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Mythopoeia in the Struggle against Slavery, Racism, and Exclusive Afrocentrism

Edith Hall and
Justine McConnell

An important result of the publication of *Black Athena* was a new interest in defining the work done by ancient Greek mythology and its post-Renaissance reception in the creation of racist ideology. When Bernal asked that we think harder about the implications of the myths of the Asiatic Pelops and especially the Egyptian Danaus settling in mainland Greece, he was stressing the unquestionable truth that many ancient Greeks themselves believed that their land was an ethnic and cultural melting pot. Since they believed it, he reasonably suggested, we should not be too quick to dismiss the historical truth to which the myth of Danaus might ultimately bear witness. Edith Hall (1992) published an argument in response to Bernal that mythical cartography and genealogical mythology involving ethnicity often express quite other things, to do with Greek self-definition, than biological ethnicity. On the other hand, it cannot and should not be denied that a great deal of subsequent scholarly work of great significance on the ancient constitution of ethnicity by, among others, Jonathan Hall, Phiroze Vasunia and the scholars assembled in Irad Malkin's *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity* (2001) has been inspired and informed by the debate Bernal's work had fuelled.

Yet when it comes to reworkings outside academia of the ancient Greek myths relating to Africa in anti-colonial writers since Césaire, let alone anti-slavery writers since the beginnings of the abolition movement in the eighteenth century, the Danaus myth has never

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been one that has found much favour. This is in spite of a very few recent 'topical' or 'updated' productions of Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, an ancient tragedy that dramatizes Danaus' arrival in Greece. By far the most significant of these productions was the Romanian director Silviu Purcarete's international tour (1996–7) with *Les Danaïdes*, a performance of Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, extended to include a reconstruction of the lost plays in its tetralogy. But the Danaids' identity as Egyptian exiles was transformed to suggest, instead, the plight of Islamic refugees in Bosnia (a reality during the war of the early 1990s) (Hall 2010: 340–1). Rather more significant in terms of articulating the subjectivity of diaspora Africans has been the use of the *Suppliants* in Giulio Angioni's novel *Una ignota compagnia* (2006), of which the title is a quotation from the ancient play. Angioni asks the reader to associate the experience of African as well as Sardinian wage slaves in a contemporary Milanese factory with that of Aeschylus' Egyptian asylum-seekers (Hall 2009: 39). This is particularly interesting because Angioni's use of the myth is both analogical (in that it compares an ancient mythical situation with a contemporary situation), and aetiological (in that some of his exploited heroes have indeed come from North Africa, thus repeating or continuing the long *history*, rather than myth, of migration from that continent to hard labour in the Western world).

In this chapter we use as a springboard the historicizing interpretation of myth, favoured by Bernal, which infers from Danaus' arrival a genealogy and aetiology tracing certain Greek peoples and practices to Africa. We aim to illuminate some of the more allusive models of classical myth—what we might choose, for clarity, to describe as the analogical, resistant, and 'equivalent' models—instantiated in fiction and poetry about people of African descent outside Africa. Edith Hall provides context and perspective by exploring some strategies that have been adopted since the late eighteenth century in creative reworkings, relating to Africa, of classical mythology, before Justine McConnell goes on to take Achille's *nekuia* in Derek Walcott's *Omeros* as our primary case study.

The men who made fortunes from slavery themselves appropriated classical mythology as they defined and tried to dignify their activities; perhaps the most extraordinary example is the attempt to add mythical lustre to the forced expatriation of Africans to the Caribbean in the bizarre aetiological imagery of the infamous 'The Voyage of the

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Sable Venus'. An important publication in the defence of slavery was Bryan Edwards's *History Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, which was published first in 1793 and ran into several editions (see Hodkinson and Hall 2011). In the second volume, Edwards (1793: ii. 26) sidestepped the issue of sexual relationships between white men and black slave women (which, provided there was no official marriage, he implicitly condoned) by reproducing a poem that tackles the theme with what now seems breathtaking frivolity. It was penned in Jamaica in 1765 by Edwards's private tutor there, the Revd Isaac Teale, and is a twenty-six-stanza ode, celebrating the arrival of a female slave from Angola to the West Indies (see Blouet 2000: 216). The roguishly sexy tone is set by the epigraph, a line from Virgil's *Eclogue* 2.18: 'The white blossom of privet falls, while the dark blueberries are picked.' In Virgil, this is addressed to a youth by a shepherd who is erotically fixated upon him. In Teale's poem, the coy register is consolidated by conventional references to Erato, the Muse of love poetry, along with the love poets Sappho and Ovid. The 'sable queen' begins her journey from Africa in an inlaid ivory car drawn by winged fish, surrounded by peacocks, ostriches, and dolphins, soft breezes fluttering around her. Her skin surpasses 'the raven's plume, | Her breath the fragrant orange bloom'; she is as beautiful as the Venus of Florence (that is, of Botticelli), and 'at night', we are with monstrous insensitivity told, it is impossible to tell the difference between white and black beauties. At this point the sea-god assumes the disguise 'of a Tar, | The Captain of a man of war', and the sable Venus smiles at him with 'kind consenting eyes'. The result is the birth of a mixed-race Cupid, before his mother arrives, to a rapturous reception, in Jamaica (Edwards 1793: ii. 27–32).

