

THE IRISH IN THE CARIBBEAN:
DEREK WALCOTT'S EXAMINATION OF THE IRISH IN *OMEROS*

by Irene Martyniuk

In a 1977 interview with Edward Hirsch, Derek Walcott explained his affinities with Irish culture and poets. Asked about the influence of Synge and Yeats on his dramatic work, Walcott explained, "The whole Irish influence was for me a very intimate one . . . I've always felt some kind of intimacy with the Irish poets because one realized that they were also colonials with the same kind of problems that existed in the Caribbean. They were the niggers of Britain" (59). Not only does his trenchant observation predate Roddy Doyle's similar assessment in his novel *The Commitments*, it also prefigures the role of the Irish in Walcott's important 1992 Caribbean epic, *Omeros*. Through the character of Maud Plunkett in *Omeros*, Walcott creates a mixture of Homer's Penelope and Joyce's Molly Bloom, creating a fully-realized character who is both the colonizer and the colonized, silenced by gender, yet aware of her own person and values. Maud, I contend, is a most important character in *Omeros*, bodily representing the mental dilemma Walcott so famously grappled with in his 1962 poem, "A Far Cry from Africa:"

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Omeros* is an epic, although one that has challenged the structural aspects of the genre. An epic embodies a national character and ethos. It is an inherently political genre since, as Holman and Harmon define the term in *The Handbook to Literature*, it is "important to the history of a nation or race" (177). While the actual structure of *Omeros* veers away from the formal structures of an epic, the underlying function of the work fits the definition. Furthermore, I contend that out of the myriad of allusions and references that pepper the text, the relationships to Homer and Joyce are paramount to understanding the politics of *Omeros*. Geert Lernout agrees, arguing not only for the importance of the obvious Homeric relationships, but also explaining, "Joyce's role in this epic is crucial; it is simply impossible to write a modern-day homeric epic without reference to *Ulysses*" (97). To be sure, the majority of critics, including Lernout, point out that *Omeros* is not a specific retelling of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, or *Ulysses*. However, it is not meant to be since direct retellings, now only in a post-colonial setting, simply create a counter-discourse to the Western model, retaining the Western power structure but inverting the positions. Walcott

himself has rejected any such project, arguing, “What’s new about a classic is that it stays new” (Schoenberger 92). Instead, by intertextually reformulating these original texts, Walcott finds acceptance and celebration of the post-colonial in the very stories Europeans have identified as specifically their own—their founding texts or “master narratives.” Walcott’s ludic use of these texts is the political backbone of *Omeros* and, I argue, the specific way Walcott empowers the Irish as post-colonial hybrids.

The use of Homer and Joyce is careful and deliberate. Epics like Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Joyce’s *Ulysses* reflect a community, guide a community, and authorize a community through an original voice of the people—even if that new voice is retelling an older story. By appropriating these Western master narratives, Walcott points to the mechanics of the epic itself. He reveals both Homer’s and Joyce’s already-present post-colonial concerns in their texts. Rather than lamenting a lost world, Walcott uses Homer and Joyce through his own politically charged play with language to show the power of a community. Post-colonial peoples, Walcott argues, do not only need new, counter-epics or even new epics created in the European tradition. They also need to find what is already authorizing in the epics of the old which then allows them to converse on equal ground with European culture. This authorization can be understood in what Piero Boitani, in his study of classical literature, identifies as the “shadows” of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, akin to Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “unhomely” in post-colonial literature.

“The shadow[s] of Ulysses” for Boitani are those key moments in the narratives that are left unspoken. For instance, the Sirens tempt Ulysses by singing “history” in what W.B. Stanford cites as “one of the most famous stories in European literature and a rich source of allegorical and symbolical interpretations” (77). But, Boitani asks, what song do they sing? (16). Tiresias prophesizes about Ulysses’ future, even telling him how and when he will die—but the seer’s words, no matter how they are translated, never make complete sense (18). For Boitani, these “shadow” moments invoke a cultural history, allowing a reteller to fill in the blanks with his own cultural concerns and issues. The shadows are the untold stories of the Other, Boitani contends. They fascinate readers and retellers for precisely this reason. But while Walcott follows the same lead, being drawn to the “shadows” of the text, he is not interested in the narrative aspects of unspoken stories, but instead uses the presence of the “shadows” to authorize his own voice—the voice he has found already present in Western classic epics. He speaks not *of* the unspoken Other, but *from the position of* the unspoken Other. He (re)tells the same story, but now from a new perspective; a perspective Homer and Joyce already authorized, he implicitly contends, through their very creation of such shadows in their texts.

