

## Review Article

# "*The Odyssey*": Derek Walcott's Dramatization of Homer's "*Odyssey*"

ROBERT HAMNER

WHEN DEREK WALCOTT chose to rewrite the epic genre in *Omeros* (1990), his primary innovation was to create his own version of what a modern Homer might have written in the twentieth century rather than adhere once again to the time-honored narrative line that mutates from Homer through Virgil, Dante, Milton, Joyce, and Kazantzakis. As a matter of fact, Walcott insists repeatedly that before writing *Omeros* he had read only excerpts of Homer and Virgil's works (Bruckner 13, Lefkowitz 1, White 35). Judging by the extensive parallels between Homer's original and Walcott's *The Odyssey*, that reading gap has been meticulously closed.

On first approaching Walcott's latest play, I had two primary concerns: I wondered how my familiarity with Homer's epic would weigh against Walcott's use of the material, and I had my usual apprehensions about treating a stage play in terms of its written text. Regardless of all the interaction that reader-response theorists have shown to take place between the reader and the written word, vital aspects of dramatic performance are supplied by actors, musicians, directors, costumes, technicians, and the communal presence of a live audience.

Although no two people may see exactly the same play, I can draw upon at least one reviewer's assessment of the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Odyssey* at The Other Place in Stratford. Robert King writes that Walcott "introduces both artful elements and artsy touches" in the three-hour dramatization of Odysseus's adventures. He notes the contemporary references such as the blind bard wearing shades, the London Underground representing Hades and, characters who play mul-

multiple roles, utilizing West Indian accents as well as modern idioms. King suggests some unevenness of effect but found the "homecoming" emphasis particularly credible. By questioning the bloody parallels between the fate of Troy and that of her suitors in Ithaca, Penelope interrogates Odysseus's masculine code, his personal psychic burden.

While some of the details of production may be missing from the published version of the play, basic thematic elements carry over, and the reader has several privileges denied the theatre audience. The reader can exercise control over the narrative speed, analyze the prosody, cross-reference motifs, images, literary devices, linguistic patterns, and focus on interesting subtleties that might well detract from the immediacy of stage action. In the case of Walcott's *The Odyssey*, the textuality of the play, its literary texture, is so dense that it demands critical analysis. Not only are major facets of Homer's plot and characters retained, but Walcott creatively exploits even minor details to reflect both on modern life and the contemporaneity of the Greek original.

The Prologue with which Walcott opens *The Odyssey* introduces a blind narrator-singer, Billy Blue, to replace the absent, objective Homeric storyteller. Since the characters act out the story, Billy's main function is to link many of the scenes (fourteen in Act I, six in Act II), and finally to assume the part of Homer's Demodocus at the end of the play. As is usual with Walcott, Blind Billy is not the only linking device. Whereas he threads the narrative of *Omeros* with an omnipresent sea-swift, he emulates Homer in *The Odyssey* by frequent references to a swallow. In keeping with Homer, this swallow also often doubles as the watchful Athena. Walcott ties his story together with other Homeric touches as well; Achilles's shield, for which Odysseus and Ajax contended on the ashes of Troy, figures in key stages of the journey home; Odysseus's olive-tree bedstead in Ithaca serves both Homer and Walcott as symbol of home and of Penelope's unwavering faith. Above all, Homer's wily Odysseus is a natural extension of the trickster figure from Walcott's favoured African and Caribbean lore.

While councils of the Olympian gods are noticeably absent from Walcott's play, his sequencing of events on earth is fairly

faithful to the Homeric outline. Scenes two through four are an abbreviated odyssey for Telemachus. As in the Greek original, Athena assumes the shape of Mentès and warns Telemachus to escape the treacherous suitors at the court of Ithaca and to seek information about his lost father from Nestor and Menelaus. When Telemachus feels that his visit with Nestor in Pylos has brought him no closer to Odysseus, Mentès/Athena assures him that he has acquired knowledge vital to the young: the necessity of patience and the fact that old men suffer (28). At the end of scene four, Walcott uses mime to effect a smooth transition from Telemachus to Odysseus. As Telemachus and Menelaus begin to discuss the depiction of Proteus on a figured vase, Odysseus and Proteus emerge on the fog-shrouded stage. After they engage in a silent wrestling match and Proteus indicates the direction Odysseus must take, the audience is prepared to focus on his journey in the fifth scene.

