

Justine M^cConnell, *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora since 1939*. Oxford, OUP 2013. Pp. x + 312. ISBN 978-0-19-960500-2. £65.00.

A further volume in the fine OUP 'Classical Presences' series, M^cConnell's book deals with the work of creative artists of ultimately African descent who respond each in their own way to the Homeric *Odyssey*. M^cConnell focusses above all on issues of identity and homecoming, the search by people of the African diaspora for a place within the postcolonial world. The author ranges with considerable skill, and with an alert sensitivity to political and historical nuance, across poetry, drama, the novel and film. Her book will greatly interest scholars not only of the *Odyssey* and classical reception, but also of postcolonial literature.

A lively Introduction (pp. 1-38) outlines the ways in which the *Odyssey*, particularly Book 9, can be read as a kind of proto-colonial text. The Cyclops, an archetypal naïve 'Other' whose home is invaded by Odysseus and whose goods are taken, becomes especially important to the writers discussed by M^cConnell. She touches here also on the problem for postcolonial authors whether or not to publish in the colonial languages, and on the contested value, for these authors, of Classics that were formerly central to an oppressive colonial system of education.

A welcome feature of M^cConnell's book is that it does not deal only with works written in English. Aimé Césaire's groundbreaking anticolonial poem of 1939, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natale* ('Notebook of a return to my native land'), which was to strongly influence many of the works discussed in *Black Odysseys*, is the subject of Chapter 1 (pp. 39-69). Although Césaire draws no explicit parallel between his poet-narrator who 'returns' in imagination to a subjected Martinique, and Odysseus who comes home to Ithaca, M^cConnell argues persuasively that 'themes of return, *katabasis*, displacement, heroism, oppression, and imperialism, all contribute to the formation of *Cahier's* relationship with the *Odyssey*' (p. 63). In particular, she analyses in terms of Odysseus' meeting with the Cyclops the important episode of *Cahier* in which the narrator encounters an ugly poverty-stricken black man on a tram. She finds that the narrator shows facets of both Odysseus and Cyclops, of both arrogant hero and despised 'Other'.

In her second chapter (pp. 71-105), M^cConnell discusses the many and complex ways in which the novel *Invisible Man* (1952) by black American writer Ralph Ellison responds to the *Odyssey*. Just as Odysseus must conceal his true identity and adopt multiple disguises in order to survive, so the hero of *Invisible Man* (never named in the novel) must play numerous roles as he struggles to find an identity and a place for himself in American society. In the process, as M^cConnell shows, *Invisible Man* displays traits of the trickster, both of Homeric Odysseus and of African-American Brer Rabbit, and must face down hostile Cyclopean figures, such as the controlling doctors in a hospital, and Brother Jack, manipulative leader of the quasi-communist Brotherhood. Like Odysseus, *Invisible Man*, too, becomes 'No Man' and undergoes a descent to the underworld. But M^cConnell draws attention not only to the similarities, but also the differences between novel and epic, most important of which is that Odysseus regains his true identity and home, whereas *Invisible Man* at the end of the novel remains in his underground hiding place, not yet having forged a stable identity for himself.

The central and longest chapter of the book (pp. 107-154) surveys two works of Derek Walcott, his *Omeros* (1990) and *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (1993). In discussing *Omeros*, M^cConnell emphasises the way in which Walcott, by erasing temporal and geographical difference, is able to assimilate ancient Mediterranean with modern Caribbean, the oral epic poet Homer with an African griot or the St Lucian singer, Seven Seas. In the process, as she well comments, 'Walcott is removing classical Greece from its pedestal, but he does so without lowering its value' (p. 108). The part of *Omeros* where the *Odyssey* looms largest is in the twentieth-century poem's *katabasis* when Achille, in a vision brought on by

sunstroke, 'visits' Africa and encounters his forebears. Again M^cConnell is alert to difference: she points out that, unlike Odysseus, the questing Achille in his *katabasis* resembles an insubstantial ghost to those he meets; and whereas Odysseus interrogates the shades, it is Achille's ancestor who questions him.

