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 **Myth, Fairy Tale, Epic, and Romance: Narrative as Re-Vision in *Linden Hills***

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Myth, Fairy Tale, Epic, And Romance:
Narrative as Re-Vision in *Linden Hills*

What readers have from me is truly my own vision.

--Gloria Naylor

If anything was the problem with *Linden Hills*, it was that nothing seemed to be what it really was. Everything was turned upside down in that place.

--*Linden Hills*

When Virginia Fowler asked Gloria Naylor in a 1993 interview, "Do you see yourself as having some sort of prophetic role as an artist?" Naylor replied, "I see myself more as a filter than I do as a prophet. I see myself-- I call myself within my own head a wordsmith. I'm a storyteller, I really am" (Fowler 143). Naylor's second novel is a masterpiece of storytelling, a tightly woven narrative of intertextualities, multiple layers of story that reiterate, revise, and invert familiar western texts. Critics have closely examined some of these intertexts, especially Dante's *Inferno* (Ward), Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* (Houmans), Virgil's *Aeneid* (Ward, Saunders), and the Gothic novel (Sandiford). Less has been written about the biblical myth as intertext in *Linden Hills*. This vast cycle of stories pervades the novel as Naylor constructs her inferno, explores the demonic dance of shadow in Willa's cave, traces Willie's epic journey through the Linden landscape, and, finally, destroys her Gothic mansion and the people who live there.

Within this biblical frame, other familiar stories arrest my attention and provoke me to examine how Naylor uses them. The doomed marriages of *Linden Hills* offer multiple versions of the German fairy tale "The Frog Prince"; the relationship of the Norman Andersons revises the Book of Ruth as chivalric romance; the Reverend Michael T. Hollis' ritual of dressing for Lycentia Parker's funeral parodies the classical epic hero arming for battle; and the story of Laurel Dumont transforms the Daphne of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Naylor's use of patriarchal western narratives provokes a question. As an African-American woman writing in the last quarter of the 20th century in a country where patriarchy once ensured the oppression of her people, why does she choose patriarchal narratives as the architectural bases for her novel? Obviously, these works have **[End Page 1410]** fired her imagination, but in her study of Naylor's use of Shakespeare's *King Lear* in *Mama Day*, Valerie Traub suggests a more complex answer. Naylor's characters, she explains, "posit a transhistorical reading strategy," and Naylor's use of Shakespeare educates us "in reading for a diversity of historical and racial pasts." Traub concludes that "we are drawn to deconstruct only that which also speaks to us--but with a difference" (161-62). What is this "difference" in *Linden Hills* that makes us want to pay attention to how Naylor has reworked stories from our dominant cultural history? Given the upside down world of *Linden Hills*, Naylor's intertexts teach us that these western stories, though powerful in the history of ideas, cannot accurately reflect the history of her black characters, cannot tell their stories. When they try to live in the white narrative, they are doomed to failure.

In analyzing Naylor's use of Shakespeare, Peter Erickson suggests that she diminishes rather than expands the Bard's "cultural reach" (144). Her work is forward looking as it "provides a valuable test case of how we are going to formulate a multicultural approach to literary studies" (145). I agree with his idea as I consider myth, fairy tale, epic, and romance as intertexts in *Linden Hills*: Naylor's interest in the great writers of the western canon "neither translates into kinship nor supports a model of continuity; the main note is rather one of conflict and difference Shakespeare does not assimilate Naylor; Naylor assimilates Shakespeare" (145). Part of my joy in reading *Linden Hills* derives from my fascination with the complexity of

Naylor's assimilations and the virtuosity of her performance as she tells the stories of the people who inhabit fictional landscape.

The story of Daniel Braithwaite...

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