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'Hellenic Myth, Irishness and Violence in Yeats and Longley'

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While both W. B. Yeats' and Michael Longley's poetry merges Greek mythology with traditional Irish mysticism, the two poets have different aims and social foci. Yeats's poem, "Leda and the Swan" and Longley's "The Butchers" present differing opinions of "the troubles" that occurred in Ireland during their respective time periods. Yeats's work, which condemns the violence done to Ireland by outside forces, contrasts with Longley's more ambiguous interpretation. However, each shares certain similarities in Greek myth and poetical construct.

"Leda and the Swan", by William Butler Yeats, is an example of Irish poetry which draws on Classical Greek and Latin texts to create a commentary on the political atmosphere in Ireland. The poem is based on the story of Leda, who was raped by Zeus in the form of a swan and later gave birth to Helen of Troy. In Yeats's poem, Leda represents Ireland, forcefully violated by a foreign power — Great Britain.

The first two stanzas hold a semi-regular pattern, including end rhyme and a steady meter. Yeats's style in this poem is almost sonnet-like in form, loosely based on iambic pentameter. Despite this, the poem is charged with Grecian mythical violence. The first stanza reads: "A sudden blow: the great wings beating still/ Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed/ By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,/ He holds her helpless breast upon his breast." The poem begins with brute-force,

with a “sudden blow,” so to speak. The imagery is vivid, and immediately registers with any reader who is familiar with the story in question.

The second quatrain continues with: “How can those terrified vague fingers push/ The feathered glory from her loosening thighs? / And how can body, laid in that white rush, / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?” Again, the regular end-rhyme and flowing meter keep the narrative moving, incorporating classical imagery with the “feathered glory” of Zeus and his indomitable power.

The third stanza, however, creates a major shift. Instead of a four-lined quatrain, the verse is a six-lined sextet, with a deafening caesura in the third line. This line begins with a newsprint-like headline: “Agamemnon dead.” (line 19) and conjures a flashing image of what is to come of the union of Leda and the swan—“the broken wall, the burning roof and tower” (Line 20). After the stuttering pause, the line continues with a jarring question about whether Leda “put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” (Line 23-24). The poem here takes on a more sober, probing aura, no longer about the violence at hand, but the future ramifications for Greece (and Ireland) as a nation. This stanza is more from Leda’s perspective, allowing the reader to feel the regret she feels at having been so violated.

According to Leo Spitzer, writing for “Modern Philology” on Yeats’s poetry, the poem’s construct follows that of ancient Roman historians, “with which the poet must have been long acquainted” (Spitzer 274). Yeats’s use of “the broken wall” in line 20, as opposed to another format, such as “the breaking of the wall” follows a typical Latin phrasing which was customary for the likes of Livy and Ovid.

Writing for the same journal, Hoyt Trowbridge comments on the instantaneous colossal scope of the poem: “Here, in a line and a half, the subject is immensely broadened, opening to the mind a vista of history” (Trowbridge 121). The poem at times also contracts to a more intimate, contemplative perspective, allowing the reader to focus on Leda and her plight. Leda takes on the

persona of Hibernia—the symbolic figure of Ireland. Therefore, the swan is Great Britain, a violent invader who takes what he likes from the vulnerable, weak Ireland.

Trowbridge also comments on the clearness of diction in the piece. He asserts that “the vocabulary is, for the most part, literal and common, without obscurity or ambiguity, immediately clear to any reader” (Trowbridge 125). This, according to Trowbridge, is typical of Yeats’s later style of writing. His early career was fraught with high-minded word choice, according the pre-Raphaelite style of poetry. “Leda and the Swan,” however, is clearly and plainly written, leaving readers in no question of its meaning—violence has been done in Ireland.

Elizabeth Cullingford, in her chapter on “Leda and rape,” states that “according to Yeats, the poem was inspired by a meditation on the Irish situation in relation to world politics. The first version was finished...in the atmosphere of political instability resulting from the Civil War” (Cullingford 142). Yeats intended the poem to lash out against Great Britain’s yoke, even to serve as a catalyst for public outcry. In Yeats’s own words, as he began to write “Leda and the Swan,” he “thought, ‘Nothing is now possible but some movement from above preceded by some violent annunciation.’” (Allison 49). He then used the poem as a metaphor to make this “violent annunciation,” even though he further stated that “as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it” (Allison 49). Whether politics “went out” or not, however, “Leda and the Swan” still stands as a forceful political statement about the violent relationship between Ireland and Great Britain. It is a poem based on social injustice and forceful subjugation by a higher power.

By contrast, Michael Longley’s poem, “The Butchers” offers a more equivocating view toward the situation in Northern Ireland. Longley offers a more optimistic eye. Longley’s fifth volume of poetry, *Gorse Fires*, appeared in 1991 (Brearton 161). Like Yeats, the book includes poems loosely based on episodes from Greek myth, particularly Homer’s *Odyssey*. Unlike Yeats, however, Longley’s poem ends on a more positive note, calling for peace rather than war.

