A review of

***A Mercy*, by Toni Morrison (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008)**[1]

João de Mancelos

(Universidade Católica Portuguesa)

A new novel by African American writer Toni Morrison always constitutes a literary event, particularly because this author does not publish regularly and tends to be discreet about her projects. It was, therefore, with high expectation that I began reading *A Mercy* — but also with prudence. Morrison's readers approach her books holding a pencil, to take notes about the numerous characters, belonging to several generations and ethnic groups; to turn the pages backwards and forwards, searching for a piece of information, essential to enlighten a specific aspect; to mistrust the tricky narrators; to elaborate a chronology of events, whose order Morrison constantly subverts. In other words, her novels demand a vigilant attention to details and a sound deductive capability. The effort is rewarded by the inventiveness of the plots, and by the lyrical beauty of Morrison's style that rests upon the careful choice of words and the creation of emotional atmospheres.

Compared to other books by Morrison, *A Mercy* is — similarly to her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) — easy to read, and likely to captivate an audience less familiarized with her literary work. The plot, which implied a detailed research, takes place chiefly in the area of Maryland, during the decade of 1680. Those must have been fascinating times due to the kaleidoscopic variety of colonizers — mainly English, Dutch and Portuguese —, with diverse cultures and beliefs. However, those differences originated an atmosphere of conflict and suspiciousness, which commanded caution. In such historical moments, the virtues of solidarity and mercy are more valuable than the richness promised by the New World — as this novel emphasizes.

Surprisingly, this is a narrative that begins with… a pair of shoes, and later of boots, owned by Florens, a young African, "with the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady" (Morrison 2). Her proprietor, Portuguese D'Ortega, offers her, reluctantly, to his creditor, the adventurer Jacob Vaark, a man whose main quality is mercy. One of the subjective reasons to choose Florens, and not another slave, resided in the surprise Jacob experienced when he first saw her: "On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of

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license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those two little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes, that made him laugh" (Morrison 24). The motive may seem trivial — but the consequences were profound for Florens and the group of women who welcome her.

These constitute a heterogeneous feminine community, representative of several ethnic groups: Rebekka, Jacob's Dutch wife; Sorrow, a mentally disturbed girl, the daughter of a sea captain; Lina, a wise Native American, the only survivor of a tribe decimated by disease; and, of course, young Florens, who, being different, inspires curiosity, fear and mistrust. Her words to a free Negro could have been directed to all who enslaved her: "You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be" (Morrison 155).

A Mercy presents several differences compared to Morrison's previous books. The author had already approached the theme of slavery — in the extraordinary *Beloved* (1987), for example — but had not yet focused her attention on the Black and the Native American existence in the beginnings of the European colonization. History manuals, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century, register the horrors of the "peculiar institution", and of the conquering process of North America. Nevertheless, it is sometimes a fictional character who allows us to understand, beyond the cold facts, the individual pain and experience. In this sense, novels complete general History with private *stories*. In *A Mercy*, through the memories of Lina, the reader understands the saga of the five hundred tribes who were forced to live under unfamiliar rules and creeds. In one of the most touching passages of the novel, Lina recounts how the diseases carried by Europeans decimated her tribe:

> Infants fell silently first, and even as their mothers heaped earth over their bones, they too were pouring sweat and limp at maize hair. At first they fought off the crows, she and two young boys, but they were no match for the birds or the smell, and when the wolves arrived, all three scrambled as high into a beech tree as they could. They stayed there all night listening to gnawing, baying growling, fighting and worst of all the quiet animals sated at last. (Morrison 44)

Without acrimony, Lina teaches her white boss the importance of respecting all trees and creatures; explains him the mysteries of nature; shares with Florens the oral legends of her people. The author follows, up to a point, the romantic and transcendentalist image of the *bon sauvage*; nevertheless, Lina is not a stereotype: she possesses a singular dimension, with specific feelings, ideas and traumas, which make her an indispensable character for the development of the plot.

Another difference in regard to previous novels resides in the importance Morrison

grants to religion as a cause of conflict: faith defines attitudes of intransigence or mercy, inclusion or distance. In this context, different beliefs separate characters such as Protestant Jacob and the feverously Catholic D'Ortega; "pagan" Lina and her mistress Rebekka; Quakers and Puritans.

Similarly to what happens in the novels *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Paradise* (1998), the realm of the supernatural is represented by the spirits or ghosts who, in vigil or during sleep, manifest themselves. For instances, Sorrow chats with Twin, an imaginary confident; and Lina talks to plants and animals: "She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain" (Morrison 147-47). Convincingly, Morrison integrates these supernatural elements in the quotidian of her characters, fusing two universes which, in our western culture, appear to be dissociated.

In terms of literary strategy, Morrison's readers know the author does not deny herself the joys of experimenting, and reveals the influence of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), William Faulkner (1897-1962), and, mostly, of the way African Americans narrate stories. In *A Mercy*, Morrison centers each chapter on a specific character: Florens, Jacob, Lina and Sorrow are some of the people whose stories are interwoven, disclosing different points of view. It is up to the reader to put the pieces of the puzzle together, a task not always easy, but certainly rewarding, since he also becomes a *writer.*

In conclusion, *A Mercy* combines natural and supernatural, historic and private, to draw a vivid portrait of the colonies in North America, in the 17th century. Dealing not only with the African American or Indian experience, but also with the quotidian life of the white colonizers, Morrison shows how a community can survive religious bigotry and prejudice. However, can it also endure the power of a forbidden love? The answer is somewhere in the iridescent pages of *A Mercy*.