

Religious Rhetoric in Tyler Perry's Play *Madea's Family Reunion*
By Angela M Nelson¹

Tyler Perry is an African-American media phenomenon producing, directing, writing, and acting in gospel musical stage plays and movies. He hit the American national scene in 2005 when the film adaptation of his gospel play *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* debuted in movie theaters. The purpose of this paper is to examine Tyler Perry's play *Madea's Family Reunion*, which traveled around the country in 2002-2003, to describe the intersections of and relationships between African-American popular culture, religion, and rhetoric. I will argue that the songs in *Madea's Family Reunion* are rhetorical forms of religious expression within an African-American Christian and performative context. I will draw upon Laurent Pernot's discussion of four rhetorical forms of religious expression for my analysis.

As African-American popular culture, gospel musical stage plays focus on the idioms and practices of black American Christian churches and the intimate and romantic lives of single, heterosexual women and married black women (Williams and Coleman). Perceived to be pleasurable and good by its primary audience—African-American women (Pollard 65-6; Robertson), gospel plays consist of personas, arts, and rituals, express African-American beliefs and values, and are affected by production and dissemination practices and media industry controls and regulations. The focal comedic character in *Madea's Family Reunion* is “Mabel Simmons,” or “Madea,” played by Tyler Perry; her comic foil is neighbor Deacon Leroy Brown.

Four major storylines intersect in *Madea's Family Reunion*: Lisa's fiancé Ronnie is physically abusing her and her old boyfriend A.J. still loves her; pregnant Jackie, Madea's

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granddaughter, is married to Kevin, an unemployed, ex-prisoner, and her recovering, cocaine-addicted cousin Tina has seduced him; Madea's granddaughters Lisa and Tina reveal to their mother Cora that their father sexually molested them when they were children; and Madea's "don't-need-no-man" niece Vickie is being pursued by her past high school boyfriend Reverend Jonny Lewis. The precipitating event that brings the family together is the Simmons family reunion that they hold the same weekend as the funeral of Irene, Madea's sister, and Lisa's wedding.

Six conventions of gospel musical stage plays in *Madea's Family Reunion* include: (1) plots based on challenges of contemporary life such as drug abuse, unemployment, and domestic violence; (2) a cast of heroic, villainous, and buffoonish characters; (3) a combination of dramatic and humorous scenes; (4) actors and singers with marquee value within black America, e.g., Gary Jenkins of *Silk*, Terrell Phillips of *Blackstreet*, Quan Howell of *Sounds of Blackness*, and Regina McCrary of *Dr. Bobby Jones and New Life*; (5) a score largely consisting of either existing gospel songs, new inspirational music, and/or R & B songs (Pollard 57; Robertson); and a premise that assumes heroic characters are believers and followers of Jesus Christ.

Laurent Pernot's essay "The Rhetoric of Religion" is useful for drawing a connection between rhetoric and religion in Tyler Perry's gospel play. Pernot outlines four types of religious discourses: discourses about the gods, discourses to the gods, discourses to the worshipper, and discourses of the gods (238-39). Drawing from both pagan and Christian religious traditions during Graeco-Roman antiquity, Pernot shows that preaching, prayers, and hymns are rhetorical forms of religious expression because they are "persuasive speech following set forms and structures" (236). Proceeding from Pernot's analysis, I argue that four gospel songs and two inspirational songs in *Madea's Family Reunion* are rhetorical forms of religious expression because like preaching, prayers, and hymns, they are "persuasive speech," or arguments in

song, that make requests of God (discourse to God), comfort the worshipper (discourse to the worshipper), and describe God's goodness and power (discourse about God).

In particular, traditional, black gospel songs and contemporary, inspirational songs by Tyler Perry and Elvin Ross, his music director and song collaborator, are significant in Perry's plays and originate from an African-American Christian and performative context. Led by composers Charles A. Tindley and Thomas A. Dorsey, African Americans in black Holiness/Pentecostal, Baptist, and Methodist churches (Harvey 23) created gospel songs around the turn of the century. The "gospel" in black gospel music refers to the "good news of the Gospel" of Jesus Christ in the "bad times of life" (Harvey 25). Ross and Perry's inspirational songs are written specifically for Perry's plays and these songs connect the audience with Perry's theme (Pollard 70). Black music performance, in general, relates to *soul*—kinship with other black people—and *style*—the way and manner in which the performance communicates group identity. Therefore, the performative context of black gospel music and inspirational music is important to understanding the power and charismatic energy in Perry's play. These performance elements include back-up vocalists, vamps and choruses, melismatic vocal passages, vocables and other percussive vocal sounds, e.g., full-throated, strained sounds; call-response patterns, and physical body motions.

In Louis-Charles Harvey's theological analysis of 1700 lyrics of black gospel songs, he found that Jesus Christ is praised as being "Everything because he is *Friend, Protector, and Liberator*" (27). The songs "Jesus Will Fix It" and "Have You Tried My Jesus?" are *discourses about God* that align with Harvey's analysis and are an example of a type of hymn that praises God's goodness (Pernot 237). The songs describe how God will "fix" any problem they may have and that "He's alright." Deacon Brown, Mrs. Mattie (Deacon Brown's wife), Cora, and Rev. Lewis use a call-response structure and incorporate handclapping, foot-stomping, head-

bobbing, and flexed body joint movements in their legs, in particular bent knee-bones as they move from side to side while singing. Ross and Perry's inspirational song "Open My Heart" is an example of *discourse to God*. Sung by Vickie, "Open My Heart" follows the rhetorical structure of a prayer: Vickie (1) addresses God as a friend; (2) argues in support of her request by stating that she has been hurt before and that she has experienced pain; and (3) makes a request for God to "change her heart" so that she will have a desire to love again (Pernot 240).

Pernot states that the "discourse an individual addresses to himself ... to comfort ... himself, may also be religious" (238). Although he does not develop this discourse with the same depth as the other three, Pernot proposes that "meditations and spiritual exercises" by the worshipper are examples of this religious discourse and that they "obey a kind of rhetoric" (238). The traditional gospel songs "On the Battlefield" and "Trouble in My Way" are examples of *discourse to the worshipper*. The worshipper sings in the chorus that he is on the "battlefield for the Lord" and that he will serve God until he dies. "Trouble in My Way" is the worshipper's meditation on how they "cry sometimes" when they face problems. Crying does not diminish God's power but crying is sometimes necessary in order to endure struggles in life. The worshipper is not worried, however, because "after while," they know that "Jesus will fix it."

In the finale of *Madea's Family Reunion*, Ross and Perry's "The Family that Prays Together," is performed with ten of the thirteen cast members. Another example of discourse to the worshipper, it affirms that the Simmons family will "stay together" because they pray together. Although the chorus and two verses are sung in unison, in the vamp (or repeating section) near the end of the song, Jackie, Kevin, A.J., Rev. Lewis, Vickie, Deacon Brown, Cora, and Mrs. Mattie each individually improvises on the word "pray." The song and the last section of it, in particular, exhibit the rhetorical structure of preaching because they are exhorting the audience to "persevere in the beliefs they already hold" (Pernot 237) regarding prayer to God, no

matter what problems they are experiencing.

In sum, the songs in Tyler Perry's gospel musical stage play *Madea's Family Reunion* are rhetorical forms of religious expression within an African American Christian and performative context. Although originating in an African-American cultural context, gospel songs and inspirational songs have characteristics of preaching, prayers, and hymns. At a basic level, traditional black gospel songs and contemporary inspirational songs used in *Madea's Family Reunion* are religious rhetoric because they are arguments in song that make requests of God, comfort the worshipper, and describe God's goodness and power.

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