

Transcending the Classics:
Derek Walcott's *Omeros*
Richard Sacks – Spring 2023
Handout #2 (for class of 3/27/23)



"the gods in session" in the storm of 9.3 (pp. 51-54):

- 9.3.19 In the grey vertical forest of the hurricane season,
9.3.20 when the dirty sea returns the wreaths of the dead,
9.3.21 all the village could do was listen to **the gods in session**,

9.3.22 playing any instruments that came into their craniums,
9.3.23 the harp-sighing ripple of a hither-and-zithering sea,
9.3.24 the knucklebone pebbles, the abrupt **Shango** drums

9.3.25 made **Neptune** rock in the caves. Fête start! **Erzulie**
9.3.26 rattling her ra-ra; **Ogun, the blacksmith**, feeling
9.3.27 No Pain; **Damballa** winding like a zandoli

9.3.28 lizard, as their huge feet thudded on the ceiling,
9.3.29 as **the sea-god**, drunk, lurched from wall to wall, saying:
9.3.30 "Mama, this music so loud, I going in seine,"

9.3.31 then throwing up at his pun. People were praying,
9.3.32 but then **the gods, who were tired, were throwing a fête**,
9.3.33 and their fêtes went on for days, and their music ranged

9.3.34 from polkas of rain to waves dancing La Comète,
9.3.35 and the surf clapped hands whenever the patterns changed.
9.3.36 **For the gods aren't men, they get on well together**,

9.3.37 holding a hurricane-party in their cloud-house,
9.3.38 and what brings the gods close is the thunderous weather,
9.3.39 where **Ogun** can fire one with his partner **Zeus**.

Note "Erzulie, / Shango, and Ogun" also appear at 48.1.66ff./p242)

(during Ma Kilman's search for the cure for Philoctete's wound)

- 48.1.66 **so the deities swarmed in the thicket**

48.1.67 of the grove, waiting to be known by name; but she
48.1.68 had never learnt them, though their sounds were within her,
48.1.69 subdued in the rivers of her blood. **Erzulie**,

48.1.70 **Shango, and Ogun**; their outlines fading, thinner
48.1.71 as belief in them thinned, so that all their power,
48.1.72 their roots, and their rituals were concentrated

48.1.73 in the whorled corolla of that stinking flower.
48.1.74 **All the unburied gods, for three deep centuries dead...**

A: "the gods in session"

Shango (9.3.24): "The patron deity of the Old Oyo Empire ... in Yoruba ritual thought as **the deity of thunder and lightning**. The preeminence of Shango among Yoruba gods is linked to the profound supernatural powers associated with the deity. He is regarded as one of the fieriest gods in the land. **His worship is astonishingly widespread**, and his adherents are spread all over Yorubaland (Nigeria), Dahomey (now Benin Republic), **the Caribbean, and the Americas.**"

(*Oxford Reference Online*, from *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*)

"Shango married three deities: Oya, who rules over storms and the Niger River, and Oshun and Oba, who became rivers with those same names."

(from Y. Bonnefoy, *American, African and Old European Mythologies*, p. 144)

Erzulie (9.3.25): "The goddess of love in the Voodoo pantheon [in the Americas].... She lives in fabulous luxury and appears powdered and perfumed. She is lavish with her love as with her gifts. On the fingers she wears **three wedding rings**, since her husbands are **the serpent god Damballah, the sea god Agwe and the warrior hero Ogoun.**"

(*Oxford Reference Online*, from *A Dictionary of World Myth*)

Ogun the blacksmith (9.3.26+39): "Ogun is the [Yoruban/West African] god of blacksmiths and of all those who use iron: warriors, hunters, farmers, butchers, fishermen, and barbers.... In Brazil [and the Americas generally], his warlike features are retained; his other functions have disappeared."

(from Y. Bonnefoy, *American, African and Old European Mythologies*, p. 145)

Greek and Roman gods:

using Roman name – Neptune (9.3.25): the god of the sea in the Greek and Roman mythological systems; in both systems, we are reminded of Neptune's equality to and independence from Zeus (e.g., *Il.*15.185-199)

using Greek name – Zeus (9.3.39): the chief god of the Greek and Roman mythological systems, and **possesses thunderbolts**; the children of Zeus and his wife Hera include **Ares (the god of war)** and (by Hera alone) **Hephaistos (the blacksmith god)**

not named – "the blacksmith" (9.3.26) = Greek Hephaistos, Roman Vulcan: the blacksmith god in the Greek and Roman mythological systems; Hera conceived him alone in response to Zeus' giving birth to Athena; Hephaistos is **married to Aphrodite/Venus (the goddess of love) who cheats on him with Ares (the god of war)**

