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THE SHROUD IN *OMEROS* AND CATULLUS 64

DEREK WALCOTT AS *POETA NOVUS*

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Derek Walcott's Omeros *(1990) adapts numerous intertexts from the Western literary tradition in the creation of a new, Caribbean epic. It is well known that in* Omeros *Walcott made use of the* Iliad*,* Odyssey*, and Virgil's* Aeneid*. In this article I argue that Walcott also used texts and motifs beyond this hardcore epic tradition. It is in particular his echoes of Catullus' poem 64 and its ekphrasis in Maud's shroud which make Walcott a true* poeta novus*.*

INTRODUCTION

In a famous comment, V.S. Naipaul stated in the 1960s that "nothing has ever been created in the West Indies", suggesting that Caribbean literature is mere mimicry.[1] Caribbean poet Derek Walcott parried this insult as follows: "Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for quite long time, because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before".[2] It seems that this statement has come true in Walcott's highly intertextual poem *Omeros* (1990), which adapts the Western literary tradition from Antiquity to Shakespeare and beyond, creating a new Caribbean epic.[3] Thus, it turns the qualification 'mimicry' into a honorary nickname. It is, for example, common knowledge that in

[1] V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage. Impressions of Five Societies — British, French and Dutch — in the West Indies and South America* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1962), 27, 29.

[2] Derek Walcott, "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 16.1 (Feb. 1974), 9. For Walcott's stance towards mimicry, see also his 'What the Twilight Says,' *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998), 3-35.

[3] For general discussions of *Omeros*, see Don Barnard, *Walcott's Omeros: A Reader's Guide* (Boulder: FirstForumPress/Lynne Rienner, 2014); Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997); and Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 183-212.

Omeros Walcott brought Homer to postcolonial St Lucia in more or less the same way that in *Ulysses* Joyce took Homer to (post)colonial Dublin.[4] Nevertheless, it appears to be less known that in *Omeros* Walcott also made use of Classical intertexts and motifs beyond the hardcore epic tradition of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, echoing in particular the Roman 'new poet', or *poeta novus*, Catullus and his poem 64.[5] In this article I discuss some overlooked Classical echoes in *Omeros* to position Walcott as a modern *poeta novus*, and — in unsuspected ways — as a creator of "nothing one has ever seen before".

For the sake of clarity, I first sum up some relevant plot details of *Omeros*. Narrator Derek, an alter ego of Derek Walcott himself, is a middle-aged Caribbean writer living in the US and visiting his native island St Lucia. In a quest for his poetics he frequently engages with representations of the arch poet, such as Omeros, Seven Seas, and the ghost of his deceased father. In a bar on the island he also meets the aged couple Dennis and Maud Plunkett, who show some traces of the *Odyssey*'s Odysseus and Penelope. After WWII Dennis, a retired British army officer, and Maud, an Irish woman, married and settled on St Lucia where they have a pig farm. Despite the success of their farm, they still suffer from the fact that they never had a son. Dennis secretly adores Helen, a young woman who works for Maud. Helen, however, alternately carries on love affairs with two local fishermen, Achille and Hector. Nevertheless, Plunkett spends most of his time researching the history of St Lucia for her. In this way, he discovers the history of a young namesake, who died in 1782 during the Battle of the Saintes between Britain and France, which gave Britain control over St Lucia and other islands in the West Indies.[6] The discovery of his namesake is Dennis Plunkett's way of compensating for his lack of a son. While Dennis is writing, Maud, in

[4] For some similarities between Walcott's *Omeros* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, see Geert Lernout, "Derek Walcott's *Omeros*: The Isle is Full of Voices," *Kunapipi* 14.2 (1992), 95-97.

[5] There has been considerable debate about whether *Omeros* can be identified as an epic, especially because Walcott denied the qualification himself. For Walcott's *recusatio*, and various arguments *pro* and *contra*, see Stefania Ciocia, "To Hell and Back: The Katabasis and the Impossibility of Epic in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.2 (2000), 87; Gregson Davis, ""'With No Homeric Shadow'': The Disavowal of Epic in Derek Walcott's 'Omeros'." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 96.2 (1997), 321-33.; Hamner *Dispossessed*, 3-4, 8-32; and Line Henriksen, *Ambition and Anxiety. Ezra Pound's Cantos and Derek Walcott's Omeros as Twentieth-Century Epics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 233-46. Considering Walcott's intertextual use of the epic tradition in *Omeros*, I will treat the text as an epic here.