Scene five is short but important because in it a raging storm wipes out Odysseus's crew, including his trusted helmsman, Elpenor—more reminiscent of Aeneas's loss of Palinurus (*The Aeneid*, Book Five) than the death of Homer's Elpenor—and casts Odysseus naked and unconscious on the beach of Scheria. His discovery there by princess Nausicaa (scene six) leads to the famous episode in Alcinous's palace where Odysseus is induced to relate his adventures since the fall of Troy. In having Billy Blue take the role of the blind poet Phemius to open scene seven at Alcinous's banquet, Walcott radically displaces Homer's two court poets: Demodocus and Phemius. Walcott could have mistakenly placed Phemius in Scheria and then Demodocus in Ithaca; however, two figures who are so prominent that many scholars see them as projections of Homer himself are not likely to be transposed accidentally.

Whatever Walcott's reasoning, such displacement generates at least two highly relevant themes. First, Blind Billy Blue's playing himself as well as two other poets suggests a commonality of poetic function regardless of place and time. If poets themselves are not actually interchangeable, at least their function in society is fairly constant. In this regard, Walcott has courtiers suggest to Phemius that he can generate poetry out of Odysseus's tale that

will “ride time to unknown archipelagoes” (59). The identity of certain distant archipelagoes becomes evident several pages later when masked revellers sing of bacchanalian carnival in a distinctively Caribbean vernacular (75). On another occasion, Odysseus questions Demodocus/Billy Blue’s dialect:

ODYSSEUS: That’s a strange dialect. What island are you from?

DEMODOCUS: A far archipelago. Blue Seas. Just like yours.

ODYSSEUS: So you pick up various stories and you stitch them?

DEMODOCUS: The sea speaks the same language around the world’s shores. (122)

A second basic theme grows out of the Demodocus/Phemius displacement in the final scene of the play. When Demodocus is threatened in Walcott’s final scene (as Phemius is spared in Homer’s epic) Odysseus’s faithful swineherd Eumaeus pleads the value of poets: “He’s a homeless, wandering voice, Odysseus. / Kill him and you stain the fountain of poetry” (151-52). Demodocus’s voice is worth preserving, and these separate themes ultimately merge with dramatic irony. We recognize that Walcott himself is a West Indian tributary of that ancient fountain in *The Odyssey*.

After Odysseus enters the story-telling mode before Alcinous, Walcott quickly slips back into dramatic presentation for the remainder of the play. Scene eight finds Odysseus within the clutches of the brutal Cyclops. Walcott plays with the I/eye combination familiar within the coded language of Rastafarian culture to portray the social dialectic of an oppressive government. While the Cyclops sees only one way, Odysseus explains that humans have two eyes because of their dual nature, for contrast and for balance; one to laugh, one to cry: “Left, right. Good, bad. Heaven, hell” (68).

Pretending conviviality, Odysseus entertains the Cyclops while concealing his identity under the pseudonym of “Nobody.” Homer’s original use of this ploy reflects Odysseus’s perspicacious guile; in Walcott, it produces further reverberations. If the social and political implications are not sufficiently evident, we need only recall Walcott’s insistence regarding *Omeros* that he did not wish to ennoble the peasantry in his epic. His characters

are, it should be remembered, inhabitants of the region V. S. Naipaul dismisses in *The Middle Passage*: "History is built around achievement and creation; and *nothing* was created in the West Indies" (29; emphasis added). The people of the Caribbean Walcott respects seem historically insignificant; yet, he insists, "History makes similes of people, but these people are their own nouns" (Bruckner 13). Their strategic adaptability allowed them to survive in the New World in the same way that Odysseus's pretending to be Nobody assisted his escape from the Cyclops.

