ARTICLE

Syncretizing Art, Religion and Illness in *The Book of Mechtilde*

Bonnie Wasserman

University of Arizona, US

bwasserman@email.arizona.edu

In *The Book of Mechtilde*, Jamaican author and artist Anna Henriques uses metaphor in both text and illustrations to examine her mother's battle with cancer and her own sense of loss after her mother dies. The narrator begins by metaphorically draws upon the Book of Job as well as Afro-Caribbean spiritual beliefs on the island such as divination and the existence of duppies. She also alludes to the post-independence political instability in Jamaica as different groups such as the JLP and PNP vied for power. By incorporating this mixture of metaphors in the depiction of her mother's disease, the narrator addresses the syncretic nature of Caribbean belief systems, the history of the island and the difficulty of dealing with grief at a young age.

Keywords: Jamaica; Duppy; Divination; Book of Job; Anna Henriques; Metaphor; *The Book of Mechtilde*

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (5). In *The Book of Mechtilde*, Jamaican author and artist Anna Ruth Henriques seeks to understand one thing—her mother's illness and death—in terms of several other things such as the biblical *Book of Job*, her mother's complicated faith, and the contentious political period in which she lived. Even the language Henriques uses to layer these types of metaphor on top of each other is given deeper meaning by being accompanied by another form of representation—images. In *The Book of Mechtilde*, Henriques combines illustration, text, intertextuality, and metaphor to examine the mixture of her mother's Judeo-Christian faith and ethnic background, her battle with cancer, and the political turmoil in post-independence Jamaica.

Text and Illustration in *The Book of Mechtilde*

Through its blending of words and images, Henriques's book about her mother's final illness demonstrates an understanding of the meaning of "text" that Mieke Bal argues for in *An Introduction to Narratology*. Bal explains, "a text is a finite, structured whole composed of language signs" (5). She also asserts, "a text can have a broader interpretation in the form of an image" (5). For people who understand this, "a text does not have to be a *language* text." Bal offers the example of comic strips because their use of a "non-linguistic, sign system ... namely the picture" (4). In *The Book of Mechtilde*, Henriques combines words with illustrations to create meaning and interpret her mother's life and death. The resulting text suggests what Hodge and Kress describe in *Social Semiotics*: "meaning resides so strongly and pervasively in other systems of meaning, in a multiplicity of visual, aural, behavioral and other codes, that a concentration of words alone is not enough" (vii). Using illustrations and words Henriques creates a novel from the dual perspectives of a young girl as well as a grown woman for whom "words alone" are "not enough" to explore the meaning of her mother's death.

Illustration adds meaning to this tale of a Caribbean woman who dies at an early age leaving three young children behind. Illustrations appear on the right hand page facing prose on the left. Many of the pages with images have a colorful picture of a figure in the center of a circular labyrinth with tiny gold lettering surrounding it and geometric shapes in the outside corners. In the illustration below on page 79, note the top line of text with the reference "Mechtilde-Job 42:1-26 ARH 1992." Henriques overtly signals the intertextuality of her book with the *Book of Job* by titling this image "Mechtilde-Job" and using numbers to signify chapters and verses as if they were from the Bible. She also inserts herself within the image by using

her initials, ARH (Anna Ruth Henriques) and the date she completed the work (see **Figure 1**). By placing Mechtilde's story in the tradition of biblical books Henriques sacralizes her mother, or at least the memory of her mother, and that memory is further examined in different ways throughout the book.

Through illustration Henriques also portrays her mother's spiritual identity and conversion from Christianity to Judaism. Throughout the novel, Mechtilde is depicted with a large red cross on her body symbolizing how she was born a Christian and maintains her Christian heritage during her entire life-time. On page 53, she wears an orange robe with a large red cross with an M in the center (see **Figure 2**). Henriques does not disclose whether she is Protestant or Catholic, though the two groups have existed in

Figure 1: Illustration of "Mechtilde-Job 42:1-26 ARH 1992." Henriques, Anna Ruth. *The Book of Mechtilde*. Knopf, 1997. p. 79.

Figure 2: Illustration of Mechtilde in an Orange Robe. Henriques, Anna Ruth. *The Book of Mechtilde*. Knopf, 1997. p. 53.

Jamaica since the early colonization of the island by the Spanish Catholics and the English Protestants in the seventeenth century.

When Mechtilde marries a Jewish man, the union is symbolically depicted as a marital bed with a blue Star of David. After their marriage, a blue Star of David is added to her clothing and appears behind the cross or as a blue halo around her head reflecting an intermingling or syncretization of the two faiths. Henriques also adds stars with crosses inside of them in the corners of the illustrated page on page 29 to further concretize or reinforce the blending of the two faiths with imagery (see **Figure 3**).

Furthermore, when depicting Matilde's family, Henriques includes an illustration of her mother standing next to three portraits symbolizing her three children with blue halos around their heads. These images line a wall above a staircase. Whereas both the mother and her children have blue halos around their heads, Mechtilde is the only with a red cross on her robe indicating that the children were raised exclusively as Jews (see **Figure 4**).

