While Homer’s decision to betray Francine is terrible and unfortunate, it is nevertheless consistent with the needs of the rebellion; if Homer had done the morally right thing and accused Lilith of setting the fire, she would have undermined the rebellion and years of planning.

Similarly to the way in which the night women assist Lilith after she kills Paris, they again offer her aid following the events at the New Year’s Eve ball. When Lilith accidentally spills soup on Miss Isobel’s chaperone, Robert Quinn orders a white slave driver named McClusky and his men to whip her; however, once they have her alone, they brutalize and gang-rape her. While Robert Quinn is shocked when he learns of Lilith’s rape, Homer, who has lived on the estate longer than any other slave, is unsurprised. Sexual violence is used as a weapon against slave women so frequently that what the slave drivers do to Lilith is, as Homer informs Robert, “what one expect from a man” (James 161). Pallas, who is first to find Lilith following her assault, “clean [her] off and wash out [her] pussy” before calling upon the other night women for help (James 162). After moving Lilith to Homer’s bed, Homer and Gorgon assess her wounds while “Pallas and Iphigenia [remain] on the lookout” (James 160). Homer and Gorgon then rub down Lilith’s face, neck, breasts, belly, and back with the soothing jelly of a “sinkle-bible plant” (James 160). In the close attention Homer and Gorgon pay to each part of Lilith’s body as they rub her from head to foot – the word “rub” being repeated four times – this moment assumes a ritualistic or ceremonial quality. Despite the frequent arguments the night women have, in this moment they work together to heal Lilith and ensure her recovery.

Although the night women come to Lilith's aid following her sexual assault, it is important to note that she is not accustomed to such intimacy from them. The fact that Lilith “jerk” when she “feel Gorgon touch her” and “flinch” as Gorgon rubs her body with jelly suggests that this type of physical touch is not expected or welcomed from any of the night women except Homer (James 159, 160). Rather than intimacy, Lilith is accustomed to violence. This expectation of violence is rooted in the fact that although the night women are joined biologically and symbolically as sisters, they frequently physically and verbally attack each other. As Gorgon explains to Lilith, a woman is like a rose in the sense that she is “[p]retty like frock but will stab the shit out o’ you” (James 103). While women are often compared to flowers because of their associations with purity and femininity, the rose in particular bears thorns that can inflict pain and draw blood. In other words, in the eyes of the night women, a significant part of being a woman revolves around one’s ability to perpetrate violence.

It is this very violence, however, that causes Lilith to fail to recognize a sense of community between herself and other women. For example, as Lilith explores the ratoon fields one night, she witnesses a runaway slave woman being forced to perform oral sex on McClusky. When he is finished with her, he beats her and shoots her with his musket. Lilith is sickened by this assault and she “shudder, but beyond that nothing” (James 63). The slave woman “don’t have green eye,” which means “[s]he not no sister and she not no mother” to Lilith (James 63). Despite the fact that both Lilith and this woman have been victimized and sexually assaulted by McClusky, Lilith does not recognize any common ground between them. Although Lilith might appear “a likely comrade because of her own experience being beaten and raped,” Warren J. Carson observes that this is not the case (231). Rather, by determining that she and this woman are not biologically related, Lilith creates distance between them which allows her to look upon

the woman as a complete stranger. The slave woman's death allows Lilith to distance herself even further, as she looks upon her dead body not as human but as "[c]row food" (James 63). Precisely in this moment when one would expect Lilith to feel a sense of sisterhood with this woman based on their shared experience of sexual assault, she instead expresses indifference. Lilith's attempt to set herself apart from this woman, in addition to the apathy she displays toward her assault and execution, can be understood as a strategy to navigate her own situation. While Lilith recognizes that she too could be assaulted and killed by the slave drivers, she prefers to believe that this woman was killed because of some inherent character flaw. In this sense, by distancing herself from the woman, Lilith attempts to distance herself from meeting the same tragic fate.

