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"Fruit of the loom": New spins on Penelope in Walcott and Márquez

A common trait between Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez and Caribbean poet-playwright Derek Walcott, besides their emergence from the margins into central international fame, is the professed influence, and pervasive use, of classical myth in their works. "A constant feature of García Márquez's style has been his fusion of Greek, Spanish, and American literary models and mythology", writes Mary Davis,¹ while Walcott, author of *Omeros*² and *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*,³ "has often been praised for his ability to fuse the classics, folklore and history..."⁴. In a New York interview, Walcott affectionately mentions writing under the influence of "the two great Caribbean artists, Hemingway and Homer."⁵ This mythical element has become an indisputable basis for scholars dealing with either writer, and has produced research not only on direct parallelisms between characters in their works and mythical figures, but discussions on the larger theoretical-structural aspects and uses of myth as well.⁶

Myth interpretation being an evolving and many-faceted operation, even a "minor" detail can prove a pivotal part of the interassociative web of mythemes that orders the underlying schema. One such "web," both literal and figurative, is the focus of this essay, which seeks to establish a further significant tie between the 1967 masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*OHYS*) by García Márquez⁷ and the 1992 *Omeros* by Walcott, on the basis of the two writers' use, in these works, of the story of Penelope's weaving ruse as delineated in Homer's classical epic, *The Odyssey*. What will be examined is the way the Homeric parallelism is incorporated in each text, how interpreting this image of Odysseus' faithful wife negatively in García Márquez and positively in Walcott serves each writer's specific point, and what this mythic symbol of the weaving woman reveals about the overall work; for, as Robert Sims reminds us, "[Márquez's] emphasis on myth holds the key to unlocking the plenary vision which he finally synthesizes in CAS."⁸

Penelope's famous ruse with the shroud of her father-in-law, Laertes, may involve what is deemed a typical female activity, weaving, but its importance in the epic is attested to not only by its triple mention in *The*

Odyssey (2.89-110; 19.131-56; 24.128-48), but by the immense scholarship on the subject as well.⁹ The story is first presented in the beginning of the epic by Antinoös, leader of the suitors, and it offers both an early characterization of Penelope and an evaluation of the importance of her trick:¹⁰

"For it is now the third year and the fourth will soon pass, since she has been deceiving the hearts of the Achaeans in their breasts... And she devised in her heart this guileful thing also: she set up in her halls a great web, and very wide; and straightaway she spoke among us:

"Young men, my wooers, since goodly Odysseus is dead, be patient, though eager for my marriage, until I finish this robe – I would not that my spinning should come to naught – a shroud for the lord Laertes, against the time when the fell fate of grievous death shall strike him down;..."

"So she spoke, and our proud hearts consented. Then day by day she would weave at the great web, but by night would unravel it, when she had let place torches by her. Thus for three years she by her craft kept the Achaeans from knowing, and beguiled them; but when the fourth year came as the seasons rolled on, even then one of her women who knew all told us, and we caught her unraveling the splendid web. So she finished it against her will, perforce."

Thus Penelope is introduced, first of all, as a female Odysseus, full "of many wiles." Like her hero-husband, she is steadfast in her single-minded purpose to await faithfully his return; and she is able to manipulate the flow of the plot to achieve her goal: she freezes the action of the story for almost four years, at the end of which, we are told by the now-dead suitor Amphinomus in the third narrative of the web ruse, Odysseus appears, as if on cue. Penelope is thus seen, through her *metis* (craftiness) and *dolos* (trickery), as formulating her own narrative to "suit" her wishes. In the same line of thought, Nancy Felson-Rubin comments:¹¹

Uncertain over her marital status and pressed to take some action, Penelope imagines various strands of plot, projecting what could happen and examining, as it were, the possible lives she could lead. Homer depicts her nature as introspective, self-reflexive, scheming, improvisatory, and perspicacious. Whenever she previews her destiny in dreams and fantasies, manipulates her suitors'

desires, and chooses a pathway with deliberation, she seems to control her own destiny.

The association of weaving and devising schemes/plots is, of course, not new, as the three Moirae of Greek mythology are also portrayed as weavers. Linguistically speaking, moreover, "[i]n Homeric thought, 'weaving' implies more than making a garment. What a person weaves... is of course often a cloth or a garment. But it may also be a 'plan', 'trick' or 'counsel'."¹² It is not incidental that Penelope also weaves herself into the circle of queens and goddesses of *The Odyssey*, in the sense that every first (and often subsequent) appearance of a famous female character in this text is marked by a. a weaving activity and b. the offering of clothing to a male hero (as Helen does for Telemachus, and Calypso, Circe, Leukothea, Arete, Nausikaa, and Penelope do for Odysseus). In this manner, Penelope repeats herself in multiple *loci* in the text as a supra-human symbol of the weaver, the femininely fertile plotting mind, the ubiquitous presence equivalent only to that of the omniscient, omnidirecting poetic mind itself, Homer – or Homer's actual ghost-writer, the Olympian goddess Athena: *ergane Athena*, patron of weaving arts and wise subterfuges, who by her sole personal initiative and ceaseless ingenious efforts "weaves" Odysseus's story and final triumph (24. 479-80).

But if Penelope has her thesis in Athena, the story also provides us with her anti-theses: the now-domesticated but still infamous Helen of Sparta, her sister and Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra, and Penelope's own young maidservant, Melantho. Faithless Helen's invocation by Penelope as a way to excuse her initial reluctance to recognize Odysseus (23.218-24) might suggest, as many critics claim, Penelope's unindulged escapist fantasies of sexual and moral release which she has had to suppress for twenty years. Clytemnestra is also portrayed as a polar opposite to Penelope by Agamemnon's ghost (11.423-66). These two queens have thus also been "weavers," but, unlike Penelope, of evil plots that lead to their infamy. Finally, of Melantho, the servant-girl who reveals to the suitors Penelope's web-ruse ("unraveling" thus Penelope's plot and forcing her to "weave" her shroud to the end), Felson-Rubin commends:¹³

This disloyal maidservant, who "used to sleep with Eurymakhos, and she was his sweetheart" (18.325), is rebuked first by Odysseus, then by Penelope. Each thereby repudiates female boldness and perhaps even female wantonness... Their common, like-minded disapproval of Melantho unites them. In addition, Melantho is a metonymic sign of Penelope (acting out

what Penelope could be doing but is not); through a scapegoat mechanism, their coordinated vituperations against a blameworthy Melanthe enable them to interact positively at the hearth venting their excess, negative energy.

