Shipwrecked
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This chapter explores the influence of the Homeric shipwreck and the figure of Odysseus, particularly his role as a single survivor, on works from antiquity and the modern world. Homer’s Odysseus chooses to return home rather than becoming immortal, yet shipwreck survivors in comparable works look more favorably on the opportunities for transformation and a new identity. I begin by examining the oldest shipwreck story ever recorded. Then I consider ancient Greek and Roman epic, drama, and novels that adapt—and deviate from—Homer’s *Odyssey*. Finally, I turn to two modern adaptations of Homer’s *Odyssey* by the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott. There we find an impulse absent in Homer, for the new life on offer is accepted.

**The Egyptian “Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor”**

One of the oldest recorded stories of all time is the Egyptian “Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor” (ca. 1900 BCE), a narrative told by an unnamed sailor upon his return. Comparing this work with Homer’s *Odyssey* allows us to speculate on the topic of Homer’s originality. In the Egyptian tale, after describing his ship and crew of 150 brave men, the survivor recounts how he took a sea journey in service of the pharaoh. When a storm hits, the sailor
seizes a piece of wood for flotation and is cast by a large wave onto an island. He shelters under a tree for three days. Everyone else has perished.\footnote{Parkinson (1997) 89–101 dates this story to the period of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt (1940–1640 BCE). I will follow his translation. For a discussion of how one story is “nested” within another, see Baines (1990) 67–70; for its mix of humorous and serious messages, see Rendsberg (2000).}

But things are not so bad at first. He builds a fire and makes an offering to the gods, and the island has a wondrous abundance of food: he feasts on figs, melons, fish, and birds. Then danger threatens. Approaching with the sound of thunder, a huge serpent with scales of gold and lapis lazuli confronts the sailor. The serpent asks, “Who has brought you?” (70) The sailor describes his journey, but it is the serpent who explains, “God has let you live and has brought you to this island of the Spirit” (114–15).\footnote{The island is called Ka, which is the Egyptian word for “soul.” Parkinson (1997) 99 note 14 sees the island as marking a transition: “the spirit (ka) was the link between life and death, so his description implies that the island exists halfway between this world and the next.” Baines (1990) 71–72 remarks on the allegory of the journey of life and “reaching land” as a euphemism for dying.} The serpent then predicts that a ship will come after four months and that the sailor will return home and eventually die in his hometown.

Delighted, the sailor promises to speak about the serpent’s greatness in the presence of the pharaoh and offers to return with gifts. The serpent only smiles, for he already has all that is valuable on the island. Besides, the island will not remain after the sailor’s departure: it will be turned into waves and exist no more. Subsequent events then take place as the serpent predicted: a ship comes after four months, and the sailor returns home with many valuable gifts from the serpent, including perfumes, cedarwood, incense, ivory, and baboons. He is raised to the rank of “follower” (or retainer) by the pharaoh and is rewarded with the acquisition of two hundred servants.

Though antecedent to Homer by well over a millennium, this Egyptian tale is analogous to Homer’s *Odyssey* in several respects. In the Egyptian tale, this single survivor has been divinely selected and lands on a magical paradise. In the *Odyssey*, arrival on unknown islands is associated with threat, magic, and even cannibalism, yet the possibility also exists for a kind of paradise (with the Phaeacians) or even immortality. While the shipwreck in the Egyptian tale causes much loss of life, the lone survivor finds himself on an awe-inspiring island: “there was nothing that was not on it” (52). Storytellers have a tendency to present such islands as a kind of utopia. It is difficult not to think of other magical places: the Elysian fields “at the ends
of the earth” awaiting Menelaus and Helen (Odyssey 4) or the island of the immortal Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic. The Egyptian sailor will not become immortal, only wealthy and famous (though, ironically, we never learn his name). As in Homer, the survivor meets a divine inhabitant on the island: the serpent is evidently a divine manifestation of the creator god.

As with Odysseus’ arrival on Calypso’s island, the Egyptian sailor did not intend to land on a particular island. From the human perspective, such accidental arrivals are caused by wind and waves beyond human control. There are no directions; it is almost impossible to get to these islands on purpose, and no one returns a second time. In the case of the Egyptian story, the island will not even be there in the future. So the sailor returns home to tell the tale and is elevated in social status.