While slaves at Montpelier are often forced to resort to violence as a means of survival, the violence perpetrated within the group of night women is motivated by specific suspicions, rivalries, and tensions. The first time Lilith formally meets the night women at one of their nightly meetings, there is already an undercurrent of tension and suspicion that bleeds into the performance of violence. Not only is the conversation among the women riddled with insults, but when Lilith threatens to tell the mistress that the night women have been meeting and plotting, "[e]very woman in the room look 'pon Lilith. Gorgon get up. Callisto hold up her knife by the blade and look at Lilith" (James 72). In the night women's abrupt silence and intense focus on Lilith, there exists an implicit threat of violence. Jim Hannan criticizes James for "repeatedly substitut[ing] silence, long looks, and hisses for meaningful dialogue," claiming that the lack of narrative insight into these moments "suggest[s] a lack of imagination" (66). However, it is precisely these types of subtle interactions that convey great meaning. Silence, long looks, and hisses are entirely appropriate in this world of secrecy and distrust, where no one wants to reveal

too much. The threat in the night women's silence is made tangible when Callisto threatens Lilith with a knife and Pallas holds a musket to her head. Such behavior between the night women not only demonstrates the readiness with which they will turn to violence against one another, but also illustrates the volatile nature of their sisterhood.

The "collective and individual aggressions" that Ana Ozuna identifies between the night women also create an atmosphere of perpetual tension (137). At one of the night women's meetings, "Callisto shoulder almost touch Lilith knee. Lilith squeeze her legs together but they touch Callisto anyway" (James 277). In this moment, Lilith is so uncomfortable about the lack of space between her and Callisto that she physically tries to make herself smaller. The discomfort Lilith feels is primarily located in the fear that Callisto will retaliate for this physical touch and "turn round with her eye like a knife" (James 277). Violence is so ingrained in the women's interactions that even Callisto's eyes are described in terms of weapons. The expectation that Callisto will attack Lilith for something so innocent as this incidental physical contact emphasizes how strained the relationship between the night women truly is. The unease Lilith feels in this moment is also made worse, rather than alleviated, by the kindness Callisto displays a moment before when she instructs Gorgon to give her seat to Lillith. Because this act is so uncharacteristically kind, it makes Lilith even more suspicious of Callisto's intentions and consequently more uncomfortable. It is in this way that even when the night women engage in kindness with one another, it is undermined by the greater threat of violence that colors the majority of their interactions.

3. Collective Resistance: The Building of Community

Despite the frequent acts of violence and lack of solidarity among the enslaved women, there are moments when they manage to unite and resist their white owners. Nehl notes that on

Jamaican plantations, acts of resistance “ranged from individual acts of sabotage, disobedience or non-cooperation to organized violent uprisings,” all of which the enslaved women at Montpelier participate in (167). Although the slave women might seem powerless against the threat of violence by their white owners, they are never entirely powerless. As observed by Michel Foucault, power is composed of a “network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess” (26). In other words, power is a dynamic that is always shifting and does not belong to any one person or party. Within the boundaries of the domestic, the house slaves frequently act in ways that allow them to resist and subvert their oppressors, which affords them a level of control. In this way, the slave women transform the sphere of the domestic into one of political mobilization.

The slave women who work in the great house wield significant influence over their white owners in part because they are responsible for preparing their food. White people are forced to trust their slaves for survival because of their role in the plantation system of food production. Maggie Kilgour, who writes about consumption as a literal and metaphorical means of incorporation, observes that the “need for food exposes the vulnerability of individual identity” and “the illusion of self-sufficiency and autonomy” (6,9). Although white slave owners determine what and when they eat, the slave women’s ability to contaminate their food and gain control over their bodies undermines their authority. As James’ narrator remarks, one of the main things white people fear, besides their slaves’ physical strength and the threat of violence, are “the fingers that sprinkle something in the soup that might be pepper today, poison tomorrow” (James 261). Slave owners are particularly scared of their slaves rebelling in ways they cannot detect; while they can quell a rebellion using weapons and physical violence, it is much more

difficult to combat poison or contaminants in one's food. The fact that this method of subversion is easier to hide makes it a choice form of resistance among the slave women.

