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Greek and Roman Texts

From Refuge to Horror:

The *Omeros*'s Representation of a House Through the Lense of the *Iliad*.

There is no denying the strong Homeric influence at the heart of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. The modern-day epic still follows Achille and Hector in their war for Helen, but in Walcott's retelling, there is no Troy, no fabled heroes, no feats; there is simply the island of St. Lucia—its streets and restaurants, and its otherwise ordinary inhabitants, beset by misery and trauma. Walcott scaffolds *Omeros* on Homer's *Iliad* but noticeably inverts its themes and values, and perhaps none more so than the notion of the house. Once a place of refuge and sanctuary, the house undergoes scary renovations in St. Lucia, becoming a place of indescribable horror in order to reveal the disturbing reality of confronting trauma.

The *Iliad* first alludes to the house as a place of refuge in Book 6, when Andromache implores Hector not to fight, but to remain with his family in the safety of their home. She pleads, “Show some compassion, stay here on the wall, don't make your son an orphan and your wife a widow” (130.431). Here, Homer starkly contrasts the inside of the house, where walls provide safety and shelter, from the outside world, where strife and death await. This distinction is made further apparent as Hector refuses Andromache's plea, exiting the house all the same. His departure leads Andromache to arrange a funeral and even to mourn Hector's death—even

though he is still alive. The terror and distrust Andromache shows for the outside world is all but overwhelming for her, making more poignant the perceived safety and protection of the house against the brutal world beyond its walls.

The house is again portrayed as a refuge during a heart-warming scene of domesticity when Hector cradles his child in his arms. Hector's horrifying bronze armor frightens the screaming child, causing both parents to “burst out laughing” (131.471). In addition to offering a welcome respite from the gruesome battle scenes which come before, the scene sees Hector remove his armor—for the first and only time in the epic—to calm the boy. Hector’s armour exudes glory and status, so much so that he is often referred to as “Bronze-Helmeted Hector.” By laying his helmet “bright-gleaming on the ground” (131.475), Hector symbolically dispenses with the outside world’s values and prostrates himself, affirming both the nobility of fatherhood and the sanctity of the house where that role is paramount. Hector caresses the boy, rocks him in his arms, and delivers a prayer to Zeus for his son’s health and future. This extended display of humor, humility, and humanity, reinforces the Homeric perception of the house as a refuge furnished with love and security.

In reality, however, home is precisely the opposite of love and security for Andromache, whose entire family had been slaughtered in the halls of her childhood house. Her father, seven brothers, and mother all were killed on the same day, leaving her traumatized and destitute. Andromache acknowledges her tragic past with a concerningly nonchalant tone. Although she is “still shedding tears” (129.40), her feelings are minimal and reserved as she recounts her father’s funeral, stating bluntly that they “cremated him there in his fine inlaid armor, heaped a funeral mound over him,...”(128.416) Therefore, Andromache’s perception of a heart-warming, gentle, home contrasts the traumatic reality that her entire family’s death occurred within its walls.

In the world of *Omeros*, the noble, intimate Homeric home is nowhere to be found. Walcott distorts the home into a house of horrors, rife with existential dread. In Chapter XXXIII, Canto III, for example, Walcott builds horror through a stark change in syntax, tone, and narration. An abrupt change from *terza rima tercets* to compact rhyming couplets immediately establishes an ominous and suffocating peculiarity about the House. Simultaneously, his descriptions juxtapose mundane objects and dark abstractions to evoke an eerie, sardonic mood, as in the phrases, “house of telephone and lust,” “House of toothbrush, house of sin,” and “house of channelled CableVision, whose dragooned carpets sneer derision”(173). Beginning each of these descriptions with ordinary objects coaxes the reader into a false comfort in the mundane, which Walcott soon exposes to be cursed and abnormal. This strategy cements that nothing—not even a toothbrush—feels safe in the House. To add to the madness, Walcott even animates the House into a grotesque, shape-shifting creature, which displaces the narrator and ultimately engulfs the poem. These technical strategies—syntax changes, eerie tonal descriptions, and unstable narratorial direction—culminate to transform the House into a nightmarish monster within which nothing can feel safe.

Walcott adds to the uncanniness through continued references to locked doors, beginning when the Poet first approaches the House in Canto II. Here, the Poet stands outside the door, fiddles with his keys, “hoping a ghost would rise from her chair and help [him] unlock it” (172). This forbidden, “barred” atmosphere is furthered through waves which crouch behind every door, waiting eagerly to rush in at any moment, as well as “branches scratching, ‘Let me in!’” (173). These constant forces—looming in corners, scratching on window panes, and begging to enter—let the suspense fester that the House is a place of unease and dread. Whereas

Andromache perceives her home as a welcoming refuge, the Poet perceives the House as an impenetrable, closed-off cell with secrets hiding behind each door.

In this horrifying environment, the Poet does not find asylum or shelter. He even declares “I do not live in you, I bear my house inside me, everywhere” (174), implying that the House’s ghosts, shadows, abnormalities, secrets, and fears, are in fact his own. The Poet, then, is the “House that creaks, age fifty-seven,” where “marriages go bust,” because he is the 57-year-old man struggling after a failed relationship. He eats meager meals of rice, withdraws into a solitary room, and impatiently longs for a letter from his former lover, just, as he explains, a Japanese soldier might have done in World War II. Only, instead of the abandonment in World War II, he suffers from “abandonment in the War of Love” (171). The Poet is so overcome that even passerbys notice his distress and are cautious to make eye contact with him. Thus, the Poet carries his fears everywhere, unable to escape his House of horrors, in contrast to Andromache, who can escape the outside world by retreating to the safety of her home. In this way, the Poet is cursed to live with his fears, while Andromache is privileged to hide from her own.

The poet learns to live with his fears by direct confrontation as he knocks down the doors and opens up the windows, letting the suppressed wave and ignored branches finally rush inside. He understands that opening up his horrors will transform the House into a home saying “House that lets in, at last, those fears,... shows her her room, and feels the hum of wood and brick becoming home” (174). This proves true, as the House’s unique rhyming couplets begin to crumble as soon as the Poet regains control and power of his own story. This is demonstrated when the Poet reasserts himself with the pronoun “I,” saying “unlucky house that I uncurse by rites of genuflecting verse”(173). This breaks the anaphora of “House,” threatening the House’s reign as narrator. Similarly, as the Poet continues to let his fears into the house ‘where knobs of

brass do not exist, whose doors dissolve with tenderness” (174), the rhyming couplet morphs into a slant rhyme so that by the very end, there remains only a faint rhyme between the last two lines ending in “hum” and “home.” Therefore, only when the Poet fully embraces his horrors can he reclaim his poem from the House and find peace, becoming home.

Overall, in reconstructing the Homeric Home into a House of Horrors, Walcott provides a glimpse into Andromache’s pain when her entire family died in her childhood house- the pain that Homer merely glosses over in the Iliad as he over-glorifies human life. Walcott demonstrates that this past trauma does not present itself in a warm, uplifting refuge like Andromache makes it out to be, but rather, in an inescapable House of horrors that torments and agonizes its host. This is seen through the Poet’s complicated journey as he regains control over his own poem to protect himself from the House of horrors that lives inside of him. When finally, he opens the doors and welcomes the demons to a spot at his table, he can truly overcome the House, find comfort again, and move on with his poetry. With this haunted house description, Walcott provides a more realistic view of trauma and a more hopeful message about the importance of confronting the past to move on.