

Romanticism and the Rhetoric of Racialization

IN HER LANDMARK ESSAY “MAMA’S BABY, PAPA’S MAYBE: AN AMERICAN Grammar Book,” first published in the Summer 1987 issue of *Diacritics*, Hortense Spillers sketches a theory of racialization in which she suggests that the marking of enslaved persons “‘transfers’ from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments,” moments that Spillers traces not only back to the founding violence of the transatlantic slave trade in the fifteenth century but forward to the dominant rhetoric of the late-twentieth-century United States, which, as she shows, “remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement.”¹ Such remarkable continuities across the *longue durée* challenge many operative assumptions in Romantic studies. Thanks to scholars who work on race and Blackness, historicist conventions are currently being revised in needed ways that are not so much presentist as attuned to how racial slavery is “a past that is not past,” as Christina Sharpe has it.² I’m not as certain, however, that Romanticists have come to terms with the rhetoric of racialization, the stabilizing effects of which run counter to some *idées reçues* derived from poststructuralist theory in general and the homegrown tradition of rhetorical reading in particular.³ This essay is an effort toward doing so.

I would like to thank Sumita Chakraborty for her insightful suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay. I am also especially grateful to Patricia A. Matthew, whose patience and feedback enabled me to develop the piece into a coherent statement.

1. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 67, 68.

2. Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13. See, for two recent examples, Deanna Koretsky, *Death Rights: Romantic Suicide, Race, and the Bounds of Liberalism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2021); and Patricia A. Matthew, “‘A daemon whom I had myself created’: Race, *Frankenstein*, and Monstering,” in *Frankenstein in Theory: A Critical Anatomy*, ed. Orrin Wang (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

3. But here, too, see Matthew, “‘A daemon,’” which traces racialized monstering metaphors from *Frankenstein* to the language Darren Wilson used to justify his murder of Michael Brown. By “the tradition of rhetorical reading” I refer to the work of Paul de Man and its massive, ongoing impact on Romantic studies and literary studies

Taking my cue from Spillers, I'd like to propose that Romantic studies needs to overhaul its "theoretical inquiries into the problems of figural language" in order to contend with how logics of racialization function in the era, not just because these inquiries were initially developed without any consideration of race and Blackness, but because many of their basic protocols have since been absorbed throughout the field, including in studies of race.⁴ In particular, all sorts of scholarship for the past three decades has approached rhetorical operations with the normative assumption that one should reveal the instability they wreck on totalizing systems; in politically oriented work, *instability* and its synonyms—*ambiguity*, *undecidability*, *indeterminacy*, *multiplicity*—are often cathected and presumed to bear a metonymic proximity to, and promise of, some notion of liberation.⁵ Yet, when it comes to the rhetoric of racialization, research that follows this protocol fails to recognize that instability is less an obstacle to the codification of racial logics than a condition of their possibility and perpetual reinscription.⁶ Put differently, it elides the fact that antiblackness "undeniably became the total environment" of the Atlantic world (to quote Sharpe again), and so obscures the processes through which this environment has been recursively produced and sustained.⁷ If, as Frank Wilderson has argued, "chattel slavery, as a condition of ontology and not just as an event of experience, stuck to the African like Velcro," then what rhetorical operations secured racial slavery as a metaphysical condition at a historical moment when prospects of abolition appeared on the horizon?⁸ Rather than valorizing the apparent instability of racial categories in the period, Romanticists might do better, I suggest, to examine how such categories nevertheless consolidated into something like a political ontology founded on antiblackness.

more broadly. As will become clear, in this essay I'm particularly interested in the diffuse and indirect influence of de Man's ideas on the field.

4. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), viii. Barbara Johnson and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. are two scholars who have worked on race within this tradition, though that work is not often cited in Romantic studies (outside of Gates's discussion of Olaudah Equiano). See, for example, Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 172–83; and Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

5. I suspect this is one reason why much theory in recent decades has focused more on tropes than on grammar, as Brian McGrath observes in "Determination in the Passive Voice (Wordsworth and Williams)," *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* (2020). My own previous work on analogy operates under the assumption I aim to critique here.

6. Scholars in critical race theory have been making this point for decades. For a canonical articulation, see Ann Laura Stoler, "Racial Histories and their Regimes of Truth," *Political Power and Social Theory* 11 (1997): 183–206, esp. 197–200.

7. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 104.

8. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 18.