In juxtaposing the Egyptian tale with Homer’s Odyssey, we might consider one of the great unanswered questions about Homer, namely, his originality. Because he worked in an oral tradition that extended back many generations, it is difficult to say which parts of Homer’s epics are new. He was certainly not the first poet to tell the story of Odysseus. Over a number of days or nights, the singer (and composer) of the Odyssey would present the story of Odysseus to an audience that was already familiar with the stories of the Judgment of Paris, the siege and sack of Troy, the deaths of Achilles and Agamemnon, and Odysseus’ journeys. In fact, Homer takes advantage of his audience’s previous familiarity with the epic tradition to shape his story in a subtle way. Homer is under no obligation to retell the story of Odysseus’ life or the Trojan Horse or even to remind his audience who Zeus or Agamemnon or Penelope is. Instead, Homer constructs his story around one event: the return of Odysseus, long after Troy is sacked.

It is impossible to tell which of Homer’s episodes are wholly original—never before told—and which he adapted from earlier singers, but we can speculate. Could it be that the elaborately constructed answer to the question of Odysseus’ identity was the work of the Odyssey’s poet; that is, might Homer’s Odyssey be the first song about Odysseus with such a profound

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4. Parkinson (1997) 90 argues that “the serpent is a metaphorical representative of the creator-god.”

5. The snake only tells the Egyptian, “God has let you live.” As with many shipwreck stories, there is an almost illogical mix of accident and divine plan; see Thimmes (1992) 35.
exploration of identity? There is no way to prove this possibility. Surely other poets sang of shipwrecks, but had anyone previously linked shipwreck with new possible roles as Homer has? Perhaps we should be cautious. Given the connection between shipwreck and social transformation found in the Egyptian tale, this thematic link from shipwreck to potential transformation may be a natural move.

The shipwreck episodes of the *Odyssey* allow Homer to explore the issue of identity by presenting new roles that Odysseus could adopt. Interestingly, the Egyptian tale also connects shipwrecks with a new sort of status, suggesting the likelihood that shipwreck survivors will typically adopt new roles. Perhaps Homer’s innovation is that Odysseus rejects such an opportunity: he chooses to return to his humble island and aging wife and civil tension. The Egyptian sailor is happy in his social elevation, yet Homer’s hero makes the decision to remain who he was. Could this be new with Homer?

**Ancient Shipwrecks in Greek and Roman Epic, Drama, and the Novel**

Shipwreck episodes proliferate in literature of the ancient world. The Hebrew Bible story of Jonah tells of threatened shipwreck; and in Psalm 107, God sends a storm but also rescues the voyagers. Virtually every genre of Greek and Roman literature, both poetry and prose, contains a shipwreck episode. In post-Homeric Greek and Roman epic, Apollonius, Vergil, and Lucan introduce disasters afflicting heroes at sea—not surprisingly, given the long “shadow” of Homer. For example, in the *Aeneid*, Vergil deliberately models storms at sea on those in the *Odyssey*. His hero Aeneas (like Odysseus) is harassed by divine wrath. In this case, it is not the sea god but Juno, Jupiter’s wife, who sends a storm in the first scene in the epic (*Aeneid* 1.88–91). Aeneas’ first words echo those of Odysseus when he confronted Poseidon’s storm in book 5 of the *Odyssey*. Aeneas cries out,

\[
\text{O three and four times blessed}
\text{are those who died before their fathers’ eyes}
\text{beneath the high walls of Troy.}
\]

\[(1.94–96; \text{cf. } \textit{Odyssey} 5.306–10)\]

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Winds crack the oars, strip the sails, and drive three ships onto rocks. The helmsman of Orontes’ boat is knocked overboard; ship and crew are swallowed beneath a wave. After Neptune, the “Roman Poseidon,” senses the storm and calms the sea, Aeneas’ ship lands on the North African coast. Aeneas believes the rest of his fleet is lost and heads to Carthage on foot, but in the end, only a single ship out of the fleet of twenty is destroyed (1.381, 584).7

Long journeys in the ancient world—both epic and historical—were generally made by sea. Later writers looked back to Homer for inspiration; an audience of epic poetry would surely have expected to hear of shipwrecks and other adventures. Yet while Aeneas and Jason (with the Argonauts) meet with storms, they are not shipwrecked; indeed, their ships and crews must remain intact for these heroes to accomplish their missions of bringing Trojan refugees to Italy or retrieving the Golden Fleece. Vergil (and Apollonius) allude to Homer frequently, and shipwrecks may even appear imminent (and occur to others), yet the hero’s crew and ship arrive safely.8 These poets do not adopt the shipwreck scenario of the Odyssey in the strict sense. With regard to its distinctive feature—a single man driven to an inhabited island—the Odyssean shipwreck is quite atypical (cf. the Egyptian tale).9