John Savage, who writes about the use of poison on slave plantations in Martinique during the early 19th century, observes that white plantation owners had a fearful obsession with poison. Slave owners assumed the perspective that of all the likely perpetrators, "poisonings almost always originated" with the most "loyal and dutiful slaves" (Savage 637). Because loyal slaves had the "greatest level of their master's trust," it not only put them in an ideal position to harm their masters but also allowed them to avoid detection (Savage 637). Furthermore, acts of poisoning were often not performed by a "single perpetrator" but rather by an "unseen network of slave poisoners" (Savage 639). The concept of the unseen enemy – both in terms of poison and the collective efforts of poisoners – instilled fear in white slave owners and threatened the very foundations of their control.

As trusted house slaves, Homer and Lilith assume a position of significant influence over their white owners. Because they are responsible for cooking at Montpelier and Coulibre respectively, they are able to tamper with their owners' food. As they discuss methods of subversion, Lilith reveals to Homer, "Sometime, when the recipe call for molasses, me slip some dog shit in it too" (James 222). Homer admits to similar tactics, noting that she prefers to use "[c]ow shit" (James 222). The humor here is not lost on the women, as Lilith jokingly remarks that "[w]hite man be one strong bastard with all the shit he eat" (James 222). While cooking is typically surrounded by ideas of sustenance and nurturance, purposefully contaminating food in this way indicates the corruption of this domestic task. Although contaminating their owners' food is nowhere near the same as poisoning it, it still serves as a form of vengeance. Whereas Lilith and Homer derive a sense of satisfaction from adding disgusting things to the food, their

owners are completely unaware of their tactics. Homer and Lilith's knowledge, compared with their owner's lack thereof, places them in an even greater position of power. It is also important to note that as Homer and Lilith share their preferences for undermining their oppressors, they repeatedly fall into fits of laughter. Their mutual laughter at the expense of their common oppressor suggests that by exchanging information, Lilith and Homer actively engage in a form of bonding. In this sense, laughter is depicted as both a subversive and empowering act – albeit a limited one – that the enslaved women engage in. By expressing their mutual dislike for their oppressors and sharing their methods of resistance, slave women find unity in their collective insubordination.

Similarly to cooking, the domestic responsibility of making tea is corrupted by house slaves in order to gain influence over their oppressors. While Homer's extensive knowledge of plants and herbs makes her an invaluable asset to her white owners, it also positions her as a dangerous individual; as easily as Homer's teas can cure, they can harm. Lilith remarks while examining the many types of teas and herbs in Homer's cupboard that a "woman like Homer could have any kind of bush. Bush to make you happy or sad, sick or well" (James 131). Homer's knowledge of the effects of particular herbs affords her control over the minds and bodies of those she prepares tea for. For instance, Homer delivers tea to Mistress Roget at Coulibre that should "cool her nerves," but in secret she informs Lilith that the tea "goin' do more than that" (James 221). Homer's methods are so covert that, unbeknownst to anyone else, she has also been "friggin' up the mistress mind [at Montpelier] with [her] tea for years" (James 221). In other words, Homer actively poisons Mistress Wilson and makes her mentally unwell over a duration of years, causing her to slowly descend into madness. In this regard, Savage notes that white people on Caribbean plantations feared the way in which "poison could be

controlled from afar and administered slowly” (650). The link between poisoning and witchcraft in Europe goes back many centuries and while they were viewed as separate crimes, they “shared some key characteristics, including secrecy and an association with women” (Paton 240). By lacing the Mistress’ tea with harmful herbs, Homer does more than simply subvert her authority; she gets revenge in a way that is both tangible and destructive. Homer’s ability to strip her master of her sanity, all while doing a “woman’s work” – collecting herbs, brewing tea, cooking – underscores the power that the domestic sphere provides enslaved women in their revolutionary efforts.

