

The Resemblance of Colonial Mimicry: A Revisionary Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*

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ABSTRACT

My essay attempts a revisionary reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*. The first work by a leading African/postcolonial novelist, this novel has generally been read in terms of an "English aesthetic" that Ngugi would come explicitly and decisively to repudiate in his later writing, most notably *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. Along with Ngugi's second novel, *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between* is thought to display a certain simplicity, if not naivete, in terms of its aesthetic ideology. My argument is that critics have overlooked the depth and complexity of Ngugi's early fiction. Ngugi's apparent embrace of "Englishness" in his earliest fiction is riddled with ambivalence, ambiguity, and slippage. Undoubtedly, *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* draw on aesthetic models from Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, and Thomas Hughes. But these texts are colonial mimics that critique even as they seem to imitate.

This essay turns on a revisionary reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's earliest novel, *The River Between*. It is excerpted from a longer project that includes, as well, a critique of the aesthetics of mimicry and irony in Ngugi's second novel, *Weep Not, Child*. The premise of my overall argument is relatively straightforward. *The River Between* mimics and revises canonical English texts, specifically Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, in turn *Weep Not, Child* mimics and revises *The River Between*. My essay revives and seeks to expand an argument propounded by Ato Sekyi-Otu in an insightful but curiously neglected essay published nearly two decades ago. "The verdict of critics of the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o," Sekyi-Otu begins, "is that his early writings are modest artistic exercises woven around plots whose narrative structure is uncomplicated and charting problems of peyayne ethical significance" (157). Contending that the critical verdict of the philosophical and aesthetic universe

of Ngugi's early fiction requires reappraisal, he contests the self-evidence of that consensus: "Is it possible that some of the characteristic concerns which we encounter in the later Ngugi are first dramatized in the earlier novels, perhaps with the matchless complexity of a vision not yet privy to the reductive truths of a systematic doctrine?" (Sekyi-Otu 157). My reading of *The River Between* answers this question in the affirmative. I also seek to reinvigorate the concept of mimicry in postcolonial studies by exploring its aesthetic dimensions.

Critics have generally identified these two texts with an "English aesthetic," which aesthetic, it is claimed, Ngugi would come explicitly and decisively to repudiate in his later writing, most notably *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. I contend that while seemingly right in its broad outline, this reading is problematic on two interrelated grounds: firstly, it hinges on a radical discontinuity between Ngugi's early and later fiction that is not altogether sustainable; secondly, it appears to overlook the extent to which Ngugi's apparent embrace of "Englishness" in his earliest fiction is riddled with ambivalence, ambiguity, and slippage. Undoubtedly, *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* rely on aesthetic models drawn in part from such writers as Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, and Thomas Hughes. However, Ngugi's engagement with canonical English writers embodies an exemplary instance of what Homi K. Bhabha terms colonial mimicry. As is well known, Bhabha defines the concept of colonial mimicry as "a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite" (*Location of Culture* 86). Ngugi's early novels mimic canonical English texts—they are almost the same but not quite, almost English but not quite. For Bhabha, the mimic is at once "resemblance" and "menace" since the belated or secondary copy, through its inevitable excesses and slippages, turns back to disrupt the authority and priority of the original. *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* mimic—and mock—the structure and logic of the conventional tragedy as well as the logic and structure of the conventional *bildungsroman*.

Before embarking on specific close readings of *The River Between*, I will trace and revise (which is to say mimic) the conventional narrative of Ngugi's development as a novelist. *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*, and *A Grain of Wheat* (all of which texts were published in the 1960s) are conventionally thought to belong to the earliest phase of Ngugi's literary career, the period of his purported Englishness. Published in 1977, *Petals of Blood*, represents what we may be regarded as the mid-point of Ngugi's career, a period during which he went through what Simon Gikandi, perhaps following Fredric Jameson, has termed "a crisis of representation" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 129). Published originally in Gikuyu in the 1980s, *Devil on the Cross* is said to mark Ngugi's famous "epistemological break" with the English language and with the culture of Englishness.

Carol Sicherman offers a cogent account of the effect on Ngugi's creative writing career of the system of education in what she calls "late-colonial East Africa" (12). Since the textual analysis that follows is heavily indebted to Sicherman's four hypotheses, I will cite her essay at some length:

Four hypotheses govern this paper [. . .] first, that Ngugi's primary education in a Gikuyu Independent school (1948–55) gave him an awareness of "colonialism's oppressive force" and a pride in peasant culture, which itself had provided informal education in songs, stories, proverbs, riddles [citation omitted], second that at Alliance High School, the combination of flexible ethnic pluralism, rigid and proselytizing Christianity, and colonial doctrinalism—along with high

intellectual demands—made a lasting impact on its most famous graduate and gave him the intellectual tools with which he later attacked the colonial mind controls; third, that the same combination of pluralism, doctrinalism and intellectual rigor appeared as well at Makerere—but differently proportioned: with the doctrine muted, with the intellectual demands increased, and—perhaps most important—with a much greater encouragement to write creatively; fourth, that at Leeds, Ngugi found in Fanon and Marxist theory a doctrine to replace the Christian imperial model that was inculcated at Alliance and assumed at Makerere—and that this way of thinking took root in the nationalist soil prepared by the Gikuyu independent school. (Sicherman 12–13)⁴

Both *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* were written in the early sixties while Ngugi was a student at Makerere. As shall be seen presently, the texts embody the contradictory impulses of Ngugi's early aesthetic education: on the one hand, they seem to affirm Gikuyu (and African) culture, on the other, they appear to attack traditionalism and endorse Christian doctrinalism.⁴ At first glance, the two texts would seem to embody an unmistakable "English aesthetic." As Sicherman puts it, "lonely Conradian heroes populate his first three anglophone novels, in which only the secondary characters exhibit active resistance" (19). Along the same lines, Gikandi highlights the isolationism and introspection of Waiyaki, the central character in *The River Between*: "This 'inward turn' as it were, is the very mark of the good novel as defined by the great tradition via Makerere University College. Psychological introspection and a sense of moral crisis that would have satisfied Leavis and his disciples mark Ngugi's novel" (Ngugi *wa Thiong'o* 65). Gikandi and Sicherman may be a little too unidirectional in their assessment of Ngugi's early fiction; specifically, they both overlook the mimic aspects of his apparent Englishness.

