

Hagar "The Egyptian": Allusions and Illusions in "The Stone Angel"

PATRICIA KÖSTER

IN *The Stone Angel*, Margaret Laurence makes considerable use of literary allusions to deepen the meaning of her narrative. Since Hagar is the narrator, most of these allusions seem to come out of Hagar's memory, and thus to demonstrate her thought processes. In addition to that, however, they also awaken ironic reverberations in the reader's mind, commenting obliquely on Hagar's apparent intentions and conscious attitudes toward them. One extremely important group of implications springs from Hagar's identification of herself as Egyptian.

Not explicitly cited in *The Stone Angel*, the original reference connecting Hagar with Egypt is the Old Testament narrative: "Now Sarai Abram's wife . . . had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar."¹ Hagar Currie has clearly accepted some association with the Biblical Hagar, even though the direct source of the name was "a well-to-do spinster great-aunt in Scotland."² Indeed, as child she is unwilling to identify herself with the idea of service implied by the word "handmaid": "I used to think how sad to spend one's life in caring for the houses of others. I never had any premonition, and I felt myself to be — oh, quite different from Auntie Doll, amicable but different, a different sort entirely" (p. 34). Ironically, Hagar on her wedding day is "still thinking of [herself] as chatelaine" (p. 51), and of other women as servants, but "the next day . . . got to work and scrubbed the house out . . . as though [she]'d been driven by a whip" (p. 52). However, Hagar's double vision of herself both as high-born lady and as slave can be related to one tradition about the Biblical Hagar, "a daughter of Pharaoh, who . . . declared that it was better for his daughter to be a bondservant

in the house of Abraham than a mistress in the palace of another."³ Although unlikely to know of the tradition, Hagar Currie seems to have fantasied some such idea, since she several times refers to her father, Jason Currie, as a pharaoh, most notably in the opening paragraphs of the book. When she calls him a "fledgling pharaoh" she wishes to comment on the doomed effort to "proclaim his dynasty" (p. 3), as even among well-fledged pharaohs one dynasty after another perished, but indirectly she also establishes herself as an Egyptian princess. When she returns from Toronto, she explicitly says, "I was Pharaoh's daughter reluctantly returning to his roof, the square brick palace so oddly antimacassared in the wilderness." She obviously would prefer the bondage of "a one-room school" to that of being her father's hostess, "a thing and his" (p. 43).

Perhaps Hagar is even aware that the word "Pharaoh" derives ultimately from "great house" (*OED*). Certainly she is always conscious of house sizes, and seems to feel that her rightful place is in a large house. When Marvin and Doris begin to hint that the Vancouver house is "too big," Hagar "wouldn't call it big, as houses go . . . Four bedrooms big? The Currie house had six. Even the old Shipley place had five" (p. 35). Although "that house of Mr. Oatley's [is] like a stone barn" (p. 155), it is "a proper house filled with good furniture" (p. 158), unlike the despised Shipley place. Hagar certainly believes that she is helping John by bringing him to such a house. She always thinks of John as the heir of all her father's virtues, "the sort of boy [Jason Currie]'d wanted" (p. 64), "a boy after his own heart" (p. 123), and therefore himself a future pharaoh. She never admits that John really resembles Ishmael, the wild son of the Biblical Hagar.⁴ To John, life at Mr. Oatley's is an exile which he ultimately rejects; he prefers sleeping in the bushes with Arlene to "living in other people's houses" (p. 182).

Although Hagar appreciates some of the ironical overtones aroused by calling herself "Pharaoh's daughter," she is unwilling to admit clearly that she lived in Bram's house more as a servant than as a wife, cleaning stoves and floors, lamp-chimneys and pans — and, of course, children — (p. 112), but rejecting Bram's gifts of laughter and love. In fact, she makes herself into a hand-

maid, and even manages to create pains for herself out of "every good joy [she] might have held" (p. 292). When she recollects Mavis, Hagar can "thank goodness" for "a few decent cards": after the sexless marriage with Matt, "Mavis married Alden Cates and went to live on the farm, and . . . she bore him three youngsters and she raised Rhode Island Reds and took prizes at all the local poultry shows and grew plump as a pullet herself . . ." (p. 61). What was good for Mavis is, however, interpreted as bad for Hagar:

chickens. Messy things — how I detested their flutter and squawk. At first I could hardly bring myself to touch them, their soiled feathers and the way they flapped in terror to get away. . . . they never ceased to sicken me, live or dead. . . . (p. 126)