Edwards commissioned an emerging book illustrator, Thomas Stothard, to provide a design for a plate to illustrate the poem, and the result is indeed a shocking near-parody of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1486). An almost naked and very dark, curvaceous woman, with a blank, unreadable facial expression, drifts at sea surrounded by uniformly white flying cherubs and muscular white male gods. The impact of the poem and the engraving together is not only to create an obscene travesty of what Africans really experienced on the Middle Passage, but to illustrate and legitimize white male fantasies about the black women in their possession. The 'Voyage of the Sable Venus' effaces all anxiety, violence, and coercion from the relationship, turning sexual intercourse with slaves, and indeed reproduction with

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them, into a wholly consensual affair: this Venus looks on her 'Tar' with 'mild consenting' eyes. Moreover, in an extraordinary allegorical move, Venus and Neptune come to stand for the entire institution of slavery itself, conceived as an ideal love affair that somehow unites the physical perfection of the African body with the desiring subject of the narrative, the male slave merchants and inheritors of the European cultural tradition.[1]

For the anti-slavery movement, however, it was usually Prometheus, the chained Titan, who was adopted as the mythical representative of the unjustly enslaved African. There was no attempt to create any aetiological narrative tracing Prometheus' origins to Africa: his story was used analogically. The image reproduced here (Fig. 20.1) is the vignette decorating the cover of a widely disseminated collection of poems by three British authors. It was published in order to celebrate the passing of the 1807 Slave Trade bill. In the text, Prometheus is without doubt explicitly equated with Africa, while Hercules—'Alcides'—represents Britain. The first poem opens with a resounding reference to the opening scenario of the *Prometheus Bound* attributed to Aeschylus, in which Strength and Violence hammer Prometheus to the rocks of the Caucasus.

Prometheus caused the abolitionists some problems, since his ability to force compromises with Zeus after his delivery and his association with revolutionary socialism frightened many members of the mainstream public (Hall 2011b). This is one reason why attempts were made to make some other ancient mythical figures represent, however badly and by whatever Procrustean mechanisms, the experience of slaves and their descendants. Jean de Pechméja, for example, was intrigued by the story of Telephus, the son of Hercules with two ethnic identities—biologically Greek but culturally Mysian—who spent some of his life as a slave in the palace of the Argive royal family. Inspired by the form of Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699) but relying upon the political ideas of Montesquieu and Rousseau, in book VI of his utopian novel *Télèphe* (1784), Pechméja sets out a plan for a system of free colonial labour. Acting as intermediary for a large band of fugitive slaves, Télèphe proposes to their former masters that they be recalled to the plantations 'not as slaves, but as citizens' (Pechméja 1784: vi. 216–17; see Seeber 1937:

[1] For a reproduction of the engraving and further discussion, see Wood (2000: 21–2 with fig. 2.4). See also Hall (2011a).

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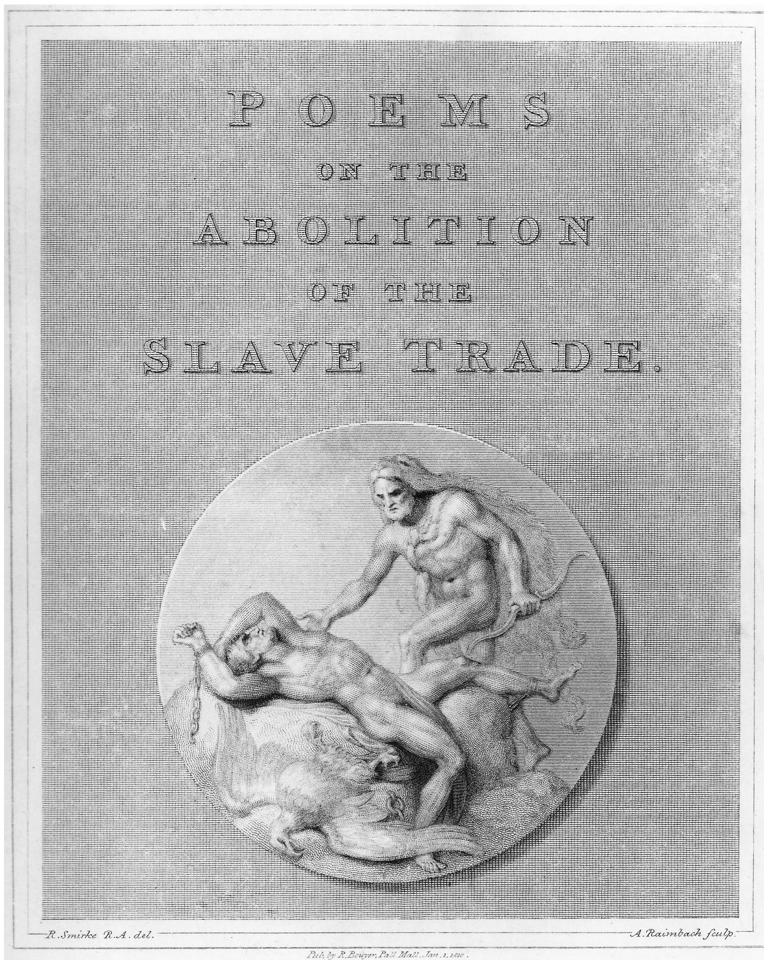