The River Between seems, at first glance, to be a good example of the kind of third world texts that Jameson classifies as national allegories, with the provision that its brand of nationalism is that of an ethnic polity, not a nation-state.⁵ The novel has been read as the classic text of anticolonial Gikuyu nationalism: "If one wanted to understand cultural nationalism in Central Kenya in the 1920s," Gikandi contends, "one turned to Ngugi" ("African Literature" 28). The nationalist mandate of the novel aims to articulate an appropriate anticolonial poetic. The novel strives to depict colonialism as a disruption of the natural order of things, a disruption that caused such serious rifts within the once united native community that the central opposition actually dramatized in *The River Between* is within the Gikuyu polity rather than between the Gikuyu and their white colonizers. The text struggles to heal the internal rift between two Gikuyu communities—the Christian Makuyu and the traditional Kameno—as a precondition for the articulation of an effective anticolonial nationalism. The novel is animated by the romance of an organic Gikuyu community outside the culture of colonialism, but that romance is itself unintelligible without colonial culture. A paradox is immediately apparent in the internal logic of *The River Between*: it expresses the need for communal unity using the rhetoric of organic restoration, but the specific means and terms by which the reunification of Kameno and Makuyu is to be secured involve Christian conversion and colonial education.

Waiyaki, the novel's tragic hero, embodies, quite literally, the case for tribal unity articulated by the novel. His story—the story of a private individual—is always, to put it in Jameson's terms, an allegory for the embattled situation of Gikuyu culture under colonialism. In particular, his romantic relationship with Nyambura is a

problematic allegory for the eventual reconciliation and reunification of Makuyu and Kameno, and for the restoration of what the text would have us believe was the natural order of things. Drawing on arguments by Doris Sommer and Jean Franco, Gikandi argues that in nationalist allegories "romantic love is an imaginative mechanism for overcoming the divisions embedded in the *polis*. In an ideal world, Waiyaki's marriage to Joshua's daughter would overcome the division between Kameno and Makuyu" (Ngugi *wa Thiong'o* 66).⁶ In Sommer's and Franco's arguments, such allegories naturalize a patriarchal and heterosexist order of things in the name of national liberation and unity. The figure of the woman is typically turned into "the territory of domestic stability" on whose strength "the narrative of an ideal identity holds its lure" (Ngugi *wa Thiong'o* 238). The romance between Waiyaki and Nyambura ends disastrously—they are excommunicated from Christian Makuyu and condemned to death by traditional Kameno. This failure notwithstanding, the text leaves no doubt that this romantic union between man and woman represents an organic ideal towards which the people of the two ridges should collectively aspire.

As is conventional in the anticolonial texts of this period, *The River Between* turns on three discursive maneuvers: an attempt to establish the rationality of precolonial African cultures, an effort to explain the calamity of colonialism, and a bid to discursively transcend coloniality. In order to refute the negative image of Africa produced by colonial discourses, the text presents positive images of a precolonial Gikuyu world predicated on a traditional sacral ontology as well as a form of democratic political authority legitimated by popular consent and rational public debate. The image of a democratic precolonial African polity is addressed in the first instance to the putatively democratic Western colonial powers and the emerging African educational elite. It is intended to demonstrate, in terms intelligible to the West, that Africans had developed elaborate notions of democratic governance prior to colonial conquest. The image of rational democratic self-governance, however, is at rather odd variance with the autocratic and nonrational authority presented in the novel under the guise of tradition. We are presented with a world predicated in the first instance on the realm of hereditary seers (Mugo wa Kibiro and Chege). These men exercise unfettered spiritual and political power over the community on the authority of prophetic discourses. Early in the novel, we are told that the other elders in Kameno feared and respected Chege, the reigning seer, because "he knew, more than any other person, the ways of the land and the hidden things of the tribe. He knew the meaning of every ritual and every sign. So he was at the head of every important ceremony" (Ngugi 7). Traditional authority is, it would seem, produced and exercised by means of a certain monopolization of knowledge.

The text suggests that the entire history and destiny of the tribe—from the tribe's originary wholeness in immemorial time, to its complacent immediate past, to its calamitous colonial present, to its future organic restoration—is contained in the body of prophetic and historical knowledge handed down through generations of seer families. The irony here is that, as Gikandi demonstrates, the putatively organic community affirmed in the novel derives its paradigms and parameters from colonial anthropology rather than precolonial Gikuyu culture. (I return to this contention towards the end of my essay.) In a bid to transcend coloniality, the novel claims that the calamity of conquest had been foretold in traditional prophesies: Mugo wa Kibiro—from whom Chege is said to have descended—"a long time back prophesied the invasion of Gikuyu country by the white man" (Ngugi 7). If the Gikuyu were conquered, if the natural order of things was disrupted, it was because, the text

suggests, they had disregarded prophecy. As Chege informs Waiyaki (the son he anoints as the last in a long hereditary line of Gikuyu seers), Mugo proclaimed to the people, "[t]here shall come a people with clothes like butterflies (Ngugi 19). These people, he asserted, would fly "about over the land, disrupting the peace and the ordered life of the country" (Ngugi 19). However, the community is said to have disregarded prophecy and scorned the seer. "People did not believe him. Some even poured scorn on him, laughing at him, for they said: 'He is not well.' And they would not listen to his voice, which warned them: 'Beware!' The seer was rejected by the people of the ridges" (Ngugi 19).