Thus the shroud-trick mytheme in Homer's Penelope is revealed as first a device for controlling the plot, and secondly as a characterization tool for various characters in the story. The forced completion of Laertes' shroud marks the beginning of the action in the *Odyssey*, which is simultaneously, however, the beginning of the end, Odysseus final step home: thus the weaving becomes the plot. And finally, by basing her characterization on her weaving ruse, the obvious (as contrasted to the invisible *prima mobile* Athena) central weaver, Penelope, can be seen as a synecdoche for both text and the art of text-making, as implied also by the etymology of her name: *Penelopeia*, she whose works/deeds are of the *pene*, the "woof" or "loom."¹⁴

Having set the mythic basis for the comparison, we can proceed with the way the story appears in Walcott and García Márquez. *Omeros* could be considered the epic of the Caribbean, not in the sense of a war-poem;¹⁵ but as a testament to the character and culture of a people. Robert Hamner sees *Omeros* as a hybrid genre of Euro-Afro-Caribbean origin.¹⁶

The juxtaposition of such disparate points of reference has grown familiar enough in Walcott's work, but nothing heretofore approaches the scale of his epic-length *Omeros* (1990). In this 325-page poem, he does for the dispossessed peoples of the New World what epic poets from Homer to James Joyce have done for their countries. Yet despite the presence of certain traditional literary conventions, Walcott avoids ennobling characters beyond the enduring beauty of their simple lives. It is an eloquent tribute to the island of his youth.

This story of a St. Lucian fisherman, Achille, who is transported during a sea-adventure into his ancestral Africa and back to self-realization is replete with Homeric imagery, from the names of the book's characters (Achille, Hector, Helen, Philoctete), to the natural landscape (e.g., the Cyclops imagery of pp. 12-13), to Homer himself guest-starring in several parts; but, as most critics observe, these identifiers are also subverted by the postmodernist ruse of flirting with them only to move beyond them, into an identity Caribbean and universal: "Mr. Walcott's epic is a significant and timely reminder that the past is not the property of those who first created it; it always matters to all of us, no matter who

we are or where we are born."¹⁷ Therefore, to find the rationale behind the allusions, we have to look at the infrastructures of mythical patterns, at the metalanguage of symbolic values and how these are grafted in the new poetic meaning.

The Penelope character of *Omeros* is Maud Plunkett, the middle-aged Irish wife of Major Dennis Plunkett, an English officer who, after many wanderings, has decided to make St. Lucia his home, trying to establish a connection with the local spirit. Yet this "Odyssean" form of continuity is rejected in the story, as Robert Hamner observes, as too easy a way of bringing the western past and the nonwestern present together:¹⁸

At the beginning of the poem, [Plunkett] assumes the burden of legitimizing Helen [a local beauty and the Plunketts' ex-housemaid] by creating around her a history of the island. thus he might grant St. Lucia the kind of written narrative that provides Western nations their confirming textuality. Politically correct as this gesture might be, were it to succeed, it would contradict Walcott's determination in *Omeros* to subvert traditional forms of ennobling marginalized peoples.

A surface identification, therefore, is exorcised both inside and outside the book; yet the question remains why the poet deliberately chose to build a work with Homeric allusions on all levels. If neither Dennis Plunkett nor the archaically – named islanders, nor even the self-doubting poetic persona himself, are to be avatars of a viable reconciliation of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, then it is perhaps the weaver who must tighten the unraveled threads.

Like Penelope, Maud Plunkett appears at first sight a match for her husband, the typical respectable *memsahib*: she manages Plunkett's tempers, gardens assiduously, sympathizes patronizingly with the locals but can't understand them, and misses Ireland with an intense colonial *nostos* worthy of an Odysseus. This apparent simplicity has elicited, in critical texts, no more than polite references to her as an appendage to Plunkett, as in Brown: "Maud Plunkett, one of the book's most sympathetic characters, is a gardener from Ireland in St. Lucia because her husband is there looking for a son and for a connection with history."¹⁹ Yet Walcott's wish to talk not about warriors but simple people dictates all the more the examination of this helpmeet.

Maud is contrasted to what appears to be the main female character in the story, Helen, the enigmatic St. Lucian beauty who lives a bohemian life but does not for a moment yield her pride (making her all the more beautiful). Helen is the object of desire and contest between Achille and

Hector, the two fishermen: she abandons the former for the latter, much like Helen of Sparta had become Helen of Troy for ten years. Her casual and exotic sexuality upsets Maud's "Victorian" morals, who thinks of Helen, much like Penelope did of the original, as a lost, misguided soul (122-25). But as Helen is also the Plunkett's former maid, dismissed because she was accused of stealing one of Maud's dresses, the colonial aspects of Walcott's parable are honed into the image of Melantho as well, the servant who usurps the habit of her mistress.

This poem is, however, not about domestic morality, as Walcott indicates *a posteriori* by having his Melantho, in his stage version of his *Odyssey*, be forgiven her misguided path, while the original Melantho was hanged by Telemachus. But in *Omeros*, even exculpation is out of place, for Walcott embraces and celebrates the manners of his St. Lucian people, whose fate inescapably led them to wear at some points the castoffs – cultural, political, moral – of white colonialism; but who have risen with pride, beauty, and dignity (or, according to the poet, with the inevitable digestive motions of time and history) to live again. This is also indicated through Walcott's use of the Penelope myth: although Maud is the one to blame Helen, she is also the one to alter – a handiwork connection – the dress to fit Helen's body, and the first to openly admit that "[s]he looks better in it," as the V opening of the dress on Helen's back becomes a sign of the victory of black beauty over the minds of the white onlookers (29). Helen herself blends into her Penelopean identity, not as a model housewife but at the moment when, as a human being in need of understanding and love, she expresses her desires and loneliness through a very sensual masturbation, while she fantasizes about the missing Achille: "Not Helen now, but Penelope, / in whom a single noon was as long as ten years, / because he had not come back..." (153).

