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The politics of adaptation: contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy

van Weyenberg, A.L.B.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy

...the Greeks were the niggers of the Mediterranean. If we looked at them now, we would say that the Greeks had Puerto Rican tastes. Right? Because the stones were painted brightly. They were not these bleached stones. As time went by, and they sort of whitened and weathered, the classics began to be thought of as something bleached-out and rain-spotted, distant.

—Derek Walcott

On hearing the name “Greece” a cultured European man immediately feels himself to be in his home country.

—G.W.F. Hegel

In this study, I explore contemporary African adaptations of classical Greek tragedies. I analyse six dramatic texts by South African and Nigerian playwrights, written between 1973 and 2004. These adaptations are situated in and speak to contemporary contexts. Through their reworking of ancient plots and characters, Athol Fugard, Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, Yael Farber and Mark Fleishman lend Greek tragedy relevance for South Africa and Nigeria. In this sense, as theatre scholar Kevin J. Wetmore states, “African adapters of Greek tragedy are doing the exact same thing Greek tragedians did: using the material of the past to comment on the present” (2002: 26). Rather than emphasising Greek tragedy as a metaphysical or existential genre, the playwrights I discuss understand it as fundamentally political.

The main title of this study is “The Politics of Adaptation.” I use this phrase to refer to the ways in which the discussed adaptations engage with and perform politics.

The article “the” is not intended to denote a singular, conclusive definition of what would be *the* politics of adaptation, but rather refers to the possible politics at play in adaptation. Those entail two interrelated levels. Firstly, playwrights turn to Greek tragedies to comment on their respective political presents. They choose to rework *Antigone*, the *Bacchae*, the *Oresteia* and *Trojan Women* because these texts, in their re-readings, hold political relevance in the contexts of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, and colonial and post-independence Nigeria. Through their emphasis on Greek tragedy’s relevance in contemporary African contexts, the writers also bring into play an additional level of politics. This level entails not so much the products but rather the process of adaptation and comes into existence through the relationship adaptations establish with the texts on which they draw. This relationship, which is also a relationship between different cultures, traditions and temporalities, is established in two ways. Firstly, the adaptations direct attention to Greek texts and contexts, as well as the cultural tradition of which Greek tragedy has come to form a canonical part. Therefore, although this is not a study in Classics and though I am not a classicist by training, I do engage with that discipline insofar that it is relevant to develop my argument. Secondly, as I will elaborate, by offering Greek tragedies as theirs, the playwrights indirectly yet effectively undermine Eurocentric claims of ownership and authority. They counter these claims by performing, through adaptation, a cultural politics directed at the Europe or West that has traditionally considered Greece as its property and as the very foundation of its supposedly superior culture. I am interested in both levels of “the politics of adaptation,” as well as in how these levels relate to and inform each other.

The subtitle to this study is “Contemporary African drama and Greek Tragedy.” I start with “contemporary African drama” rather than “Greek tragedy” because I wish to stress that I take the contemporary texts as the starting point of my analyses. Below, I expand on my methodological approach. The neutral conjunction “and” denotes a relationship in which contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy are equal partners, exceeding pre-set distinctions of chronology and hierarchy. I understand adaptation not in terms of a linear and one-directional relationship, in which the pre-text remains an authoritative source, but as a constellation in which different texts, contexts and traditions relate to one another non-hierarchically and simultaneously. Where in the following pages I talk about “African adaptations of Greek tragedy,” I do so only for the sake of clarity and brevity; I am aware that this shorter phrase does not fully convey the nuances of my longer subtitle, and I ask the reader to keep this in mind.

Two words in my subtitle deserve some explanation. First of all, though I write about contemporary “African” drama, it is not Africa I discuss. I do not make comprehensive claims about a continent that, as is often forgotten, consists of different countries,

peoples, languages, religions and histories. I use the adjective “African” solely for the purpose of brevity. My analyses focus on the contexts of South Africa and Nigeria. I do not set out to compare these contexts to each other. Moreover, just as this is not a study about Africa, neither is it about Nigeria or South Africa. My focus is more narrowly defined: I examine a selection of Anglophone dramatic texts written by a number of Nigerian and South African playwrights.