But in a perfectly circular argument, Mugo, anticipating the failure of his first prophecy, is also said to have secondarily prophesied the coming of a savior and the transcendence of coloniality. As Chege informs Waiyaki, ancient prophecy had proclaimed "[s]alvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people" (Ngugi 20). Mugo is claimed to have recognized that colonial power represented a threat to Gikuyu culture so powerfully and radically different that it called for new strategies: "Mugo often said you could not cut the butterflies with a panga. You could not spear them until you learnt and knew their ways and movement. Then you could trap, you could fight back" (Ngugi 20). Waiyaki is enjoined by the authority of a self-assured prophecy to "[g]o to the mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man" (Ngugi 20). In a fundamental sense, the novel is structured by the imperative to fulfill this prophecy. The novel literally unfolds as a chronicle of Waiyaki's attempts to embody this redemptive prophecy. The novel takes the form of a tragedy, since its ill-fated hero is burdened with the weight of an unrealizable but authoritative prophecy. That Waiyaki fails to lead the people beyond coloniality calls into question the founding authority of prophecy and the organic community it would foreordain.

In addition to the sacred realm of the seers, the text suggests that secular political power in precolonial Gikuyu culture—the putative natural order of things—was produced and exercised by a council of elders, the Kiama. This council consisted exclusively of men selected on the basis of age. Despite the hegemonic maleness of both secular and sacred power, the text strives to posit, as part of its anticolonial critique, a natural democratic dispensation among the Gikuyu. Important decisions, the text suggests, were arrived at democratically by means of public discussion involving the entire community. We see such forums when, for example, the people of Kameno try to determine the best way to respond to encroaching colonial power and, more specifically, when they debate whether western education enhances or retards communal liberation. At such forums, it is possible for an elder such as Kabonyi to be, at least temporarily, defeated by a youth such as Waiyaki.

The River Between seems to suggest that the precolonial order of things was natural and that the rift between Makuyu and Kameno was unnatural. The association between tradition and nature occurs, as many readers have observed, early and often in the text. Indeed, as André-Paul Michaud notes, "[h]umans do not join Ngugi's delicately crafted geography until Chapter 2" (48). The famous opening lines describe the natural world in which the novel is set: "The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them there was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kameno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernable plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept, the big deep sleep of their creator" (Ngugi 1). These lines seem

to posit a natural world that is prior to, independent of, and indifferent to human action. However, there is an anomaly in this narrative of indifferent nature: two of the innumerable, anonymous, and sleepy ridges are distinguished and named. Between Kameno and Makuyu, we are told, there was a valley called the valley of life. A human agent names the valley and assigns to it life-sustaining properties. A human narrative inserts itself onto the script of an apparently indifferent and undifferentiated natural world. We are then told that a river flowed through the valley of life. The narrator informs the reader—addressed pointedly as "you"—that s/he could have seen the river from each ridge had there had been "no bush and no forest trees covering the slopes" (Ngugi 1). Somewhat implausibly, Michaud interprets this narrative of obscured vision to mean that conflict between Makuyu and Kameno is somehow prefigured in the natural world: "Nature identifies the conflict. The antagonistic villagers have, both literally and figuratively, lost their 'life-stream'" (49). The implication of this line of argument would seem to be that colonialism had driven a wedge, or at any rate, had been allowed to drive a wedge between two organically united communities.

Michaud's reading seems to be authorized by the text itself—at crucial moments, the narrator appears to link the rhythms of the natural world to those of the human world: "Honia was the soul of Kameno and Makuyu. It joined them. And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were united by this life-stream" (Ngugi 1). In a fashion typical of the landscape descriptions found in innumerable nineteenth century English novels, the narrator seems to be suggesting that the human world derives its founding authority and fundamental legitimacy from nature. But Ngugi's mimicking of the conventions of nineteenth century English prose is, in Bhabha's terms, as much menace as it is resemblance. In the very next paragraph, the narrators suggest that the natural world foreordains conflict and strife: "When you stood in the valley, the two ridges ceased to be sleeping lions united by their common source of life. They became antagonists. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region" (Ngugi 1). Far from being unnatural, the conflict between Kameno and Makuyu is, the narrator now suggests, inscribed legibly onto the natural world. What are we to make of the shifting and conflicting depictions of nature—at points indifferent, at others unifying, at yet others, dividing—in the opening chapter of the text, the chapter that would authoritatively frame the rest of the narrative? A close reading of the internal logic of *The River Between* discloses that the conflicts afflicting the human world are the result of contingent human action and have no basis in or connection with the natural world. The conflict between Kameno and Makuyu precedes—and enables—colonial conquest. At the heart of the conflict, the text invites us to infer, is a contest for political power among ruling elites and the subsequent monopolization of power by the Kameno aristocracy in the name of the pre-ordained and natural order of things.

In the wake of the contradictory discourse on the connection between the natural and the human world, the narrator presents an instructive myth of tribal origins:

It began long ago. A man rose in Makuyu. He claimed that Gikuyu and Mumbi sojourned there with Murungu on their way to Mukuruwe wa Gathanga. As a result of that stay, he said, leadership had been left to Makuyu. Not all the people believed him. For had it not always been whispered and rumoured that Gikuyu and Mumbi had stopped at Kameno? And had not a small hill grown out of the

soil on which they stood south of Kameno? And Murungu had told them: This land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity (Ngugi 1–2)

As Ato Sekyi-Otu argues, the most striking feature of this putative narrative of origins is its performative unnaturalness, that is, “its shameless acknowledgement of its own fictiveness and rhetoricity, its inaugural ambiguity” (159). In an insightful and compelling reading, he continues

The story of beginnings is apocryphal and unauthorized. Neither reporter, nor referent, neither subject, nor object, are accredited with unequivocal, transcendental authority. Nor is the founding event said to be a product of an authorial project or preordained itinerary. The man who rose in Makuyu merely claimed that Gikuyu and Mumbi sojourned there “on their way to . . .” In place of indubitable origins and an irreversible destiny we have here an account of genesis, destiny and, therefore, meanings as effects of a journeying experience, a contingent outcome of an unplanned sojourn. The Kameno version of the story, while it asserts Kameno paramountcy, is equally argued with epistemological modesty. Again, rumor had it that the deities who attended the founding event had stopped at Kameno on their way to a destination which is not even named in this instance. That the story has plural versions and that the action of the deities is *not* the consequence of a final causality are, in a sense, two ways of saying the same thing. As a contested myth of shared but indeterminate origins, unable to consecrate the hegemonic pretensions of either Makuyu or Kameno, the founding narrative is a quintessentially political act, for the political is the speech act of the community invoking unity with the forked tongue of partisan claims. (Sekyi-Otu 159–60)

To adopt Bhabha’s formulation, the novel articulates, at the outset, a myth of origins that remains firmly attuned to its fictiveness even as it appears to assert its anticolonial necessity.¹⁴ Neither the disastrous division nor the desired unity between Kameno and Makuyu is inscribed with the authority and finality of natural acts. Either unity or division would be the result of contingent political acts and choices.