Fig. 20.1. Abolitionist propaganda: Hercules liberates Prometheus

157). Télèphe was a useful enough analogical figure for the anti-slavery sentiments at the time, since, although he endured temporary enslavement and was brought up abroad, he was of divine birth on his father's side and of aristocratic Greek descent on his mother's. But it is hardly surprising that this relatively minor mythical figure failed to ignite the imaginations of many other activists.

American audiences looked to another Titan in addition to Prometheus. Joel Barlow's first edition of his epic of the 'discovery' and

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foundation of America (1787), then entitled *The Vision of Columbus*, did not yet contain the appeal for the slave that was put in the 1807 revised version with its newly Homeric title *The Columbiad*. Book 8 of the revised epic contained a whole new polemical episode in which Atlas, 'Great brother guardian of old Afric's clime' (Barlow 1807: 292) denounces to Hesper (America) the enslavement of Africans (Barlow, incidentally, was in contact with Robert Smirke, the painter of the vignette reproduced as Fig. 20.1, who also provided illustrations for Barlow's epic).[2]

> Enslave my tribes! What, half mankind imban,
> Then read, expound, enforce the rights of man!
> Prove plain and clear how nature's hand of old
> Cast all men equal in her human mould!
> (Barlow 1807: 293)

Since Atlas was reputed to hold up the sky from the Atlas mountains in north-west Africa, or on a promontory nearby in Morocco, there was a certain cartographical logic for making him the spokesman of the continent from which slaves were derived. Moreover, the story of Atlas allowed Barlow's abolitionist readers to identify themselves, flatteringly, with Heracles, who would one day relieve Atlas of his heavy burden of servitude. Although the Atlas symbolism seems not to have caught on, two paintings by J. M. W. Turner suggest that revenge for the inhuman crime of slavery can be inflicted by elemental natural forces, which are allegorically associated with two massive Greek mythical figures not dissimilar to Titans. In *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* (1829), it has been argued that Odysseus' ship, threatened by the vengeful fury of the bellowing Cyclops, consciously suggests an ancient slave galley; in *The Slave Ship* or *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhon coming on* (1840), the violence of the oncoming storm may be rendered more powerful by the alternative title's suggestion that it was activated by the mythical personification of the whirlwind, and son of Earth, Typhon himself.[3]

When a British playwright attempted to find an acceptable hero in a Greek myth to stage in a tragedy to celebrate the 1833 abolition of

[2] The paintings were commissioned by the Pennsylvania Academy, which exhibited eleven of them in 1807, and reproductions were included in the edition published that year (Barlow 1807).

[3] See Wood (2000: 53–4) on *The Slave Ship* in relation to Thomas Stothard's proslavery engraving *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*.

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slavery—rather than just the trade in slaves—he encountered such difficulties that he was forced to 'invent' a new Greek tragic mythical plot and slave-hero altogether, neither of which had anything to do with Africa at all. In 1836 Thomas Noon Talfourd, a radical Liberal MP, Abolitionist, and Chartist sympathizer, adapted Euripides' *Ion* in order to celebrate all the reforms instigated by the Liberal Party, especially the Great Reform Act of 1832, which had massively extended the male franchise. The play was performed at Covent Garden, to great acclaim, with the avowed Republican William Charles Macready in the starring role.

But in his attempt to write a play more specifically about slavery, *The Athenian Captive* (1838), Talfourd had to invent a plot involving a male slave (Thoas, a Euripidean name) who (somewhat like both Oedipus and Ion) does not know that he is the long-lost son of the Corinthian tyrant Creon and his wife, an Athenian aristocrat. The (apparently) ordinary citizen Athenian Thoas, now a prisoner of war and enslaved, nevertheless refuses to take off his helmet in front of the king, and, when offered the choice of slavery or death, responds, 'Dost dare | Insult a son of Athens by the doubt | Thy words imply?' The play's most theatrically powerful feature is the contrast between Thoas' first armoured, helmeted entry in Act I and his second, in a slave's garb, in Act II. When Lycus, the wicked slave-master, comes to give him servile dress, Thoas laments:

> Must an Athenian warrior's free-born limbs
> Be clad in withering symbols of the power
> By which man marks his property in flesh . . .

Talfourd did really mean it: the *Reading Mercury* of 5 May 1838 reports that he spoke with considerable passion on the subject of 'Negro Emancipation' at a public meeting in his constituency. The action of the play throughout underlines the equality of all members of mankind and the inhumanity of slavery, especially in the friendship between Hyllus and Thoas, which transcends superficial markers of status and race, and Hyllus' fanstasy that he and Thoas can exchange clothes and thus erase the social boundary dividing them.