The second word in need of clarification is “drama.” I refer here to dramatic texts and not to the performances of these plays. Because dramatic texts function and circulate as texts in their own right, I believe it valid and worthwhile to consider them as independent cultural objects. My primary concern, then, is not how adaptations are staged and received in performance, but how they function as texts in relation to other texts. Despite this focus on textuality, I do discuss specific aspects of performance, but only insofar as these are referred to or implied by the texts. Also, I draw on the idea of the performative, an idea that is useful in reassessing the distinction between the other concepts of performance and text as one that, while operative, is gradual rather than essential. Reading a text is, much like viewing a play, a performative practice that takes place in the present act of reading.¹

While the validity of textual analysis is rarely questioned with respect to Greek tragedies, the situation seems to become different once African drama is concerned. I experienced this first-hand at a conference in Chicago in 2008, where a theatre scholar accused me of “reinscribing colonialism by privileging text.” Despite her genuine conviction, I believe that a claim as hers risks preserving the logic it seeks to contest. It implies a binary opposition between a West of literacy and print and an Africa of illiteracy and orality, which simply does not hold in contemporary African cultures. I do not privilege text over performance, but I do make text my centre of analysis. There is a crucial difference between the two.

Below, I outline the framework for the rest of my study. I do so from different angles. To appreciate the dynamics at play in African adaptations of Greek tragedy it is, first of all, crucial to understand the role classical material, and Classics as a discipline, have played within Eurocentric traditions and ideologies. I wish to make clear from the start, however, that I emphatically do not reduce the discussed texts to mere reactions to these Eurocentric traditions and ideologies. In fact, as I elaborate below, one of my purposes is precisely to challenge the historicism that underlies such reductive readings. In this sense this study is also about the relation between past and present and, thus, about history. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss what Eurocentric classicism entails and implies and how it has informed

¹ For a good discussion of the concepts of performance and performativity and how these interact, see Bal (2002: 174-212).

(contemporary) perspectives on texts that take classical material as their inspiration. I consider a number of concepts that have been suggested by various scholars in their analyses of contemporary readings of classical material and explain my own points of departure. I then move towards a more specific discussion of the relationship between contemporary African cultures and ancient Greek tragedy. The present introductory chapter is thus intended to lead to a clearer understanding of what “the politics of adaptation” might entail in the South African and Nigerian adaptations of Greek tragedy that form my corpus of analysis.

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

In my approach to African adaptations of Greek tragedy I employ a methodological framework similar to that of what has come to be known as Classical Reception Studies, still a relatively new field of research. Scholars in this field investigate the performance and reception of ancient drama across different cultural contexts and within different media. Classical Reception Studies is primarily defined by the ways in which it challenges conventional classical scholarship, commonly described as “The Classical Tradition.” What this type of scholarship entails becomes clearer with reference to a specific example. I take the book *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* by Scottish-American classicist Gilbert Highet, published in 1949 and reprinted in 1987, as such a clarifying example.

In the introduction to this book, Highet writes that “our modern world is in many ways a continuation of the world of Greece and Rome” because “in most of our intellectual and spiritual activities we are the grandsons of the Romans, and the great-grandsons of the Greeks” (1987: 1). I quote Highet not to question Greek and Roman influences on Western culture—though such influences obviously demand critical reflection—but because the phraseology demonstrates the tendency to refer to Greece to emphasise the superiority of Western civilisation, while revealing the rhetorical strategy on which that argument relies. Through his use of the word “continuation” Highet establishes a direct line of influence between the contemporary Western world and classical antiquity. By subsequently referring to “we” as the grandsons and great-grandsons of antiquity (no granddaughters and great-granddaughters present here), he couches this relationship between contemporary Western culture and classical culture in genealogical terms, thus posing the former as the natural and rightful inheritor of the latter. This genealogical relation is also employed, for example, by the English Romantic poet Percy Byssche Shelley (1792-1822) who, in the preface to his poem “Hellas” (1822) claims that “We are all Greeks—our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece” (Fraistat and Reiman 2002: 431). Or by the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), who nostalgically asserts that “[o]n hearing the

name ‘Greece’ a cultured European man immediately feels himself to be in his home country” (quoted in Settis 2006: 102). It is also evident in the title of Martin Mueller’s book *Children of Oedipus, and Other Essays on the Imitation of Greek Tragedy* (1980).