[6] *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Battle of the Saintes" (2019).

her loneliness, spends her years gardening and doing needlework, embroidering a large piece of silk as "her silver jubilee gift".[7] She feels unwell and near the end of *Omeros* dies of cancer. Her coffin is covered with the jubilee quilt, which has become her shroud.[8] It is this shroud that carries the intertextual and metaliterary overtones that are the subject of this article.

MAUD'S SHROUD

Early in the poem, Walcott renders Maud's quilt elaborately. For the sake of clarity, I first quote this rendering and list the points relevant for the analysis below before turning to the intertextual echoes and their interpretation:

> Maud with her needle, embroidering a silhouette
>
> from Bond's *Ornithology*, their quiet mirrored
> in an antique frame. Needlepoint constellations
> on a clear night had prompted this intricate thing,
>
> this immense quilt, which, with her typical patience,
> she'd started years ago, making its blind birds sing,
> beaks parted like nibs from their brown branch and cover
>
> on the silken shroud. Mockingbirds, finches, and wrens,
> nightjars and kingfishers, hawks, hummingbirds, plover,
> ospreys and falcons, with beaks like his scratching pen's,
>
> terns, royal and bridled, wild ducks, migrating teal,
> pipers (their fledgling beaks), wild waterfowl, widgeon,
> *Cypseloides Niger, l'hirondelle des Antilles*

[7] For Maud's loneliness, see Walcott *Omeros*, X.i and L.i; for the jubilee gift, see ibid., XVI.ii.

[8] For Maud's funeral see Walcott *Omeros*, LIII.ii, and for the time spent embroidering, ibid., XVI.ii and LIV.i.

(their name for the sea-swift). They flew from their region,
their bright spurs braceleted with Greek or Latin tags,
to pin themselves to the silk, and, crying their names,

pecked at her fingers. They fluttered like little flags
from the branched island, budding in accurate flames.[9]

We read that Maud embroiders a piece of silk with branches, or perhaps trees, and birds, which she copied from the main ornithological book of the West Indies, James Bond's *A Field Guide to the Birds of the West Indies*.[10] The birds are embroidered with Greek and Latin name tags on their spurs. The narrator names quite a few of the birds, ending with the sea-swift, the one that constitutes a motif in the larger epic itself. It is the migrating swift that guides the narrator and the local fisherman Achille, on their travels across the Atlantic and back home again. The composition of the birds on the quilt is said to be inspired by the constellations of the stars. In this way, the birds suggest the exact location of St Lucia, turning the quilt into a celebration of the island itself. In a passage much later in *Omeros*, we also learn that the silk is green, thus evoking the greenness of both St Lucia and Maud's native Ireland.[11] There are, moreover, some details that prompt a more elaborate interpretation: the birds on the shroud are blind and they sing, their beaks compared to nibs, and the birds seem to come alive, pecking at Maud's fingers. These details will be examined below.

In order to establish the metaliterary implications of this passage, I first analyse its use of classical intertexts.[12] As Christina Dokou observed, the shroud itself brings to mind a famous shroud from high epic, the one which Penelope, according to the *Odyssey*, spent

[9] Walcott *Omeros*, XVI.ii.

[10] James Bond, *A Field Guide to the Birds of the West Indies* (Philadelphia: Academy of Natural Sciences, 1936).

[11] Walcott *Omeros*, LXII.ii; for the quotation, see below.

[12] For intertextuality as an implicit form of metaliterarity, see Eva Müller-Zettelmann, *Lyrik und Metalyrik. Theorie einer Gattung und ihrer Selbstbespiegelung anhand von Beispielen aus der englisch- und deutschsprachigen Dichtkunst* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2000), 221-22.

three years weaving — and unweaving — for her father-in-law Laertes. In this way she tried to delay in choosing a new husband during Odysseus' ten-year-long journey home when many had assumed him dead.[13] There are, however, differences between the two shrouds. In Maud's case there is no ruse intended, and Dennis' absence is emotional rather than physical. Furthermore, she originally intends her quilt to celebrate her and her husband's jubilee anniversary rather than as a shroud for her funeral. Walcott also diverts from the *Odyssey* in the sense that Maud embroiders her own shroud, rather than a shroud for someone else. Finally, while in the *Odyssey* we never hear anything about Penelope's design, in *Omeros* the birds Maud embroiders, their constellation, and their actions are represented in the text. Thus, in *Omeros* the content of the shroud forms a separate textual level within the frame of the larger text. In other words, the passage of the shroud in *Omeros* is, contrary to that in the *Odyssey*, an ekphrasis.