If at first the novel presents an internal self-contradictory myth of origins that is firmly attuned to its fictiveness, there occurs very early in the narrative a radical transformation. Sekyi-Otu instructively contrasts the equivocalness and contestedness of the narrative of Gikuyu origins reported to us by the narrator with the firm assurance and unidirectionality of the partisan myth of origins that Chege subsequently narrates. In contrast to the equivocal and competing myth of origins, Chege’s belated myth is distinguished by its brevity, certainty, and self-assurance: “It was before Agu, in the beginning of things,” he informs his son, the designated savior, “Murungu brought the man and woman here and again showed them the whole vastness of the land. He gave the country to them and their children and the children of their children, *tene na tene*, world without end” (Ngugi 18). The revised myth bestows land to the Gikuyu unconditionally by divine right in perpetuity; ownership is no longer a matter of human agency, historical contingency, and political choices. Sekyi-Otu asserts:

In Chege’s version of the founding narrative, beginnings are sedulously cleansed of their metaphoricality, their speculative character, their poetic freedom. What may be called, the anthropocentric index of the original speech act, the fact that

it was a covenant solicitous of the willed inscription of human deed upon Nature’s sacred gifts, is censored out of the text; so that the divine presence, the ordinance of grace, becomes the sole source, proprietor, and guarantor of the production of life and meaning. (165–66)

To deploy Bhabha’s apt phrasing, Chege’s revised myth of origins—which is also Waiyaki’s myth and ultimately, if not unambiguously so, Ngugi’s myth—tragically believes “too much in its necessity and too little in its fictionality” (“Representation” 97). Though it is the second myth of origins narrated, Chege’s myth paradoxically occupies a position of textual priority; it is the myth on the basis of which the narrative of *The River Between* unfolds. The narrator’s conflicted myth of origins is actively suppressed, if not altogether forgotten, by the text shortly after its provocative introduction. Put otherwise, the mimic structure of *The River Between* may in the end be more resemblance than menace. Despite its claims to tribal universality and its language of finality, Chege’s creation story represents, according to the logic of the first myth of origins presented in the text, Kameno’s partisan version of events. It is doubtful that Christian Makuyu would accept his views regarding the natural order of things. In a certain sense, Chege’s story amounts to a rearguard action to restore Kameno’s political power by inventing an ostensibly anticolonial tradition. In Chege’s false prophetic self-assurance, Waiyaki’s tragic ruin is writ large.

The moment when Waiyaki, seduced by his father’s visions of grandeur, self-assuredly constructs himself as the last in a line of prophets who would redeem and unify the whole community, seems, on the surface, to mark reconciliation with the natural order of things. Waiyaki, newly anointed the last prophet, stands atop a hill and surveys his territory: “The ridges slept on. Kameno and Makuyu were no longer antagonistic. They had merged into one area of beautiful land, which is what, perhaps, they were meant to be. Makuyu, Kameno and the other ridges lay in peace and there was no sign of life, as one stood on the hill of God” (Ngugi 16). There is here a remarkable contraction of the space for human agency. Waiyaki’s vision—despite the slight hesitation embodied in the word “perhaps”—is endowed with self-assurance and finality. Communal unity is preordained, and Waiyaki is its natural author. The vision articulates no material, political, economic, or ethical basis for unity; on the contrary, it seems, under the guise of anticolonial tradition, to silently re-inscribe the grounds for Kameno paramountcy and for elite power. This is Waiyaki’s hubris: the contention between the ridges will be resolved—if it is indeed to be resolved—not by divine right but by human choices and actions. For almost the duration of the novel, Waiyaki’s quest for communal reunification is characterized by a certain conceptual emptiness. He seems to be engaged in what Sekyi-Otu has contemptuously but correctly termed, a “neutralist cult of mindless and purposeless reconciliation” (167).

Some of the vagueness can no doubt be explained by Waiyaki’s extreme youth at the beginning of the novel. The novel is, after all, structured as a *bildungsroman*, that is a novel in which a central character gradually, fitfully, and circuitously comes to self-knowledge and self-actualization. But the vagueness of Waiyaki’s character persists long after his youth. His arrested development may in fact be read as an ambiguous critique of the genre of the *bildungsroman*. Ngugi’s mimic may function in part by constructing an unpersuasive hero. Even as he fetishizes the idea of building schools (so much so that he latefully resigns from the Kiatta in order to devote himself fulltime to building more schools), there is little indication of what the actual

pedagogical content of these schools might be, or how specifically the schools may achieve legitimate reconciliation between Christian Makuyu and traditional Kamenos, much less assist in anticolonial struggle. Towards the end of the book, Waiyaki comes to pin all hope for communal reunification on the mantra of education understood, in Sekyi-Otu's dismissive formulation, "as the acquisition of propositional truths whose authoritativeness is captured by their attributives, 'the white man's secret magic and power.' The only differentiating or qualifying element which the force of circumstance demands of this putatively neutral and apolitical intellectual climate is that it be managed, administered, and consumed, ever more increasingly, by Africans" (Sekyi-Otu 170). In a persuasive interpretation, Sekyi-Otu suggests that Waiyaki prefigures the neutralist bureaucrats who would come to inherit the colonial structures of power at independence in Africa. It is no small irony that while at this stage in his literary career Ngugi heroicizes Waiyaki, he would later engage himself in a partisan campaign to reform the Eurocentric education system in postcolonial Kenya. The point to be underscored, however, is that Waiyaki's heroicization is not without ambivalence.