My case study here is an interrogative couplet from Mary Robinson's anti-slavery poem "The Negro Girl" (1800) that turns on a metaphor for captivity—namely, *despair*, which, by the early nineteenth century, not only had become synonymous with racial slavery in the white British political imagination but operated within a pervasive figural logic that worked to solder the metaphysical equation between slavery and Blackness. In the idiom of Alexander Weheliye, who routes Spillers's discussion of "the hieroglyphics of the flesh" through the conceptual apparatus of Deleuze and Guattari, this logic could be called a "racializing assemblage."⁹ Yet, while my approach here is indebted to Weheliye's, I want to stick with Spillers's focus on grammatical and rhetorical operations, because I think it has more analytic precision and because it brings her theory of racialization more directly into conversation with Romantic studies, or at least with its most impactful strain of literary theory.

This conversation could well have begun in 1987—or so one can imagine. After "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" appeared in the Summer issue of *Diacritics*, its Winter special issue was titled "Wordsworth and the Production of Poetry" and was edited by Andrzej Warminski and Cynthia Chase, who collected essays from two conferences devoted to Romanticism and theory that took place that Fall (in addition to a 1967 essay by Paul de Man). While the issue is implicitly positioned as a response to the early New-Historicist work of Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson, at its center is a postscripted exchange between Warminski and Frances Ferguson concerning de Man's reading of the "Marion" episode in Rousseau's *Confessions* and the broader stakes of rhetorical reading. For Ferguson, "de Man analyzes ambiguity, the ability of language to be taken in more than one way, in order to read a multiplicity of readings as annihilating the possibility of reconciling those meanings with one another"; for Warminski, de Man analyzes the undecidability between rhetorical or tropological systems of meaning and the grammatical and material dimensions of language that condition their possibility and impossibility.¹⁰ In other words, their point of disagreement concerns whether the fundamental disjunction de Man theorizes is located between meanings (Ferguson) or between grammar and meaning (Warminski); both, however, assume that the invariable upshot of rhetorical reading is to reveal the constitutive instability of textual systems, including "the social text," which, according to Warminski, "is nothing but a texture woven of the

9. See Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

10. Ferguson, "Historicism, Deconstruction, and Wordsworth," *Diacritics* 17, no. 4 (1987): 38.

same undecidabilities.”¹¹ How might this debate have gone differently, one wonders, had it involved a consideration of Spillers’s essay on the rhetoric and grammar of the “cultural text” that is “the socio-political order of the New World”?¹²

Of course, in 1987 racialization was not at the center of theoretical debates in Romantic studies, and I set “Wordsworth and the Production of Poetry” in even closer proximity to “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” not to find fault but to take a synchronic snapshot of this moment in critical theory: same journal, same year, similar materialist conceptions of language, and yet very different concerns, emphases, and findings. In terms of diachrony, their respective trajectories have diverged as well. Spillers’s essay has been and continues to be as influential as any article ever published in *Diacritics*, having been cited over thirty-five hundred times (which doesn’t include citations of *Black, White, and in Color*, Spillers’s 2003 book of essays in which it was collected).¹³ Yet traces of that influence are rather difficult to find in Romantic studies, where, on the other hand, de Manian rhetorical reading has had and continues to have a massive impact, both direct and indirect.¹⁴

One aspect of that impact involves the general subsumption and elaboration of de Man’s basic insight that language is essentially figural. Flip forward a decade in Romantic studies, for example, and you’ll see that early scholarship on race and slavery tends to approach rhetorical instability as a site of subversion and political potential. The methods were largely New Historicist and the theoretical paradigms were mainly drawn from postcolonial theory, but the ideas about language descended from the tradition of rhetorical reading.¹⁵ So, for example, in the introduction to *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780–1830* (1998), Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson emphasize that the essays in that volume “share a common concern to articulate in detail the instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions which Romantic-period texts reveal at the heart of colonialism’s discourses,” with the assumption that such revelation is politically productive.¹⁶ “At best,”

11. Warminski, “Response,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 4 (1987): 48.

12. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 67.

13. This estimate is according to Google Scholar as of November 2021.

14. The relatively small impact Spillers has had on Romantic studies is one index of the marginalization of Black women in the field that Bakary Diaby, who discusses Spillers, has recently noted in “Black Women and/in the Shadow of Romanticism,” *European Romantic Review* 30, no. 3 (2019): 249–54.