Hight continues that, despite other influences on Western civilisation, without the Greco-Roman strain, our culture would be “less worthy to be called a civilization” (1987: 1). He presents the value of classical antiquity as common, unquestionable knowledge. Western civilisation’s natural inheritance of antiquity thus affirms this civilisation’s value and, consequently, superiority. Hight’s introduction exemplifies nineteenth and twentieth century European intellectual thought, in which ancient Greece has often been referred to as the idealised model for all that is good about Western culture and as the place to which all humanist values can be traced back. This attitude was in part a reaction to change. In Britain, as society was transforming rapidly due to industrialisation and the expansion of the British Empire, the longing for antiquity as an idealised place of origin increased. And so, influenced by German intellectuals such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Hölderlin and Goethe, the cultural elite in Britain started to rely on a kind of romantic nationalism which similarly employed Greece as the idealised, founding origin of Western theatre, literature, philosophy and politics.²

As Christopher A. Stray, a specialist in the history of classical scholarship and education, suggests, the invariant features of classics “relate to its construction from the symbolic resources of antiquity as an exemplary standard, something of permanent and general value able to resist the corrosions of change and relativity” (1996: 77). In other words, antiquity provided an anchor point to which to “return” as an escape from the many societal transformations. At the same time, the far-advanced stage of this industrialised society was legitimated by tracing a line of descent back to where it had all started: ancient Greece.

This romantic approach towards “Greece,” which is exemplary of Eurocentric classicism, presents problems and contains telling paradoxes. First of all, it strips Greece of any historical or socio-political context, constructing it rather as a mythic point and place of origin or, as Hugo Donnelly describes, “a kind of pastoral theme-park”: “[t]he Greeks represented the innocent childhood of western civilization, an exemplary race living in the dewy freshness of the world’s dawn, carrying on uncomplicated yet prodigiously cultured lives” (2002: 688). The construct Donnelly describes has little to do with historical reality. It takes “Greece” as a point of cultural origin, while “Greece” cannot be pinned down to one particular historical moment of, let us say, conception. What is commonly referred to as “Ancient Greece” comprises a sizable stretch of time,

² Frank M. Turner explains that, while throughout the eighteenth century Britain had often compared itself to the ancient republic of Rome, the nineteenth century witnessed a predominating concern with Greek antiquity (1989: 61-63).

from the start of the archaic period in the eighth century BC to the Roman conquest of Greece in 146 BC. The notion not only lacks a clear temporal definition, but a geographical one as well, as “Ancient Greece” came to include colonies in South Italy and Sicily and Asia Minor and later Egypt and Libya. Often, when the name “Greece” is used, it metonymically replaces the particular historical context of Athens in the fifth century BC, the age of tragedy and democracy. It becomes the expression of an ideal, comprising celebrated elements from different historical moments and different geographical locations in a singular origin of Western civilisation.

In reality, the “Greek home” to which so much nineteenth and twentieth century European thought refers as the origin of philosophy, art and politics, is geographically, temporally and culturally distanced from the cultural centres of later European intellectualism. The direct link that is established between ancient Greece and the contemporary Western world and the way in which it is subsequently contrasted to non-Western cultures, disregards the fact that the development of Greek civilisation depended on an expanded trading network across the Mediterranean, which entailed considerable cultural exchange between Greece, Asia Minor and North Africa, from as early as the eighth century BC (Wetmore 2002: 7). As I discuss later, Martin Bernal has responded to this oversight by highlighting the influence of Asian and African cultures on ancient Greece and thereby destabilising the very foundations on which “The Classical Tradition” rests.