Shipwrecks often appear in ancient drama as a useful plot device.10 Introducing shipwrecks is one means for the dramatist to have someone arrive unexpectedly and alone, leading (as we saw in the Odyssey) to recognition scenes, reunions, and dramatic irony. For example, in Euripides’ Helen, the wife of Menelaus, Helen, has remained in Egypt during the Trojan War (only her phantom was at Troy). After Troy is sacked, Menelaus attempts to sail home but is driven by winds to Egypt. His vessel is shattered against the shore, and he loses most of his crew. Describing himself as a hapless “shipwreck” (nauagos, 408), he does not know where he is (409–15). Then he meets Helen, not knowing it is her or she him. Yet finally the couple is reunited. Helen herself even refers to this surprising turn of events as a happy shipwreck.

7. De Saint-Denis (1935) 217–18 discusses the three storms in the Aeneid.
8. In Argonautica 4 (after they have acquired the fleece and Medea), winds drive Jason and his crew to North Africa and the shoals of Syrtes (Libya)—this echoes the gales that drove Odysseus and his crew to the land of the Lotus-eaters (Odyssey 9.67–84). On other shipwrecks in epic, see Austin (1971) 51.
10. For example, see Aeschylus’ Agamemnon (654–59), Euripides’ Trojan Women (65–97), and Seneca’s Agamemnon (462ff.).
Though your ship was untimely lost,
this disaster may turn out to be fortunate.

(Helen 1080–81)

If a poet, playwright, or novelist has a desire to separate two lovers, reunite brothers who have not seen each other since childhood, or create some other “coincidental” sundering or reunion, a shipwreck becomes an extremely useful stratagem for bringing about such events (as we shall see in chapter 4, Shakespeare is quite fond of shipwrecks).  

Finally, we turn, in this brief survey, to novels. Lateiner’s “Heavy Weather for Storm-Tossed Lovers” considers how ancient novels follow epic literature in many respects regarding storms at sea. Lateiner analyzes the typical patterns that are often employed to separate two chaste lovers or to introduce various adventures. The *Satyricon*, a novel by the Neronian author Petronius (60s CE), is, in many ways, a parody of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The “hero” Encolpius is harassed by the wrath not of Poseidon (Odysseus’ nemesis) but of Priapus, the god of the phallus and sexual power. There are underworld journeys, disguises, scenes of recognition, and shipwrecks. Encolpius even comments, “If you calculate your chances in life, shipwreck is everywhere” (*Satyricon* 115). As Lateiner notes, this remark reflects a philosophical position—danger is everywhere in our lives—but it also serves as a “metacritical” comment on the ubiquity of shipwrecks in literature. Everywhere you look—that is, in every book you read—you find a shipwreck. Lateiner observes that novels introduce the idea of lovers clinging to one another on stormy seas as a replacement for epic’s “lonely heroes.” Again the Homeric situation is not strictly adopted, for now there are couples, groups, and crews surviving. An updated version with a sole survivor, like Odysseus, is relatively rare.

11. In Plautus’ *Rope*, a shipwreck saves two young women from a pimp and reunites one of them with her father (who lost her when she was just three years old). In Euripides’ *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, it is of interest that Orestes and Pylades are not shipwrecked at the land of the Taurians, for the Taurians (on the Black Sea in the present-day Crimea) were accustomed to sacrificing shipwrecked survivors to the virgin goddess Artemis (see Herodotus 4.103). In Euripides’ play, Iphigenia the priestess (who herself was miraculously saved at Aulis) plans to sacrifice her brother Orestes, whom she does not recognize. Shipwreck works as the means of recognition, though the shipwreck here is hypothetical (see 755–899).

12. See Lateiner (unpublished paper) for his chart analyzing the features of such storms. Hagg (1983) 21 notes that even in the oldest fragment of the ancient novel, the *Ninus Romance*, we encounter “the ingredients of shipwreck, war, and eloquent love” (17).