EKPHRASIS

Ekphrasis, a 'verbal representation of visual representation', has a long tradition, dating from the ekphrasis of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, and appearing in multiple genres ranging from ancient epic and rhetoric to postmodern poetry.[14] Ekphrasis has been analyzed from numerous different angles, varying from the maker of the object, the materiality, the making process, and the contents, to the viewer, the focalizer, the gendered gaze, the paragone between literature and the visual arts, and the relationship between the ekphrasis and its narrative frame.[15] A distinction is often made between actual and notional

[13] *Od*. 2.94-110; see Christina Dokou, "'Fruit of the Loom': Νέες προσεγγίσεις της Πηνελόπης στους Walcott και Marquez," Σύγκριση 15 (2017), 153-74.

[14] James A. Heffernan, *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3; William John Thomas Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 152; *Il*. 18.478-608.

[15] See, for example, Jaś Elsner, "Introduction: The Genres of Ekphrasis," *Ramus* 31.1-2 (2002), 1-18; Don Paul Fowler, "Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis," *Roman Studies* 81 (1991), 25-35; Simon Goldhill, "What Is Ekphrasis For?" *Classical Philology* 102.1 (2007), 1-2; Heffernan *Museum*; John Hollander, 'The Poetics of Ekphrasis,' *Word and Image* 4.1 (1988), 209; Irene J. F. de Jong, *Narratology and Classics, A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37; Andrew Laird, "Sounding out Ecphrasis: Art and Text in Catullus 64," *Roman Studies* 83 (1993); Mitchell *Ekphrasis*, 151-81; John Pier, "Narrative Levels," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology,* ed. Peter Hühn et al., §21; Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

ekphrasis, i.e. the representation of existing works of art that the reader may already know or see for themselves, and artworks imagined by the author.[16]

In Classical ekphrasis, the represented objects vary from shields to cups and architectural elements, and, occasionally, to textiles. Famous examples of textiles in Classical ekphrasis are Jason's cloak in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, and the two artworks from the weaving competition between Minerva and Arachne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[17] Considering the purpose of the quilt, the closest model for Maud's shroud appears to be the coverlet of Peleus' and Thetis' wedding bed in Catullus' poem 64.[18] It now seems to be particularly meaningful that Maud's shroud was originally intended as a gift for her silver wedding anniversary and therefore probably as a quilt for her marriage bed. Thus, apart from Penelope's woof, there is a second model for the shroud in *Omeros*. The double purpose of Maud's quilt, for marriage bed and deathbed, thus aptly evokes the shroud from the *Odyssey* and Catullus' coverlet in one.

Catullus

In order to clarify the implications of Walcott's use of Catullus 64 as a hypotext, I briefly introduce it here.[19] The poem is an *epyllion*, or miniature epic, which was favoured by poets in Catullus' cycle. These so-called *poetae novi*, or neoteric, or new poets, turned from traditional epic as it was brought from Greece to Rome, to the Alexandrian tradition of shorter and, to some extent, experimental poetry.[20] The frame narrative of Catullus' poem 64 consists of the myth of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, that of a heroic man and a goddess. During the party, the mortal guests may have a look at the wedding bed

[16] Heffernan *Museum*, 7, 146; Hollander *Ekphrasis*, 209.

[17] Apollonius, *Argonautica* 1.721-68; *Met*. 6.70-128.

[18] Catullus 64, 47-266.

[19] There is a vast amount of literature on Catullus 64. Influential commentaries include C. J. Fordyce (ed.), *Catullus: A Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); Wilhelm Kroll, *C. Valerius Catullus* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1960); Kenneth Quinn, *Catullus. The Poems* (London: St Martin's, 1970, 1973); Douglas F. S. Thomson, *Catullus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

[20] Peter L. Schmidt, 'Neoteric Poets,' in *Brill's New Pauly*, eds. Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider.

and its purple coverlet or *vestis*, which is represented in an ekphrasis.[21] The coverlet is decorated with events from the myth of Ariadne on the island of Naxos, her lament after her abandonment by the negligent hero Theseus, and the approach of the god Bacchus.[22] After admiring this coverlet, the mortal guests leave and the gods arrive. They listen to a wedding hymn 'spun' by the *Parcae*, or Fates, about the actions of the couple's future son Achilles in the Trojan War. This song constitutes, like the ekphrasis about Ariadne, a separate narrative level.[23]