Maud's main trace in the story is given *via* a magnificent embroidery she works on throughout the narrative, and which is completed right before her unexpected death, to serve as her memorial shroud. It is a tapestry depicting all kinds of birds, Caribbean and English, with their scientific names tagged under them; an artful, peaceful coming together of two worlds, joining the natural kaleidoscope and the human ordering mind:

... Maud with her needle, embroidering a silhouette

from Bond's *Ornithology*, their quiet mirrored
in an antique frame. Needlepoint constellations
on a clear night had prompted this intricate thing,

this immense quilt, which, with her typical patience,
she'd started years ago, making its blind birds sing,
beaks parted like nibs from their brown branch and cover

on the silken shroud. Mockingbirds, finches, and wrens,
nightjars and kingfishers, hawks, hummingbirds, plover,
ospreys and falcons, with beaks like his scratching pen's,

terns, royal and bridled, wild ducks, migrating teal,
plovers (their fledgling beaks), wild waterfowl, widgeon,
Cypseloides Niger, l' hirondelle des Antilles
(their name for the sea swift). They flew from their region,
their bright spurs braceleted with Greek or Latin tags,
to pin themselves to the silk, and, crying their names,

pecked at her fingers. They fluttered like little flags
from the branched island, budding in accurate flames.
The Major pinched his eyes...

... and saw her mind

with each dip of her hand skim the pleated water
like a homesick curlew...

... How often had he admired

her hands in the half-dark out of the lamplit ring
in the deep floral divan, diving like a swift

to the drum's hoop, as quick as a curlew drinking
salt, with its hover, skim, dip, then vertical lift.
Tonight he shuddered like the swift, thinking,

This is her shroud, not her silver jubilee gift. (88-89)

This passage offers us several important clues to Maud's significance, beginning with the reason for the making of the quilt: like the mariner Odysseus consulting the constellations to find his way home, "homesick" Maud metaphorically navigates across "the pleated water" of her fabric to Ireland. Patient as a Penelope, she creates a world of "blind birds" singing and migrating: and if blindness and the poetic or prophetic gift are two sides of the same coin, as Walcott's "blind Omeros" espoused archetype suggests (in Homer, his counterpart old sage Seven Seas, and the Joyce/Tiresias/Virgil figures) then we must take this odd epithet to indicate Maud's poetic capacity in creating through her art, like Walcott and like Homer, a world to suit her own needs and desires. As Walcott

writes this poem to exorcise the postcolonial curse of his "double mind",

I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text;
her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking
basins of a globe in which one half fits the next

into an equator, both shores neatly clicking
into a globe; except that its meridian
was not North and South but East and West. (319)

equally Maud makes her embroidery not simply a pastime, but a means of healing, a mosaic of races transported to the Caribbean and finally growing beautiful there:

And those birds Maud Plunkett stitched into her green silk
with sibylline steadiness were what islands bred:
brown dove, black grackle, herons like ewers of milk,

pinned to a habitat many had adopted.
The lakes of the world have their own diaspora
of birds every winter, but these would not return.

The African swallow, the finch from India
now spoke the white language of a tea-sipping tern,
with the Chinese nightingales on a shantung screen,

while the Persian falcon, whose cry leaves a scar
on the sky till it closes, saw the sand turn green,
the dunes to sea, understudying the man-o'-war,

talking the marine dialect of the Caribbean
with nightjars, finches, and swallows, each origin
enriching the islands to which their cries were sewn. (313-14)

In the manner that Homer, Penelope and Athena are identified in their "weaving" of *The Odyssey* plot, thus Maud-Penelope is identified with Walcott-Omeros in stitching together the fabric of their voyage to fulfillment: "... and the ghosts I will make of you with my scratching pen/ like a needle piercing the ring's embroidery/ with a swift's beak, or where, like a nib from the rim/ of an inkwell, a martin flickers a wing dry" (266). The symbolism of the bird spanning distances (real and metaphorical) is ubiquitous in the poem, creating another spun web of associations with Maud-quiltmaker as the pivotal metaphor: "If there is an equivalent to the epic simile, it must be figured in the sea swift that stitches horizons together, adorns Maud Plunkett's quilt, leads Achille to

Africa, and finally symbolizes the poet's circular journey overseas and back again to his green island for renewal."²⁰ Birds also figure largely in the Athena and Penelope-related passages of *The Odyssey*, as either the goddess transforms into various birds, among them a sea-swift (3. 372), or Penelope formulates her wish for Odysseus' return in her prophetic dream of an eagle-Odysseus swooping down out of the blue to eat her twenty pet geese-suitors (19. 535-58).

But as the first full description of Maud's quilt suggests, this, too, will serve as a shroud. Moreover, as the completion of Laertes' shroud brings about the ending of *The Odyssey*, and in a masterful reversal serves the young suitors instead of the old man, while resurrecting at last a wife who had interred herself willingly for the sake of her husband, so the final application of the quilt surprises us more than Maud's death – and in a similar fashion. It is understood early in the poem that Maud sacrificed her own homeland happiness for the sake her husband's quest for a personal *mythos* and history: in all the numerous instances where the poem transcribes Maud's thoughts, Ireland figures prominent. This lack of fulfillment on her part annoys Major Plunkett's conscience – all the more because he loves her – to the point where, irritated by Maud's playing of Irish songs on the piano, he hurts her feelings mortally by slamming the piano lid shut, "missing her fingers" (56-57). Soon after, Maud expires just when she has finished her quilt. This negative climax leads to a death fraught with images of remorse on Plunkett's part, and what seems like a failed parallel to the Penelopean enterprise, a fear of the spinning-wheel (of the Fates?) in Maud's last thought: "The gold wheel frightened her" (260).