If Molly Bloom is the shadow of Penelope, as Joyce intends, then Maud Plunkett in *Omeros* is the shadow of both these women, encompassing both the Old and New Worlds, and finding a space in-between that is the true place of all post-colonials, a third identity that celebrates hybridity rather than lamenting colonial invasion. Maud’s character appears only sporadically throughout the poem, mostly in her relationship to her husband [Regimental Sergeant] Major Dennis Plunkett. Only a few episodes are devoted entirely to her, yet each mention, no matter what its length, reveals her crucial position as the hybridized post-colonial.

At first glance, however, Maud appears to be the stereotypical British colonial wife. The couple own a pig farm which Plunkett spends his days running while Maud tends to her

large gardens. In the evenings of the time of the poem, Plunkett carefully traces the Battle of the Saints—a pivotal sea battle between the French and the British in which Britain won control of St. Lucia until its eventual independence in 1979. While Plunkett works, Maud weaves a tapestry representing all of the different birds found on the island. It eventually becomes her shroud, draped over the coffin at her funeral. She attends Mass regularly—without Plunkett—and keeps watch over him since he still suffers from the aftermath of a wartime head wound. She has brought her antiques and valuables with her to St. Lucia and is in a constant battle against the weather to preserve her old things and old manners (61). She appears to be subservient to Plunkett, “wifely,” the speaker describes, for instance, hurrying from Mass so he can get the freshest bread at the bakery and never openly questioning his constant refusal to pay for a passage back to Dublin for a visit (24). Like Homer’s faithful Penelope, Maud waits and weaves, sure of her position as the conquering “queen,” as Plunkett calls her, over the natives (269).

On this same first level, perhaps the most “colonial” aspect of Maud is her treatment of Helen, a beautiful St. Lucian woman. Maud hates Helen, calling her “our trouble” (29). It begins almost as soon as Helen has been hired as the Plunketts’ maid. Maud admonishes Helen for talking too loudly in the kitchen with the gardener, after which Helen mutters a stream of patois that Maud believes is about her. Ultimately, Maud dismisses Helen when the maid begins to wear a lemon yellow dress that she claims Maud gave to her. Maud, in a fury, argues that Helen stole it, and even though Plunkett will not side with either woman, he allows his wife to dismiss the maid (64).

Of course, there is more to Maud’s hatred, and it, too, is stereotypical of the colonial situation. Plunkett has become infatuated with Helen. He watches the woman as she works around the house and defends her to Maud. His lust grows when he catches Helen trying on Maud’s jewelry in the couple’s bedroom. Helen takes control of the situation, announcing, “You will let / me try this” (96). Plunkett acquiesces and does nothing. Even after she is fired, Plunkett remains obsessed with Helen. Pregnant and out of work, Helen returns to the Plunketts’ farm to borrow money. She deliberately provokes Maud, not only by ripping up Maud’s carefully tended to flowers and refusing to address her former employer as “Madam” as Maud expects, but particularly by announcing her condition so as to briefly make Maud suspect that Plunkett is the father. When the ploy fails, Helen saunters away, undeterred, and Maud is “enraged” (125). Plunkett’s fantasy culminates as he watches Helen trying to find work in a café, leading him to embark on a project to write the true history of St. Lucia—Helen of the West Indies, as it is called—as an homage to his real-life Helen. He will give her a legitimate, European history: “Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen’s war” (30). As he works, Maud makes gentle yet biting fun of her husband, for instance, calling the famous cannon *Georgius Rex* the “Gorgeous Wrecks,” and thus reminding him of her presence (93) since “the harder he worked, the more he betrayed his wife” (103). Ultimately, Plunkett’s lust for Helen is only a minor aberration and he realizes Maud, despite her Irish blood, is his true and Western love. They seem to be typical colonials.

