
“We Are Still Mythical”:
Kate Tempest’s *Brand New Ancients*

JUSTINE MCCONNELL

THE LIGHTS ARE DOWN. On the simple stage is a microphone. Behind it, a drum kit. Chairs for two musicians on one side, a third chair on the other. And so we wait. An audience more diverse than at most theater performances, ranging from teenagers to the retired, from the conservatively dressed elite to the experimentally provocative youngsters. The performances at the North Wall in Oxford sold out weeks before it opened, and a small queue formed before tonight’s performance, eagerly hoping for returns. The same, I hear, has been true in most of the venues in which Tempest has performed around the country.

Kate Tempest. Rapper, poet, musician, playwright. Kate Tempest, winner of the 2012 Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry,¹ who has performed everywhere from Glastonbury Festival to the Royal Opera House, from London’s Battersea Arts Centre to New York’s St Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn. Kate Tempest. A brand new Homer telling her story of *Brand New Ancients*.*

She shambles onto the stage, as if a little shy, a little uncertain. In jeans and a t-shirt, looking very young, she seems an unlikely star of the evening. The first time I saw her perform *Brand New Ancients* was when it opened at Battersea Arts Centre back in 2012. She came onto the stage, we clapped as we have all learnt to do—part of the dutiful ritual of the theatre. She quieted our applause with a “Seriously. I haven’t done anything yet. You don’t even know if you’ll like it!” It

*Kate Tempest, *Brand New Ancients*, performed at the North Wall, Oxford, 25 and 26 February 2014.



Kate Tempest performing *Brand New Ancients* at Battersea Arts Centre. Photo Credit: Christina Hardinge, courtesy of BAC.

could have seemed an affectation, but something in her earnestness persuades against any artifice. In Oxford, she welcomes us to the theater, thanks us for coming as if we have arrived at a party she is hosting, remarks how much she has

enjoyed wandering around Oxford over the last few days. Laughing, she tells us that she has just learnt that some people here can even still perform ancient Greek plays in Greek (my friends and I glow with pride: the evening before we had taken Kate to the pub after she and I did an “In Conversation” piece, hosted by Oxford University’s Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama. She had taught us to play chess; we had regaled her with our best recitals of Aeschylus, ably performed by Lucy Jackson, who had played Clytemnestra in the Oxford Greek Play two years before).

Tempest introduces the band because, as she says, there will be no time to do so at the end. And she is quite right: from the moment the story begins we will all be utterly enthralled, bound together in a different world, with no curtain to mark the liminal space, no fourth wall to break. This is one of the defining elements of storytelling, and when, midway through, Tempest steps back from the story for a moment and addresses the audience directly, it melds seamlessly with the narrative rather than being a moment of authorial intrusion.²

From the moment she begins, the shyness disappears. Tempest leads us into the story with a long proem that functions not as an invocation of the Muse, but rather as an invocation of us, the audience, to see the heroes of our modern age:

There’s always been heroes
and there’s always been villains
and the stakes may have changed
but really there’s no difference.
There’s always been greed and heartbreak and ambition
and bravery and love and trespass and contrition—
we’re the same beings that began, still living
in all of our fury and foulness and friction,
everyday odysseys, dreams and decisions . . .
The stories are there if you listen. (4)

And as the poem gives way to the main story itself: “Now, focus” (6). It is this frame which self-consciously draws atten-

tion to the performance poet as narrator. Of course, it is the very co-existence of author and performer that makes performance poetry distinct from many other theatrical forms, where the writer and performer are seldom the same person. Contemporary performance poetry is the modern descendant of the oral poetry scene which gave us the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; it seems fitting then that Tempest should appropriate this form for her own modern epic. As she puts it, "People have been rapping words since Homer, and before."³

If the term "epic"—frequently applied to *Brand New Ancients* in its advertising material and critical reviews—jars with any who find it hard to consider this 75-minute performance thus, it should not. For the poem, notwithstanding its scale, contains not only many of the other defining elements of epic, it is also a very long work within the context of contemporary performance poetry, where many pieces will be just a few minutes long. Relative brevity may be a feature of new epics in our modern era, where our attention spans seem to have shrunk dramatically, and a play or film that exceeds three hours is always remarked on as "lengthy," and indeed, often carelessly described as "epic." But "miniaturizing" epic has been a feature of the genre since at least the nineteenth century, when it was felt that epic magnitude was impossible to replicate in the modern world. Tempest's "epic," moreover, warrants that designation for more specific reasons: starting *in medias res*, *Brand New Ancients* features gods and heroes (albeit redefined for our modern age), an introductory statement of themes, a mini *katabasis* on the London Underground, and even epithets via the music. If the nationalistic overtones are missing, that is only fitting for our globalized world where "nationalism" has become almost irrevocably tainted with the horrors of empire and colonialism.