But does this Penelope truly run out of patience before her Odysseus finally finds his home? When Maud dies, Walcott's and the poem's resolution is far from accomplished; but he uses her remaining quilt to create his own web-stratagem, for this release to come at the eleventh hour and disguised like an Odysseus: "We do not have a straight line of development, but rather like Penelope's weaving, under pressure from suitors, or Maud Plunkett's knitting of birds – those animals of wonder to the Greeks, and of shame to those moderns who long to be *rooted* somewhere or in some Nowhere – we have complicated patterns and some puzzling juxtapositions..."²¹ The first sign of this unhoped-for resolution comes, appropriately enough, at the moment of Major's last glimpse of his wife's face at the funeral:

We watched the Major lift

his wife's coffin hung with orchids, many she had found

in the blue smoke of *Saltibus*. Then Achille saw the swift
pinned to the orchids, but it was the image of a swift

which Maud had sewn into the silk draping her bier,
and not only the African swift but all the horned island's
birds, bitterns and herons, silently screeching there. (267)

As Maud's bier becomes the symbolic ground on which the island's flora and fauna are spread, as she is finally identified with the St. Lucian ground that had alienated her so in life, all the characters of the book – poet included – erase their differences and come together, not with the clash and slaughter that marks Odysseus' reclamation of his home, but in simple islander humility. Helen in her quietly regal air announces to Achille that she is coming back to him, after Hector's death, as she is to prepare for the birth of her baby: Maud's gesture shows Helen for the first time not as a symbol, but as a human being. As his grief subsides day by day, the Major comes to realize the magnitude of Maud's sacrifice, understanding her stance as the outcome of their long-ago marital vows, which she had kept in a paradigmatically Penelopean fashion only to allow her husband his final chance to find a "port of entry" he had been denied because of his wars (304-06). Maud, not St. Lucia, had been Plunkett's Ithaka all along, and only now that the two are one can he finally find peace: he lets go of his colonial hauteur to ask of the local obeah woman, Ma Kilman, if his wife is happy in the other world, and he receives the description of a happy Maud in a place that looks exactly like Ireland. Ever a foil to her Odysseus, she reaches her native home at the same time he discovers his, both finally in peace.

Thus Maud's labor – the quilt – serves its function both as a decisive device for "weaving" and controlling the overall plot, even when she, like Penelope, is laboring against all odds; and moreover, though she does not unstitch her real work at any point, her ruse, her buying of time is suggested by the way Plunkett's tightly woven world of colonialist patronage comes unraveled in the *dénouement*. Maud's progress, unlike Penelope's, is not palindromic – but when it is time to unravel her own mystery, the action is both redeeming of time lost and literally coming alive:

Ma Kilman opened her eyes, took her spectacles
off, and rubbed their cracked lenses. She was no sibyl
without them.

"She happy, sir!" Like you oracles,

so would I be, he thought. A twenty-dollar bill

as an extra. He was rising from her table
of sweaty plastic when a white hand divided

the bamboo-bead curtain, and calm as Glen-da-Lough's
vision, Maud smiled, to let him through. The wound in
his

head froze him in the scorched street. Innumerable flocks

of birds screamed from her guidebook over the shacks
of the village, their shadows like enormous fans,
all those she had sewn to the silken quilt, with tags
pinned to their spurs, and he knew her transparent hands
had unstitched them as he watched them flying over
the grooved roofs till they were simply the shadow of...
of a cloud on the hills. He sat in the Rover
and looked back at the No Pain Café. Maud closed the door
and sat next to him with the bread, beaming with love.

(307-08)

Like Penelope unraveling a death-symbol to buy life, Maud stitches the means to unravel death, physical and spiritual, with her own transformation into an Athena-like swift. The cosmic importance of this symbolism is noted by Bruckner, who however does not perceive the final image of unraveling in the poem: "[s]ome of the most memorable, dazzling characters are birds. Sewed into a quilt that becomes the universe by an old woman – who, unlike Penelope in the *Odyssey*, doesn't unravel her work every night – they take flight and fill the skies of the book the way old gods filled the skies of Homer."²² Like Odysseus, Maud returns to a spouse grieving for her, who is "trembling at his return" (308) and guides him home:

His wound healed slowly. He discovered the small joys
that lay in a life patterned like those on the quilt,
and he would speak to her in his normal voice

[...] he liked taking orders

from her invisible voice...

... He read

calmly, and he began to speak to the workmen
not as boys who worked with him, till every name

somehow sounded different; when he thought of Helen

she was not a cause or a cloud, only a name
for a local wonder. (309)

Thus finally not only Walcott's and Maud's vocation coincide, but the patchwork of world views, black, white, or mixed, in and out the text, are stitched together in this quilt of harmony. Maud's body unraveling as her quilt is being stitched have been the means to achieve this happy ending to the poetic Odysseus' Caribbean voyage.

In Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, however, there is no happy ending, not in the conventional sense of the word. Like Walcott after him, García Márquez returns to the theme of Odysseus and Penelope later on, in *La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada* (1972), but without changing the pessimistic undertones fraught with black humor he adopts in *OHYS*: the boyish, blonde Ulysses loses his naiveté along with his innocence, while his supposedly-faithful Eréndira runs off on him with the hard-earned wages of sleeping with thousands of "suitsors," the customers of her grandmother's wandering (i.e., anti-Ithacan) brothel. Yet though this burlesque ending carries its own weighty share of philosophy, it but summarizes the detailed psychological examination of the mythical model the earlier epic novel presents in the person and deeds of one of the book's more ambivalent characters, Amaranta Buendía. It is proposed here that she exemplifies the Homeric paradigm of a Penelope-weaver figure, although critics usually disregard the Homeric undertones in this work in favor of more apparent or "central" mythical figures that appear in this work: as Arnold Penuel observes, "T. S. Eliot once expressed an opinion to the effect that a writer should write with a knowledge of all Western literature in his bones, from Homer on down to the present. García Márquez certainly complies with Eliot's dictum in starting with Homer, though this is less well known than is his admiration, for example, of Sophocles' plays, or his knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology."²³ Still, as the analysis of the treatment of the Penelope myth in Amaranta aims to show, nothing could be further from García Márquez's intentions than Eliot's eurocentrism.