There are a number of similarities between Catullus 64 and *Omeros*. First, Catullus 64 and *Omeros* bear some thematic resemblance: they both make use of the Greek myth of the Trojan War. While Catullus 64 begins with the wedding of Achilles' parents, Peleus and Thetis, and ends with Achilles' horrific bloodshed at Troy, *Omeros* deals with the aftermath of a colonial Trojan War and its effect on a descendant of the victims, a postcolonial Achille. Furthermore, both poems feature a love triangle. Helen, Hector, and Achille in *Omeros* not only evoke their counterparts in the *Iliad*, Helena, Menelaus, and Paris, but also match Ariadne and her two lovers, Theseus and Bacchus, in the ekphrasis of Catullus 64. Perhaps there is even an echo in the relationship between Helen, Maud, and Dennis in the frame text of *Omeros*. These love triangles perhaps represent some of the cultural issues experienced in the Caribbean, such as the complicated relationship of Caribbean culture with Europe and Africa, or perhaps with the European tradition and local reality.

Secondly, both ekphraseis seem to hold the middle between notional and actual ekphrasis. While both objects themselves — Catullus' coverlet and Walcott's shroud — do not exist outside their narratives and we know next to nothing about the more detailed spatial arrangements of their designs, the ancient reader was familiar with variants of the myth of Ariadne, much like the reader of *Omeros* can look up Maud's individual birds in a copy of Bond's *Ornithology*. Hence, both ekphraseis represent the rearrangement of

[21] The word *vestis* occurs at the beginning at the end of the ekphrasis in 64.50 and 265.

[22] Theseus is called *immemor*, unmindful or forgetful, three times in ll. 58, 135, and 248, underlining his lack of attention to Ariadne.

[23] Julia Haig Gaisser, "Threads in the Labyrinth: Competing Views and Voices in Catullus 64," *American Journal of Philology* 116.4 (1995), 579.

familiar material. There is a further resemblance between the ekphrasis of the shroud in *Omeros* and that in Catullus 64: both passages contain the suggestion of sound. Andrew Laird observed that, technically, a picture cannot render words, apart from in embroidered or woven lettering. He therefore classified ekphrasis with speech as 'disobedient', that is, inconsistent with the representation of a work of art.[24] However, while the ekphrasis in Catullus 64 indeed includes Ariadne's lament and Aegeus' instructions for Theseus in direct speech, in *Omeros* it mentions the singing birds but does not represent their song.

Besides poem 64, Maud's shroud also evokes two other poems by Catullus. The birds' pecking at Maud's fingers may evoke his poems 2 and 3 about Lesbia, the speaker's married mistress who distracts herself from the pains of love with her little bird, letting it peck her fingertip on her lap.[25] Like Lesbia, Maud distracts herself from the absence of her love by 'playing' with her birds. In this way, there is another love triangle at work in the background. However, while Lesbia is a married woman secretly engaging in a love affair, Maud is the ignored spouse, coping with grief rather than impatient excitement.

These references to Catullus suggest that Walcott in his ekphrasis drew close to the Classical poet who challenged the conventions of high epic. This observation alone has some bearing on Walcott's poetics: with *Omeros* he does not simply take Homer to the Caribbean, but in his echoes of neoteric poetry he taps into a Classical attempt to adapt the elevated genre. In following and adapting Catullus, Walcott tries to be a modern *poeta novus* himself. The intertextuality of the ekphrasis of the shroud thus has metaliterary implications.

Textiles and birds

The echoes of Catullus 64 in Maud's shroud have more metaliterary implications. Catullus 64 contains a number of implicit and explicit associations of textile work with narration. For example, the wedding hymn sung by the *Parcae* contains a refrain, another Alexandrian

[24] Laird Ecphrasis, 19.

[25] *cui primum digitum dare appetenti / …solet*, ('whom she always gives her fingertip to peck'), Catullus, 2.3-4.

device, which suggests that the song is spun: '*currite ducentes subtegmina, currite, fusi*'.[26] Thus, the singing of a song is imagined as spinning, in particular by figures of authority. In Latin literature, the *Parcae*, probably ancient birth goddesses, were imagined as women spinning the threads of fate and thus determining the duration of people's lives.[27] In this way, Catulllus 64 may be taken to imply that a poet or bard is a divine creator, defining the lives he invents. Furthermore, Laird argued that the use of the word *vestis* for the coverlet may have rhetorical overtones. Laird bases his interpretation of the word on passages in Petronius and Quintilian, who compare the treatment of speech to that of *vestis* or cloth.[28] Laird suggested that the use of *vestis* in Catullus 64 implies that the ekphrasis represents "a spoken text as well as a woven one", a notion which is enhanced by the close association of spinning and the song of the *Parcae* later in the poem.[29]