To sum up: Eurocentric classicism relies on mythologisations of “Greece” in which Greece is actually missing. This entails an interesting paradox, because while Greece is theorised as a point of cultural origin, it is simultaneously, without hesitation or caution, posed as a timeless essence. “Greece” is viewed historically as a particular moment and place of origin, from which a direct line of progress is drawn to the here and now of our contemporary Western world, but “Greece” is also perceived a-historically as a universal essence that reflects the values of the Western tradition. On closer inspection, both perceptions are constructs of the same assumption, because if “Greece” is where Western civilisation was born and bred, and if “Greece” represents a system of universal values, Western civilisation therefore holds universal validity. The chronological line traced back to ancient Greece merely serves to substantiate the quasi-historical validity of the superiority of Western culture. As ancient Greece becomes the legitimisation of Western culture and as Greek history is posed as universal history, the specificity of its historical context is misrepresented to serve a Eurocentric logic. The very framing of “Greece” as apolitical and ahistorical becomes a political act. This Eurocentrism also informs the relationship between Greek tragedy and (post) colonial Africa where, as I discuss later, colonising powers used “the Classics” to state their superiority as educated societies.

The politics involved in the “invention of tradition” as described above becomes clearer by reflecting on the different temporalities involved.³ On the one hand, as Hight’s introduction to his *The Classical Tradition* demonstrates, it insists on a genealogical line of inheritance that makes “us” the “grandsons” of Greece, thus tracing a line from past to present. On the other hand, because this lineage is not given, but deliberately chosen from and within the present, the line actually runs from present to past. Greece is selected as an ancestral home, and this selection is fundamentally an act of cultural politics, because as Harold Bloom explains, “[a]ll continuities possess the paradox of being absolutely arbitrary in their origins, and absolutely inescapable in their teleologies” (2003: 33).

A question that then concerns me—as a scholar located in the Netherlands with a (limited) classical education and in many ways taught to consider myself a “granddaughter” of Greece—is how to examine critically a tradition from a position within that tradition. Historian and postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty is right when he writes that it is one thing to be “aware that an entity called ‘the European intellectual tradition’ stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history,” it is another thing to realise that “fabrication or not, this is the genealogy of thought in which social scientists find themselves inserted” (2000: 5). It is safe to assume that this genealogy of thought extends beyond the scholarly field and informs the cultural sphere as a whole.

The adaptations I analyse in the subsequent chapters provide an answer to my question. From a Eurocentric viewpoint their location would be considered to be outside the European intellectual tradition of which Greek tragedy forms a canonical part. But this is only the case when a unified, linear notion of “tradition” is adhered to. Classicist Lorna Hardwick proposes, instead, to think of a plurality of traditions, including the rewriting of existing traditions and the invention of new ones (2007: 47). Indeed, once we pluralise the notion of tradition, the situation changes, as do the “locations” of the adaptations and of the texts they adapt, which now all become part of a constellation of different yet interrelated traditions. Consequently, the texts in question cannot be pinpointed to one particular place and time or one particular culture or tradition. In fact, they deny the very possibility of doing so. The analysis of these adaptations forces me to approach the European intellectual tradition to which I belong from a more ambiguous perspective: no longer solely from within, but also—through these texts and the relation they establish with their pre-texts—from outside. Never entirely outside, of course, because I cannot simply remove myself from the tradition in which I am inserted or deny the ways in which that tradition inevitably informs my reading, but no longer exclusively from within either because I am also

³ I borrow the phrase “invention of tradition” from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1983).

forced to recognise that “Greece” is just as distanced from me as “Africa.” Adaptations insist on such an ambiguous or double perspective and through it stimulate readers to, as Freddy Decreus phrases it,

complement the internal Western vision we developed of ourselves and of Classics (too often relying upon essentialism and universalism), with an external one: an appreciation coming from abroad, from intercultural and post-colonial perspectives. This might amount to a beautiful exercise in informing us of our place in history and culture. (2007: 263-264)