Through Waiyaki, the colonial school in *The River Between* is figured—unsuccessfully, I have been suggesting—as a discursive space that could strategically allow for cultural renewal and anticolonial resistance. Livingstone, the colonial headmaster, has different ideas for the school. For him, the school and the hospital and the church (the three institutions that collectively make up the Siriana Mission Centre) were a means for securing the conversion of African subjects to Christianity and civilization. He seems to an extent to be modeled in the image of the Doctor, the magisterial principal of Rugby School in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Both men seek to cultivate ideal English subjects. The difference is that Livingstone operates in a colonial situation. That the colonial institution should manifest itself in a tripartite formation as church, hospital, and school reminds one of Michel Foucault's discussion of the pervasiveness of disciplinary power in the various institutions of European modernity: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (228). Livingstone is frustrated by the prospect of failure for the larger civilizing mission. "True, the school and the hospital had expanded a great deal. But these people seemed only interested in education, while they paid lip service to salvation. They were entrenched to blind customs" (Ngugi 55). In other words, Livingstone's civilizing mission is frustrated by the apparent menace of colonial mimicry, a menace embodied in ambiguous fashion in Waiyaki. The custom principally in question here is circumcision, in particular the practice of clitoridectomy. In an odd Manichean opposition, the white missionary also comes to recognize messianic potential in Waiyaki. "For many seasons they learned and worked hard. Waiyaki made quick progress and impressed the white missionaries, who saw in him a possible brave Christian leader of the Church" (Ngugi 21–22). It is as if Waiyaki's aristocratic lineage in and of itself is a mark of distinction for both the colonized and the colonizer. That Waiyaki can simultaneously embody two diametrically opposed prophetic discourses (the one traditional and anticolonial, the other Christian and antitraditional) bears witness to the conceptual emptiness at the heart of his messianic mission; it bears witness, as well, to his mimic construction.

Ngugi's novel also mimics the aesthetics of tragedy. Muthoni, Joshua's daughter, a young Christian woman who dies during a secret clitoridectomy, prefigures Waiyaki's tragic quest for reconciliation in *The River Between*. As Gikandi puts it, "Waiyaki's journey into the thicket of cultural crisis is, of course, foreshadowed by

Muthoni's narrative, a story that is often read as a commentary on the tragedy of biculturalism in a colonial situation" (Ngugi *wa Thiong'o* 66). Gikandi describes her affirmation of cultural hybridity as eloquent. But to what extent is Muthoni really an example of the impossibility of biculturalism? In many ways, the text self-consciously constructs Joshua, Muthoni's Christian father, as the mirror image of Chege, Waiyaki's traditionalist father. One is the spiritual head of Christian Makuyu, the other of traditional Kamenos. They both operate with uncompromising doctrinal certainty. As head of their respective patriarchal households, they each demand absolute, dutiful obedience from their infantilized wives as well as their children, Waiyaki on the one side, Nyambura and Muthoni on the other. Drawing from the tragic form that it simultaneously mimics, *The River Between* constructs the two men as similarly situated extremists who together are driving the community into unnatural civil strife. Each of the children caught up in the crossfire articulates and enacts, if unsuccessfully in all three cases, a vision of communal reunification and renewal.

Muthoni's reconciliatory bid takes the form of a desire to be both traditional Gikuyu and Christian: "I say I am a Christian and my father and mother have followed the new faith. I have not run away from that. But I also want to be initiated into the ways of the tribe" (Ngugi 43). There is a lack of depth to her profession of Christianity: she is merely mimicking her parents in professing the "white man's faith." She asserts traditional Gikuyu culture by opting to be circumcised, a practice that is anathema to the Christian church: "Father and Mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not satisfy me. I want, I need something more" (Ngugi 26). Muthoni seems to be an exemplary mimic figure who brings colonial difference radically to bear on Christian civility. However, her characterization is ultimately problematic and unpersuasive unless she is read ironically. She seems intended to repudiate shallow, ill-conceived multiculturalism. Her longing for circumcision seems primordial and prerational. One is troubled by the apparent collapse of the ostensibly weighty ways of the tribe into the singular event of circumcision. Muthoni's logic is strangely metaleptical: her mother and father were circumcised before Christian conversion. After conversion, the fact of their circumcision remained an emblem of shame in particular for her father, who is decidedly no model for cultural hybridity. While the narrator alleges that a Gikuyu woman lurks underneath the façade of Muthoni's mother's Christianity, little in the story justifies this flat assertion of a primordial tribal essence. If anything, she is portrayed as woman in dutiful obedience to a Christian patriarch.

As she is dying after a botched operation, Muthoni proclaims the apparent triumph of biculturalism. She asks Waiyaki to "tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe" (Ngugi 53). There would seem to be something undoubtedly heroic and tragic about her story. But one is troubled by the conceptual emptiness at the heart of all her thoughts and actions. Her embrace of Christianity seems so devoid of specific doctrinal content that it amounts to little more than mindless obedience to the dictates of a fanatical father (this also seems to be the entirety of Nyambura's Christianity). Her embrace of tradition seems equally superficial. Even though she says she desires to learn the ways of the tribe, that entire tradition is reduced, in her rendering of it, to a single contentious cultural practice. Like Waiyaki and Nyambura in her tragic wake, Muthoni seems to be motivated not by a

well-thought-out and trenchant biculturalism, but rather, by a cult of mindless neutralism. Given the conceptual insubstantiality of Muthoni's characterization, I think it would be a mistake to read her life and death, as Gikandi seems to, as a "commentary of the impossibility of building cultural bridges in the Manichean culture of colonialism" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 62). The lesson to be learnt here is that if cultural bridges are to be built, then they will have to be contingent on more substantive and critical terms than are presented in Muthoni's tragic biography. The first step in any such process would be an argument that makes the case for the desirability of cultural bridges in the first place. In the internal logic of the text, however, Muthoni represents the virtuous, if tragic, figure who, like John the Baptist in the Bible, prepares the way for the real savior.