The metaliterary use of textile has a more elaborate intertextual tradition than just Petronius' and Quintilian's use of the word *vestis* alone. Textile work has been used as a metaphor for poetry since at least the earliest traces of European literature, the Homeric epics. Our very word 'text' was derived from the Latin noun *textus* ('tissue'), related to the verb *texere* ('to weave'), and its use as a metaphor for 'construction, combination, connection, context' has also been attested since Quintilian's.[30] In the Homeric epics and Greek lyric poetry, weaving also functions as a metaliterary metaphor for poetry.[31] Although a modern reader might be inclined to notice the visual resemblance of weaving and writing, it seems that ancient poets compared the acts of thinking, singing, and the composition

[26] 'Run, shuttles, passing the threads', Cat. 64, 333, 337, 342, 347, 352, 356, 361, 365, 371, 375, and 381.

[27] Albert Henrichs, 'Parcae', in *Brill's New Pauly*.

[28] Petr. *Sat*. 118.5; Quint. *Inst. Or.* viii.5.28.

[29] Laird *Ecphrasis*, 27, 28.

[30] Charlton Thomas Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), s.v. "textus," "texo."; Laird 1993, 18-30.

[31] Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's Odyssey* (Lanham: Lexington 2004, rpt. 2017), 155-56; Jane McIntosh Snyder, "The Web of Song: Weaving Imagery in Homer and the Lyric Poets," *Classical Journal* 76.3 (1981), 193-96; Hanna M. Roisman, "Helen in the "Iliad" "Causa Belli" and Victim of War: From Silent Weaver to Public Speaker," *American Journal of Philology* 127.1 (2006), 1-36.

and performance of oral poetry to weaving.[32] Other forms of textile work are also used as metaliterary metaphors. A professional reciter of, for example, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in later Ancient Greek history was called a rhapsodist, 'a man sewing a song', (ῥαψῳδός), someone who patches pieces of already existing songs together.[33] Furthermore, in the tale of Philomela, the subject of Sophocles' largely lost play *Tereus*, and which was mainly handed down to us in the account by Ovid, embroidery replaces speech when Philomela conveys her rape in embroidery sent to her sister Procne through handwork after her rapist, who happened to be her sister's husband, had cut out her tongue.[34]

Seen in this light, the fact that Walcott chose a textile for his ekphrasis may suggest that the shroud is a symbol for poetry in general, and perhaps for *Omeros* itself. The ekphrasis is also a *mise-en-abyme*, a "situation when part of a work resembles the larger work in which it occurs".[35] This notion is enhanced by the fact that Maud's shroud contains another metaliterary symbol in its design, the singing bird. Like textiles, poetry has also been compared to birdsong at least since Aristophanes' comedy *Birds*.[36] This also occurs in the tale of Philomela. After the rape, Philomela and Procne first avenge themselves by brutally killing the son of Procne and her rapist husband. At the end of the tale, the two women manage to escape by metamorphosing into birds. One of them became the swallow, the other the nightingale, lamenting the death of her son.[37] Subsequently, the Ancient Greek word for nightingale, ἀηδών (*aedon*), was also used as a metaphor for poet.[38] Moreover,

[32] See, for example, Snyder Web, 193-96; Anthony Tucker, "Singing the Rug: Patterned Textiles and the Origins of Indo-European Metrical Poetry," *American Journal of Archaeology* 110.4 (2006), 539-50.

[33] H. G. Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Repr. 9th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), s.v. "ῥαψῳδός."; Joachim Latacz, 'Rhapsodes' in *Brill's New Pauly*; Tucker *Rug*, 546.

[34] *Met*. 6.412-74. There is also a brief summary in Apollodorus' *Library*, 3.14.8.

[35] De Jong *Narratology*, 37.

[36] Leonard Lutwack, *Birds in Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 45-52; Douglas J. Stewart, "The Poet as Bird in Aristophanes and Horace," *Classical Journal* 62.8 (1967), 357-61; Jeni Williams, *Interpreting Nightingales: Gender, Class and Histories* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 17.

[37] Classical accounts differ in the attribution of the birds to the sisters. While in fragments of Sophocles' *Tereus* and in Apollodorus' account Procne changed into a nightingale and Philomela became a swallow, Ovid turned Procne into a swallow and Philomela into a nightingale; Williams *Nightingales*, 20.