...

great swathed hips . . . it was the lack of a foundation garment. (p. 56)

...

children: everywhere I'd turn, there he'd be, getting under my feet, until it got on my nerves. (p. 112)

It is Hagar herself who has made the tokens of Mavis's good fortune into the tokens of her own bondage.

Bram brings Hagar to a potential "land [of] milk and honey" (*Ex.* 3:8, 17, etc.), but she almost completely ignores the literal cows (Bram "hurried with the milking" — p. 86), and is frightened by literal bees (p. 57), and terrified when Bram offers John honeycomb on a knife (p. 125). Symbolically, she thus shows her rejection of the milk and honey of human love. The closest she comes to sharing love with Bram is on the night when the horse dies: she "awkwardly" expresses sympathy and "might have opened to him openly" — but in fact continues "much the same as before" (pp. 87-88). Furthermore, she cannot accept the idea that Marvin is her son, or that John is Bram's: "Marvin . . . was a Shipley through and through" (p. 64); John was born with "black hair, a regular sheaf of it. Black as my own, I thought, forgetting for the moment that Bram was black-haired too" (p. 122). In thinking of the children in this way, Hagar is implicitly thinking as a handmaid rather than as a wife. Instead of sharing

parenthood with Bram, she divides it, making herself a resentful instrument of Marvin's birth — "I'd not wanted children . . . the child [Bram] wanted would be his, and none of mine" (p. 100) — and a single parent to John. She drives herself to the hospital, where she is "calm as a stout madonna" (p. 122). By corollary, she implicitly makes John an equivalent to Jesus, born without any human father. No wonder she is annoyed when Bram later says that he himself was born "in a barn . . . Me and Jesus" (p. 125). By this claim Bram not only attacks Hagar's attempt to present John as a descendant of Curries only, but also indirectly asserts the falsity of her self-image as madonna. Hagar renews her role as single parent by running away to Vancouver with John, whose alarm at her words, "I'll have a man in the house" (p. 141), reflects both desire for his real human father and dislike for any possible substitute. John in fact wants the ordinary happy family life which Hagar sees as good for Mavis, but which she cannot grasp for herself, going to a new bondage with Mr. Oatley.

If the Biblical Egypt is "the land . . . of bondage" (*Ex.* 20:2), the historical Egypt is the land of incest. Pharaohs married close relatives in order to preserve the royal blood from dilution, a custom which receives literary elaboration in William Golding's novella, "The Scorpion God." There is of course no actual incest mentioned in *The Stone Angel*, but Jason Currie has powerful emotions toward his young daughter. After she exclaims over the infested sultan, he punishes her severely:

He struck and struck, and then all at once he threw the ruler down and put his arms around me. He held me so tightly I was almost smothered against the thick moth-ball-smelling roughness of his clothes. I felt caged and panicky and wanted to push him away, but didn't dare. Finally he released me. He looked bewildered, as though he wanted to explain but didn't know the explanation.

"You take after me," he said, as though that made everything clear. (p. 10)

Jason Currie's explanation sounds remarkably like a statement of the pharaonic ethos: because she is *like* her royal father, therefore he embraces her. He of course is not consciously aware of the

incestuous overtone. Again, when Hagar returns from Toronto and tells him that she wishes to teach school, Jason first grips "the newel post . . . as though it were a throat," and then grasps Hagar's hand until "the bones in [her] fingers hurt" (p. 44), telling her that "men have terrible thoughts," and clearly infuriated at the thought of her going to dances. Three years later, when she announces her engagement, he forbids marriage to Bram, orders that "You'll marry no one," and again applies a combination of sadistic force with affectionate entreaty:

Then, without warning, he reached out a hand like a lariat, caught my arm, held and bruised it, not even knowing he was doing so.