Amaranta, the daughter of Ursula and José Arcadio, the founders of Macondo, dutifully waits for her groom to come while typically schooling herself to become a fitting wife and housekeeper (much as Penelope or Maud minister to their wifely duties). But when her desired man, the blonde Pietro Crespi, finally arrives, Odysseus-like, from a distant land, he rejects Amaranta in favor of her prettier, restless antagonist, Rebeca—who in turn rejects Crespi for her Herculean adoptive brother, José Arcadio. The scandalous assertion of character strength and sexual

freedom make Rebeca a Helen figure, and in the same foil/kin position that the original Helen is placed *vis-à-vis* Penelope in *The Odyssey*. The alternative of Odysseus forgetting his faithful wife for the charms of any of the numerous seductresses in *The Odyssey*, twists the myth into an unforeseen direction, which however continues to conform to basic elements in the Homeric myth: like Penelope, Amaranta methodically dupes and then rejects her suitors, from the rebuffed Crespi to Colonel Gerineldo Márquez – but her motives are bitterness, vengefulness, and a deep trauma caused by her fear of teratogenesis and another betrayal by her fiancé:

"Irrational fear" seems a little casual – with a heart like Amaranta's fear seems entirely rational – but there is an important insight in the picture of love and the terror of love fighting it out, making Amaranta some kind of Latin American cousin of the Princess of Cleves, or any of the world's great, frightened renouncers. The cowardice and the love are significant, only great love makes the cowardice moving, and not merely abject. Amaranta's vocation is to miss love, and painfully to cherish the knowledge of all she's missing, to maintain intact her raw, intentional regret...²⁴.

The tragedy of this Penelope, therefore, becomes the irremediable fact that her biding for time has been for nothing. Even the second Odysseus-figure, Colonel Gerineldo, who is more like his mythic predecessor, a seasoned and tired warrior returning to his native place to find "his only refuge" at "Amaranta's sewing room" (166), is a disappointment:

When the news of his return reached her, Amaranta had been smothered by anxiety. But when she saw him enter the house in the middle of Colonel Aureliano Buendía's noisy escort and she saw how he had been mistreated by the rigors of exile, made old by age and oblivion, dirty with sweat and dust, smelling like a herd, ugly, with his left arm in a sling, she felt faint with disillusionment. "My God," she thought. "This wasn't the person I was waiting for." (166)

This very down-to-earth episode is actually a direct parallel to two of the episodes in *The Odyssey*, both reflecting an ambivalent, if thoroughly human, side of Penelope in her conduct regarding her husband. The first one is her dream after her interview with the disguised Odysseus, in which she sees her husband as he was twenty years ago, right before he left for Troy (20. 87-90): like Amaranta, Penelope's natural reaction in

picking up the subconscious signs of her returned husband is to project her own wishful memories of him on the present reality. It is not difficult to understand then why, when she first sees the bloody, beggarly-clad Odysseus standing amidst the slaughtered suitors, she is reserved and unrecognizing, disappointed, as Odysseus remarks – and it takes more than a good bath and restored appearance for him to win her recognition and acceptance back (23. 88-172). Gerineldo proves himself true to form, but disastrously not so in the essence of the homecoming husband.

García Márquez goes even further to measure the effect of this frustrated homecoming, and the excess energies of a Penelope that can no more be satisfied by diverting them to weaving and weeping. The issue of incest, one of the most prominent themes of the novel, can be neatly fitted in the Homeric subversion as well. There seems to be an incestuous obsession ruling Amaranta, which is clearly attributed both to the particular Buendía genetic penchant, but also to her sexual frustration. The fact that she only engages in near-incest (or very serious foreplay) with members of her family that are minors, almost her "sons" (like Aureliano José and Fernanda's José Arcadio) could be interpreted as Márquez's overture to consider a peculiar tangent of the Telemachus-Penelope relationship developing in their dysfunctional Ithacan household. At the beginning of the contest of the bow (*toxou thesis*, in Part 21), whose sexual connotations and parallelism to weaving make it an apposite finale to the shroud-ruse,²⁵ Telemachus, although aware of his father's presence, first makes a speech in praise of Penelope and then proceeds to try stringing the bow himself, in order to prove a worthy heir to Odysseus' battle gear. He almost succeeds the third time, "but Odysseus nodded in dissent, and checked him in his eagerness" (21.106-129). This act on the part of Telemachus could be simply the outcome of his freshly-kindled manhood in the light of his father's return; on the other hand, in openly praising Penelope as an erotic and spousal object, and then engaging in a contest not only against her suitors, but to an extent against his own father, he becomes quite suspect to the modern, Freudian reader of the text. In setting up the deliberate conflation of maternal and erotic bonds between Amaranta and the Buendía youths, García Márquez could be one of those readers.

To continue setting the points of "comparative deviation" from Homer, instead of forgiving Helen/Melantho, as Penelope and Maud do, Amaranta becomes deadly jealous of Rebeca (as later of the uncannily beautiful Remedios, another Helen figure); or, instead of rejecting her in a socially-sanctioned manner, Amaranta vows to kill her step-sister, a decision she is nevertheless unable to carry out due to apparent lack of both Penelopean courage and resourcefulness, though, as Carmen Arnau

observes, she does not lack characteristics that match Odysseus' determination and practicality, being one of García Márquez's domineering, "masculine" women who "are firmly rooted in the land they tread on".²⁶

On the other hand, Rebeca does suffer social ostracism and dies a lonely death, deformed and bitter: this has led critics to identify Amaranta with the punitive virgin aspect of Athena, as she appears in the Medusa or Arachne myths.²⁷

Curiously enough, however, the myth of the monstrous birth, Amaranta's (and the entire family's) deterrent and bane, is an element of the Penelope myth, only not one that appears in mainstream *Odyssey*, but as early as Pindar. According to Marilyn Katz:²⁸

Servius, in his commentary to the *Aeneid*, summarizes the scandalous tradition that was common in antiquity: "For when he [Odysseus] returned home to Ithaca after his wanderings, it is said that he found among the household gods Pan, who was reported to have been born from Penelope and all the suitors, as the name itself Pan seems to indicate; although others report that he was born from Hermes, who transformed himself into a goat and slept with Penelope. But after Odysseus saw the deformed child, it is said that he fled [again] to his wanderings"

(Servius in *Aen.* 2.44).