[38] Liddell and Scott, s.v. "ἀηδών."; Albert Schachter, 'Aedon,' in *Brill's New Pauly*; see also Williams *Nightingales*, 20; Lutwack *Birds*, 47-48.

the fact that the birds on Maud's shroud are said to be blind brings to mind the traditional blindness of classical seers, the wise poet Homer, as well as the character Omeros and his alter ego Seven Seas in Walcott's *Omeros*.[39]

A NEW LANGUAGE

Based on the intertextuality of the metaliterary use of textiles in Classical literature, it seems that embroidering Maud in *Omeros* is presented as a rhapsodist, composing a new song by stitching together the songs of others. Furthermore, the ekphrasis suggests that these songs belong to the Greek and Latin tradition: Maud's birds or 'poets' have "Greek and Latin tags" at their spurs, the tags referring to the bird guide Maud copied from. The birds, moreover, are embroidered "in an antique frame", indicating the embroidery hoop as well as the framework of Classical literature. Nevertheless, according to a later passage in the poem, the poet-birds also appear to adapt to their new surroundings:

> And those birds Maud Plunkett stitched into her green silk
> with sibylline steadiness were what islands bred:
> brown dove, black grackle, herons like ewers of milk,
>
> pinned to a habitat many had adopted.
> The lakes of the world have their own diaspora
> of birds every winter, but these would not return.
>
> The African swallow, the finch from India
> *now spoke the white language of a tea-sipping tern*,
> with the Chinese nightingales on a shantung screen,

[39] Cf. Dokou *Loom*, 159. Perhaps even the little bird in Catullus 2 and 3, the famous *passer*, could be interpreted as a metaphor for the poet. In that case, Lesbia distracts herself from love with poetry or perhaps even values poetry over love. For the erotic interpretation of the bird, see Julia Haig Gaisser, *Catullus* (Oxford Readings in Classical Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 305-7.

> while the Persian falcon, whose cry leaves a scar
> on the sky till it closes, saw the sand turn green,
> the dunes to sea, understudying the man-o'-war,
>
> *talking the marine dialect of the Caribbean*
> with nightjars, finches, and swallows, each origin
> enriching the islands to which their cries were sewn.[40]

Adopting the melting-pot St Lucia as their new home, the birds are said to have kept their colours, but also to have made an important adaptation. Their language is now specified as that of "a tea-sipping tern" and "the marine dialect of the Caribbean", or in other words, Caribbean English and perhaps French patois.[41] When transferring this to *Omeros*, it may imply that Walcott used a number of intertexts from the Old World, but also adapted them — if only in his choice of language — to his present surroundings.

CONCLUSION

It seems that Walcott's favourable adoption of the sneer of mimicry becomes particularly pronounced in his use of the shroud in *Omeros*. The two quotations about the shroud above suggest that Walcott acts as a modern rhapsodist and *poeta novus*, on the one hand paying tribute to his Classical ancestors, while on the other changing their designs. As a first act of renewal, Walcott combined Penelope's shroud from the *Odyssey* with the coverlet of Peleus and Thetis' wedding bed from Catullus 64, thus rolling into one an example of ancient epic with a newer form of epic. Furthermore, Walcott also replaced Catullus' idea of a heroic, mythical design, and opted instead for a home-made quilt, filling it with elements of the local environment rather than with heroes or gods. In this way, Walcott left out the contrast between humans and gods from Catullus 64, making art the domain of ordinary people instead. In the same way, the frame of *Omeros* deals with local people who have been attributed names from the heroic Greek tradition, rather than with the mythical gods and heroes in Catullus.

[40] Italics my own. Walcott *Omeros*, LXII.ii.

[41] Don Barnard, *Walcott's Omeros, A Reader's Guide* (Boulder: FirstForum, 2014), 248.

Moreover, in his choice of medium (textile work) and contents (birds) Walcott used two metaliterary symbols, confirming that the shroud expresses his poetics. It seems that according to Maud's shroud in *Omeros,* poetry is produced in the here and now, attributing an important, but subservient role for the high-brow literary tradition of the Classical past. Like a postmodern descendant of the neoteric poets, Walcott cherishes the small as true and honest, preferring over the traditional grandeur of high epic the ordinary daily life of the Caribbean. Thus, *Omeros* is indeed an example of Walcott's idea of mimicry. In Maud's shroud, as well as in *Omeros* as a whole, Walcott mimicked the Classical tradition, but only in order to produce something new.

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