"Hagar — " he said. "You'll not go, Hagar."

The only time he ever called me by my name. To this day I couldn't say if it was a question or a command. (p. 49)

Hagar cannot understand Jason's attitude because it is one which neither he nor she can consciously face. Particularly significant is the use of Hagar's name. Ordinarily, Jason kept to the term "miss" when he was displeased, and "daughter" when he felt kindly disposed . . ." (p. 14). He presumably dislikes to be reminded of his frustrated hopes for a bequest from his aunt Hagar, "who, to [his] chagrin, had left her money to the Humane Society" (p. 14). In addition, however, he may feel a general satisfaction in thinking of the close relationship expressed in "daughter," and perhaps a fear of acknowledging the separate person implied by the use of the proper name. His using it once only is his most direct expression of love for her (Hagar does not remember any time when he touched her, except for the three described). In contrast, Bram boasts that he never calls his wife "Mother" (p. 80); he is willing to accept Hagar as a separate person, and to let her make her own decisions. When she decides to leave Jason, the reaction is emotional turmoil, and the reproach "There's not a decent girl in this town would wed without her family's consent, . . . It's not done" (p. 49). Exactly the same could be said about her decision to leave Bram; however, "he didn't seem surprised. He never even asked [her] to stay . . ." (p. 141).

Although Bram rejects the incestuous overtones which would be implied by calling his wife "Mother," Hagar herself introduces them: "I wired Mr. Oatley after Bram's death and told him my brother had died" (p. 192). Her reason for the lie is of course that when she first met Mr. Oatley she "told him [her] husband was dead" (p. 158). Without realizing it, she has reversed a pattern found in the Bible: Abram told Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister in order to save his own life (*Gen.* 12: 11-20). In that case it was a partial truth rather than a full lie, for she was his half-sister as well as his wife (*Gen.* 20: 12). Hagar, however, has declared her dead husband to be her brother in order to maintain the "proper appearances" which she will later reject (p. 292), and which are worse than any Egyptian bondage. Although formerly offended at Bram's pharaonic presumption in wanting "his dynasty" (p. 101), Hagar has by her telegram asserted a pharaonic marriage of (royal) brother and sister, and unintentionally established Bram as patriarch.

Besides bondage and incest, Egypt has a further meaning relevant to *The Stone Angel*. As a culture, ancient Egypt is a land where all arts and all knowledge serve death. The pyramids are tombs or cenotaphs, and in an Egyptian funerary temple, as Spengler suggests, "Der heilige Weg führt . . . sich stets verengend bis zur Totenkammer, . . ." ⁵ Hagar's way also leads to death, and grows ever narrower:

Lord, how the world has shrunk. Now it's only one enormous room, full of high white iron cots. . . . (p. 254)

...

The world is even smaller now. It's shrinking so quickly. The next room will be the smallest of all. . . "Just enough space for me." (p. 282)

The first part of this realization is placed immediately after Marvin tells her "what was on the X-ray plates": only then can she "see that what's going to happen can't be delayed indefinitely" (p. 254). In fact, all the memories in *The Stone Angel* are part of Hagar's preparation for death, even though she herself is slow to realize that she is dying and that she is preparing to die.⁶ Significantly, her earliest reference to Egypt opens the story: her

mother's monument in the graveyard is the dynastic claim of a "fledgling pharaoh" (p. 3).

While the primary reference of Hagar "the Egyptian" is to the Biblical Hagar, and to the overtones of bondage, of incest, and of the funerary arts in ancient Egypt, Margaret Laurence brings in other literary references. The word "gipsy" derives from the word "Egyptian," and in Scottish usage can still be replaced by it.⁷ Hagar connects this further meaning to herself when she has the first conversation with Mr. Troy: "Here we sit, the little minister straight from the book, bashful and youngly anxious, and I the Egyptian, not dancing now with rowanberries in her hair, but sadly altered" (p. 40). She refers to a passage in Barrie's novel, *The Little Minister*, describing Gavin Dishart's first sight of the gipsy girl, Babbie, "a bare-legged witch dancing up Windyghoul [a path through the woods], rowan berries in [her] black hair."⁸ Presumably Hagar, having already identified herself through the Biblical Hagar as Egyptian, when reading *The Little Minister* has associated herself with Babbie "the Egyptian" (*LM*, 5 and passim), even though the only clear resemblances are in the word "Egyptian" itself, and in the fact that both Babbie and Hagar have black hair. *The Little Minister*, unlike other works cited, was written during Hagar's lifetime, being first published in 1891, while Hagar was at finishing school in Toronto, and perhaps read by her at about that time.⁹