Scholars working within Classical Reception Studies engage in that exercise. They put emphasis on the two-directional nature of influence and analyse the connection between present and past in terms of a dialogue, in which one does not lead to or result in the other but in which both are continually implicated with each other. Their main premise is that cross-cultural migrations are never unilinear trajectories, but represent complex and dynamic socio-political and aesthetic interactions. Hardwick, the director of the “Classical Receptions in Late Twentieth Century Drama and Poetry in English” project at the Open University (UK), suggests a “migratory model” to explore the dynamics at play. Such a model recognises that “classical texts have provided important fields in which different societies have worked out the relationship between past and present and their interaction with that of others”; it recognises further that “classical texts are themselves diasporic, uprooted from their original contexts, travellers both physically and metaphorically across time, place, and language”; it constantly compares “the contexts and practices of different receptions of the same ante-texts, image, or theme”; it recognises “the shaping forces of the subsequent filters that have conditioned understanding of the texts without assuming that only one set of filters matters”; and finally, it “leaves room for investigating why any particular ante-text re-emerges under particular cultural conditions and for considering the extent to which the dynamics of its relationship with its ancient context are replicated or revised” (2007: 46-47).

Hardwick’s migratory model is helpful because it provides ways to analyse the cultural politics in the relationship between source and receiving culture. In doing so it emphasises both time and space, both history and geography. Those emphases are important because Classics traditionally appropriated and (ab)used antiquity as both the origin and centre of European (often used synonymously to “Western”) civilisation. Classics has been tied in with what Chakrabarty describes as the “imaginary figure” of Europe, a figure which, he explains, is often taken as the origin of modernity, both in Europe and outside. It is this “Europe” which, in analysing non-European modernities, he seeks to “provincialize” or “decenter” (2000: 4). As his choice for

these two geographical referents implies, Chakrabarty's project not only addresses the politics of time (in its challenging of historicism) but also of space.⁴

A main methodological distinction with the Classical Tradition is that, rather than celebrating classical cultural objects as static relics from the past, scholars in Classical Reception Studies recognise that "the 'invention' of new traditions of the classical is an indicator of broader cultural dilemmas and shifts" (Hardwick 2007: 43-44). The focus on cultural contexts and processes affects the discipline, which is opened up not only to a wider body of cultural theory but also to the wider world. As Deceus objects, too often still classicists ignore the theoretical discussions that have dominated elsewhere in the humanities, as if "Classics' does not have to prove its credentials at all, a long lasting Western tradition being proof enough to motivate the high standards of its value and survival" (2007: 250). Classics has long been dominated by essentialist, Eurocentric assumptions, maybe in part out of fear that new theoretical developments within the humanities would undermine the discipline's position. Fortunately, many classicists today engage with contemporary theoretical and philosophical debates and embrace interdisciplinarity as a way to move their discipline forward, rather than fixing it in an idealised past, no longer viewing it as "something that permanently 'is'" but as something "that is always 'becoming'" (Deceus 2007: 252). In that sense, Classical Reception Studies has helped in bringing Classics back in touch, as it were, with the rest of the humanities.

WHY "ADAPTATION"?

My methodology is in many ways similar to the one used within Classical Reception Studies. I do not, however, consider my study as placed within the discipline of Classics. Since my topic requires the interdisciplinarity offered by different fields of study, such as literary studies, African studies, theatre studies and postcolonial studies, I employ an interdisciplinary approach in which Classics is brought to bear upon other fields of research, and vice versa.

Classical Reception Studies' central concept is "reception." According to Charles Martindale, in contrast to "tradition" or "heritage," "reception" stresses the mediated, situated, and contingent character of readings of the classics and, consequently, the active role played by receivers (2006: 2-3, 11).⁵ Despite the valuable insights this concept

⁴ In his book Chakrabarty sets out to demonstrate how the categories and strategies that come from European thought are "both indispensable and inadequate" in representing non-European modernities (2000: 19).