Although the alternate myth is probably too obscure to have been picked up by García Márquez, Katz notes (77-78) that ambivalent attitudes in and about Penelope incorporated in the text's language have been consistently picked up by scholars. In that sense, the subversive reading of the Penelope myth in *OHYS* is within the classical commentary tradition. One wonders, though, at the author's reasons of introducing a Pan-creature in his narrative, not once, but twice: as the persecuted monstrosity appearing at Ursula's death (the woman whose fear of the beast-child is largely responsible for Amaranta's neurosis), but also as the son of Amaranta-Ursula, a woman who, by virtue of *OHYS*'s onomastic tradition, to be connected to Amaranta both as a foil, but also as a derivative. Amaranta-Ursula fleshes out all of the repressed desires of that frustrated Penelope, the incest (which will be dealt with later) and the Odyssean fantasy of coming back to one's native land, leading one suitor by a love-leash, and finding the ideal lover waiting for her all these years in wise seclusion.

But what leads critics such as Samuel García to identify Amaranta with Penelope is, undoubtedly, her trademark sewing work, especially the

shroud she weaves for Rebeca that ends up, in the reversal mode of the earlier examples, as her own biercloth.²⁹ When an aged Rebeca is discovered still alive in her own house, expected to die at any moment, Amaranta, who has been diverting her time of solitude and waiting for her hated rival's death with a proto-Penelopean ruse of pulling off buttons "to sew them on again so that inactivity would not make the wait longer and more anxious" (283), devises the ultimate revenge on Rebeca, and goes to it with the same crafty secrecy that Penelope went about her shroud-trick:

No one in the house realized that at that time Amaranta was sewing a fine shroud for Rebeca... She had decided to restore Rebeca's corpse, to disguise with paraffin the damage to her face and make a wig for her from the hair of the saints [which is Remedios the Beauty's shorn hair]. She would manufacture a beautiful corpse, with the linen shroud and a plush-lined coffin with purple trim, and she would put it at the disposition of the worms with splendid funeral ceremonies. She worked out the plan with such hatred that it made her tremble to think about the scheme, which she would have carried out in exactly the same way if it had been done out of love, but she would not allow herself to become upset by the confusion and went on perfecting the details so minutely that she came to be... a virtuoso in the rites of death. The only thing that she did not keep in mind in her fearsome plan was that in spite of her pleas to God she might die before Rebeca. That was, in fact, what happened. (284)

The text then goes on immediately to relate how Amaranta was forewarned by Death herself, who is a fellow embroiderer (a supernatural parallel to Athena and the Moirae), that the set date of her death would be the exact day she would finish her shroud (thus destining her shroud for Rebeca to become her own). It also chronicles the desperate attempts of Amaranta to stall the progress of the shroud, by spinning the thread herself, and making the pattern infinitely complicated; and her final resignation in the face of her unalterable fate. Of particular interest is the last phrase in this segment, for it denotes the nonlinear compositional style characteristic of García Márquez in this work, but which, as mythical patterns go, is adopted both in *The Odyssey* and in *Omeros*. The *schema prothysteron*, the chronological disruption of the narrative in Homer, with the past events coming in the middle of the epic, is mirrored in Achille's trip to the Africa of his ancestral past and back in *Omeros*, as well as the interweaving of subplots, points of view, lands and chronological events.

As for *OHYS*, many chapters begin with the formula "many years later" viewed from a time-displaced perspective. Yet this manipulation of time can also be seen as resembling the mythical weaving pattern, where criss-crossing threads are tightened together in an overall fabric that creates sense and controls its separate elements (by stalling, speeding, or revisiting an event in time); as Williams notes on this authorial choice, "[t]he creation of a mythical time contributes to the mythical level of reality. This concept of time negates the linear progression of normal chronology and history."³⁰

Penelope longs for a release through death from her predicament when her ruse "fails," while Maud Plunkett death upon completion of her quilt is a self-willed act of liberation. In both cases, death is seen as the ultimate ally, controversial yet effective, evoked through the women's shroud-work. Amaranta, too, perceives death as a fellow seamstress who allows her to reach the resignation of her hatred against Rebeca through a realization of her own finitude. But for her death is not a controllable, or desirable option: although she calculates the date of her death, and arranges her own funeral to every detail, Death frustrates Amaranta's vengeance twice: first by Remedios' unexpected end, and finally by taking Amaranta before her rival. Although she tries to shape her own plot as Penelope did, Amaranta surrenders to the pointlessness of her life: instead of slowing down her stitching, she actually speeds up the work, for "she understood the vicious circle of Colonel Aureliano Buendía's little gold fishes" (285). "In the magnificent tapestry of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, whose fabric is studded with glistening carnivalesque reversals..." Amaranta, unlike the weaver-author, takes of Penelope only the twenty years of solitude without possibility of engineering her own release, or literally "hanging by a thread" any longer.³¹ Devoid of a perspective of an Odysseus, Amaranta dies devoid also of hope, "the corpse of the aged virgin, ugly and discolored, with the black bandage on her hand and wrapped in the magnificent shroud. She was laid out in the parlor beside the box of letters" (288). However, the Homeric identification of the traits of the weaver with those of her work works here as well, though in a twisted fashion. As Penelope's web-ruse is the basis for her *kleos*, and Maud's bird-quilt her altruistic lifework in the service of reconciliation, the final juxtaposition of Amaranta's shroud with her black bandage reveals her true nature, her great potential for beauty that was deformed into a perpetual attempt to heal a wound, a lack that could not be redressed. As José Bedoya observes, "con relación a ella y por ella, se puede tener una actitud *religiosa*, es decir, se puede tener una relación con el poder cósmico que dirige la *vida*. Amaranta teje una mortaja que es símbolo de su vida, pues cuando la haya acabado morirá ineludiblemente."³²

The box of letters to the dead, which of course will never be delivered, as well as Amaranta's previous unsent letters to Pietro Crespi, are the dead text, the negation of authorial control that Penelope-Athena-Homer had, and Walcott saw in himself and Maud. In what is yet a clearer indication of Amaranta's failure of ruse and life, moreover, García Márquez underlines the Penelopean paradigm constructed by Amaranta's kin/foil, Amaranta-Ursula, in her relation to the quintessential text woven inside the text of *OHYS*, Melquíades' scroll prophecies.