In *The Little Minister*, Babbie flouts convention. She loves to don her gipsy dress and decorate herself with wild sprays: in chapter 1, the rowan berries, in chapter 16, "a cluster of holly berries at her breast" (*LM*, 197). Hagar on the other hand associates most real flowers with death — wild cowslips and cultivated peonies grew in the Manawaka cemetery, (pp. 4-5), "lilies of the valley . . . were . . . used to weave into the wreaths for the dead" (p. 33) — and decorates herself with artificial ones (pp. 40, 146, etc.). Even as a child, walking "primly" in the cemetery (pp. 4-5), Hagar is afraid to enjoy the child's pleasure in dancing which Babbie continues to enjoy after she has ceased to be a child. Margaret Laurence uses Babbie to emphasize the bondage of Hagar to propriety: Hagar describes herself as "sadly

changed," but fails to realize that she never was "dancing . . . with rowanberries in her hair," even in a metaphorical sense.

In *The Little Minister*, love is an effective force for growth, changing both Gavin and Babbie. They both gain in self-respect as they gain in respect for each other. "In the fairy tale the beast suddenly drops his skin and is a prince, and . . . it seemed to Babbie that some such change had come over this man, her plaything . . . a corresponding change was taking place in herself" (*LM*, 271). The next day Babbie weeps over the separation which must come (Gavin does not yet know that she is engaged to Lord Rintoul); she has "only been a woman for a day" (*LM*, 287). Now in the sense that Babbie has become a woman through love, Hagar never grows up at all, though she does begin to grow. One of the stages of that growth is the incident at the hospital when Mr. Troy visits for the third and last time. Like Gavin, Mr. Troy is shy, but gathers up his courage to overcome his shyness. Like Babbie, Hagar is moved to admiration by the courage, and suddenly understands the inadequacy of her past life and the possibility of true happiness. Both the inadequacy and the happiness are, however, quite different for Hagar than for Babbie. Babbie has typically said, "Don't let us think of the future . . . Let us be happy for the moment" (*LM*, 235); she realizes the possibility of happiness in marriage to Gavin, but "knows she must shrink from the arms she would lie in" (*LM*, 287) because of her previous engagement. Hagar on the other hand has repressed "every good joy [she] might have held" and now recognizes her deepest, hitherto unconscious desire, "simply to rejoice" (p. 292): in effect, to see the happiness in the moment which Babbie has always known, and the joy in love she learns.

Barrie and Laurence are both saying that shared love is the greatest earthly good, and both make the point by depicting a woman who perceives that truth too late. Babbie, however, runs away from Rintoul just before the wedding; Gavin overcomes her efforts at renunciation, and marries her in a gipsy ceremony; she becomes a model minister's wife: "No one seeing Babbie going to church demurely on Gavin's arm could guess her history" (*LM*, 506). For Hagar too there is time to begin loving, but not to

make a marriage, which she has destroyed for an illusion "of proper appearances — oh, proper to whom?" (p. 292).