I hope this brief survey makes evident the ubiquity of shipwrecks in epic, drama, and prose fiction.\textsuperscript{14} Shipwreck episodes, dramatic scenes that bring about pivotal moments in the story, may be exploited for a variety of purposes. Shipwrecks may aid the artist in characterizing the major figures (showing heroism or cowardice) and delineating the gods’ hostility or favor.\textsuperscript{15} There are multiple literary allusions to Homer. Shipwrecks are pervasive partly because the audience expects storms at sea in a newly composed epic, but they may also be understood in terms of the writer’s competitiveness with both contemporary and past rivals. Each poet strove to be included in the elite company of great poets such as Homer; one way to do that was to take on famous Homeric scenes and try to surpass the master. Clearly, Homer’s Odyssean shipwrecks are some of the most frequent scenes imitated by later poets and other authors. Yet most later writers do not present a single shipwreck survivor like Odysseus.

Walcott’s Stage Version of the Odyssey

The many transformations that the figure of Odysseus (or Ulysses) has undergone over the past twenty-seven hundred years are wonderfully recounted in Stanford’s \textit{The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero} (1954) and Hall’s \textit{The Return of Ulysses} (2008). Odysseus continues to attract interest in very recent times, particularly in the dramatic and poetic works of Derek Walcott, a Caribbean writer from Saint Lucia and winner of the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature. I will compare Walcott’s relatively close adaptation of \textit{The Odyssey: A Stage Version}, written for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1992—with a freer use of the Odysseus figure in his epic poem \textit{Omeros} (1990).

In his 1993 stage version of \textit{The Odyssey: A Stage Version}, Walcott retains many characters and episodes from the Homeric epic, though innovations appear from the very start. These modern touches include a blind blues singer (Blind Billy Blue) who takes on the roles of the Homeric singers Phemius and Demodocus. The ancient Mediterranean is assimilated to the Caribbean Sea (Odysseus’ nurse, Eurycleia, uses a Caribbean accent). We also encounter a voodoo ceremony that facilitates Odysseus’ entry to the

\textsuperscript{14} I will only briefly mention the wonderful use of shipwreck by the Epicurean poet Lucretius, who describes how “sweet it is” to view others’ distress at sea while safely on shore (\textit{On the Nature of the Universe} 2.1ff.).

underworld (85). Yet the plot is familiar. Odysseus’ primary opponent is the god of the sea, Poseidon, yet Odysseus endures. Though “that sea beat me with everything it could find,” Odysseus “was never pinned by the trident of Poseidon” (158, 141).16

There is only one shipwreck, after Odysseus’ men open the bag of Aeolus’ winds. Everyone dies except Odysseus, who reaches the Phaeacians’ island. After his shipwreck, Odysseus’ encounter with Nausicaa is reminiscent of a “divine epiphany.” Odysseus calls Nausicaa a “nymph,” but she’s apparently heard it all before.

NAUSICAA: You’ll gain nothing addressing me in that way.
ODYSSEUS: I am dazzled. My salt eyes are scorched by the sun.
NAUSICAA: That’s how all these overtures start. With poetry.
ODYSSEUS: What poetry?
NAUSICAA: You know. “O Nymph,” and all that business.
ODYSSEUS: I thought I drowned and soared with the gulls to heaven.
NAUSICAA: See? Next you’ll croak about clutching my shining knees.

(47–48)

Now at the far end of a tradition, Walcott makes clear how familiar Odysseus’ appeal has become. This scene evoking a divine epiphany is viewed even by Nausicaa as a cliché.

Walcott also follows Homer’s strategy by using this shipwreck as an obstacle to Odysseus’ reunion with Penelope. A bolder, more aggressive Nausicaa forthrightly pursues a potential marriage with Odysseus without any encouragement from her father. As in Homer, she is unaware of Odysseus’ identity, yet she knows he has a wife. This does not deter her.

ODYSSEUS: You’re well on your way to being somebody’s wife.
NAUSICAA: Yours?
ODYSSEUS: No. I’m too old. Plus, I have one already.
NAUSICAA: Too old, with that panelled body? . . . Shall we meet properly?
ODYSSEUS: Shall we?
NAUSICAA: Nausicaa. And you’re my gift from the seas! (49)

16. In Walcott’s play, two views of the sea are found in remarks by the First Attendant (“The sea’s a maw that devours”) and Nestor (“A god who saves”) (23–24).
Walcott’s Nausicaa dismisses the age discrepancy between them and claims Odysseus as a “gift from the seas,” hers to collect like a seashell. Later Nausicaa bids Odysseus to “make this your shore” (55) and continues to press the issue.