Longley is translating Homer's text roughly into modern poetry to fit his purposes, and "The Butchers" chronicles the part of the narrative where Odysseus cleanses his household upon returning to Ithaca. The poem is based on The Shankill Butchers—a Protestant group from the 1970s who dismembered nineteen Catholics in Belfast with butcher knives, then abandoned the bodies (Russell 229).

The entire poem is one sentence—an entire epic of violence occurring in one fell swoop. Longley's version, here, is even "bloodier than Homer's" (Russell 227) in the vivid way he describes the gory dismemberment of the suitors and the hanging of the disloyal housemaids. Longley's rendition is taken almost word-for-word from Homer, but condensed. The effect, however, is much more detached than Yeats's, as it advises collaboration between different factions in Northern Ireland to make peace. Longley condemns violence instead of encouraging it. Thus, both use violence, but to different effects.

In this episode in *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is returning to purge his household of the noxious suitors that have settled there, like "bats gibbering in the nooks of their mysterious cave" (Line 21). It is interesting to note that the housemaids apparently settled there with them, perhaps suggesting that the natives have taken up with the invaders.

Further, Richmond Lattimore's translation of Homer's *Odyssey* has it that Odysseus called for "sulfur" (Lattimore 333) to cleanse the house, similar to Longley's "whitewash and disinfectant" in line 16. Unlike Homer's sulfur, however, whitewash and disinfectant may not have as purifying of a connotation. Whitewash suggests a covering-up—a superficial cleaning that leaves the filth beneath the cleansed surface.

Homer also states that Odysseus hangs the disloyal housemaids specifically that they will die in the most shameful way possible. Odysseus ordered them to be killed by sword, but Telemachus instead opts to have them rounded up and hanged, after they have finished sponging the blood from Odysseus's fancy tables and chairs (Lattimore 332). Longley spends six lines dwelling on the housemaids hanging until dead, in a scene which is faintly reminiscent of a Puritan witch hunt.

Next, Odysseus must clean the house of the suitors before Hermes is able to take their souls to the Underworld. Hermes, the Greek messenger god (Littleton 670), is compared to a clergyman waving “the supernatural baton” (Line 18) which invokes the image of a wizard or even a Druid priest. He purges the house by “whitewashing” instead of actually cleaning it. The use of “fumigating” evokes an idea of magical fire and incense. Here, perhaps, the “oceanic streams/and the white rock” (Line 25-26) are the Irish Sea rather than the River Styx. Hermes is their “deliverer” (Line 24) rather than their destroyer he—has released their souls from the prison of their bodies.

At the end of the poem, the souls of the suitors are left lingering in the mind of the reader, as “troubling reminders of the worst kind of atrocities” (Russell 230), rather than fading out of the story, like in Homer’s version. Whereas Odysseus is the primary focus of Homer’s telling, Longley’s retelling is somewhat sympathetic to the suitors and housemaids, whatever their guilt, as he invokes images of Irish pastoral settings as they are shunted off to the Underworld. Thus, Longley’s poem presents a more ambiguous portrait of “the troubles” in modern Ireland, as opposed to Yeats’s decisive one.

Longley’s choice of words points to his meaning. The word *sheughs* (Line 25) is an old one, and according to Reynolds it is:

“A markedly Ulster and Scots word...As often in literary writing when a regional word pops up among otherwise standard vocabulary, ‘sheugh’ brings with it a distinctive feeling of place; and the feeling continues in what follows. There are no bogs in the Elysian fields...but many in Ireland” (Reynolds 215).

The word *sheugh* means “an embankment [or] ditch,” (Dolan 209) according to *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English: The Irish Use of English*. Longley’s use of the word here pointedly underlines his comparison with the Irish troubles to the Homeric episode in question. Again, bog-asphodels (Line 27) bring Odysseus’ world into the world of modern Ireland. The bog asphodel has “bright yellow flowers” (Tam et al. 566) and can be toxic to animals, according to *Toxic Plants and Other Natural*

Toxicants. Longley's use of this plant firmly makes the setting of the poem Ireland rather than ancient Greece.

He does this with good reason. Edna Longley, Longley's wife, suggests that the literature produced by the Irish can serve as a crucial bridge between the two factions in Northern Ireland. Her "contention speculates how Northern Irish literature might transcend traditional political boundaries—while simultaneously recognizing them—and create a corridor of communication between the most intransigent factions of the province. This process would be a crucial step toward reconciliation" (Russell 233). "The Butchers" is an example of this. It draws attention to and questions the validity of needless slaughter.

With an eye for creating a political statement, the work of both Longley and Yeats focuses on activating their readership in favor of Irish empowerment. Both poets drew expertly on Classical poetry as a metaphor for political life in Northern Ireland during their time periods. Longley's poetry, however, focuses on reconciliation more than that of Yeats, though both poets use similar themes of Greek myth and the brutality that exists between members of the human race. Yeats's work self-professedly intends to incite the wrath of the public, while Longley's is placating, a plea for peace.

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