Although this is a story exclusively about Greeks in ancient Greece, the more mature members of Macready's public will at the performance of *The Athenian Captive* very likely have recalled that, twenty years before, he had starred as Gambia, the African slave who leads a revolt in Surinam in Thomas Morton's *The Slave: A Musical Drama*,

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'as performed at the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden. The Musick by Mr Bishop' (London 1816), set in Surinam, beginning with the suppression of a slave revolt. The hero is Gambia, an African slave, who loves Zelinda, a quadroon slave, also beloved by Clifton, a captain in the English army. William Macready played Gambia and Miss Stephens played Zelinda, in a production that celebrated the new legislation. In the same year he had also made his debut and caused a stir in the role of his notably—and as such much noted—sympathetic black Othello.

Pechméja's plantation reformer Telephus, Barlow's new debate on slavery between an oratorical Titan Atlas and a personification of the West (an *agon* with no identifiable classical precedent), Turner's Polyphemus and Typhon, and Talfourd's invented, self-sacrificing mythical Greek idealist Thoas therefore represented different ways of giving abolition mythical authority, although Prometheus remained the central analogue in abolitionist discourse of forcibly expatriated African slaves and their descendants. This was partly, no doubt, because his myth allowed the Western abolitionists of slavery to see themselves in the heroic figure of Heracles the benefactor, reconceived as a white Englishman or North American who with great generosity liberated the African Prometheus.

Long after abolition, Wole Soyinka has completely inverted—and subverted—the trope that made the white Heraclean hero liberate the Promethean black man or carry the African Atlas' burden. In the context of praising Nelson Mandela, he has pitted the African 'Herculean' burden-carrying archetype against the Odyssean, imperial Dr Livingstone archetype (Soyinka 1998: 374–5). As a series of readings and theorizations of the genealogy of classicism in African-diasporic writing—by Paul Gilroy, Shelley Haley, Patrice Rankine, Hazel Carby, Emily Greenwood, Tracey Walters, and Tessa Roynon (among others)—has shown, the genealogy of black readings of classical mythology as well as white readings of blackness in relation to classical mythology[4] is long, dense, and complicated. Until recently, however, it has not been much concerned with explicitly tracing its heroes to Africa. The relevance of the name of the titular heroine of Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), for example, reveals an allusion to

[4] See McCoskey (1998) on how the disruptive and abusive nature of white men's sexual exploitation of their female slaves is referenced by the figure of the Aeschylean Cassandra to illustrate Rosa in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (1936).

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the sexually charged relationship between Heracles and the princess he has enslaved in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. The name 'Sappho Clark' adopted by Mabelle Beaubean in Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900) signifies Hopkins's project as she turns women's attempts to become the creators of their own literary subjects and subjectivity, to create a feminist counter-mythology (although Sappho was strictly speaking a historical figure, the narratives that have clustered around her are equivalent to myth (see Tate 1992: 148–9; also Somerville 1997: 194–8)).[5]

W. E. B. Du Bois returned repeatedly to the myth of the quest for the golden fleece, above all in his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), in which the ancient narrative, compressed from Apollonius' *Argonautica*, is actually recounted (Du Bois 1911: 71–3). The fleece, for Du Bois, resonated profoundly with the involvement of expatriated and enslaved Africans in the cotton industry. In *The Souls of Black Folk* the brutality caused by the growing industrialization of the South is figured as Hippomenes, enticing 'swarthy Atalanta, tall and wild', with the golden apples of financial inducement (Du Bois 1965: 263; see also Brodwin 1972). Countée Cullen's personal investment in the racial strife he saw depicted in Euripides' *Medea*, an investment revealed in his version of 1935, is transparent. Gwendolyn Brooks's poems *Annie Allen* (1949) and *In the Mecca* (1968) have been read by Walters as revisions of the Demeter and Persephone myth. For Orlando Patterson in *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964), it was Sisyphus' punishment that represented the endless travail of the poor, descended from slaves, condemned in eternity to labour fruitlessly for little profit. Toni Morrison's engagement with the classical tradition goes far beyond the appropriation of *Medea* in *Beloved*, the Demeter/Kore myth in *The Bluest Eye* and allusive treatments of Oedipus and Odysseus in the *Song of Solomon*. Roynon has shown how Morrison often subverts the central role that Greece and Rome have played in American self-representation.[6] These models are not historical, genealogical, nor aetiological, since Heracles actually beat up Africans in ancient myth, Jason is Greek, and so were Sappho and Iole, Atalanta,

[5] In an as yet unpublished paper, delivered at the American Philological Association in 2006, Shelley Haley discussed Pauline Hopkins's Afrocentric revisioning of both Sappho and Chariclea, the heroine of Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*.

[6] On Cullen, see Rankine (2006); on Brooks, see Walters (2007); on Morrison, see Roynon (2006, 2007a).

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Oedipus and Odysseus, as also, although they were divinities, were Demeter and Persephone. Medea was associated with the Persians and Medes, and Sisyphus had little to do with Africa. The myths are therefore used, however importantly Africa figures at an implicit level in these texts, analogically.