15. I should mention that de Man himself does not accord political potential to rhetorical instability or to any of the linguistic dynamics he analyzes, and in fact repeatedly cautions against finding value in them, whether positive or negative. Nevertheless, he does *prepare* such an elaboration, particularly through many of the verbs—*undermine*, *subvert*, *resist*, *undo*—with which he regularly personifies these dynamics.

16. Fulford and Kitson, “Romanticism and Colonialism: texts, contexts, issues,” in *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780–1830*, ed. Fulford and Kitson

they write, “the instability of the writings highlighted in this collection deconstructs the binary oppositions and apparent truths by which imperialist ideology becomes hegemonic.”¹⁷

More recent scholarship on race largely leaves this assumption unquestioned, especially when it subscribes to the myth that nineteenth-century racial science inaugurated modern racism. In the introduction to *Race, Romanticism, and the Atlantic* (2013), for instance, Paul Youngquist not only notes that “through much of the Romantic era, race was an ambiguous marker, less a clear designation than a diffuse rhetoric of human differences”; he also stresses that his collection of essays “works to hold race open to its ambiguities.”¹⁸ According to Youngquist there, “race hardens into racism” at the end of the Romantic era when it becomes grounded in the certainties of biology, and so scholars should attend to where it can be loosened; “the problem of race turns productive,” he writes, when its “fungibility introduces an element of instability” and “a potential for multiplicity haunts its assertions.”¹⁹ A similar call can be heard as well in recent discussions concerning the future of Romantic studies, such as in Yin Yuan’s suggestion that, in light of Black Lives Matter, Romanticists should consider the “rhetorical construction” of racial categories in the period because “their instability carries seeds of subversion.”²⁰

The project of imagining the Romantic era (or the eighteenth century, or the seventeenth century, etc.) as a time before an ossified racial order can be a powerful one, but it meets its limits as soon as it bumps up against the long course of history and the fact that the fungibility of Blackness enabled dispossession and racialization.²¹ As Marlon Ross observes in the volume

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

17. Fulford and Kitson, “Romanticism and Colonialism,” 11–12.

18. Youngquist, “Introduction,” in *Race, Romanticism, and the Atlantic*, ed. Youngquist (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 4.

19. Youngquist, “Introduction,” 5, 3. But see, too, Youngquist, “Black Romanticism: A Manifesto,” *Studies in Romanticism* 56, no. 1 (2017): 7–10, for a discussion of racialization that draws on Weheliye and invokes Sylvia Wynter’s longer, genealogical view of racial modernity.

20. Yuan, “Spelling the Orient,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 68 (2019): 196.

21. For such an approach to the eighteenth century, see Roxann Wheeler who “purposely feature[s] examples of the elasticity accorded black and white skin color and of the mutability of identity because they belie our current sense of color’s intractability.” *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 6. As Saidiya Hartman has illustrated as well as Spillers, however, the “elasticity of Blackness” goes hand in hand with dispossession and racialization, for “the figurative capacities of blackness and the fungibility of the commodity are directly linked.” *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25–26. Stoler is attuned to such figurative capacities when she suggests that racial “essentialisms are not secured by fixed traits but by substitutable and interchangeable sets of them” and that essentialist thinking rests

edited by Youngquist, “the racial economy can work powerfully through and within its own *incoherence*” and has indeed done so, “operating consistently across centuries.”²² Jared Sexton reframes this observation in terms of political ontology when he states that Blackness “functions *as if* it were a metaphysical property across the *longue durée*.”²³ A practice of rhetorical reading attuned to this *longue durée*, I would suggest, would not read in these observations subversive possibilities or deconstructive potentials, both of which downplay the extent to which antiblack violence conditions the climate of the Atlantic world. Rather, it would direct its attention to the “totalizing stability of metaphorical processes” through which racial categories have been iteratively inscribed as if they were metaphysical properties.²⁴

Take, for the purposes of illustration, a couplet from Mary Robinson’s “The Negro Girl” (1800) that turns on the figure of “despair.” The couplet is situated within an extended apostrophe to Nature in which Zelma, the persona to whom the title refers, responds to her lover’s capture by demanding an explanation for the “lot” of Nature’s “dark progeny” and asking with regard to the “Negro” in general,

Is it the dim and glossy hue
That marks him for despair?²⁵

Positioned not as a feeling but as a fate, “despair” stands here as a metaphor for the condition of slavery. While a physical signifier of Blackness (“the dim and glossy hue”) is what seems to mark one for this condition, this mark itself only finds its significance through the metaphysical concept (“despair”) that links it to slavery and concludes the ballad couplet. One could say, then, that both

on “the fact that those attributes that make it up have moving and fungible parts” (“Racial Histories,” 199, 200).