As noted before, Amaranta-Ursula can be interpreted as a fleshing out of Penelope's most secret fantasies of role-reversal with her wandering husband. The energy and resourcefulness of Ursula and the determination of Amaranta are united in her to create a character worthy of an adventurer "driven on a sailor's breeze" (382). In an interesting parallel with Maud Plunkett, Amaranta-Ursula is also connected to bird imagery: but, unlike Maud's successful reconciliation of difference, Amaranta-Ursula's attempt to rekindle the destroyed bird population of Macondo fails, for the birds cannot adapt and take off in mad nostalgia for their native island. Her pointless return to the sterile and doomed Macondo, the dead past, is culminated by the fact that she and Aureliano in a sense finish another shroud much like Amaranta's, for they mesh together in their doomed offspring (himself an interweaving of Aureliano and José Arcadio traits) the last two remaining threads of the Buendía family, that will, true to the Homeric form, spell their immediate end-tale. But on the other hand, only when her pig-tailed son's body is literally unraveled by the ants is the Sanskrit text that has been the double fabric of both book and prophecy finally unraveled, revealed, and released from waiting (a parallelism made clearer by the description of the scroll formula, whose juxtaposed odd and even lines in two different codes resemble the interweaving of two threads that makes a fabric). In that sense, Amaranta-Ursula stands in the middle of a myth-control gesture that has Amaranta on the one hand, and the wise gypsy on the other. Melquíades' control of the narrative is revealed as the work of a master-weaver, a person that can look at patterns of the past, and through them, synthesize both the image of the future – much as the author does – and the penultimate Aureliano's unique chance to true understanding and an identity. Yet Melquíades' weaving is also a ruse, for its revelation comes too late to save the doomed family, itself having kept the generations of the Buendías occupied – and thus, like the suitors, fixed to their solitary fate. A wanderer like Homer and a wielder of superhuman powers like Athena, a man who dies and comes back to life to offer advice (like Maud), Melquíades stands in contrast to Amaranta, who has been unable

to let go of her rancor-filled past and weave an Ithaka for herself and those men who have needed it.

The setting up and then deconstruction of the weaving Penelope myth is perhaps García Márquez's way of pointing to the dangers of the (post-)modernist search of rejuvenation of one's culture through myth: although it is a viable tool, as Walcott's *Omeros* and even García Márquez's short story "El ahogado más hermoso del mundo" prove, one must always be selective of the mythical elements one returns to. Amaranta, as her name implies, is changeless, is dead form, a wishful restorer of corpses to a very epidermic, unconvincing beauty: similarly, the use of myth/tradition for tradition's sake brings sterility and perversion to what should be informed, but predominantly timely. By presenting three different web-spinners, the novelist indicates that myth affords multiple interpretations, some better left dead. Walcott's optimistic view urges a journey into myth without forgetting that the enrichment of the present is the final goal:

to mimic, one needs a mirror, and... our pantomime is conducted before a projection of ourselves which in its smaller gestures is based on metropolitan references. No gesture, according to this philosophy, is authentic, every sentence is a quotation, every movement either ambitious or parathetic, and because it is mimicry, uncreative. The indictment is crippling, but, like all insults, it contains an astonishing truth.³³

The question of authenticity, which Walcott inherits as a dialectic between him and V. S. Naipaul, must balance itself out between the organizing principle of the past and the energy of the present. García Márquez, working towards the same goal from the opposite point of view, shows us the evils of suppressing one's present time on earth by insisting on the settlement of old scores. Even though things do repeat themselves and presumed-dead spouses return, the irrepeatable finitude of time in *OHYS* indicates that the capacity of myth to rejuvenate and enrich the present should not interfere, as Amaranta's puritanical superstition does,³⁴ with the capacity to surprise and alter fate that is the very myth of myth, the way Penelope's ruse shows us. To weave successfully, to weave beautifully, one must first learn to unweave.

Notes

- ¹ Mary E. Davis, *The Voyage Beyond the Map: 'El ahogado más hermoso del mundo,'* in pp 159-68 of George R. McMurray (ed.), *Critical Essays on Gabriel García Márquez*, Boston, G. K. Hall & Co., 1987: 165.
- ² Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990. All subsequent quotations of the poem are taken from this edition and are given by page number in parenthesis only.
- ³ Derek Walcott, *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993.
- ⁴ D. J. R. Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage to an Unwanted Man," in pp 396-99 of Robert D. Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, Washington, D. C., Three Continents Press, 1993: 397.
- ⁵ Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage" p. 398.
- ⁶ See, for example, Samuel García, *Tres Mil Años de Literatura en Cien Años de Soledad: Intertextualidad en la Obra de García Márquez*, Medellín, Colombia, Lealon-Paragrama, 1977, on the Freudic-Olympian parameters of García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Robert Lewis Sims, *The Evolution of Myth in Gabriel García Márquez from La Hojarasca to Cien Años de Soledad*, Hispanic Studies Collection, Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1981, on applications of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural theories on myth; Raymond L. Williams, *Gabriel García Márquez*, Twayne's World Authors Series 749, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1984, on the Oedipus myth in *OHYS*, a view supported also by Lewis, undoubtedly due, in part, to García Márquez' declared admiration for Sophocles. On the other hand, Walcott is seen as an essentially "Homeric" poet, for example in Bruckner; the texts in Stewart Brown (ed.), *The Art of Derek Walcott*, Chester Springs, PA, Seven Books-Dufour, 1991; and Robert D. Hamner, *Derek Walcott: Updated Edition*, Twayne's World Authors Series, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1993.
- ⁷ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gregory Rabassa (trans.), New York, Harper & Row, 1970. All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition and are given in parenthesis only by page numbers.
- ⁸ Sims, *The Evolution of Myth*, p. 9.
- ⁹ For further bibliography on the subject, see Marilyn A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in The Odyssey*, Princeton, PUP, 1991: 25 n. 9.
- ¹⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 2 vols., A. T. Murray (trans.), The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1960: I. 43-44. All subsequent translated quotations are given from this edition by Part and line number(s).
- ¹¹ Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*, Princeton, PUP, 1994: 18.
- ¹² Agathe Thorndon, *People and Themes in Homer's Odyssey*, Dunedin: U. of Otago P., 1970: 94.
- ¹³ Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope*, p. 29-30.
- ¹⁴ For the etymology, see Didymos, *Schol. Od.* 4. 797, and Eustathius, *Od.* 1. 343ff.
- ¹⁵ Walcott in Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage" p. 396 contests this sense:

- "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 great warriors. [...] I was thinking of Homer the poet of the seven seas."
- ¹⁶ Hamner, *Derek Walcott; Updated Edition*, p. 19.
- ¹⁷ Mary Lefkowitz, "Bringing Him Back Alive" in pp. 400-403 of Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 403.
- ¹⁸ Hamner, *Derek Walcott, Updated Edition*, p. 146.
- ¹⁹ Brown (ed.), *The Art of Derek Walcott*, p. 199.
- ²⁰ Hamner, *Derek Walcott: Updated Edition*, p. 145.
- ²¹ John Figueroa, "Omeros," pp. 195-96, in Brown (ed.), *The Art of Derek Walcott*, pp. 193-213.
- ²² Bruckner, "A Poem in Homage," p. 397.
- ²³ Arnold M. Penuel, *Intertextuality in García Márquez*, York, South Carolina, Spanish Literature Publications, 1994, p. 120.
- ²⁴ Michael Wood, *Gabriel García Márquez; One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Cambridge: CUP, 1990, p. 81.
- ²⁵ On the relation between shroud-ruse and bow contest, Helene P. Foley, in p. 104 of "Penelope as Moral Agent," claims: "... her choice as a contest of skill and strength leaves open, in a fashion characteristic of Penelope, several possibilities. The Suitors may demonstrate that none of them is equal to Odysseus; [...] The contest with the bow has the potential to serve, like the web, as a tricky device to delay the remarriage." In Beth Cohen (ed.), *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, New York and Oxford, OUP, 1995, pp. 93-115.
- ²⁶ Carmen Arnau, *El mundo mítico de Gabriel García Márquez*, Nueva Colección Ibérica 36, Barcelona, Ediciones Península, 1971, p. 25.
- ²⁷ Samuel García, *Tres Mil Años de Literatura*, pp. 28, 33, and 55, respectively.
- ²⁸ Katz, *Penelope's Renown*, p. 77.
- ²⁹ Samuel García, *Tres Mil Años de Literatura*, p. 33.
- ³⁰ Williams, *Gabriel García Márquez*, p. 80.
- ³¹ David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*, Lexington, The UP of Kentucky, 1995, p. 51.
- ³² José Ivan Bedoya, *La estructura Mítica del relato en la obra de Gabriel García Márquez*, Medellín, Colombia, Lea Editorial, 1987, p. 99.
- ³³ Derek Walcott, "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" in pp. 51-57 of Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 53.
- ³⁴ On the subject of dead vs. viable tradition, Penuel in *Intertextuality*, p. 66, notes: "Symbolically, Amaranta's shroud is a womb. Ursula's words ironically suggest that Amaranta, out of her fear of life, has really never lived, has never left the womb. Amaranta's hypocrisy is transparent. Not only has her overevaluation of virginity led to a life of sterility but she has manifestly harmed those around her. Traditionally treated as a symbol of purity, innocence and virtue, virginity metamorphoses in this context into a symbol of sterility and death."

Περίληψη

Χριστίνα Ντόκου: “*Fruit of the Loom*”: Νέες προσεγγίσεις της Πηνελόπης στους Walcott και Márquez

Το άρθρο εξετάζει συγκριτικά τη χρήση της Ομηρικής μορφής της Πηνελόπης, πιστής συζύγου του Οδυσσέα, στα κλασικά αριστουργήματα δύο συγχρόνων κατόχων του Νόμπελ Λογοτεχνίας: τα *Εκατό Χρόνια Μοναξιά* του Κολομβιανού μυθιστοριογράφου Γκαμπριέλ Γκαρσία Μάρκεζ και το μεγάλο ποίημα *Όμηρος* του ποιητή της Καραϊβικής, Ντέρεκ Ουώλκοττ. Η ανάλυση επικεντρώνεται στα στοιχεία που αφορούν στο περίφημο τέχνασμα της Πηνελόπης να κερδίσει χρόνο από τους μνηστήρες υφαίνοντας και ξε-υφαίνοντας το σάβανο του πεθερού της, Λαέρτη, δείχνοντας το πώς τα στοιχεία αυτά, οι ερμηνείες και οι συνδέσεις τους αξιοποιούνται από τους μεταγενέστερους καλλιτέχνες για να αναπλάσουν την – θετική για τον Ουώλκοττ, αρνητική για τον Μάρκεζ – εικόνα της ανυφάντρας που περιμένει και κάνει σχέδια σε έναν αγώνα ενάντια στο χρόνο και τη δύσκολη θέση της. Μέσα από αυτή τη διαδικασία, η Πηνελόπη αναδεικνύεται από δευτερεύων χαρακτήρας σε μετωνυμία όχι μόνο για πανόπτες προφήτες και θεότητες μέσα στα ίδια τα κείμενα, αλλά και για τον ίδιο τον ποιητή-δημιουργό που υφαίνει την ιστορία του ως τέχνασμα μέσα στο χρόνο, χρησιμοποιώντας το (μυθικό) παρελθόν για να εμπλουτίσει το παρόν και το μέλλον.