In the person of Mr. Ogilvy, the narrator of *The Little Minister*, Barrie shows the folly of unshared love. Ogilvy loved Margaret, but kept silent too long, until she married the unsuitable Adam Dishart. When Dishart disappeared, Ogilvy became her second husband, and fathered Gavin. When Dishart reappeared, Ogilvy had to leave the deeply shamed Margaret, whom he had made an unintentional bigamist. Ogilvy keeps away from her and Gavin, unwilling to cause her further pain for her shame. When Gavin finally hears the story, he thinks that his parents should have been reunited after Adam Dishart's death, and comments that "all this tragedy you [Ogilvy] have told me of only grew out of your own indecision" (*LM*, 421-22). The logic of the whole book contrasts Gavin's decisiveness in love with Ogilvy's hesitation. Even Margaret, unaware of Babbie's connection with Gavin, tells Babbie, "that if two people love each other, neither has any right to give the other up" (*LM*, 467). These ideas are highly relevant to *The Stone Angel*. Hagar, like Ogilvy, fails to show her love, and the logic of her whole story condemns that failure. Again, like Margaret Dishart, for many years she lives apart from the man she loves, having fled the scene of her shame with a beloved son who is to achieve great things as a result of his education. The differences are of course laughably obvious. Whereas Gavin forges steadily ahead with his studies, starting university and a job at twelve, and taking his first parish at twenty-one, John Shipley feels no desire for learning, does poorly at all levels of school, and is unable either to earn a scholarship or to save the money to pay for any university education at all. Gavin turns out to be as studious as the father whom he has forgotten, but quicker to finish and firmer in love. John too is like his father, and therefore the opposite of Gavin. Bram and John Shipley, like Adam Dishart, are fond of laughing, of drink, and of informal companionship. (Bram even resembles Adam in having a handsome beard.) Hagar, unable to distinguish, "always bet[s] on the wrong horse" (p. 237). Although she has connections with various characters in *The Little Minister*, her reference to herself as Babbie, even a "sadly changed" Babbie, merely

emphasizes the differences. Babbie grows from an extended childhood into a real maturity; Hagar, never having had a real childhood, remains in an ungipsylike limbo of propriety almost to the end.

Besides Babbie, Hagar identifies herself with another Scottish literary gipsy, Meg Merrilies. This identification has already been discussed,¹⁰ and I shall add only a little to Dr. Coldwell's outline. At Shadow Point, Hagar compares herself to Meg Merrilies and to the Ancient Mariner. The connection with the Ancient Mariner lies in thirst and guilt, although she denies the guilt: "What albatross did I slay, for mercy's sake?" (p. 186). She bears her guilt somewhere, however, even if not materially around her neck, for she is soon perceiving a courtroom in the woods to try her: "the sparrows as jurors . . . [would] condemn me quick as a wink, no doubt" (p. 192). Hagar is guilty toward the sparrows in having taken their bucket of water (pp. 186-87), but her real guilt, like that of the Ancient Mariner, lies in lack of love; her albatross is John, whom she finally can lament the following night in the cannery.

Although Hagar denies a resemblance to the Ancient Mariner, she asserts one to Meg Merrilies: "I'm not weary, at all, nor heavy laden. I could sing. I'm like Meg Merrilies" (p. 151). Hagar is again denying her guilt, hinted at in the Biblical allusion, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden" (*Matt.* 11:28), although physically she soon is "all at once tired" (p. 152). Furthermore, she is not really like Meg Merrilies, who is accustomed to hunger and thirst; Hagar has been pampered by Doris for the last seventeen years. Meg, a gipsy all her life, knows how to live out of doors; Hagar, town bred, has come to Shadow Point with a little snack food and no drink, wearing a cotton housedress and a sweater (she wishes that she "had a blanket cloak" like Meg's — [p. 163]). In stanza 6 of Keats's poem, which Hagar does not remember, Meg is shown as freely giving away her handiwork,¹¹ whereas Hagar "can't think of many" — in fact, not any at all — whom she has helped, aside from Dan, who rather suffered from her ostentatious spelling instruction (p. 276).