Muthoni's death exacerbates the rift between the Christians and the traditionalists. Casting aside Muthoni's dying proclamations, the men on both sides of the Manichean opposition endow the contingent event of her death with an excess of conflicting but self-assured significations. Ngugi presents Muthoni as a powerful example of a subaltern woman who, in the context of a masculinist culture, cannot, for all verbal dexterity, seem to speak.³ For Livingstone, the death "for ever confirmed the barbarity of Gikuyu customs" as well as the moral imperative to stop the practice of circumcision by any means (Ngugi 55). Henceforth, he would rely on coercion and not conversion, direct pressure and not persuasive pedagogy. For Joshua, the death confirms the morality of his Christian conversion and comes to represent a temptation, a test to his faith that must be resisted even at the cost of losing his entire family. For Chege, Muthoni's death confirms the immorality of Christianity. In a compelling illustration of the necessarily retrospective character of prophecy, he claims to have foretold the tragedy: "Had he not foreseen this drama? Had he not seen the estrangement between father and daughter, son and father, because of the new faith? This was a punishment to Joshua" (Ngugi 54). The irony of these lines deprives Chege of any claim to prophetic authority. If he had indeed foreseen the drama of Muthoni's death, there is no indication that Chege felt impelled to share his prophecy before the fact, much less take effective action to forestall the tragedy. Like his prophecy regarding colonialism, this prophecy comes dubiously after the fact. Both sides of this binary opposition are presented as equally extremist and equally blind in a move that prepares the ground for Waiyaki's middle of the road politics.

What might explain Waiyaki's—and ultimately Ngugi's—investment in a denued notion of unity and reconciliation? Gikandi suggests the paradigms of Malinowskian anthropology provide an invaluable context for reading both *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* (19).⁴ He points out that Malinowski's investigations of cultural change in Africa in the wake of the colonial encounter focused on African subjects who had been exposed to European culture and who therefore "lived under the sway of more than one culture" (Gikandi, "African Literature" 19).⁵ Malinowski's discourse of social change turned, Gikandi observes, "on the fate of native cultures caught between the conflicting forces of tradition and change, and on colonial subjects trying to reconcile the antagonist forces associated with these diverse forces, trying to be at home in the world" ("African Literature" 19). This formulation presents an uncanny description of the world of *The River Between* and of Waiyaki in particular. Educated at the elite colonial school (Siriana), Waiyaki strives to be an engine for social change. He is the colonial mimic man who mediates between the two contending factions of his ethnic community—the traditional Kameno and the Christian Makuyu. At an

extradiegetic level, Waiyaki's story is something of Ngugi's autobiography. Educated at the elite colonial institutions, Ngugi strives to invent an anticolonial tradition, but, as I have previously suggested, the colonial library overdetermines the paradigms and parameters of that struggle. As Gikandi asserts, *The River Between* is more useful for telling us about the anxieties of Ngugi's encounter with colonial modernity than about precolonial Gikuyu culture ("African Literature" 28).

Waiyaki's ultimate goal is to provide his reunified community a way out of the nightmare of colonialism. For much of the novel, he is so obsessed with building more schools that he does not stop to articulate a coherent pedagogy, much less demonstrate the efficacy of education for the anticolonial struggle to which he vaguely subscribes. Instead, he promotes what Sekyi-Otu has polemically termed "the idolatry of an anesthetized education" (173):

His god, education, guided him, showed him the light, made him overcome personal frustrations and hardships. It drove him through hills and valleys, through the forests and darkness of the night. He had not yet stopped to think where all this was leading, whether the new awareness and enthusiasm he had helped to create would be quenched by education. If anybody had suddenly asked him a question in that direction, he might have burst out: Unite and build more schools (Ngugi 109)

There is, undoubtedly, an element of satire here. The author is mocking his mimic tragic hero and undermining thereby his tragic authority. Waiyaki embraces the cult of education so much so that, as Sekyi-Otu argues, "[i]n place of education serving the requirement of unity, unity would serve the ends of education" (173). In the words of the narrator, "[e]very day he was becoming convinced of the need for unity between Kameno and Makuyu. The ancient rivalry would cripple his efforts in education" (Ngugi 91). The apolitical and anaesthetizing nature of this romance with education is unmistakable. Waiyaki even resigns his appointment in the Kiama in order to depoliticize his messianic educational mandate. This decision makes little sense given that the reasons for his Siriana sojourn were directly and explicitly political—that is, to help liberate his people from the yoke of colonial domination. In a telling passage, the text suggests that Waiyaki's apolitical pedagogy was enshrined at Siriana: "Perhaps the teaching of Livingstone, that education was of value and his boys should not concern themselves with what the government was doing or with politics, had found a place in Waiyaki's heart" (Ngugi 65).

Toward the end of the novel, Waiyaki belatedly articulates an explicit liberationist pedagogical mission predicated, above all, on healing the rift between the two ridges. In one sense, Waiyaki's conceptual vagueness throughout the novel prepares the ground for the depth that he attempts to exhibit towards the end of the novel, so we should perhaps temper the forcefulness of Sekyi-Otu's vigorous critique and underscore the fundamental ambiguity of colonial mimicry. Belatedly, Waiyaki seeks to represent schooling as an instrument for social change based on cultural fusion and the transcendence of the limits of both traditionalism (embodied in Kabonyi and the conservative Kiama) and colonialism (embodied in Joshua and Livingstone). Waiyaki defends the traditions of the Gikuyu people against Christian assault, charging that "[a] religion that took no count of the people's way of life, a religion that did not recognize spots of beauty and truths in their way of life, was useless. It would not satisfy. It would not be a living experience, a source of life and a vitality. It would only

man a man's soul" (Ngugi 141). As was the case with Muthoni, there persists, even in Waiyaki's belated embrace of Gikuyu traditionalism, a pointed lack of specificity as to what that tradition entails. At the same time, he condemns the conservatism of the Kiama as reflected in their rejection of the necessity of education in the changed world. The Kiama are trying to cling to an old order of things whose time has irreversibly passed. Waiyaki rejects the practice of clitoridectomy while seeking to conserve the traditional values it was purported to embody: "[c]ircumcision of women was not important as a physical operation" (Ngugi 142). From the locus of the school, Waiyaki articulates a vision that seeks to transcend the limits of both tradition and colonialism thereby inventing a new tradition: "[E]ducation for unity. Unity for political freedom. Education, Unity, Political Freedom" (Ngugi 143).