NAUSICAA: Then, our marriage-cart, drawn by nodding white oxen . . .

ODYSSEUS: Whoa! Whoa! Not so fast! You deserve a good husband.

NAUSICAA: There’s a “but”?

ODYSSEUS: How’ll I explain it to my wife?

NAUSICAA: Tell her you met me and were swept overboard and . . .

ODYSSEUS: That’s true.

NAUSICAA: Wouldn’t she be happy that I saved your life? (58)

Nausicaa’s father, Alcinous, can only comment, “She’s a smart girl but a bit too fresh for her age” (58–59). As in Homer, Nausicaa presents a temptation that may derail Odysseus’ homecoming, and—as in Homer—Odysseus rejects this opportunity for a new life, as well as Calypso’s offer to make him a god (57; cf. 81).

There are wonderful scenes in Walcott’s play, especially one with the Cyclops Polyphemus as a twentieth-century totalitarian leader ruling a nation where “thought is forbidden.” Walcott also adopts the Homeric Odysseus’ habit of concealing his identity, both with the Cyclops and upon landing in Ithaca. Reduced to a “nobody,” a “king who begs” (129), a wandering beggar whose tales no one quite believes, Odysseus must once again reestablish his identity as husband of Penelope and king of Ithaca.\(^{17}\) For audiences familiar with the ancient model, much interest derives from the modern play’s innovations on the classical model. Walcott does include an Odyssean shipwreck (though only one) and again Odysseus chooses to return to Ithaca, as he rejects the chance for a different sort of life. Characters follow a different path in Walcott’s work *Omeros*.

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17. To the suitors, Odysseus is “King O’ Beggars” (141); to Telemachus, he is “This majesty in rags” (137). For “No man” (*outis*) in Homer’s *Odyssey*, see 9.366–414. In Walcott’s *Odyss*, Odysseus says, “They call me No-man” (41); on his arrival in Ithaca, he says “I’m nobody” (110; cf. 92, 121, 126). Burian (1997) 366 comments on Walcott’s abiding interest in “the importance of sea, islands, wandering, and return” and adds that “it is hardly surprising that the myth of Odysseus recurs more than any other, and in many guises” (361); see also Thieme (1999) 151–97.
Walcott’s *Omeros*

Another reworking of the Odysseus figure appears in Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990). This long poem (over three hundred pages in verse) is set on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia in the late twentieth century. Characters include islanders of African descent: Achille, a fisherman; Hector, a taxi driver; and Helen, an ex-domestic who sells T-shirts. A second group comprises the Englishman Dennis Plunkett and his Irish wife, Maud. Dennis fought in World War II under Field Marshall Montgomery in Africa; now he and Maud live on Saint Lucia. A third distinct group consists of one: the narrator, the “I,” the teller of the tale. He is also an islander, interacts with the characters he “creates,” and possesses a biography that coincides in many respects with that of Derek Walcott, the islander author of this work. In addition to romantic conflict, the plot also concerns a search for the past: Achille seeks knowledge of his African heritage, Plunkett researches a history of the island, and the narrator endeavours to tell the story of the islanders’ lives.

My focus here will be the portrayal of Dennis Plunkett as a kind of Odyssean character. In fact, both Dennis and Maud Plunkett are linked to Odysseus and Penelope. We hear of Maud’s patience and her embroidery of a shroud (88–89). Yet she is not waiting for her husband to return. Plunkett is, in some sense, an inverted Odysseus. In Homer, Telemachus goes out to find his father; in Walcott’s *Omeros*, Plunkett tries to find a son. As the narrator recounts, the absence of a son prevents Plunkett from taking a journey, “a masochistic odyssey.”