Scenes ten to thirteen are devoted to Odysseus's experiences on Circe's island. Here again Homer is interpreted rather than imitated in order to elucidate aspects of the human condition. When his companion Eurylochus complains that Circe reduces men to swine, Odysseus insists to the contrary: "We create our own features. Not her. We change form" (77). Athena intervenes to assist her favorite against Circe's magic spells; nevertheless, Walcott makes it clear that love of Penelope is the primary force drawing Odysseus homeward. Neither sex with a goddess nor the prospect of immortality is sufficient temptation. When he leaves, Circe helps prepare him to enter the underworld, and his preparation is dramatized in the form of an Afro-Caribbean Shango ceremony. He is given a wooden sword representing the divisiveness of his natural state: the known/the unknown, the world/the underworld, body/soul, presence/absence. Circe leaves him with the knowledge that the spirit of his mother Anticlea awaits him in Hades.

Walcott's version of Hades is the Underground: turnstiles, tracks, trains, and vagrants included. Each soul has its proper station and Odysseus is permitted to see many of his old comrades pass by: Elpenor his drowned helmsman; Ajax, still jealous over losing the shield of Achilles to Odysseus; the war-loving Thersites; Agamemnon, bloody from wounds inflicted by Clytemnestra and Thyestes. Anticlea and the old prophet Tiresias assure him that he will eventually reach his faithful wife and dispense justice among her suitors in Ithaca. With this encouraging prospect, Act I concludes.

The first scene of Act II is occupied with a surreal raft voyage between Hades and landfall in Ithaca. During the voyage, Odys-

seus acquires a number of unusual passengers, ranging from a pair of mermaids to ghosts of his dead crewmen. He dismisses the mermaids, but his spirit crew guides him safely past the Sirens and the perils of Scylla and Charybdis. The last of these seaborne dangers past, Odysseus is lulled to sleep by his old nurse Eurycleia and Billy Blue, singing alternately in rhyming dialect and standard lyrics. The dream quality of this action suspends time so that there is no causal connection between Odysseus's exit from Hades and his arrival home.

That suspension is underscored when the actual landing in Ithaca is carried out by Nausicaa's sailors (Act II, scene 2). On awakening, Odysseus must be convinced that he is at last on his native shore, and has to be told that his bags of treasure have been secured in a nearby cave. Aided once again by Athena, who takes the form of a shepherd, Odysseus resumes his disguise as Nobody and joins his loyal swineherd Eumaeus long enough to judge who among his household may be trusted, and how he might destroy the insolent suitors who are wasting his estate. In the brief dream comprising scene three, Athena reinforces the idea that men and not the gods are responsible for an individual's destiny. When Odysseus protests, she argues that he is always skeptical, "the first to discount each omen" (119). At last he is forced to admit that he blinded the Cyclops, thus incurring the wrath of the monster's father Poseidon.

During the period of surveillance at court (scenes four and five), Odysseus and his herdsman endure the insolence of several guests and Odysseus even witnesses the death of his long-suffering pet Argus. When Eumaeus describes the melancholy scene to blind Billy Blue/Demodocus, the two finally realize that the strange beggar is Odysseus himself. Shortly after the elderly nurse Eurycleia recognizes her master by the unique scar on his thigh, young Telemachus (who has just returned from consulting Menelaus in Sparta) is drawn into the conspiracy. In scene six after removing all the armaments from the banquet hall, Telemachus, Odysseus, Eumaeus, and Athena make short work of the suitors. The ringleaders Antinous and Eurymachus are dispatched by Odysseus with particular relish (148-49).