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"The World's Great Classics read backwards" in 13.1 (pp. 71-72):

- 13.1.1 "I grew up where alleys ended in a harbour
13.1.2 and Infinity wasn't the name of our street;
13.1.3 where the town anarchist was the corner barber
13.1.4 with his own flagpole and revolving Speaker's seat.
13.1.5 There were rusted mirrors in which we would look back
13.1.6 on the world's events. There, toga'd in a pinned sheet,
13.1.7 the curled hairs fell like commas. On their varnished rack,
13.1.8 **The World's Great Classics read backwards** in his mirrors
13.1.9 where he doubled as my chamberlain. I was known
13.1.10 for quoting from them as he was for his scissors.
13.1.11 I bequeath you that clean sheet and an empty throne."
13.1.12 We'd arrived at that corner where the barber-pole
13.1.13 angled from the sidewalk, and the photographer,
13.1.14 who'd taken his portrait, and, as some think, his soul,
13.1.15 leant from a small window and scissored his own hair
13.1.16 in a mime, suggesting a trim was overdue
13.1.17 to my father, who laughed and said "Wait" with one hand.
13.1.18 Then the barber mimed a shave with his mouth askew,
13.1.19 and left the window to wait by his wooden door
13.1.20 framed with dead portraits, and he seemed to understand
13.1.21 something in the life opposite not seen before.
13.1.22 **"The rock he lived on was nothing. Not a nation**
13.1.23 **or a people," my father said, and, in his eyes,**
13.1.24 **this was a curse.** When he raged, his indignation
13.1.25 jabbed the air with his scissors, a swift catching flies,
13.1.26 as he pumped the throne serenely round to his view.
13.1.27 He gestured like Shylock: "Hash not a Jew eyes?"
13.1.28 making his man a negative. An Adventist,
13.1.29 he's stuck on one glass that photograph of Garvey's
13.1.30 with the braided tricorne and gold-fringed epaulettes,
13.1.31 and that is his other Messiah. His paradise
13.1.32 is a **phantom Africa**. Elephants. Trumpets.
13.1.33 And when I quote Shylock silver brims in his eyes.



B: "The World's Great Classics read backwards"

B1) the narrator's ancestral journey: "like Hamlet's old man" (12.1.39/p68)

- 12.1.31 "I was raised in this obscure Caribbean port,
12.1.32 where my bastard father christened me for his shire:
12.1.33 Warwick. **The Bard's county**. But never felt part
12.1.34 of the foreign machinery known as Literature.
12.1.35 I preferred verse to fame, but I wrote with the heart
12.1.36 of an amateur. It's that Will you inherit.
12.1.37 I died on his birthday, one April. Your mother
12.1.38 sewed her own costume as Portia, then that disease
12.1.39 **like Hamlet's old man's** spread from an infected ear...

* The narrator's ancestral journey in chapters 12-13 (pp. 67-76) features his visit with his father's ghost

* *Hamlet* begins with the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost

B2) Plunkett's ancestral journey: "the changing shadow of Telemachus" (52.3.7)

[Note 17.3.3-5/p94: "This was his search's end. He had come far enough / to find a namesake and a son. *Aetat xix.* / Nineteen. Midshipman."]

- 52.3.6 ... but there **in that khaki Ulysses**
52.3.7 **there was a changing shadow of Telemachus**
52.3.8 **in me, in his absent war**, and an empire's guilt
52.3.9 stitched in the one pattern of Maud's fabulous quilt. (p263)

* Plunkett's ancestral journey in chapters 14-19 (pp. 77-104) features "finding" the young midshipman named Plunkett who died in the "Battle of the Saints"

* the *Odyssey* begins with an extended focus on Odysseus' son, Telemachus

B3) Achille's ancestral journey: "like another Aeneas" (60.1.4/p301)

[Note 34.3.2/p176 with its image of "bending Virgilian reeds"]

- 60.1.44 **He might have to leave**
60.1.45 **the village for good**, its hotels and marinas,
60.1.46 the ice-packed shrimps of pink tourists, **and find someplace,**
60.1.47 **some cove he could settle like another Aeneas,**
60.1.48 **founding not Rome but home, to survive in its peace...**

* Achille's ancestral journey in chapters 24-28 (pp. 77-104) features his visit with his ancestor Afolabe in his ancestral village in Africa

* the *Aeneid* begins with Aeneas landing in African Carthage, which Dido generously says he may make his new home, and also rule it equally with her

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"Plunkett's ances-tree" in 16.1 (pp. 87-88):

