CAAS 2017

Panel Proposal: **Classical Reception in the Caribbean**

In honour of the outstanding work of this year's Clack Lecturer, Gregson Davis, and to enhance the growing field of scholarship on classical reception in the Caribbean, we propose the following panel. It will be comprised of four speakers offering papers of 15 minutes each. Professor Gregson Davis has agreed to offer a brief response.

For many, the landmark of classical reception in the Caribbean is Derek Walcott's 1990 epic poem, *Omeros*. In recognition of this, the first paper will return to the root of classicists' early fascination with Walcott, asking once more what Homer, the touchstone of European manners, had to say to a man whose ancestors were African slaves, and who was raised on an island remote from what are seen as the traditional centers of classical culture in ancient Greece and Rome? When Walcott travelled to Europe, everywhere he saw monuments that reminded him of his alienation from European culture. On his return to his own island, he found the bardic figure of Omeros waiting for him. This paper will examine Walcott's personal encounter with Omeros on St. Lucia, demonstrating that it stands as one of the most profound epiphanies vouchsafed to any poet. We would have to go back to classical Greece, to Pindar's encounter with the god Pan, for example, to find any experience comparable to this encounter of the poet and his Muse.

The second paper will continue the focus on Walcott's poem, but will turn its attention to issues of translation. *Omeros* is obviously not a translation of the *Odyssey* in the way that Walcott's *Odyssey*-play is, turning Homeric epic into Caribbean drama. And yet, comparing the different approaches to the *Odyssey* in these two works uncovers ways in which *Omeros* also translates Odyssean motifs into Caribbean language and imaginary, and interprets Afro-Caribbean culture through Odyssean patterns and reflections. In particular, the paper will focus on Achille's sun-struck, imagined voyage out—which is also a voyage home—to Africa, and the return, in Books 2 and 3. The paper will argue that the Odyssean references turn what is effectively a kind of *katabasis* into a synthesis of epic / bardic culture and African past that produces a multilayered sense of origins necessary for a fully embodied return home: an affirmation, an embrace, of the Caribbean's rich realities.

The third paper will take up a broader Caribbean poetic voice through a survey of poets, such as Kamau Brathwaite, Claudia Rankine, Julia de Burgos. Expanding the range slightly beyond Emily Greenwood's "Anglophone" frame, this paper is interested in the relationship between a broader Caribbean vernacular, such as what is found in figures from Santería and Candomblé, the traditions that speak to larger issues of African retentions, on the one hand, and the classical analysis of form and poetry that Walcott himself gives us, on the other. This paper will argue that it is within this tension – of the vernacular and the classical – that a unique Caribbean poetic voice can be found.

The final paper will pick up on this exploration of the non-Anglophone Caribbean and the interplay of the classical and the vernacular by an analysis of Patrick Chamoiseau's early play, *Manman Dlo contre la fée Carabosse* (1977). Written for children, Chamoiseau's drama – which has yet to be translated into English – features a witch-like figure, described in the play as a 'Graeco-Roman deity'. Her attempts to control the Caribbean island and impose the written word upon it bring her into conflict with the indigenous water deity,

Manman Dlo, who fights to protect the land and its oral traditions. Written in both French and Martiniquan creole, with a linguistically creole chorus, the play's colonial allegory depicts both the tension and the fraught solution that can be found between the classical and the vernacular, the written and the oral, in the Caribbean.

We anticipate robust discussion, which Professor Davis's response will accentuate. Davis is in the ideal position to situate the panel within the longer arch of the Greco-Roman Classics and their Caribbean reception.