Compared to Waiyaki's erstwhile conceptual emptiness, this belated cultural critique possesses substantive material content. Critiquing both traditional and colonial authority, the mimic figure displays the full force of the revisionary power lurking under his cheap colonial imitation. However, Waiyaki pedagogy is still rooted in a neutralism that would suggest an ethical equivalence between colonial and colonized cultures. There is also a circular logic at the heart of his vision: education for unity is uttered at the same breath as unity for education; it is still unclear which term precedes and justifies the other and on what grounds. Sekyi-Otu is right to contend that the educational mandate Waiyaki propounds is still politically empty: what is the specific context and content of the education being propounded? In what specific ways will that education achieve unity and political freedom? Kabonyi's pointed question to Waiyaki—will education bring back the lost lands?—remains unanswered. As if to consummate his vision of cultural unity, Waiyaki enters into a romantic relationship with Nyambura, Joshua's eldest daughter. As I have stated previously, this ideal union prefigures the future reunion between Makuyu and Kamau, between Christianity and tradition. In part because of its own inarticulateness, the union is doomed to fail. Both the Christians and the traditionalists reject Nyambura and Waiyaki. But the text depicts the deaths of the two lovers in terms of murdered innocence. Both camps stand condemned for their extremism and intransigence. The romance of Education, Unity, and Freedom lives on as an unrealized but authoritative dream.

The text equates and condemns the extremism of both the traditionalists (represented by Kabonyi and his son Kamau) and the Christians (represented by Joshua). In a sense, however, Kabonyi's and Kamau's actions are tarred with greater illegitimacy. Joshua may well be mistaken in his uncompromising and unfeeling embrace of the "white man's faith" to the peril of his own family and community, but he is at least sincere and single-minded in his fanaticism. By contrast, Kabonyi's and Kamau's defense of traditional purity is compromised. Kabonyi, we are told, is motivated by jealousy—he wants his family to exercise political power. Whether that power is traditional or Christian seems to him of little consequence. He argues for traditionalism using the same fervent rhetoric with which he once argued for Christianity. He left the church not out of deep conviction, but because he realized that Joshua would never relinquish power. Similarly, he is opposed to Waiyaki's educational mission not out of any deep conviction, but because he wants his son, Kamau, to replace Chege's son as leader of the community.

Kabonyi's vehement attack against colonialism and his calls for violent resistance—arguments that in and of themselves might have been eminently reasonable, especially in light of Waiyaki's empty pedagogy—ring hollow when read against what

the texts portrays as his greed and ambition. By the same token, Kabonyi's castigation of Waiyaki as a traitor because of his relationship with Nyambura is rendered dubious by the realization that Kamau had courted Muthoni but lost out to Waiyaki. In short, Kabonyi and Kamau are not simply mistaken extremists (like Joshua is); they are manipulative frauds. Reading the text against the grain, we may surmise that Kamau and Kabonyi represent the powerless and marginalized within the traditional Gikuyu community as Ngugi depicts it. After all even as it renders Kabonyi illegitimate, the text is careful to document the historical and enduring valid of his anticolonial claims. While Kabonyi and Waiyaki debate, the alienation of Gikuyu lands by colonial authorities continues unabated. Ironically, some of the most recently alienated land is, we are told, in the immediate vicinity of Siriana, the elite colonial school. Despite his surface illegitimacy, Kabonyi embodies a pressing concern. "There was indeed a growing need to do something. This feeling had been strengthened by this most recent alienation of land near Siriana forcing many people to move from places they had lived in for ages, while others had to live on the same land, working for their new masters" (62). Seduced by visions of grandeur, Waiyaki cannot see that the facts on the ground belie his pathetic prophetic discourse of salvation. Kabonyi and Kamau voice legitimate concerns even as they seem to be depicted pathologically. We may in fact speculate that their pathologization serves the ideological purpose of masking a contest for power among the ruling elite. Waiyaki seems to voice an illegitimate vision even though he is apparently depicted heroically.

I have pointed to the patriarchal nature of authority on both the traditional and Christian sides of the cultural and political contest portrayed in *The River Between*. I close my analysis with some remarks on the troubling intersection of the space of the school and the politics of gender in the novel. Whatever its politics and pedagogy, the space of the school is silently but aggressively masculinized in the text. No women seem to attend or teach at any of the schools depicted in the novel. I must emphasize that I am not advancing here an anachronistic critique that can be overcome by merely asserting that the realist text is historically accurate in its depiction of the gender exclusions of colonial education in Africa. The gendered exclusions of *The River Between* cannot be explained within the internal economy of the text. We are told relatively early in the narrative that the Siriana Missionary Centre was "a big place with hospitals and a flourishing school taking boys and girls from all over the country" (Ngugi 28).¹² The remark represents, at least potentially, a sharp departure for the historical masculinism of the *bildungsroman* (as well as the masculinism of many of the founding texts of modern African literature). One could cite here by example *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, a book in which the central character's socialization is said to with "a war of independence" against his mother and nurse, continues to include male mentor and male playmates, and culminates in the hypermasculine world of a boys' boarding school.¹³ Yet, having made its gender inclusive provocation, *The River Between* only seems interested in the education of boys—Waiyaki, Kamau, and Kinuathia. I have already underscored that Ngugi seems particularly interested in the education of the aristocratic male child, but at least boys of other backgrounds are depicted learning at the margins.

Girls are absent from the economy of education that the text explores. Even Joshua's Christian daughters seem somehow to remain firmly outside the culture of the school. They acquire what little learning (much of it Christian dogma) they seem to possess informally in the domestic sphere of the home. As Nyambura reminds

Muthoni, "You and I are now wise in the ways of the white people. Father has been teaching us what he learnt at Siriana" (Ngugi 25). If Siriana does in fact take both boys and girls as the text itself pointedly asserts, why does Ngugi seem contradictorily to imply that Siriana took boys exclusively and that girls could only be educated informally in the privacy of the home at the discretion of a benevolent father?