- 16.1.1 **Plunkett's ances-tree** (his pun) **fountained in blossoms**
16.1.2 and pods from a **genealogical willow**
16.1.3 above his blotter's green field. **One pod was the Somme's.**
- 16.1.4 **It burst with his father's lungs.** Then a pale yellow
16.1.5 asterisk for a **great-uncle marked Bloemfontein.**
16.1.6 At the War Office he'd paid some waxworks fellow
16.1.7 to draw flowers for battles, buds for a campaign.
16.1.8 The cold-handed bugger'd done it for a fortune.
16.1.9 Undertaker's collar, bald as a snooker-ball,
- 16.1.10 as hunched as a raven, he plucked titles in turn
16.1.11 from their cliffs of gilt ledgers, picking with his bill
16.1.12 **from Agincourt to Zouave**, returning to where
16.1.13 he found **blue blood in the Plunketts.** The Major
16.1.14 voiced no objection. **But why Scots? Why a claymore**
16.1.15 **with a draped tartan?** And, when the willow faded
16.1.16 into a dubious cloud, he smiled. To pay more,
16.1.17 naturally, and he did. A carved, scrolled shield waited
16.1.18 at the willow's base, his name and hyphen
- 16.1.19 for a closing date, **then a space for son and heir.** "No heir,"
16.1.20 he told the mummy from Madame Tussaud,
16.1.21 **who believed he had dropped an aitch.** "I mean `No. Here,' "
16.1.22 **snapped the Major, pointing to where the blank place showed**
16.1.23 on the waiting shield. "No heir: the end of the line.
16.1.24 **No more Plunketts."**
16.1.24 The crow wrote it on the design.

Note the opening of the prologue to Shakespeare's *Henry V*

- HV.Pr.1 **O** for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
HV.Pr.2 The brightest heaven of invention,
HV.Pr.3 A kingdom for a stage ...
HV.Pr.12 ... can this cockpit hold
HV.Pr.13 The vasty fields of France? **or may we cram**
HV.Pr.14 **Within this wooden O the very casques**
HV.Pr.15 **That did affright the air at Agincourt?**

C: "Plunkett's ances-tree"

C1) "One pod was the Somme's / It burst with his father's lungs."

Somme [= 'burden' in French]: "river, northern France... From Amiens, near which its headstreams (including the Ancre [= 'anchor' in French]...) converge, the Somme follows the floor of a trench across the chalk country, ... an important barrier in the approaches from Flanders [cf. "**Flemish noise**" at 1.14.17/p78] toward Paris... The name Somme is derived from the Celtic samara, meaning "**tranquil.**" ... [T]he First Battle of the Somme (July–Nov. 1916) [was the] costly and largely unsuccessful Allied offensive on the Western Front during **World War I.** The horrific bloodshed on the first day of the battle became a **metaphor for futile and indiscriminate slaughter.**" (from *Britannica Online*)

C2) "Then a pale yellow / asterisk for a great-uncle marked Bloemfontein"

Bloemfontein [= 'flower' + 'fountain' in **Dutch/Afrikaans**]: "capital of Free State province (formerly Orange Free State) and judicial capital of the Republic of South Africa.... [I]t became the seat of the British-administered Orange River Sovereignty (1848–54) and of the Orange Free State (an independent Boer republic formed in 1854). The failure of the Bloemfontein Conference (May–June 1899) resulted in the outbreak of the [**Boer**] **War** (1899–1902)[,] ... the largest and most costly war in which the British engaged between the Napoleonic Wars and WWI." (from *Britannica Online*)

C3) "titles ... / ... / from Agincourt to Zouave"

Agincourt (cf. below left the opening of Shakespeare's *Henry V*): name of the battle in 1415 "resulting in the decisive victory of the English [under Henry V] over the French in the **Hundred Years' War**" (from *Britannica Online*)

Zouave: "(**French, from Berber *Zwāwa***, the name of an Algerian people) A soldier in a former light-infantry brigade of the French army, originally composed of Algerians. They were renowned for their spectacularly colourful uniforms..." (from *Oxford Reference Online*, from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*)

Also, **the subject of six works by Van Gogh** as he experimented with the "savage combination of incongruous tones." (from *metmuseum.org*)

C4) "he found blue blood in the Plunketts.../...But why Scots? Why a claymore?"

- 5.2.22 ... Phantom narrator, resume:
5.2.23 **Tumbly. Blue holes for his eyes. And Scottie** wiser
5/2.24 when the shock passed. Plain men. Not striking. Not handsome.

C5) "No heir" (+/- "dropped aitch"): ~ air, hair, hare, here, hear

Note "no air" as midshipman drowns in 15.3, Maud singing "airs" in 10.1, the "no hair" fellow here in 16.1, repeated "hare" in 14.2, "phantom hearer" in 64.2, etc.