In the wake of this bloodbath, it remains only for Odysseus to convince Penelope of his identity. He may have reached home and eliminated his rivals against tremendous odds, but then Penelope demonstrates her worthiness of such a husband. Throughout his prolonged absence (even after he was presumed dead), she waited patiently, outmanoeuvring numerous suitors, and now she tests his authenticity by insisting that he move their marriage bed. By imposing this obstacle, Penelope not only legitimates her own personal rights, but she demonstrates that she is Odysseus's intellectual equal. When he reveals that he knows the secret that the bed is carved from a rooted olive tree, Penelope finally accepts her husband (157).

Walcott's treatment of Penelope's skepticism, however, goes beyond Homer's simpler resolution of conflicts. The alteration signals the difference between an heroic age and our relativistic modern times. Postmodern, specifically feminist, criticism has heightened our consciousness of authors' slanted agendas so that we look for alternative interpretations. For example, in reexamining the traditionally masculine epic form of the *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* from a feminist perspective (and I use the indefinite article judiciously), Mihoko Suzuki argues, "At many points the *Odyssey* interrogates its epic predecessor." Suzuki notes as the most striking instance Achilles's denigration of glory in the underworld, "implicitly [repudiating] the choice he perforce made in the *Iliad* of a short and glorious life over a long and obscure one" (58). Walcott's Penelope exhibits similar reservations when she surveys the carnage in her palace. She complains that her house has been turned into an abattoir. To Odysseus's protestation that he killed for her, Penelope cries out "IT'S FOR THIS I KEPT MY THIGHS CROSSED FOR TWENTY YEARS?" (153). Nevertheless, the couple are reconciled, and the curtain falls on Billy Blue singing of "that peace which, in their mercy, the gods allow men" (160).

So both the written page and the staged performance yield similar insights. The acted version provides the vivid immediacy of live sound and color. The printed word allows more careful scrutiny of the verbal and philosophical intricacies. Aside from bringing the narrative line to completion, the text raises meta-

textual questions. Walcott's Penelope is not the only character to undermine the accepted values of their society. In the underworld, Walcott's Tiresias asserts that Helen may have been a cause of the Trojan war, "but not its root" (94). The reader/audience is left to fathom that root. In addition to passages which intimate that future generations in distant places will be hearing Odysseus's story, the very act of composition is occasionally made part of the unfolding narrative. Courtiers admonish Phemius to collect Odysseus's "sailor's prose" into one song—lines humming "like a succession of arrows," or combers "horizon long . . . like huge oars," "Thudding like lances on the heart of this earth" (54); and Alcinous commands: "Listen, poet, and let your eyes seal each image" (59).

With its layerings of intertextual meaning, *The Odyssey* is a fitting complement to Walcott's 1990 rewriting of the venerable epic genre. *Omeros* represents what Homer, the man, might have sung were he the mixed descendant of slaves living in the New World. *The Odyssey*, while clearly more faithful to Homer's literary example, seizes aspects of an ancient narrative to emphasize latent affinities between past and present. For all their apparent disparities the relationship of then and now is not far to seek. As Walcott vividly demonstrates, one grows out of the other.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bruckner, D. J. R. "A Poem in Homage to an Unwanted Man." Rev. of *Omeros*, by Derek Walcott. *New York Times* 9 Oct. 1990: 13, 17.
- King, Robert. Rev. of the Royal Shakespeare Company's Production of *The Odyssey*. *The North American Review* Mar.-Apr., 1993: 43.
- Lefkowitz, Mary. "Bringing Him Back Alive." Rev. of *Omeros*, by Derek Walcott. *New York Times Book Review* 7 Oct. 1990: 1, 34-35.
- Naipaul, V. S. *The Middle Passage*. London: André Deutsch, 1962.
- Suzuki, Mihoko. *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.
- Walcott, Derek. *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*. New York: Noonday Press, 1993.
- . *Omeros*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.
- White, J. P. "An Interview with Derek Walcott." *Green Mountains Review* NS 4.1 (1990): 14-37.