Other authors have, however, drawn on a model that *is* aetiological in the sense that it does see ancient Greek myths, especially those of siege, quest, and travel (the stuff of Homeric epic) as doing important ideological work in creating psychological precedent for colonization. This use of myth 'resists' the dominant reading to imagine its implications from the perspective of the hero's victims. Once the supernatural world of the *Odyssey*, for example, is read from this perspective, the figures whose territories Odysseus explores can and have been read as paradigms for peoples colonized and exploited by Western powers. Indeed, for some black critics, the Cyclops Polyphemus' eye is no more than a marker of radical *difference*. For this group of interpreters, the Cyclops represents the way that ancient Greek colonizers *imagined* the different types of human that they encountered on their marauding voyages. Their own different appearance, diet, and mode of production, and the fear they feel become projected onto the figure of the primitive ogre and crystallized in him. What is now needed, it is being argued, is not identification with the Greek adventurer as he invades the home of the Cyclops, devours his food, intoxicates, and blinds him—a triumphalist celebration of the Greek's right to subdue and dominate—but a reading that tries to imagine what it *felt like to be the Cyclops*, that turns him into the *subject* of the narrative, rather than its *object*. This line of argument owes much to the readings of Polyphemus' close relation Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the colonial agenda of which was pointed out with the greatest eloquence by Aimé Césaire in his 1969 French version of the play *Une Tempête*.[7] In David Dabydeen's *Coolie Odyssey*, which explores the difficult relationship between a black man and a white woman, configured as Caliban and Miranda, there is also the mysterious presence in the modern woman's world of a man with 'a prehistoric eye' who delivers to her 'strange usurping tales of anthropophagi | And recitation of colonial texts' (Dabydeen 1988: 28).

[7] The anticolonial reading of *The Tempest* emerged as a response to José Enrique Rodó's 1900 essay *Ariel* (see Rodó 1929), although in his version Ariel represented the virtuous youth of Latin America and Caliban the evil materialism of the United States.

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The 'resistant' position has been taken furthest by Sylvia Wynter, Professor Emerita at Stanford University, who proposes that black readers should practise what she calls 'a Cyclopean poetics of reading'. She argues that the Cyclops defines radical difference within the repertoire of images encoded in Western culture, on the level of 'marvellous reality' (Wynter 2002). For Wynter, the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey*, on the level of the imagination—of magical realism—is profoundly important in the history of racism. In the Caribbean and North America, for Aimé Césaire in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1952), and Wilson Harris in *The Mask of the Beggar* (2003), as well as Derek Walcott in *Sea Grapes* (1976) and *Omeros* (1990), the encounter between Odysseus and the Cyclops has both before and after Wynter been the focus of much analysis of the original colonial encounter (see Rankine 2006, Hall 2008: 90–8, and McConnell 2009).

In *Omeros*, Walcott's 'resistant' position extends beyond the Cyclops to a number of other Homeric themes, even reaching to the genre of the work itself: while critics have been divided over whether it can be labelled an 'epic' (see Farrell 1997: 249–50 and Hardwick 2000: 98), Walcott himself has rejected that categorization, albeit ambivalently:

> I do not think of it as an epic. Certainly not in the sense of epic design. Where are the battles? There are a few, I suppose. But 'epic' makes people think of great wars and warriors. That isn't the Homer I was thinking of; I was thinking of Homer the poet of the seven seas. (quoted in Hamner 1997: 396)

If Walcott is subverting the 'epic' Homer, then who is this 'poet of the seven seas'? Most likely it refers to an Everyman figure of a poet, a perception of Homer as less distinctly Greek and more 'universal', whose poems are as meaningful to audiences in the Caribbean, Africa, and the Americas as to those in Europe. The idiomatic sense of 'the seven seas', referring to any large number of different seas, gives the character Omeros his nickname in Walcott's poem, as well as him being called, deflatingly, after the vitamin pills of the same name (III.ii, pp. 17–18). At the same time, Walcott is surely aware that 'the seven seas' are first mentioned in the Sumerian hymn, number 8—these hymns being the earliest-known literature, composed in Mesopotamia, and dating back to 2300 BCE.[8] As such, Walcott is

[8] See Meador (2000: 72–3) for a translation of hymn number 8.

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entering into the fray surrounding Bernal's work, alluding to the influence of Mesopotamia on ancient Greek culture, and to the connections between the two. It is clear that the Homer Walcott *was* 'thinking of' is a Homer whose works are as relevant to the displaced descendants of the Middle Passage and victims of colonialism as to the perpetrators of it.