Intertextuality between *The Book of Mechtilde* and *The Book of Job*

Throughout *The Book of Mechtilde*, the author makes many comparisons with *The Book of Job*. She begins the book by writing that she was looking at making a "memorial" of sorts to her mother and happened upon *The Book of Job* while looking through the Bible (Henriques ix). Though there are similarities or parallels between the two books, the narrator highlights a number of differences or disjunctions as well. The first relates to the gender of the two figures, the size of their families, and the place in which they live. *The Book of Job* begins, "There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil. And seven sons and three daughters were born to him" (*New King James Bible*, Job. 1.1-2). Whereas Job has a large family, Mechtilde is female with a much smaller

Figure 3: Illustration of Stars and Crosses. Henriques, Anna Ruth. *The Book of Mechtilde*. Knopf, 1997. p. 29.

Figure 4: Staircase Image. Henriques, Anna Ruth. *The Book of Mechtilde*. Knopf, 1997.

family and lives on the Caribbean island of Jamaica. Henriques writes, “In the Land of Jah, there lived a good woman named Mechtilde. This woman had one fine husband for whom she bore three daughters. Together they owned a small plot of land, upon which sat a house and a grand mango tree, amongst the oldest in the Land” (Henriques 2). The island where Mechtilde lives is called “Jah,” which is associated with the word for God used by the Rastafaris, and with a mango tree the narrator evokes the religious and physical landscape of the Caribbean.

Comparisons of the blessings of Job and Mechtilde simply reflect their gender. For Job, there is an emphasis on material assets and wealth. The biblical verse reads, “His possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east” (*New King James Bible*, Job 1:3). In society, men traditionally have been valued for their money and Job was very rich. Women, however, have traditionally been esteemed for their appearance—just think of our culture’s emphasis on pageants and supermodels—and the narrator tells us that Mechtilde “had been graced with great beauty, and she travelled far and wide to represent Jah in other nations” (Henriques 12). Indeed, Mechtilde was Miss Jamaica, 1959; and, due to her attractiveness, she became well known on the island and was considered very desirable. Women are also traditionally valued for being mothers and Mechtilde is depicted as being proud of her three children in the illustration with the staircase by having one hand extended underneath one of the portraits. Another major disjunction between the two narratives is that there is no Satanic figure in Mechtilde’s life that prompts God to test her virtue as in the case of Job. Instead, Mechtilde simply becomes ill and slowly weakens. Also, rather than losing her children and all her material things as Job does, Mechtilde does not. In fact, it is she who becomes ill and eventually dies leaving one of her daughters to write her story. Ultimately, Job’s life is “restored,” meaning he is given back that which was taken while

“Mechtilde’s reprieve from suffering came with death” (Henriques vii). Another disjunction from the *Book of Job* in *The Book of Mechtilde* is the inclusion of Jamaican folklore.

Jamaican Folklore in *The Book of Mechtilde*

Throughout her book Henriques includes references to the non-Judeo-Christian spiritual traditions on the island. One of the traditions is that of divination. “Jah’s people were a superstitious people and put much faith in the power of divination. Those who were bestowed with this power were mostly women who came to be known as Wise Women” (Henriques 18). These women were able to read the future and many people consulted them. As a young woman Mechtilde went to see one, and the Wise Woman had her drink from a teacup before examining it. The Wise Woman told her about positive things that would happen in her future: she would meet a man, get married, and have a family. However, she “did not speak of the impending sadness to which she had shut her eyes” (Henriques 20). Soon, the predictions came true. Within a week Mechtilde met the man she would marry and eventually had three daughters and a nice house. The art of divination in Jamaica reflects cultural roots in Africa. According to Jacob Olupona in *A Short Introduction to African Religions*, “divination is an integral component of African religions. It grants sacred knowledge and exposes the causation for both positive and negative events in the community and in individual’s lives” (Olupona 42). The inclusion of the reference to divination reflects the importance of African spiritual practices on the island. When Mechtilde became ill, however, she decides not to go back to the Wise Woman for fear of what she would say and instead tries to fight the cancer herself, once going into remission before finally succumbing to the disease.

In addition to divination the narrator mentions another Afro-Caribbean lore on the island, that of duppies. According to Leach, “In Jamaica most non-Christian spirit lore centers around the duppy” (207). Duppies could take the form of humans, lizards and snakes or even “supernatural beings” (Leach 207). In this poem, Henriques describes how as a child she feared that her mother would become a duppy and go to the Duppy Kingdom of the undead instead of heaven with Jesus Christ.

Jesus Peace/Is this what you die for Part of one must become/Duppy Kingdom/Where no one/Can sleep/Fright-filled/Of themselves and/Their hapless heads/Chests beating/Breaths rising/Breasts falling/For duppy/Duppy kingdom/Done come? (Henriques 80)

Notice that the author has shifted from prose to poetry when discussing what occurs after her mother’s death. With short lines and rhyme the author creates a sound like a drum beat that accompanies the image of breathing, especially with the sound play between the final “dom” syllable in “kingdom” and “done come.” This, in turn, reflects how a child may view death. Because of the author’s youth—she is only nine years old at the time of her mother’s death—she is fearful that Mechtilde’s soul will not go to heaven and instead end up in the “Duppy Kingdom.” Most importantly, though, the reference to Duppies signifies the author’s Jamaican background in addition to her Judeo-Christian heritage.