Once, after the war, he’d made plans to embark on a masochistic odyssey through the Empire, to watch it go in the dusk, his “I” a column

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18. Despite these familiar names, *Omeros* diverges from the Homeric situation, as a love triangle centered on Helen pits Achille against Hector.
20. Like Odysseus, Plunkett is a wounded war veteran (25, 26, and passim); also, Plunkett’s war might have lasted ten years (28)—he is even called a “khaki Ulysses” (263). Odysseus appears as a parallel for other characters as well; see Burian (1997) 368 and Terada (1992) 203–5.
21. In fact, through his historical research, the modern Plunkett locates an English midshipman named Plunkett who died at the Battle of the Saints, fought between England and France in the Caribbean in 1782.
with no roof but a pediment, from Singapore to the Seychelles in his old Eighth Army outfit . . .

but that was his daydream, his pious pilgrimage.
And he would have done it, if he had had a son.²²

Later in the book, the narrator remarks, “There was Plunkett in my father, much as there was / my mother in Maud . . . but . . . there was a changing shadow of Telemachus / in me” (263). Walcott refuses to force the literary parallels and freely makes allusive moves in more than one direction: from Plunkett (as Odysseus) to his namesake son in the eighteenth century or across boundaries to the narrator with “a changing shadow of Telemachus / in me.” As Walcott insists, “names are not oars that have to be laid side by side, nor are legends” (312–13). The classical story may supply models, but this twentieth-century work creates a new narrative and historical context in which those models may operate.

In the Egyptian tale and Homer’s Odyssey, islands appear as a kind of paradise, and in several passages of Omeros, Walcott links the island of Saint Lucia to the Garden of Eden (this is discussed in chapter 10). Yet through the character of Plunkett, Walcott reveals a more accurate appreciation of the island’s complex past. This appreciation leads, in turn, to a new identity for Plunkett, an Odyssean figure.

Plunkett gains a new perspective not only by studying history but by thinking about the past from the perspective of Helen, one of the islanders. Plunkett had believed the dominant “Western” view that the high points of history radiate out from Europe, not from a small piece of earth at the western edge of the Atlantic.

The great events of the world would happen elsewhere.
There were those who thought his war had been the best war,
That the issues were nobler then, the cause more clear.

Yet due to his near obsession with Helen, Plunkett’s quest becomes a service to her (as Walcott quibbles on “his story” versus “her story”).²³

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²³. For Saint Lucia, “Plunkett decided that what the place needed / was its true place in his-
Helen needed history,  
that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her.  
Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen’s war.  

(30)

As Plunkett lives among the islanders and gets to know them, he even comes to realize why such a history should be written. Plunkett acknowledges the effects of English colonialism, especially the exploitation of the island’s population. Plunkett sees how England has devoured the islands “like olives.”

We helped ourselves  
to these green islands like olives from a saucer,  

munched on the pith, then spat their sucked stones on a plate,  
like a melon’s black seeds.  

(25)

Plunkett, who at first believed he had found a place “where what they call history could not happen” (28), learns to view the past from the islanders’ perspective. Although rejecting the idea of Saint Lucia as paradise, Plunkett comes to appreciate the island.

England seemed to him merely the place of his birth.  
How odd to prefer, over its pastoral sites—  
reasonable leaves shading reasonable earth—  

these loud-mouthed forests on their illiterate heights,  
these springs speaking a dialect that cooled his mind more than pastures with castles! To prefer the hush  

of a hazed Atlantic worried by the salt wind!  
Others could read it as “going back to the bush,”  
but harbour after crescent harbour closed his wound.  

(61)

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tory, that he’d spend hours / for Helen’s sake on research” (64), even though it seemed that “the harder he worked, the more he betrayed his wife” (103).
This is no idyllic paradise, yet Plunkett prefers the “loud-mouthed forests” of Saint Lucia to the pastoral ideal of England.²⁴ Plunkett will not—like Homer’s Odysseus—seek a return to the land of his birth.²⁵

Plunkett undergoes a metamorphosis. As the narrator recognizes when seeing him in line at the bank, Plunkett has found a new home.²⁶

I saw that he was
one with the farmers, transplanted to the rich dirt of their valleys, a ginger-lily from the moss

of Troumasse River, a white, red-knuckled heron in the reeds, who never wanted the privilege that peasants, from habit, paid to his complexion.

(268)

Indeed, Plunkett merely wishes to be treated as one of the locals: he seeks no privilege from his English background or his white complexion. Plunkett has become a Caribbean islander. Plunkett is not shipwrecked, yet Walcott deliberately connects him to Odysseus by his search for a son, his patient wife, his war wound, his potential infidelity, and his desire for home—not “Ithaca,” but a new one on Saint Lucia.²⁷

It is true that questions of legitimacy arise. Has Plunkett inherited the sins of his European ancestors? Must he give up his right to settle in Saint Lucia? Plunkett makes his plea to Hector, after Maud and he are almost killed in a traffic accident. One of the men with Hector yells “honky” and Plunkett returns,

I am not a honky.