But for all the stereotypical colonial aspects to her character, ones that align her with the English, including and exemplified by her husband, Maud is simultaneously anything but the stereotypical colonial wife. Each detail, strewn almost carelessly about the text, reveals a powerful woman who has chosen and forged the life she wanted, making the best of every

circumstance, celebrating her hybridity even in the face of its non-acceptance. Maud was and is, we learn, a sexually feisty woman who has chosen to follow her meek English husband but has never forgotten her Irish roots. It is this specific ethnic coding that allows Maud to become the “shadow” of the precursor texts—the quintessential post-colonial. Her background irritates Plunkett yet pleases Maud. This can be seen in his “affair” with Helen. Plunkett is not just sexually aroused by an exotic Other. Rather, he is drawn to her as a woman without a “real,” European, official, and troubling history, as the Irish have with the English. He believes he can have a pure and platonic relationship and thus create a pure, specifically non-Irish son. His quest is especially urgent since he and Maud are childless, and the Plunkett family line, which he has traced, is about to end. But although he desperately desires a son, his wife’s nationality keeps him from sharing with her his solution to this problem which isn’t Helen but the son he finds in Midshipman Plunkett, a young sailor who fought and drowned in the Battle of the Saints. Plunkett figuratively adopts the young man who bore his name and yet never tells his wife of his discovery, instead “mothering” the boy with an indefinite pronoun: “He had given her a son” (103). He continues his family tree with a very English son in this parthogenetic siring, consciously erasing Maud’s Irish blood from his life and his family tree.

Maud’s Irishness is clearly marked and never forgotten by either husband or wife. She continuously dreams of visiting Dublin, pricing out tickets that she knows Plunkett will call too expensive and not buy. She plays Irish music on the piano and attends Mass “shawled” in the Irish tradition (255). Most importantly, she does all this even though she is aware of her husband’s disapproval (29). For instance, during a hurricane, Plunkett, feeling “murderous,” drives Maud to tears by slamming the piano lid down as she plays tunes from *Airs from Erin* (56). But the tears are not acquiescence, and it is Plunkett who apologizes, not Maud. Maud continues to assert her ethnic hybridity even after her death and finally wins Plunkett over. Devastated by the loss of his wife and probably plagued by guilt over his “affair” with Helen during Maud’s final months, Plunkett turns to Ma Kilman, a local sibyl, who contacts Maud in a *séance*. Plunkett begs for forgiveness, which Ma Kilman assures him is given. Only then does he accept his Irish wife:

Close to Maud on the bed’s shambles, he’d imagined
her soul as a small whirring thing that instantly
shot from its crumpled sheath, from its nest of dry vine,

to cross the tin roofs that furrowed into a sea
till, like a curlew lowering in the grey wind,
it saw the knolls and broken castles of Ireland.

Plunkett never thought he would ask the next question.
“Heaven?” He smiled.

“Yes. If heaven is a green place.” (307)

This admission, that Ireland is heaven—a promised land—finally brings him peace. Only now, with Ma Kilman’s answer, can he finally accept his wife as Irish. This awakening

heals Plunkett and leads to his final happiness. Unfortunately, it is only achieved with Maud's death.

By embracing this position, Maud becomes something more than just a counter-discourse to Penelope. If Maud were modeled only on and after Penelope, she would be exactly what we expect of a British colonial living in a colony: faithful, placid, gracious, and condescending. She would never question her husband and would focus all her activities on his eventual return. In Homer's *Odyssey*, no one, including Penelope, questions Odysseus after his return. She does not ask if he's been faithful, although her challenge about their marriage bed sends Odysseus into a rage since it implies Penelope has broken their vows. Within *Omeros*, this would entail Maud turning a blind eye to Plunkett's dalliance with Helen.

On the other hand, if Maud were modeled only after Molly Bloom, this would create a simple counter-discourse to Homer. Joyce's *Ulysses* is not just a counter-discourse, as I argue elsewhere. But if we limit our view to just Molly in isolation as a counter-discourse, we can better understand Maud. Molly is not faithful and is not patiently awaiting her husband's eventual return to their marriage bed. Instead, she consummates an affair with one of her suitors and has every intention to do so again at the next available opportunity. Unlike Penelope, she is an outsider—an Other. Raised in Gibraltar, Molly is thought of as half-Spanish on the basis of her otherwise unknown mother's name. Furthermore, she does not simply accept her husband's actions without rancor. She knows of his pornographic pictures stored in his nightstand and suspects his dalliances as well. This knowledge leads her to sleep with Blazes Boylan whereas Penelope never questions but only waits.