⁵ Martindale refers to the 1967 inaugural lecture of Hans Robert Jauss at the University of Constance in which Jauss argued for a paradigm shift in literary interpretation, which he called "Rezeptionästhetik." This new model would acknowledge the historicity of texts and allow for the aesthetic response of readers in the present (Martindale and Thomas 2006: 3-4).

offers, I find that “adaptation” better preserves the complexity of the relationship between object text and pre-text. Tim Whitmarsh states that reception “implies too simplistic a model of departure and arrival” and that what is needed is “a richer sense of the constant shuttling back and forth between text, interpreter and intermediaries.” He proposes the term “recipience” to suggest an ongoing process, rather than an achieved state (2006: 115). For Hardwick, attentive to the possible objections to the term reception, the solution might lie in the use of the plural “receptions.” In the editorial to the first issue of the recently established *Classical Receptions Journal* (2009) she suggests that, though “reception” is now sometimes thought to imply passivity, the plural “receptions” avoids “pre-empting judgements about any particular kinds of relationships between the classical material and its development” (2).

Though I concur with Hardwick’s observations, I feel that “adaptation”—though this too is a noun rather than a verb—best succeeds in preserving the notion of an ongoing and mutual process, rather than a one-directional line of influence. Grammatically, something that is received remains unaltered, it is not per definition affected by its reception, while something that is adapted, through the two-directional process of adaptation, inevitably changes. “Reception,” in other words, suggests that *Antigone* may be given all kinds of contemporary refigurations in different historical and cultural contexts, but remains a stable base or point of departure for these receptions. “Adaptation,” conversely, manages to convey the sense in which the pre-text is itself a changing object. This is also implied in the biological origin of the term, referring to the process by which an organism is modified to fit and survive in new conditions.

Adaptation, then, not only acknowledges the extent to which readings of texts determine their meaning, but also challenges positivist and historicist ideas about literary influence. The persistence of the belief that the return to an unchanged original is possible is demonstrated by Alison Forsyth’s article on adaptations of *Antigone*. She contends that Sophocles’ text has often been reinterpreted “in the service of ideologies far removed from the philosophical context of ancient Greece.” *The Island* by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona (a South African play I discuss in the next chapter) she welcomes as a “long-awaited phase of Antigone’s ‘afterlife’” in which the classic text is “reinvested ... with its original ambiguity” and Antigone “once again [becomes] as belligerent, as irrepressibly subversive and dangerously radical as the day she defined Creon’s unyielding edict” (2006: 131, 134-135). In Forsyth’s view, the success of an adaptation depends on the extent to which it succeeds in returning to the original text.

Miriam Leonard investigates the impossibility of such a return in her discussion of Jacques Derrida’s reading of *Antigone* in *Glas* (1974), which is in effect a reading of Hegel’s reading of *Antigone*, thus offering a good example of the complex workings of intertextuality. Leonard asks whether Derrida’s Antigone can ever really escape “her

Hegelian genealogy,” whether he can ever make the Greeks *his* Greeks or whether his appropriation of the Greeks will always be caught up in the politics of his predecessor Hegel (2006: 123). As Leonard demonstrates, Derrida makes no attempt to sidestep Hegel, but rather observes how in Hegel’s reading, nineteenth-century German thought, in particular a strong anti-semitism, changes the Sophoclean text and rules out a simple return to the Greeks (119). Derrida takes into account that there simply is no original *Antigone* to which he can return, that the historical contingency of Sophocles’ tragedy exceeds the context of fifth century BC Athens and also extends to Hegel’s Germany. This makes a contemporary reading of *Antigone* increasingly complex, but also increasingly rich and, most important of all, relevant.