The form of Tempest's work and its close relation to traditional oral poetics is one of the most fascinating features of her performance for those particularly interested in classical antiquity and its reception. When asked about her process, her response was illuminating:

I wrote this poem through hearing it. I love language, I'm obsessed with language. I think it's wonderful. I love written language. But when I'm working out what the metre is, it's something that I hear; I don't work it out in terms of, y'know, "Oh, this is going to be iambic pentameter and it'll be lovely to have this little thing here, let's use this literary device." I wouldn't even know how to pretend that I could do that. For me, it's *heard*. And I know where it should go because I can hear where it's going, so I'm working it out as I go along.

The process of it being something that I wrote is one thing. And, like, this is a poem that I wrote and the first time I performed it, it was on so many bits of paper . . . And I would write in my book, and I would run out of paper so I'd have to turn the book around and then start writing from the back, and then there'd be something else that I'd written that I'd have to say, "This isn't in it. Just skip forwards" . . . So then I came to sharing it, and I'm up there, like, doing all this with the book [*gestures turning it round and round*], throwing bits of paper down. And, like, it very much felt like a writer.

And now I'm at this stage with it where I'm performing it, and I don't feel like I'm performing my writing anymore. I feel like I'm being a performer of something that exists. So this whole thing about words that belong to you, and words that you've written, and then words that you perform . . . they're kind of different worlds. And maybe that's interesting: because at what point do you realise that this isn't something that you've written, but this is just something that belongs in you, that you are able to perform without the fact that you wrote it getting in the way? So you can change it if you want to. Like, if something's not working or sometimes you see a hurdle coming up which you know is going to be a kind of clunky thing to get over and you can just, y'know, sail it.⁴

The flexibility of the poem and *Tempest's* openness to changing it as she performs belies its written form, and hints at the elasticity that may still be inherent in an oral poem even after it is written down. Likewise, the importance of the ear, and of hearing the words as she composes them, are fundamental to *Tempest's* brand of performance poetry and to its place in a genealogy of oral poetics. In keeping with this, although *Tempest's* words do not employ stock epithets or a strict meter,

Kwake Bass on the drums is especially crucial to the music and rhythm of the piece; he even included a distinctive drum roll every time the character, Clive, came on the scene—as if in a nod to the Homeric epithets. The importance of *Brand New Ancient's* music also points to the deliberate generic instability of the piece, which is a part of its originality: the work bridges rap, storytelling, and performance poetry.

Brand New Ancients focuses on characters who seem unlikely heroes at first sight. Yet this is at the very heart of the poem:

These gods have got no oracles to translate their requests,
 these gods have got a headache and a payment plan and stress
 about
 when next they'll see their kids,
 they are not fighting over favourites—
 they're just getting on with it.
 We are the Brand New Ancients. (6)

Tempest's story involves two ordinary families, next-door neighbors in present-day south London. An affair, never discovered, between Brian and Jane, produces Tommy, who unsuspectingly grows up next door to his half-brother Clive. The focus then switches from the dissatisfied older generation to the two boys. There is no melodramatic revelation of the truth, no tragic *peripeteia* or hubristic downfall, although there is a kind of cathartic resolution, and an epic open-endedness, as if—as Aristotle recommended—we have witnessed only a small segment of the fuller tale.

It is, then, the form of *Brand New Ancients*, and its core theme, which make it of such interest to classicists. Nevertheless, Tempest does include specific, telling allusions to classical myth within the poem, but in Walcottian fashion, she—like her St. Lucian predecessor—proclaims an easy insouciance towards classical literature. She professed to have never finished the *Odyssey*, echoing the claim of the narrator of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*;⁵ smiling, she remarked that she is happy for these readings to be imputed to her

work, but that she did not consciously put them there herself. In Tempest's poem, an episode towards the end sees Tommy arriving just in time to protect his girlfriend, the aptly named Gloria in this *kleos*-free world; but finding himself suddenly frozen on the spot, it is, instead, Gloria herself who must fight off her unwelcome suitors. These modern-day "suitors" are, in fact, would-be rapists and are none other than Tommy's half-brother, Clive, and a friend. Tempest eschews the dramatic revelation, leaving only us as audience "in the know": Tommy and Clive, meanwhile, remain unknown to each other. In discussion, Professor Stephen Harrison asked whether this fight scene responds to book 22 of the *Odyssey*, to which Tempest replied:

Erm . . . No, it wasn't in my mind. Erm, but, I mean, I'll take that comparison! I feel like these stories are in us, they're in everybody. They inform our instinctual decisions, I suppose, but because they're so much a part . . . not just Homer's version, but the amount of times that's been retold in every movie, and book, and whatever else. The old stories and the new stories, they're all kind of part of the same. But I didn't think there was any parallel between book 22 of the *Odyssey* . . . I mean, I should have . . . That's so interesting! Because, I tell you, I never got as far as book 22! . . . But I will read it again!⁶

Despite this, there are a number of moments in the poem where there is a knowingness about the classical references that would seem to belie Tempest's disclaimer. Note the Theban echoes in:

There may be no monsters to kill,
no dragons' teeth left for the sowing, (2)

and the explicit reminder not to think of the Bible and its prodigal son, but of Homer's *Odyssey* and the long-absent father in:

the parable of the prodigal father
returned after years in the wilderness (3)

There is also Jane, "Brand New Pandora" (11) whose affair may not have unleashed all the evils of the world, but

which has certainly opened her up to guilt and recrimination and the knowledge that her actions can never be reversed. And there is Brian’s wife, described as “Brand New Medea” (12), but whose designation confounds our expectations, for this Medea strives to find the courage to leave the husband who has already emotionally abandoned her. Far from killing her children, this new Medea will struggle on, raising her son to manhood on her own. Other references, to the television show *X-Factor* and Simon Cowell as the modern-day Dionysus, for example, resonate further than mere name-dropping. Cowell is not just Dionysus, the god of wine helping us forget our troubles; he also inspires his Maenadic followers in terms strikingly reminiscent of the chorus of the *Bacchae*:

We kneel down before him, we beg him for pardon,
 Mothers feed on the raw flesh of their children struck by the madness
 That floods the whole country, this provocation to savagery. (27)

Such references give imaginative form to the thirst for fame which is both a peculiarly twenty-first-century affliction (the desire to be famous purely for being famous) and reminds us of the driving forces of both the Homeric heroes, and Euripides’ Dionysus himself: *kleos*, the urge to be widely recognized and never forgotten. At the same time, the detail of the maddened mothers sacrificing their children names the frenzied drive for celebrity as a madness, as well as demonstrating Tempest’s intricate knowledge of classical literature. In such moments, as throughout her performance, Tempest ably speaks to a wide range of audiences.

Indeed, *Brand New Ancients* is not the first time that Tempest has engaged with classical myth and literature. She has been performing her poem “Icarus” since 2005;⁷ and in 2012, inspired by her recent reading of Christopher Logue’s poetry, she performed “War Music (After Logue),” a moving engagement with the same kind of themes of combat trauma explored, in the United States via ancient Greek epic and tragedy, by Bryan Doerries’ *Theater of War* and Peter

Meineck's *Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives*. Nevertheless, Tempest is skeptical about scholarly analyses of her own work, or that of others:

I know that here in this world [at the University of Oxford], in this world of literary criticism and all that stuff, we like to think that every single thing that we find in a finished piece of work was a definitive decision, that it was cleverly decided upon, and laboured over. I'm telling you now, as a professional poet, it's as much about instinct as it is about decision-making. And, I know that you have to, in universities, take things apart and look for all the clever things that the writers did . . . I *guarantee* you: they weren't doing that.

What Tempest achieves so well, on top of the entrancing presence and mesmerizing performance, is a fully integrated modern response to the myths of classical antiquity. Far from popularizing gimmicks, Tempest has wholeheartedly appropriated the ancient world so that she is neither bound by issues of fidelity nor has to kick against them to make her own mark. Her *Brand New Ancients*, then, is more akin to Ali Smith's novel *Girl Meets Boy* (2007)—a modern reinterpretation of Ovid's tale of Iphis and Ianthe from the *Metamorphoses*—than to Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005). Like Smith's novel, Tempest's work is so fully immersed in modernity that it gives the impression of having been conceived only now. It is accessible without knowledge of its classical intertext, yet it is nevertheless illuminatingly enhanced by that knowledge.