Maud is different still and this is Walcott's genius. She possesses characteristics of both women, at times seeming more like Penelope, and at other times more like Molly. Most importantly, Maud does not value either side of herself over the other. As a colonial Penelope figure, she could totally isolate herself from the natives, which she does not, and she could always accept Plunkett and never provoke him. As the post-colonial Molly, she could harbor anger at her husband who thinks of England as their "home" and consistently denies her Irish heritage. Maud instead accepts and celebrates her hybridity, never compromising her actions. She has forged her happiness and celebrates it in gardening, weaving, and living Irish tradition.

One of Walcott's major contributions to literature and theory is his lyrical understanding of this position. He consistently struggles with his own hybridity, never choosing one side or the other, but instead accepting this unique identity. In some ways, then, Maud, rather than the speaker, is the real figure for Walcott in *Omeros*. At the end of the epic, Maud is finally physically beaten by an "empire"—"the empire of cancer" (260). But, as we have seen, she still understands hybridity in her afterlife, frolicking on the green fields of Ireland, even as she freely offers forgiveness to one of her oppressors—her English husband. Penelope does not even consider forgiving Odysseus since she doesn't question his adventures. Molly accepts her husband but does not change her behavior to conform to his desires. Maud manages to do both and thus exemplifies the positives of hybridity.

Maud is, to be sure, a minor character in *Omeros*. Most critics do not see her as I do, if they see her at all. Geert Lernout, who examines the Irish connection at length, discusses Maud's specific Irish coding, finally asserts: "Plunkett and his wife represent what is most decent of the British Empire, the ordinary people at the frontiers who fought the Empire's wars" (101-102). Maud's Irish background is not ignored, but it is also rarely placed within

a post-colonial understanding. But does she represent Walcott's speaker from "A Far Cry from Africa"? I believe so. Walcott has carefully designed each character, creating a system of allusions that bring Old World epics to a New World setting. Neither one replaces the other, but instead combine. As a poet, the speaker (who is and is not Walcott) finds that he must negotiate two Old World masters, Homer and Joyce. The former stands as a clear Western master, author of two epics that Western countries have repeatedly cited as some of their most important founding texts. The latter is more complicated, like Maud. Joyce is both a Western master and a post-colonial writer. Furthermore, he was aware of both these positions as exemplified by his Others—Leopold and Molly Bloom. In acknowledgement, the speaker of *Omeros* travels to Ireland where he walks on the Strand and drinks with Joyce's characters and ends by acknowledging, "I blest myself in his voice" (200). He learns from *Omeros* and Anna Livia to create Maud.

I believe that Maud's short scenes are crucial to *Omeros*. The St. Lucians clearly stand in opposition to a man like Plunkett, who once dreamed of circling the world, visiting each part of the British Empire before it collapsed and only abandoned the plan when he failed with his own imperial pretensions by not engendering a son. Maud is much more like the speaker and thus, like Walcott. She is caught between two worlds. Even though much about St. Lucia annoys her, she understands the islanders better than her husband. She can see "subtlety where none was before" (49).

In his essay, "The Muse of History," Walcott differentiates between two kinds of post-colonial authors—heroes and victims. "In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters," he explains (37). "The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history," he continues (37). In his 1992 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, *The Antilles*, he extends those categories to all post-colonial peoples: "Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole," he writes. All post-colonials are the reassembled vases of the world. Hybridity is to be enjoyed and celebrated, not suffered. Maud Plunkett, as an Irish woman in the Caribbean, exemplifies that position, best summed up in the moment when the speaker of *Omeros* tells us the inspiration for the character—his own mother: "There was Plunkett in my father, much as there was / my mother in Maud" (263).

In the end, Maud, too, like her husband, has a secret child. Plunkett's namesake is the pure English soldier who dies in battle and brings honor to the family—a history we know is false. Maud's child is the speaker of *Omeros*—a young man who embraces all ethnicities, accepts his hybridity, and becomes a poet. Walcott, in creating and celebrating Maud Plunkett, creates and celebrates the post-colonial hybridity of the Irish.

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