Achille, the central character of *Omeros*, is a St Lucian fisherman who 'returns' to Africa in a hallucinatory dream induced by sunstroke, and the remainder of this chapter focuses on this episode. After contemplating the deaths of some of his fellow-fisherman by drowning, Achille ponders the devastating loss of life of the Middle Passage, 'the nameless bones of all his brothers | drowned in the crossing' (XXIV.ii, p. 128); following which, he experiences a reverse Middle Passage. Guided by a sea-swift, a national bird of the Caribbean, known as 'l'hirondelle des Antilles' (signalling the centrality of the Caribbean to this experience), Achille journeys from St Lucia 'back' to Africa. He even 'felt he was headed home' (XXIV.iii, p. 131), but, as we will see, this voyage is a *katabasis* rather than a *nostos*: a transformative journey to an underworld from which he must emerge, not one to the destination itself.

As an epic motif, the *katabasis* has featured in, among others, Virgil and Dante, Homer and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as well as in the works of Freud and Marx.[9] During a *katabasis*, the traveller undergoes a series of trials through which he is metaphorically destroyed and reborn anew, often with new strength or knowledge. The *Odyssey*'s *katabasis* sees the hero descend to the underworld, ostensibly to question Teiresias about his route home. As he meets his mother there, as well as some famous warriors who had died at Troy, the episode emphasizes a reassessment of the Iliadic code, particularly seen in Achilles' volte-face regarding the decisions he should have made. The sequence renews Odysseus' confidence, links him once more to his past, and provides him with advice for the future, just as it does for Achille in *Omeros*: Achille's encounter with his father Afolabe echoes that of Odysseus with Anticleia;[10] he meets the tribespeople from whom he is descended and learns some of their history,

[9] Falconer (2005) discusses the imaginative tradition of *katabasis* and its use in literature since 1945, though she does not discuss Derek Walcott's work.

[10] See Hardwick (2000: 107) and Callahan (2003: 89) on Walcott's inversion of the Homeric precedent in this episode.

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and this new knowledge will equip him better for life on St Lucia. Emerging from his *katabasis*, Achille has a strong sense of his own hybrid identity and a pride in his multiple roots. At the same time, Gregson Davis's important arguments (2007) on the nature of 'home' for the anti-colonial and postcolonial writer—that the *nostos* can be a *katabasis*, and the colonial reality of home can render it an underworld—are illuminating here. Ultimately, however, Walcott depicts a more promising present, and a St Lucia that is successfully throwing off the shackles of its colonial past.

As Achille's voyage along the river towards his ancestral homeland begins, he hears the voice of God speaking to him, in an unmistakeably Caribbean (rather than African) dialect, thereby suggesting that St Lucia, not Africa, is his home. Yet his pirogue is a 'homecoming canoe' (XXV.ii) and even Achille himself believes that he is home ('[he] woke, not knowing where he was.|The sadness sank into him slowly that he was home' (XXVI.ii)). However, the poem goes on to proclaim that this is not so: gazing at his reflection in the river, Achille notices that it

> seemed homesick
> for the history ahead, as if its proper place
> lay in unsettlement.
>
> (XXVI.ii, p. 140).

This startling pronouncement declares that, despite the dislocation from their ancestral home ('the one pain | that is inconsolable, the loss of one's shore' (XXVIII.iii, p. 151)), for Walcott the African continent is not the true homeland of the Caribbean people. Their homes have been founded anew, on islands encompassing a multitude of different cultural influences, and this is their 'proper place', their home. West Indian identity is not to be found in Africa alone, but, rather, by embracing the present with the past, it can be found within the very hybridity that that entails; as Walcott describes it: 'a West Indian personality, one in which all our races are powerfully fused' (quoted in Hamner 1997: 23).

If Achille's reverse Middle Passage is indeed a nekuian episode rather than a return home, then the question of its interaction with Bernal's *Black Athena* becomes all the more interesting. Given the impact of Bernal's work, Walcott is likely to have been aware of *Black Athena* at this time, and certainly he spoke of its themes in reference to Romare Bearden's work in 1995, when he discussed the extensive

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debt that ancient Greece owes to Egypt (Walcott 1997*a*: 234), and also in his stage version of the *Odyssey*, where Eurycleia proclaims: 'Is Egypt who cradle Greece till Greece mature' (Walcott 1993: 9). It is possible that the publication of the first volume of *Black Athena*, and the reaction it provoked, prompted Walcott to return to a theme that he had previously explored most extensively in his 1967 play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*.

In that play, Walcott contemplated the nature of West Indian identity and the difficulty of negotiating its different facets into a cohesive whole. The vehicle by which he did this, a vision and its concomitant return to Africa, were later redeployed in *Omeros*, though Walcott's own perspective had developed in the intervening time. The protagonist of *Dream*, Makak, has a vision of a white woman who tells him that he is descended from 'the family of lions and kings' (Walcott 1972: 236) and he subsequently sets out on a journey to Africa. However, this Afrocentric dream of a return to Africa is inspired by an apparition of a white woman, which suggests that 'back to Africa' ideas may in fact come from white society. Eventually, Makak realizes that his vision of Africa is an extremely idealized one and, ironically, is still bound into the Manichean oppositions of black and white as negative and positive (Olaniyan 1995: 105–8). The dream degenerates into violence, and when Makak finally awakes he is renewed and refreshed to have thrown off the oppressive notion of an Edenic Africa that was enslaving him just as much as his oppression by whiteness had.