Whereas Homer uses tea to harm her oppressors slowly and deliberately, Lilith’s methods are more impulsive. In the kitchen at Coulibre, Lilith demonstrates to Homer how she takes the pot of tea off the stove, hikes up her skirt, “crouch good over the pot but high up that she don’t burn herself and piss” (James 222). It is necessary to note the inherent intimacy of this act; to the extent that one’s bodily waste is an extension of one’s body, when the slave owners consume the contaminated tea, they are in essence consuming Lilith’s body. While Kilgour asserts that “eating is a means of asserting and controlling individuals,” Lilith proves that it is possible to assert and control the “eater” by being in the unsuspecting position of the “eaten” (6, 7). By serving her owners contaminated tea, Lilith assumes a level of “autonomy and control” over them which they would typically gain through eating (Kilgour 18). Lilith’s fulfillment of this domestic task also disguises its corruption; while she and Homer know that the tea is contaminated, her white owners only know that she has successfully brewed a pot of tea. After Lilith urinates in the tea, Homer laughs and proceeds to spit into it. By spitting into the tea, Homer not only indicates her approval of Lilith’s behavior but also joins her in this act of

insubordination. The solidarity that Homer displays reflects the larger collective efforts of the slave women in resisting their oppressors.

While preparing tea functions as a method of resistance against white plantation owners, it also serves to build community among the enslaved women. Homer's status as an herbalist joins "the personal and cultural," which is to say that while preparing tea is one of her many duties as a slave, it becomes personal when she does so for another slave woman (Zagarell 517). Homer frequently offers teas to Lilith to combat specific ailments. For example, when Lilith returns from Coulibre, Homer offers her "two kinda tea...[o]ne to sleep and one to forget" the tragedies that ensued there (James 236). Because Lilith is responsible for the Coulibre fire, which results in several deaths, she is haunted by feelings of guilt. For this reason, Homer offers Lilith another type of tea that can stop her from seeing and smelling the children who burned to death. Even when Homer's teas do not target a specific ailment, they still provide a sense of comfort. When Homer visits Lilith at Coulibre, she leaves behind some comfrey tea which Lilith finds to be the only thing "prevent[ing] her from losing herself" as she struggles with her own personal demons (James 225). Because this type of tea is the same one Homer frequently prepares at Montpelier, Lilith derives a sense of comfort from it. The healing and comfort that Homer offers to Lilith and other women through her teas makes her a trustworthy and useful resource among the community of slave women.

The knowledge of plants and herbs that enslaved women gain from working in the domestic sphere also allows the community to take control over their sexuality. Despite the fact that slave women are largely vulnerable to sexual assault by men – and in particular by the white men who own them – they still find ways to challenge their authority. As Lilith recuperates from being beaten and raped by the slave drivers at the New Year's Eve ball, Pallas visits and "pull a

green pawpaw out of her apron and cut four slice with a knife” (James 162). She instructs Lilith to “eat the green pawpaw until up in that womb clean out” so that she will not “have no dutty stinking white pickney” (James 162). By eating this plant as a means of birth control, slave women at the estate are able to combat pregnancies they would otherwise be helpless to stop. As observed by Bush-Slimani, concoctions of certain “herbs, leaves of special shrubs, plant roots and bark from certain trees” were common abortifacients used on slave plantations (92).² Although “female reproduction [was] subject to strict patriarchal control,” abortion provided enslaved women a sense of control over their bodies (Bush-Slimani 91). While in the larger scheme of things Lilith still remains vulnerable to sexual assault, with the support of Pallas and other women, she is nonetheless able to regain some control over her own body.

It is also significant that it is Pallas, Lilith’s sister, who teaches her about the medicinal effects of green pawpaw. The biological link between Lilith and Pallas emphasizes the larger symbolic sisterhood among the women at Montpelier, which is in part maintained by the circulation of this type of advice and information. Furthermore, Pallas’ status as a house slave and her knowledge of plants emphasizes the importance of the domestic sphere in subverting one’s oppressors. Sharing such knowledge of “herbal medicines and abortifacients” with women in the community, as Bush notes, allowed enslaved women not only to protect their bodies from unwanted pregnancies but also to undermine their oppressors financially by refusing to produce more slaves (76). By raping and impregnating slave women, white plantation owners stood to profit off the children they would produce as every child “accounted for at birth in the plantation inventories” served as “an additional capital unit” (Beckles xx). For this reason, preventing or

² Some specific plants used to induce abortion include “manioc, yam, papaya, mango, lime...cassava, Barbados pride, passion flower and wild tansy” (Bush-Slimani 92).

terminating pregnancies ultimately allowed slave women to resist the economic systems that oppressed them.