Analysing *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, M^cConnell shows how Walcott rewrites Homeric epic in postcolonial fashion, rehabilitating the despised Thersites, and bringing out the tragic effects on Odysseus of all the violence of the Trojan War. Modern readers find problematic the indiscriminate slaughter of the suitors in the *Odyssey* and, even more so, the vengeful hanging of the maid-servants (averted in the drama). In M^cConnell's reading of the play, such actions are due to Walcott's 'Odysseus . . . suffering from a delusional psychosis, a type of post-traumatic stress brought on by his experiences at Troy' (p. 142).

M^cConnell moves from the twentieth century into the twenty-first with chapters on, respectively, Jon Amiel's film, *Sommersby* (1993), and *The Mask of the Beggar* (2003) by Caribbean novelist, Wilson Harris. Neither the director nor the scriptwriter of *Sommersby* is of African descent, but M^cConnell includes consideration of the film because it features a pair of freed slaves who, she argues, recall the *Odyssey's* Eurycleia and Eumaeus, while themes of departure and homecoming, and of disguise and recognition in the movie also respond to the ancient epic. Her discussion here has interesting things to say about slavery, class tensions, and questions of the stability or instability of identity in both epic and film.

Throughout her book, one senses that M^cConnell has an affinity especially for writers like Ellison and Walcott who are inclusive, who embrace – albeit critically – the cultures of both black and white. Another such writer is Wilson Harris, in whose work M^cConnell emphasizes the intense effort to build bridges between cultures and peoples, between oppressors and oppressed. Harris, she writes, 'is compelling "universalism" to take on a new, truer meaning that includes Africa, Asia, and the Americas as well as Europe' (p. 191). As far as *The Mask of the Beggar* is concerned, M^cConnell finds that the novel shares the *Odyssey's* interest in the father-son relationship and in the complexity of disguised identities. Once again, the modern work contains a Cyclops figure, a contradictory Cyclopean gaoler whom Harris refuses to make either simply oppressive or simply innocent.

South African classicists will be particularly interested in the chapter (pp. 211-235) on Njabulo Ndebele's novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003), that concludes the main part of *Black Odysseys*. In a discussion full of penetrating insights, M^cConnell shows that the novel addresses the double colonization of women both by colonial authorities and by men of their own culture. She alerts us to the quiet but decisive way in which Ndebele subverts Homeric epic by placing his Penelope, a fictionalized Winnie Mandela, in the foreground, while letting Odysseus and his counterpart, Nelson Mandela, be seen only through women's eyes. Further, the 'home' towards which the women are travelling is no familiar Ithaca; M^cConnell quotes from the novel the words of one of its female characters: 'In a country where so many homes have been demolished and people moved . . . home temporarily becomes the shared experience of homelessness' (p. 231, quoting Ndebele, p. 82). The novel, as she points out, also recreates the orality of epic through story-telling, only now it is not men but women who are the bards.

A Coda (pp. 237-253) on the cross-cultural theatre work of East African Indian director, Jatinder Verma, resident in the UK since the late 1960s, a brief Conclusion (pp. 255-258), and an Appendix, consisting of an interview the author held with Verma in 2007 (pp. 259-270), round off the book.

In setting out to maintain a dialogue between the Homeric *Odyssey* and the twentieth- and twenty-first-century anticolonial and postcolonial works she discusses, the author of *Black Odysseys* posed herself a tricky challenge. There was the danger, on the one hand, that she might concentrate too much on the *Odyssey* and make the modern work somehow subordinate and secondary to it, thus acting like a new sort of cultural colonizer; or, on the other hand, that she might focus too closely on the modern work, and let the Homeric

Odyssey disappear into the background. As it is, M^cConnell succeeds in keeping a delicate equilibrium between the two. And instead of the ancients 'giving' or 'transmitting' and the moderns passively 'receiving', M^cConnell sees the postcolonial authors she discusses as being in an active dialogical relationship with the Classics, engaging with Homer as equals, on a field of the authors' own choosing.¹ Likewise, her own discussion moves back and forth between ancient and modern, showing how the postcolonial text can cast as much light on the classical one as vice versa. The task M^cConnell set herself in this book was by no means easy, but she has carried it out with great success and with much learning lightly worn.

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¹ As M^cConnell's mentor, Edith Hall, has commented: 'The old notion of the Classical Tradition or the Classical Heritage [suggested] the idea of a legacy, passed passively down the generations like the family teaspoons' (*The Return of Ulysses: a Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* [London 2008] 5). *Black Odysseys* demonstrates just how far classical reception studies have moved on from such an idea.

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