22. Ross, “The Race of/in Romanticism: Notes Toward a Critical Race Theory,” in *Race, Romanticism, and the Atlantic*, ed. Youngquist (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 28.

23. Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 37. For a *longue durée* approach to racial formation, see Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

24. De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 63.

25. Robinson, *Selected Poems*, ed. Judith Pascoe (Broadview Press, 2000), 236. “The Negro Girl” is a revision of a 1796 poem titled “The Storm,” which features Nancy and William, two working-class English lovers who are transformed into Zelma and Draco in the later poem. The couplet I examine was added to “The Negro Girl” and is not in “The Storm,” likely because despair had become a cultural metaphor for the abjection of racial slavery against which so-called wage slavery was being contrasted and defined. For a recent insightful discussion of both poems and of how Robinson’s white feminism reproduces logics of antiblackness, see Koretsky, *Death Rights*, 54–59.

Blackness and slavery are shown to be coterminous outcomes of racialization, yet the crucial point is that *despair* functions to situate the former as if it were the causal antecedent of the latter—and that the apostrophic frame naturalizes this relation as if it were destiny. Put differently, *despair* operates as a linguistic suture or Lacanian quilting point: it knots together Blackness and slavery by providing a structuring signifier through which the inchoate signification of *the dim and glossy hue* can be retroactively fixed as the natural mark or fleshly emblem of a metaphysical condition that it then, in turn, appears to have marked out in advance.²⁶ The verb *mark*, for its part, most literally means “to choose or destine” (*OED*), though it also recalls the physical marking and branding of the enslaved. Yet, as with *despair*, these seemingly divergent meanings are not irreconcilable or even ambiguous. On the contrary, they work together to justify the hieroglyphics of the flesh that Robinson’s couplet obscures, and so limns, through its figural operations.

Indeed, what the referential function of the verb *mark* works to obscure most is that these lines are themselves racializing marks or inscriptions. In “Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diaspora” (2003), Spillers alludes to Romantic poetry when she clarifies that her notion of the hieroglyphics of the flesh was intended “to identify not only one of slavery’s technologies of violence through marking” but also “a *semiosis* of procedure” that enabled those technologies and that has “everything to do with those ‘unacknowledged legislators’ of a discursive and an economic discipline.”²⁷ Robinson’s couplet both illustrates and instantiates such legislative action. The poem does not merely represent how the hieroglyphics of the flesh “come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color”; it also leaves its own mark and erases its participation in a recursive mode of violence that its trumpeting poet feels not.²⁸ To my mind, such complicity is no reason not to study Robinson or other legislators of the period (quite the opposite) but it is good reason to check the redemptive impulse that underwrites so much work in the field. One needn’t study the rhetoric of racialization only to find sites of resistance or lines of flight; if Romanticists are to confront “the reality of the centrality of race to Romanticism”—and here I echo Atesede Makonnen—then first things first: what needs to be accepted and interrogated is just how the rhetoric of Romanticism reproduced structures of antiblackness that have become so totalizing that, now, for some, nothing short of the end of the world would seem capable of bringing about their destruction.²⁹

26. See Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 258–70.

27. Spillers, “Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diaspora,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 21.

28. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 67.

29. Makonnen, “The Race Thing,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 68 (2019): 140. My point here is not that the emphasis of Afropessimism should always win out over that of

In the case of Robinson's couplet, the different readings *despair* and *mark* engender work to condense and totalize what the poem terms a "relentless Fate."³⁰ Yet they also unfold within a linguistic structure that de Man famously aligned with the "rhetorical, figural potentiality of language" and its ceaseless undermining of the authority of grammar: the rhetorical question or erotema.³¹ This structure is, of course, essential to canonical Romantic poetry, too. In *The Questioning Presence*, Susan Wolfson explores "the fundamentally interrogative character of the major poems of Romanticism," showing how these poems challenge terms of closure.³² How might we understand the interrogative activity of abolitionists and antislavery poets who also deployed rhetorical questions to stake ontological claims, many of which "reproduced the abject position of the slave"?³³ What is the relation between the questions of canonical Romanticism and the poetics of questioning that grounds white abolitionist poetry and propaganda (of which Josiah Wedgwood's "Am I not a man and a brother?" is only the most famous example)?