In addition to sharing information and resources verbally, the slave women at Montpelier do so in written form. Literacy allows the slave women to learn information and communicate with each other by written word while avoiding detection by their oppressors. For example, Homer reads Master Humphrey's journal and mail which places her in a position to better understand and respond to the events occurring on the plantation. Although enslaved women can effectively share information by communicating verbally, doing so in writing adds an additional layer of secrecy. When Homer visits Lilith at Coulibre, she "go over to the counter where Lilith was kneading" and writes a message in the flour informing her that Master Humphrey and his fiancé Miss Isobel are sexually involved (James 214). The fact that Homer uses her finger to write in flour rather than a pen to write on paper emphasizes her and Lilith's shared position in the domestic sphere and, more specifically, in the kitchen. Homer communicates with Lilith using the tools at her disposal, which happen to be the same tools used to cook for her white owners. While flour might appear a poor substitute for paper, it is in fact a more apt method for secrecy as the message written in it can be quickly swept away to avoid detection. Moreover, by gossiping about Humphrey and Isobel's affair, Homer and Lilith engage in a form of bonding. Gossip, which is here punctuated by hushed laughter and risqué details, plays an important role in building and strengthening community among the slave women. As Patricia Meyer Spacks argues in her essay "In Praise of Gossip," gossip is key to building relationships as it reflects intimacy, "supports comradeship," and marks the "affirmation of allegiance" (28). As Homer and Lilith gossip about Isobel's promiscuity and the implications of her affair, it not only

“generates pleasure” but also “marks and encourages friendship,” which is evident through their joined laughter (Spacks 30).

Another instance in which the enslaved women engage in gossip is when Lilith confesses to Homer about her involvement in the Coulibre fire. Following this admission of guilt, Homer excitedly presses Lilith for details such as how she killed Master Roget, how long it took, and how it felt. The fact that Lilith feels comfortable enough to divulge this incriminating information to Homer emphasizes the way in which gossip “depends upon and derives from trust” (Spacks 29). In other words, Lilith does not just share these details because she trusts Homer but because she knows that Homer will keep this information secret. The association between gossip and “alliance, secrecy, [and] shared values” emphasizes the way that this type of communication allows slave women to create and strengthen bonds with one another, even as sisterhood more generally is consistently undermined (Spacks 30). The “collective force” that gossip fosters among the enslaved women bolsters their collective efforts as a community of resistance (Spacks 30).

4. The Downfall of the Community of Resistance

Despite the successful methods of resistance that the enslaved women at Montpelier employ against their oppressors, in the end, their community of resistance proves ineffective; the slave rebellion ultimately fails and the white plantation owners regain control. One of the main reasons the rebellion fails is due to a lack of solidarity between the slave men and women. Although the enslaved men and women experience many similar hardships such as physical and verbal abuse, degradation, and the threat of violence, the plantation environment nonetheless sows division and hinders the possibility of unity. While the slaves at Montpelier outnumber their oppressors as there is only “one white man for every thirty-three negro,” the lack of

solidarity and cooperation among them undermines this advantage (James 10). Furthermore, because the plantation actively promotes individualism rather than community, when the rebellion commences the male slaves act according to their own individual desires. While it is women who lead the rebellion, “[p]lenty mens, when they see woman giving command, don’t like that at all” (James 400). The slave men refuse to relinquish their authority and instead “do as they please,” some of them even inciting violence upon the women (James 400). It is in this way that even enslaved men will participate in the dehumanization and oppression of women. The toxic masculinity displayed by the enslaved men as they refuse to take instruction from and actively work against the enslaved women ultimately upholds the system of slavery by preserving the hierarchy it is built on.