However, *Brand New Ancients* demands, in a sense, two separate reviews: that of the performance by Kate Tempest touring around the UK, New York, and Australia, and that of the published poem. It was not until a year after the first performances of *Brand New Ancients*, back in September 2012, that the poem was published. This move was a very interesting one: what did this do to Tempest the performance poet? And where now did her particular kind of performance poetry sit within a spectrum of oral poetics? Watching the perform-

ance the first time, one had the impression that, though she had clearly memorized the text, the piece was still in flux in a way that exceeded the truism that every performance will, necessarily, be different. Since the publication of the text, however, it has been fixed in stone in a way that an oral text never is. Furthermore, almost like a subtitle on the title page of the book is the proclamation, “This poem was written to be read aloud.” It is testament to the power of Tempest’s performance that the mechanics of her process are not clear as you watch her perform; the overwhelming impression in performance is that the writing of the text must be secondary to her performance of it, so powerful is that performance. Yet, when asked, Tempest reaffirmed that the writing came first, and that the music, which also feels entirely integral to the piece, was only composed after the text.

While I have nothing but praise for *Brand New Ancients* as a performance piece, the published version is certainly energized by a recollection of Tempest’s performance. As a stand-alone poem, separated from its performative context, it easily withstands scrutiny, but is more like a libretto without its score and does not soar in the way the performance does.⁸ The rhymes can seem simplistic, the rhythms hard to capture. This is both to its detriment, and—in a sense—to its credit; for this really is a poem that needs to be read aloud, and when one does, one’s own patterns of speech begin to take on that particular south London intonation that is almost a patois. How versatile this may be for those not familiar with south London is harder to determine (and my own disclaimer should perhaps come in here, having lived for more than five years in the very same area of London to which Tempest dedicates the poem and in which it is set). For *Brand New Ancients* is dedicated to “Camberwell, Lewisham, Brockley, New Cross, Peckham, Brixton, Blackheath, Greenwich, Charlton, Kidbrooke and Deptford, and all the gods from all those places who taught me everything I know,” and it is richly evocative of this area of London, made up of districts that are vibrant, distinctive, and proud, but which have long

since been more economically deprived than many other parts of the city. Yet in specifics (with the exception of the mention of the tube), it could be any British metropolis—what city doesn't have an “Albert and Victoria” pub (21), for instance? One is reminded of Barbara Graziosi's work on the ancient reception of Homer; as the *Lives of Homer* suggest, by never mentioning himself in his poetry, Homer becomes a figure of universality that allows any city to claim the poetry as its own.⁹ The rapturous review of *Brand New Ancients* in *The New York Times* (16 January 2014) suggests that it too has achieved a kind of universality, equally potent for an American as for a British audience.

Kate Tempest, then, is a voice to watch in the future. Not just for those interested in performance poetry, but for classicists in particular too. *Brand New Ancients*, in performance, brings us to a kind of storytelling that has long since fallen out of favor, in modern Europe at any rate. Yet in her combination of composition, performance, rhythm, and music, deployed to give life to a tale of mythic proportions, she brings us closer to the experience of an ancient bardic audience than many of us have been before. And what is more, she compels us to think again about our definitions of heroism, gods, and epic, both ancient and modern. Just as *Brand New Ancients* was not her first engagement with classical myth, so it will not be her last. She is currently completing a new collection of poems, to be published by Picador in the autumn. Its central figure and structuring motif? None other than Teiresias.

NOTES

1. The two previous winners have also engaged with classical antiquity: Alice Oswald won in 2010 (although not for her “excavation” of the *Iliad*, *Memorial*, which was only published the following year), and Kaite O'Reilly won in 2011 for her site-specific retelling of Aeschylus' *Persians*.

2. Kate Tempest, *Brand New Ancients* (London 2013), 26–29.

3. All quotes from Tempest which are not taken from *Brand New Ancients* are from an “In Conversation” event between Tempest and myself,

held at Oxford University’s Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama on 24 February 2014.

4. Podcast interview (24 February 2014).

5. Walcott, *Omeros* (1990), LVI. iii, p.283.

6. Podcast interview (24 February 2014).

7. Tempest can be seen performing the poem here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yv5fggapRwQ>

8. The release of *Brand New Ancients* on vinyl in March of this year has ably bridged this gap, allowing the performance piece to be enjoyed even by those who have not been able to see it “live.”

9. Barbara Graziosi, *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge 2002), 84.