In *Guy Mannering*, which Keats had not read before writing

"Meg Merrilies," but which was narrated to him by an enthusiastic friend,¹² Meg Merrilies is endowed with second sight, and has the plot function of recognizing and proclaiming the true heir of Ellangowan, who is not aware of his real identity. Although at the first meeting she sees his family likeness, she allows herself then to be deceived by his coming "from the East Indies."¹³ Later, however, she works hard to restore him, and gives her own life to save him. Hagar is as "doubly blind" as the stone angel, unable to see the nature of her sons, let alone to recognize that Marvin is the true heir to Jason Currie in his dogged hard work and to Bram Shipley in his ability (mute though it be) to love. Even at the end, when Hagar tells Marvin that he has been "A better son than John," she does not know that her words are true (p. 304). She does, however, begin to see dimly that they are "spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love" (p. 307). Meg Merrilies, like an ancient Egyptian as well as a gipsy, understands death: she knows how to ease the death of a pirate (*GM*, 502-03), and how to accept her own (*GM*, 658-60). Hagar, on the other hand, cannot ease the death even of those closest to her: she cannot comfort Dan (pp. 24-25), apologize to Bram (p. 183), or "put [things] to rights" for John (p. 243). Although she is preparing for her own death, she is doing so without full comprehension, and is still unfinished at the end. She acknowledges the true heir with her words, but not yet with her whole being.

Being an "Egyptian," whether Biblical, historical, or Scottish literary, is for Hagar more a matter of illusion than of allusion. She imagines herself to be "Pharaoh's daughter," Babbie, or Meg Merrilies, just as she imagines herself to be a wild Highlander (p. 15). However, she acknowledges at last, "I've never even set foot in the Highlands. My heart's not there" (p. 306). Substituting "Egyptian" for "Siamese," she could echo the words of her creator, "I was no more Scots than I was [Egyptian]," and "The ancestors, in the end, become everyone's ancestors," because "one's real roots do not extend very far back in time."¹⁴ In this sense Hagar is both Scot and Egyptian. Her parents came from Scotland, but her "real roots" are in Manawaka, and Egypt is as useful a myth to her as the actual territory of her forebears.

NOTES

- 1 Gen. 16:1. All Biblical references are taken from the Authorized Version, the one most likely to have been familiar to Hagar Currie. Biblical parallels are discussed by Anne Thompson, "The Wilderness of Pride: Form and Image in *The Stone Angel*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 15 (1975): 97-99; see also William H. New, "Introduction," *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), pp. viii-ix; Clara Thomas, *Margaret Laurence*, Canadian Writers No. 3 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), pp. 35, 43; Sandra Djwa, "False Gods and True Covenant: Thematic Continuity between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross," in *Margaret Laurence*, ed. William New, *Critical Views on Canadian Writers* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977), pp. 75-76.
- 2 Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, New Canadian Library No. 59 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), p. 14. All further references will be to this edition, and indicated parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Rashi, cited by James Hastings et al., eds., *A Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Scribner, 1906), 2:278, s.v. "Hagar." I am grateful to Dr. Terry G. Sherwood for suggesting this reference.
- 4 Thomas, p. 43; Djwa, pp. 75-76.
- 5 Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (München, 1923), 1:245; see also Clara Thomas, "The Novels of Margaret Laurence," in New, pp. 57-58.
- 6 For a discussion of the book as Hagar's preparation for death, see J. M. Kertzer, "*The Stone Angel*: Time and Responsibility," *Dalhousie Review*, 54 (1974): 499-509.
- 7 OED, SND, s.v. "Egyptian."
- 8 J. M. Barrie, *The Little Minister*, Peter Pan Edition of *Works* (New York: Scribner, 1929), 4:8. The incident is retold, *ibid.*, p. 53. Further references will be to this edition, indicated parenthetically as *LM*.
- 9 Hagar mentions receiving magazines from Auntie Doll, but the only books at the Shipley house were Bram's Eaton's catalogues, and Hagar's poetry books in the "black box-trunk" (pp. 125-26). She might, however, have read *The Little Minister* after going to Vancouver.
- 10 Joan Coldwell, "Hagar as Meg Merrilies, the Homeless Gypsy," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 27 (1980): 92-100.
- 11 John Keats, "Meg Merrilies," *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: OUP, 1953), p. 320.
- 12 Charles Brown, *Walks in the North*, in *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1:437-38. This reference has been pointed out by Coldwell, "Hagar as Meg Merrilies," pp. 95, 100.
- 13 Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering, or the Astrologer*, Waverley Novels (Edinburgh: Cadell, 1842), ch. 23, 1:483. Further reference will be to this edition, indicated parenthetically as *GM*.
- 14 Margaret Laurence, "Road from the Isles," *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), pp. 147, 157.