When Derek Walcott returned to this theme of a visionary journey to Africa thirty-three years later, some similarities remain but important differences now exist. Joining in the debate prompted by *Black Athena*, Walcott engages imaginatively with the idea that the ancient Greek Classics belong as much to Africans as to Europeans. This was a recurrent theme in Walcott, but Bernal's work may have prompted him to return to it once again. However, his argument differs from Bernal's genealogical and aetiological model; for Walcott, it is more a matter of the distillation of history onto a different plane in which all historical periods happen concurrently with each other, as will be discussed shortly.

In *Omeros*, the fisherman Achille's voyage to Africa may recall the 'Back to Africa' campaigns that had been in existence since the early nineteenth century and were reinvigorated by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s. This is alluded to in the song that Achille listens to when he

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first returns home after his vision (XXXI.i, p. 161): Bob Marley's 'Buffalo Soldier' (1980) contains the lines (not quoted by Walcott):

> If you know your history,
> Then you would know where you coming from,
> Then you wouldn't have to ask me,
> Who the 'eck do I think I am,

as well as 'Stolen from Africa, brought to America', and 'Driven from the mainland to the heart of the Caribbean'. Bob Marley is one of the most famous Rastafarians, and Marcus Garvey is believed by many Rastas to be a prophet of their religion. However, the 'back to Africa' message is promptly undermined by a number of factors, not least that Achille's voyage takes place only in a sunstroke-induced dream, rather than in reality. Though the vision changes Achille, he does not, unlike Makak, try to take others there too: this is not his *nostos* but only a nekuian *katabasis*. This should not surprise readers of Walcott's work, as he himself has written: 'Going back to Africa is assuming an inferiority. We must look *inside*. West Indies exists but we must find it' (quoted in Rodman 1974: 240).

This is exactly what is enacted in Achille's vision: that which he experiences in his dream is the revelation of roots within his own Caribbean self, not a suggestion that his whole identity can be found in Africa. For a long time Walcott had stood apart from Afrocentrism, though he did grudgingly accept the importance of its role, for example in his 1964 essay 'The Necessity of Negritude' (Walcott 1997*b*: 20–3). But, for Walcott, Negritude or Afrocentrism cannot offer a whole answer, because they attempt to do so to the exclusion of other parts of the Caribbean inheritance, rather than embracing the hybridity. However, Bernal's thesis, emphasizing the African roots of ancient Greek society, may have softened Walcott's stance: in contrast to Negritude and Afrocentrism, which are starkly *ex*clusive, Bernal's was a theory that showed the diverse roots of the ancient Greek world (Howe 1998: 193). The ancient Greeks, therefore, like the modern-day Caribbean people, had a hybrid identity. This common experience between the people of Greece and the West Indies is one that Walcott had hit upon long ago, explored in many of his works, and in his assertion that the Greeks of the ancient world had Puerto Rican tastes (Brown and Johnson 1990: 216–17). Though this latter is more a question of nature and temperament, the similarities had long been apparent to Walcott; Bernal's work reconfirmed them.

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Where Walcott's stance differs from the thesis proposed in *Black Athena* is in the way that he finds that connection between Africa and ancient Greece. While Bernal's work may have increased his interest in the genealogical model and perhaps as a result *Omeros* depicts the meeting of Achille with his African ancestors, Walcott's primary connection is found in a less concrete proposal. His essay 'The Muse of History' expounds this, in relation to Caribbean writers: 'Their philosophy, based on a contempt for historic time, is revolutionary, for what they repeat to the New World is its simultaneity with the Old' (Walcott 1998: 37). Walcott condenses time so that it is seen on the same axis as space, with eras happening simultaneously; as he explains, 'if you think of art as a simultaneity that is inevitable in terms of certain people, then Joyce is a contemporary of Homer' (Walcott 1997a: 241). This philosophy is shared with a number of Caribbean writers, and, as Emily Greenwood (2007: 196) has shown, it confronts the temporal gap between ancient Greece and Rome and the New World, and immediately closes that gap by the assertion of simultaneity. It may also explain why Walcott is more interested in exploring influences between cultures, rather than origins:[11] traditional notions of linear time are not important to him and discussion of 'origins'/'roots' serves only to compound the problem that Caribbeans may have of being labelled derivative or imitative.

The complexity of Walcott's *Omeros* results partly from its fusion of analogical and resistant models of myth, along with one of 'equivalence': this is instantiated particularly in the epic of the enslavement of his tribes-people that Achille hears performed by the griot of the village from which his ancestors were abducted. Epic poetry and storytelling are by no means an exclusively European phenomenon, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr (1987: 37) has emphasized when commenting on the profound importance to postcolonialism of the discoveries of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in relation to orality. The broader roots of epic are foregrounded in this episode, just as they have been by the nekuian episode as a whole.

The role of the griot in Afolabe's village (whose consciousness seems to merge with that of Seven Seas/Omeros) is not merely one of entertainment but also, as in the *Odyssey*, one of preserving history for the present, in order that it may be learnt from, and the communal

[11] Rotella (2004: 149) discusses Walcott's 'distrust in myths of return to origins'.