Unlike, say, the question that concludes Percy Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Robinson's interrogative couplet does not exemplify rhetorical undecidability or wind up in a state of "suspended animation."³⁴ To be sure, her question, like Shelley's, seems intended to be rhetorical. Like the other questions Zelma puts to Nature in stanzas five through ten, it would appear designed to protest racial slavery and to project shame and blame toward its personified addressee. And yet, as a protestation addressed to Nature, it fails remarkably. Read rhetorically (*It is not his skin tone that marks him for slavery!*), the question posits the existence of other "natural," non-epidermal justifications; read literally and so answered (*Yes, it is skin tone; No, it is something else*), it confirms the racializing logic that it puts in question. Either way, Robinson's erotema reinscribes the metaphysical—which is to say metaphorical—system one would expect it to challenge.

Within a deconstructive idiom, it might be tempting to say that Robinson's couplet illustrates the "grammatization of rhetoric" rather

Black optimism but that, as Sharpe (*In the Wake*) and others have illustrated, the recognition of antiblackness as total climate is logically prior to the identification of forms of Black fugitivity from, or resistance to, the imposition of nonbeing. When it comes to the writings of white authors of the period, I believe this priority should be methodological as well as logical.

30. Robinson, *Selected Poems*, 235.

31. De Man, *Allegories*, 10. I refer here to "Semiology and Rhetoric" (1973), which became the opening chapter of *Allegories*.

32. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 18.

33. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 167.

34. Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 188.

than the “rhetorization of grammar.”³⁵ For what proves to be determinative is the inconspicuous syntactic expletive or preparatory “it” (“Is *it* the dim and glossy hue . . . ?”), which, even in the form of a question, establishes that there *is* something in Nature that marks certain beings for slavery—something, that is, aside from the kinds of racializing marks of which this couplet is itself a self-erasing example. In other words, before and independent of any meaning or content, the couplet’s syntax establishes an empty, formal justification for racial slavery against which its tropes could only protest. But such a deconstructive reading would require Robinson’s rhetoric to put up some resistance, which it does not do. However divergent in theory, rhetoric and grammar collude in this case to complete the “racial calculus” (to use Saidiya Hartman’s phrase) that these two lines of poetry rehearse and enact.³⁶

The stakes here are not as slight as a couplet. Robinson’s racializing operations do not occur in isolation, nor are they independent of ethical considerations. It’s worth noting, after all, that had Robinson wanted to state rhetorically that racial slavery is unjust, she could have formulated a prescriptive erotema (e.g. *Why should the dim and glossy hue / Consign him to despair?*). Instead, however, she closed the circle of a figural logic that works to support what Nahum Chandler might call its “metaphysical infrastructure”: since despair is black and slavery is despair, that logic goes, those marked naturally as Black are marked naturally for slavery.³⁷ Different iterations of this logic are pervasive in Romantic-era writing. If I had more space, I would show how “black despair” proliferates in early modern literature, solidifies in abolitionist verse, and subtends canonical Romanticism’s theories of political subjectivity (think, for example, of Coleridge’s insistence that “Hope” is what “above all other things

35. De Man, *Allegories*, 16.

36. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6. A colleague suggested to me that a rhetorical reading of Robinson’s question still leaves open other, more critical possibilities that exceed and subvert Robinson’s intentions and antiblack presuppositions: if the question were taken outside of the context or semiotic frame established by the earlier apostrophe to Nature, they noted, then the *it* could be read in a political register as signifying, for example, “the rapacity of European slavers” or “the prejudices of white England.” I agree that such a reading is in principle possible, and this suggestion nicely illustrates my broader methodological argument: that the deconstructive protocol of gravitating toward constitutive possibility in the name of subversion or resistance will teach us very little about processes of racialization; that this protocol ultimately serves a redemptive function, saving the text if not its author as well; and that such readings are not actually subversive or resistant when it comes to racial logics, which find their ground in cultural and political explanations as well as in essentialist ones.

37. Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 21.

distinguishes the free man from the slave”).³⁸ But that’s another story. Instead, I’ll end simply by echoing an observation that de Man makes in passing and that Spillers demonstrates at length: “Metaphors are more tenacious than facts.”³⁹ Coming to terms with their tenacity may not eradicate them, but it might dispel the idea that their rhetoricity holds the promise of liberation.

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38. Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968–2002), 6:227.

39. De Man, *Allegories*, 5.

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