A donkey perhaps, a jackass, but I haven’t spent

²⁴. On a return visit to England, Plunkett finds that he “was ready to go back home”: “What he missed was / the roar of his island’s market, palm-fronds talking // to each other” (253).

²⁵. A parallel development takes place for Achille, who “asked himself who he was” (130) and journeys to Africa (in a dream state across three centuries). He “felt he was headed home” (131; cf. 134, 141, and “his homecoming canoe” at 135). Yet Walcott (1970) 38 insists that Africa “was no longer home.”


²⁷. Hamner (1997) 3 argues that “each of the protagonists [in Omeros] is a castaway in one sense or another . . . [T]hey are transplanted individuals whose separate quests all center on the fundamental need to strike roots in a place where they belong.”
damned near twenty years on this godforsaken rock
to be cursed like a tourist. Do you understand?

(256)

Plunkett no longer sees himself as an invader, a “tourist.” He has come to
view the island as his own.

A twentieth-century treatment of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Césaire’s *A
Tempest*, raises the question of what will happen to Prospero if he stays on the
island with Caliban. Can the two of them coexist (see chapter 5 in this book)?
I suggest that Walcott supplies an answer of sorts with the Odyssean character
of Plunkett in *Omeros*. If Plunkett were true to the Homeric model, he would
return to England—that would be his homecoming. Yet *Omeros* rejects that
move. Plunkett chooses to stay on the island of Saint Lucia. Plunkett tran-
scends the paradigm of Odysseus and, by his empathy with and acceptance of
his fellow islanders, adopts a life in what has become his new home.

Each of the works examined in this chapter offers illumination in a variety
of ways. The Egyptian “Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor” presents an island
paradise and divine encounter and links shipwreck with a new life. Though
it does not explore the theme of identity in as great depth as the *Odyssey*, it
suggests that rejecting paradise and immortality may be a Homeric inno-
vation. The span of ancient Greek and Roman literature demonstrates the
ubiquity of shipwrecks yet leads us to view the Odyssean feature of a single
survivor as relatively rare. Perhaps this has been ceded to Homer as territory
where other authors choose not to compete. The works of Derek Walcott are
examples of Homeric influence in the modern world. Of greatest interest
may be *Omeros*, a modern epic poem, in which we find a radical break from
the classical model. In Homer, Odysseus rejects the offers of Nausicaa and
Calypso in order to return to his mortal wife and dissension at home. With
the figure of Walcott’s Plunkett, we find a modern analogue to Odysseus, yet
he gives up his original homeland of England and chooses a new life on the
island of Saint Lucia. Staying on a new island as a new home appears to be
a more modern tendency.

Walcott tells the story of the people of the Caribbean by playing off the
classic works of what is called Western civilization by challenging the Euro-
pean perspective, pointing to the evils of slavery and imperialism, and refus-
ing to revert to the status quo at the end.28 It may be useful to provide some

context for Walcott’s work. The islanders of the Caribbean today, of course, are no longer slaves; some have achieved political independence (Saint Lucia in 1979); new roles are sought. The family background of Derek Walcott deserves some comment. Born in 1930 on the English-speaking Saint Lucia (an island twenty-four miles south of Martinique), Walcott’s lineage comprises two white European grandfathers and two grandmothers who were the descendants of African slaves. Walcott describes himself in his poem “Schooner Flight” (1979):

I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.

One of Walcott’s enduring interests is that of identity—not only who he is but who he might become after his island’s independence. Arrival by shipwreck leads to the possibility of transforming oneself in terms of identity and fortune. Walcott employs shipwreck stories as a means of directing his fellow islanders toward opportunities for reinvention.

Walcott, “It is as though he imitates predecessors for the express purpose of emphasizing his deviation from the established pattern.”

29. S. Brown (1996) 215 believes that as a mulatto (with two white European grandfathers and two grandmothers descended from African slaves), Walcott lived “in a world divided along color lines: he is the ultimate outsider.” Walcott (1970) 10 refers to himself as “this hybrid, this West Indian”; cf. “being part-white and Methodist” (15).