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identity of people may be understood and reaffirmed. His subject matter is strikingly cosmogonic, bringing to mind Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Sumerian myths:

> who perished in what battle, who was swift with the arrow,
> who mated with a crocodile, who entered a river-horse
> and lived in its belly, who was the thunder's favourite,
>
> who the serpent-god conducted miles off his course
> for some blasphemous offence and how he would pay for it
> by forgetting his parents, his tribe, and his own spirit
> for an albino god. (XXVI.i, p. 139)

The Hesiodic tone of this contributes to the fundamental connections Walcott makes between ancient Europe, the Near East, and Africa—accentuated in Achille's *katabasis*, a motif that can itself be traced to *Gilgamesh*, the oldest surviving heroic narrative. As well as the universal themes of some folk tales that can be seen here, the war tales of the griot also recall the *Iliad*: that the 'thunder's favourite' is equally reminiscent of the fickle favouritism of Zeus, and that the serpent-god who diverts and punishes the man is a divinity of the same mould as Poseidon. The hero of the African tale, however, is defeated by the god and does indeed succumb to the amnesia that Odysseus resists. Achille has already been seen to have suffered this same fate of 'forgetting his parents, his tribe, and his own spirit' for the 'albino god' of the New World and a displaced present; the Middle Passage that Achille's ancestors underwent is thus cast in similar terms to Odysseus' inability to find his way home to Ithaca. Yet Walcott's poem shows Achille being born again, as is apt after a visit to the underworld, and this time he will remember his past, and, like Odysseus, remain undefeated by the vengeful god.

Achille, the namesake of the Greek hero famed for choosing *kleos* over *nostos*, not only undergoes an Odyssean *katabasis* in his search for home in Walcott's poem, but he also simultaneously both disappoints the expectations of his name by not possessing the battle prowess to defeat the slave-raiders, and fulfils those expectations by being felled by his now-proverbial Achilles' heel. It is his ancestors whose homes are ravaged, feeding in, perhaps, to the 'reverse similes' (Foley 1978) of the *Odyssey* in which he is compared and linked to his victims, but also articulating a complex response that resists the dominant reading by role reversal rather than by adopting the perspective of the victims/villains of Homer.

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The griot's song contradicts the image that the Afrocentrists were keen to focus on, as Derek Walcott portrays both the slaves and the slavers as Africans. He discussed this in an interview in 1990: 'The people who sold Africans and West Indians as slaves were Africans. That's a reality that is not often told . . . What happened was, one tribe captured the other tribe. That is the history of the world' (quoted in Brown and Johnson 1990: 212–13). This is an example of Walcott's deliberate denial of the singular victimhood of black people at the hands of white, and it can be seen again in his refusal to see their suffering as unique. Though the Middle Passage was horrific, Walcott equates this suffering with that of the Sioux, and also with that of the ex-patriot Major Plunkett's. In fact, to the irritation of Paul Breslin, Walcott later equates his own suffering in the wake of his divorce, with that of the massacre of the Sioux (Walcott 1990: 175; Breslin 2001: 262). As Goff and Simpson (2007: 254) have shown, Walcott not only rejects the uniqueness of African suffering by depicting the genocide of Native Americans, Aruacs, and European Jews; he also aligns the enslavement of Africans with the slavery practised in Greece and Rome, further refusing to grant exceptional status to Africa. Similarly, it is not only Achille who experiences a *katabasis* in the poem, but also Major Plunkett and the narrator: the former as he tries to communicate with his now-dead wife Maud via the medium of Ma Kilman (LXI, pp. 306–09), and the latter as Omeros leads him, in Dante-esque fashion, through an underworld journey that will free him of the strictures of the Western canon (LVIII.iii, p. 293) (Ciocia 2000: 92–8; Goff and Simpson 2007: 248–50). Depicting the enslavement of Africans by Africans not only denies the possibility of claiming racial, rather than tribal, persecution; it also removes white powers from this history to an extent. While it may complicate historical understandings of European colonizers' responsibility for the Middle Passage, Walcott's portrayal also obliterates them from the historical record to a certain degree.

As we have seen, since the late eighteenth century a number of models have been used to approach myth. Bernal's historicizing approach, which attracted such attention from audiences in a diverse range of fields, has not, in fact, been widely adopted by creative artists, who have instead turned to more allusive models. Analogical approaches, such as the anti-slavery movement's use of the chained Prometheus to represent enslaved Africans, eschewed such a genealogical model.

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Likewise, Walcott's analogical approach is not so much interested in a historicizing interpretation, as in one that 'resists' the dominant reading in order to compel his audience to consider these tales from a new perspective more pertinent to a postcolonial world. While Bernal's work has given rise to much important research within academic circles on the ancient constitution of ethnicity, writers, dramatists, and artists have adopted altogether different approaches that grant a flexibility that could not be accommodated by purely genealogical or aetiological interests, and that empowers artists to appropriate and rewrite these myths in ways that make them relevant and revealing in a huge variety of modern contexts.