The failure of the rebellion also reflects a lack of solidarity among the night women; although they work together to plan and organize the rebellion, they lack a sense of common cause. While they might share the desire to be free, they also have individual goals and desires that prevent them from effectively unifying. Even Homer, who fervently champions the slave rebellion and the possibility of forming an “all-negro republic,” has ulterior motives (James 304). As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that what drives Homer is not the prospect of freedom but of revenge against her white owners. Homer is subjected to a great deal of suffering at the hands of her owners, Master and Mistress Wilson, such as being whipped, beaten, maimed, and publicly gang-raped. The two children that result from this rape are then sold to different plantations where they are killed, a tragedy that “kill the motherness” out of Homer (James 385). In the years that follow, “Homer watch, Homer wait, and Homer plot,” joining an alliance of women who had “just enough cause to join her” in overthrowing their oppressors (James 425). Homer’s fixation on revenge culminates during the rebellion when,

instead of assisting the night women, she spends precious time viciously beating the Mistress.

While Homer's violent actions are understandable considering her many years of suffering, her lack of leadership during the rebellion proves fatal to the night women, the other slaves, and the struggle for freedom.

Iphigenia, like Homer, also has individual motivations that contribute to the failure of the rebellion. In the time leading up to the rebellion, the night women become increasingly suspicious of one another. While Iphigenia appears to work alongside the other night women in their planning and plotting, Callisto learns that she has in fact been undermining their efforts by divulging their plans to a slave on another plantation to pass on to their master. Because Iphigenia believes "no man was ever goin' want her" due to her tragic disfigurement by the slave drivers, who sprinkled her body with hot ashes, she "start to think 'bout what she want for herself" (James 426). Iphigenia's traitorous motives, while they reflect an interest in her own survival and well-being, also reflect a desire for more tangible things. In betraying the night women and sharing their plot with their master, Iphigenia believes she will be rewarded with money and freedom. By acting in ways that best benefit her, Iphigenia displays a disregard for her relationship with the night women and the harm that could befall them if their plot were revealed. Moreover, Iphigenia's betrayal of the night women's confidence ultimately leads to her own downfall. On the eve of the rebellion, Callisto alerts her sisters that one of them is a "Judas nigger" (James 378). As the women regard each other with quiet suspicion, Callisto identifies the traitor as Iphigenia and swiftly "appear from the dark behind Iphigenia, grab her by the hair and pull back, then slice right cross her throat" (James 377). Although the night women are willing to kill one another to ensure the overall success of the rebellion, it is this very inability to trust one another that leads the rebellion to fail.

Similarly to Homer and Iphigenia, rather than being motivated by the possibility of freedom, Lilith is driven by other aims. Although Lilith attends the night women's meetings regarding the rebellion, she has no intention of participating in it. In contrast with Carson's claim that the night women set aside their "differences for the common good" and join together to fight against their oppressors, I argue that the rebellion in fact highlights their differences and tensions, which reach a boiling point (232). Instead of helping her sisters kill their white oppressors, Lilith attempts to protect them. This desire to protect the very people who oppress her positions Lilith as a traitor to the night women and, more broadly, to the slave population. Lilith's betrayal of the night women is most clearly demonstrated when she shoots and kills Hippolyta to protect Jack Wilkins. As Hippolyta enters Jack Wilkins' window and aims her rifle at Lilith, it jams and she hisses "but her green eyes screaming" (James 409). The mention of Hippolyta's green eyes serves to remind the reader of the biological link between her and Lilith. It is this shared physical feature – the very one that connects the sisters – that is targeted a moment later when "Lilith fire and Hippolyta face blown to pieces" (James 409). In the same way that Lilith obliterates the most defining feature of her relation to Hippolyta by shooting her in the face, she destroys any evidence of solidarity or community between them.

By killing Hippolyta and protecting Jack Wilkins, Lilith ultimately sides with the white, male plantocracy over the collective Black, female sisterhood. Lilith's actions indicate that despite her frequent refusal to choose a side, she will do so when it is advantageous to her. The lack of a common cause between Lilith and the night women is what makes it easier for her to turn on them; while freedom is a desirable prospect, survival is more pressing. Lilith is interested in her own survival, which in the context of the slave plantation means betraying, harming, and killing others – even those who might be her sisters. While Lilith's actions demonstrate her own

personal motives, they also in a broader sense “underlin[e] the impossibility for the slaves to escape the vicious circle of violence” that slavery constructs (Nehl 22).