The apparently trivial textual discrepancy that I am highlighting becomes important when we remember that the romantic ideal heroized at the end of the novel is the union of gendered unequals: Waiyaki and Nyambura. Like Waiyaki's cult of education this ideal union is, as Sekyi-Otu puts it, ultimately inspired by the "saccharine religion of reconciliation" (172). Waiyaki is an articulate, educated visionary whose mission, however empty-headed, is nothing less than the salvation of an entire ethnic polity. Nyambura, by contrast, is a rather less articulate, less educated, adulating inferior who sees in Waiyaki her personal savior. It is as if she has simply transferred authority from one dominating male figure—her father, Joshua—to another—her lover, Waiyaki. Does this nationalist romance hinge ultimately on the objectification of women as the territory of domestic stability and the subjectification of men as social and political agents? Can we conclude that at a fundamental level Ngugi conceives of the struggle against colonial rule as a struggle between men, a struggle about masculinity? Is the menace of mimicry here restricted to a critique of colonialism but not gender?

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NOTES

1. This essay focuses exclusively on *The River Between*. A detailed reading of *Weep, Not Child* is provided in my unpublished manuscript, "The Menace of Colonial Mimicry: Ngugi's wa Thiong'o's *Weep, Not, Child* and the Aesthetics of Irony."

2. With regard to the crisis of representation in Ngugi's later work Gikandi writes: "But beneath its authoritative veneer, its mastery of the postcolonial economy, and its display of narrative totality, *Petals of Blood* was driven by Ngugi's serious doubts about both the possibility of change and the ability of the novel to represent spaces of recuperation and resistance" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 129).

3. For a comprehensive account of the history and politics of the Alliance High School and of its legendary headmaster, Carey Francis, see Kipkorir. As Kipkorir points out, under Carey Francis's tutelage, Alliance emerged as the elite "national" school in Kenya. Its graduates dominated the public sphere in both politics and commerce in postcolonial Kenya for a generation. Along with a small number of other so-called "national schools," Alliance continues to dominate the public sphere in Kenya. It remains one of the most selective schools in the country's highly stratified education system. As is now well known, Carey Francis was the model for two contrasting colonial headmasters in Ngugi's fiction: Livingstone in *Weep, Not, Child* and Cambridge Fraudsham in *Petals of Blood*. The transition from the benevolent, if racist, Livingstone to the irredeemably evil and racist, Cambridge Fraudsham, confirms the basic premise of Sicherman's genealogy: it took study at Leeds and the introduction to Fanon and Marx for Ngugi to decisively break with the ideals of Alliance.

4. Sicherman's exhaustive archival research has provided us with a dramatic, if problematic, illustration of the conflicting impulses embedded in Ngugi's colonial education. As a student at Alliance, Ngugi wrote a short story in which he appears to condemn the superstitious nature of Gikuyu culture and praise the intervention of Christianity, "without doubt the greatest civilizing influence" (in Sicherman, "Ngugi's Colonial Education" 11). However, during his tenure at Alliance, Ngugi also once participated in a debate on the benefits of western education during which he vehemently condemned colonialism. Sicherman writes: "Trembling with anger, he declared that Western Education could not be equated to the land taken from peasants by the British" ("Ngugi's Colonial Education" 14).

5. I am making passing reference to Jameson's classic—but controversial—formulation regarding third world literature. In "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Jameson (in)famously opines, "All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation" (69). He goes on to contend that in these texts, "the story of private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of third-world public culture and society" (Jameson 69).

6. The texts that Gikandi is relying on are Franco's *Plotting Women* and Sommer's *Foundational Fictions*.

7. See, for example, Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. A text ostensibly about the cultivation of ideal Englishmen begins with an elaborate, if not interminable, landscape description. The novel seems to posit a fundamental connection—the English essence?—between the land and its inhabitants.

8. I am adopting—and inverting—for my own purposes a felicitous formulation found in Bhabha's "Representation and the Colonial Text." That essay includes a forceful critique of the notion of necessary fictions in the context of cultural nationalism. All too often necessary fictions are reified into fundamental truths; they come to believe "too much in their necessity and too little in their own fictionality" ("Representation" 97). My suggestion is that at the outset of the novel, Ngugi seems to strike the right balance between the fictiveness of the myth of Gikuyu origin and the purported necessity of that myth.

9. I am making passing reference to Gayatri Spivak's now classic essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak," which examines the problematics of speaking from the margins in the context of an unequal representational system.

10. Gikandi suggests that Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* was the mediating text between Ngugi and Malinowski.

11. The key text here is Malinowski's *The Dynamics of Cultural Change in Africa*.

12. I must concede and underscore the singular nature of this gender inclusive remark. Elsewhere the novel depicts the world of colonial education as a boy's only universe. Thus, for example, the narrator informs us that Waiyaki, Karau and Kinuthia "were destined to live and learn together under the Reverend Livingstone of Siriana Mission, which had now grown into a big institution. Many boys from the hills and beyond, from Kiambu and Muranga, came there for a portion of the white man's magic" (Ngugi 21). Subsequently, the narrator contends that the school attracted boys from throughout the Kenya colony. In a manner historically typical of the conventional *bildungsroman*, this novel is mainly constructed around "boyology," that is, the unself-conscious cultivation of young male subjectivity. But for a fleeting moment, the novel toys with a radical revision of a sexist gender script. What would the fictive economy of the novel look like if it had taken seriously its own contention that Siriana was a school for the education of both boys and

girls? The path provocatively suggested but emphatically not taken by the novel may be as worthy of interest as the familiar masculinist path that is, in the end, uncritically taken.

13 See *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, 22–24, 57. “The second act of Tom’s life may now be said to have begun. The war of independence [from his mother and especially his nurse] had been over for some time, none of the women, not even his mother’s maid dared offer to help him in his dressing or washing. Between ourselves, his had often at first to run to Benny [one of the two older men who socialize Tom after his war of independence] in an unfinished state of toilet [...] But now he had conquered another step in life, the step which all real boys so long to make: he had got amongst his equals in age and strength and could measure himself with other boys, he lived with those whose pursuits and wishes and ways were the same in kind to his own” (57).

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