The final segment of *The Book of Mechtilde* examines yet another aspect of Jamaican folklore. According to Leach, the moon holds great symbolism for Jamaicans who often observed rituals by moonlight: “Now and then in a remote corner of a cane or banana plantation when the moon is full they congregate, summoned by the oracle drums for the *cumina* dance—a dance accompanied by songs in the “unknown tongues,” a dance that spells out a ritual older than the oldest settlement in the new world” (207). In *The Book of Mechtilde*, Henriques also underscores the importance of the moon when she was a child. She pleads to the moon, “Don’t let us go from your gaze/Don’t let us fall from your light/We are your sheep, Mrs. Moon” (Henriques 70). Here we are reminded how young children tend to fear darkness and how the moonlight provides a source of comfort. During the day she seeks the presence of her mother in the form of the sun, but it, too, cannot be relied upon because of the interference of clouds. She writes, “A sad sun brightened my day today/I recognized the face as it slowly crept in through the clouds/I grasped its features/But it guardedly faded away” (Henriques 76). The world is no longer the same for this child who has lost her mother. Her days and nights symbolized by the sun and moon have been disrupted and all she can do is mourn.

Metaphor Related to Illness and Death

In *The Book of Mechtilde* Henriques uses two common metaphors for cancer: that of war and of social instability. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag points out that cancer in particular has been described in terms of warfare as well as well as the “concern for social order” (72). Conflict surrounding social order has a particular history in Jamaica that colors Henriques’s use of metaphor. During the 1960s, there was “a period in

which class conflicts were played out on the terrain of culture. Individual identity and nationality became objects of political struggle, as social classes developed incompatible rival models of 'Jamaicaness' (Gray 13). Two parties in particular, the JLP and the PNP, sought power over the country. In Henriques's language, "In the early years of the Land, two tribes had risen to prominence. These two tribes vied for leadership of the Land. Before, they had used rhetoric to win the hearts of the people. Now, they lifted up swords against one another and set their followers to war" (Henriques 26). This martial metaphor to describe the two forces battling for power over Jamaica also applies to the cancer waging war on Mechtilde's body, which then functions as a symbol of Jamaica itself. As mentioned, Mechtilde was once Miss Jamaica and her body thus, in a sense, once represented the country or motherland. Near the end of her life Mechtilde "begged relief from her inner turmoil and strife, and the outer ones of the Land of Jah. She pleaded mercy from pain, for herself and her country" (Henriques 30). As she deteriorates from her cancer treatment, Henriques uses both text and a series of illustrations to depict her mother's decline. She describes her "breastless chest" after a double mastectomy and "sheetly white" appearance as her cancer spreads (Henriques 78). In the end, of course, Jamaica survives its social disorder while the mother perishes.

Unfortunately, Mechtilde does not overcome her battle with the disease and dies, illustrated by a female figure lying in a coffin on page 81 (see **Figure 5**). Through text and illustration Henriques depicts Mechtilde.

In conclusion, by layering these metaphors drawn from the various religions and traditions that Mechtilde grew up with and ones reflecting the political struggle after independence in Jamaica, the narrator creates a framework in which to examine her mother's experience with cancer. By basing the *Book of Mechtilde* on *The Book of Job*, the narrator underscores how a person can go through extreme suffering even though they are kind and good. In addition to sacralizing her mother through her use of intertextuality with a Book from the Bible, Henriques also creates a matriarchal martyr for her country. Furthermore, through the images of

Figure 5: Coffin Image. Henriques, Anna Ruth. *The Book of Mechtilde*. Knopf, 1997. p. 81.

blended stars and crucifixes, the narrator tells a tale of a successful interfaith marriage that led to a once joyful family with three children. The inclusion of divination and duppies depicts the continuance of Afro-Jamaican traditions on the island. Moreover, the inclusion of colorful illustrations reflects the simplicity of a children's book while at the same time dealing with the most serious of subjects, that of life and death.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. University of Toronto Press, 1985.
- Gray, Obika. *Radicalism and Social Change in Jamaica, 1960–1972*. University of Tennessee Press, 1991.
- Henriques, Anna Ruth. *The Book of Mechtild*. Knopf, 1997.
- Hodge, Robert and Kress, Gunther. *Social Semiotics*. Cornell UP, 1988.
- Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Leach, MacEdward. "Jamaican Duppy Lore." *The Journal of American Folklore*, 74(293): 207–215, 1961. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/537633>
- Olupona, Jacob. *A Very Short Introduction to African Religions*. Oxford UP, 2014. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199790586.001.0001>
- Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.
- The Holy Bible. New King James Version*. American Bible Society, 1982.

How to cite this article: Wasserman, B 2019 Syncretizing Art, Religion and Illness in *The Book of Mechtild*. *Anthurium*, 15(1): 5, 1–7.

Published: 12 February 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Anthurium is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Miami Libraries.

OPEN ACCESS