In order to survive the brutality of slavery, Lilith must act brutally individualistic to the point of murder and betrayal. Because she saves Jack Wilkins, Master Humphrey spares Lilith from being executed, making her the only slave to survive the insurrection. Lilith is also rewarded with added privileges; she continues to live at Montpelier “like a free negro...do[ing] her own thing as be to her mood” (James 422). The fact that Lilith survives because she protected Jack Wilkins suggests that betraying her fellow slaves and the night women was the appropriate thing to do given the context of the situation. However, it is important to recognize that Lilith’s options during the rebellion were limited; she could side with her Black brothers and sisters and face certain death, or side with her oppressors and be rewarded with her life. By showing loyalty to her white oppressors and betraying the night women, Lilith ensures her own survival and, as Sam Vásquez notes, “secure[s] a measure of mental and physical freedom” (51). These improved living conditions and privileges, juxtaposed with the descriptions of each of the night women’s deaths in the final pages of the novel, illustrate the literal and symbolic destruction of their sisterhood.

In the months that follow the rebellion, Lilith gives birth to her daughter, Lovey, who she conceived with Robert Quinn. As Lovey grows up, Lilith teaches her to read and write using the same instruction she received from Homer when she herself was a child. Ozuna posits that the “counter-hegemonic tool of literacy” serves as a multi-generational form of resistance that is passed down from generation to generation (143). Just as Homer uses the English novel *Joseph Andrews* by Henry Fielding to teach Lilith and the other night women to read, Lilith uses this book to teach Lovey. By equipping Lovey with the ability to read and write, Lilith carries on

Homer's legacy and efforts as a teacher. In the sense that literacy is a white man's weapon, Lovey not only learns to speak the language and read the books of her oppressors but also write in the language of her own dispossession. The subject of Lovey's writing, which is the "rebellious fervor of her foremothers," the night women, lends an additional layer of defiance to her writing (Ozuna 143).

In the final pages of the novel, the narrator reveals herself as Lovey Quinn and informs the reader of her endeavor to preserve the legacy of the night women. Lovey takes on this task because she recognizes that "somebody must give account of the night women at Montpelier. Of slavery, the black woman misery and black man too" (James 426). Lovey's decision to write this history down positions her as a voice for those who, as slaves, were denied a voice of their own. In this sense, *The Book of Night Women* serves as a medium for Lovey to commemorate the night women and "talk back" to her oppressors through written word. Following the rebellion, hundreds of slaves from nearby plantations are shot, hanged, tortured, and burned to death. At Montpelier specifically, the slaves captured by the redcoats are stuffed into a small crate until, days later, the surviving thirty-seven slaves are then placed into gibbets. The significance of Lovey's literary efforts is underscored by the fact that while all these slaves suffer and face horrific deaths, only the night women are honored with a song detailing their final moments. Without Lovey giving a voice to these women, they would simply be another statistic or unnamed body "hanging like uncanny fruit" from the trees at Montpelier Estate (James 418).³

As the subjects of Lovey's writing, Lilith and the other night women become immortalized. In other words, although the night women die during the slave rebellion, they never truly die as their story lives on both through written word and oral tradition. Although the

³ James here alludes to the song "Strange Fruit," which protested the lynching of Black Americans in the American south during the 20th century. This song was famously performed by Billie Holiday in 1939.

sisterhood of the night women ultimately fails as a result of the conflict, competition, and suspicion fostered by the plantation environment, Lovey ensures that their story survives and can be passed on to future generations. While Lovey's literary efforts are both remarkable and empowering, James reminds us that these associations can take a complicated turn. For example, Lovey's ability to write down the story of the night women is only made possible because her mother survived the rebellion, which she did by betraying these women and the movement. In other words, it is not always the ones with the most generous hearts who get to write these types of stories, but those who are clever enough to survive. Although *The Book of Night Women* celebrates the night women and the spirit of revolution, this sentiment is ultimately complicated by the circumstances that allowed Lovey to write this story in the first place.

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