The impossibility of simply erasing subsequent readings and adaptations of texts and retrieving an untainted original seems an obvious observation, perhaps, but one that stands in tension with something else I find important, namely the need to distinguish texts from the traditions that have appropriated them. For Hardwick, reception studies helps to make this distinction, in that it enables people to differentiate between the ideas and values of ancient texts and those of the society that appropriated them, thereby offering a way out of positivist historicism (2007: 44). In a similar vein, Italian classicist and archaeologist Salvatore Settis declares his wish to save the classics from their subsequent instrumentalisation. He refers, for example, to the ways in which totalitarian regimes, particularly in Italy and Germany, exploited the “classical” by promoting it as “the original depository of values, its presentation as perpetual and unchanging, and its *de facto* treatment as something that can be manipulated and simplified into schematic formulas at will” (2006: 83). Settis’ message in his book, appropriately titled *The Future of the Classical*, is that “the ‘classical’ could be delivered from this utilitarian approach, if we could revive and analyse its extraordinary complexity and singularity with the necessary thoroughness” (7).

It is indeed important to identify the ways in which texts are used and abused for ideological purposes. At the same time, and Settis shows awareness of this, the wish to do so warrants caution, because it implies a (nostalgic) longing to bypass history and return to the original text. Not only is it crucial to recognise how qualities that are presented as inherent in a text are projected onto that text, in other words: how readings of texts are historically, culturally and ideologically contingent, but also how each of these readings changes the texts themselves, providing new interpretations, adding layers and thereby continuously extending their meaning.

It becomes clear that history is a main factor to consider in any study of adaptation or, in fact, in any cultural study. Although not all analyses of adaptations (including those with a postcolonial focus) sufficiently take this into account, adaptation per definition implies a two-directional influence between object text and pre-text and between present and past. Taking the contemporary text, rather than the Greek text,

as the starting point for analysis helps to avoid the trap of historicist readings that rely on problematic notions of origin and authority. For that reason, also, I follow Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal's use of the term "pre-text" rather than "source text" or "archtext." As Bal explains, "pre-text" has a double meaning which "keeps reminding us of the active work on preceding texts, rather than the obedient repetition of them (1991: 430, note 16). "Pre-text" describes a text that precedes, but does not authorise or define re-readings of that text.

Classicist Barbara Goff describes conventional, historicist readings as envisaging the classical object as "*pushing* its way through time to a contemporary period, under its own steam." She proposes that another way to look at the process is to imagine the object "*pulled*, by forces not itself, which deploy it—the classical object—for their own purposes." In the first scenario the object's survival is guaranteed by its own inherent qualities and influence is perceived of as a one-directional process, while in the second scenario, the classical object, Goff continues, "far from dictating its own terms, may be put to work in the service of various projects, and may become a counter in conflicts not of its own making" (2005: 13). The "being pulled" scenario is useful because it shifts emphasis to the present rather than the past. It acknowledges that analyses of adaptations of classical texts should take the present as a starting point, approaching the classical text from, or through, a contemporary perspective. Like the active "pushing," however, the passive "being pulled" similarly implies a one-directional line of influence, in which an object from the past is pulled into the present, insufficiently acknowledging that influence is a current that also flows backwards.

Lawrence Venuti describes a similar process as Goff, yet he chooses the term "domestication." His observations concern translation but apply to adaptation as well. According to Venuti, translation inscribes the foreign text with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies, so that a text is no longer "inscrutably foreign" and communication can be achieved (1995: 9). He explains that translations set in motion a double-edged process of identity formation: they construct a domestic representation for a foreign text and culture, while at the same time constructing a domestic subject, an ideological position "shaped by the codes and canons, interests and agendas of certain domestic social groups" (10). The process through which translations (and adaptations) are able to form a domestic subject is one of "mirroring" or "self-recognition": "the foreign text becomes intelligible when the reader recognizes him or herself in the translation by identifying the domestic values that motivated the selection of that particular foreign text, and that are inscribed in it through a particular discursive strategy" (18-19). For the playwrights I discuss, too, the motivation to adapt certain Greek tragedies comes from their recognition of how these ancient texts can speak to their particular contemporary contexts. It should be noted, however, that in their case Venuti's distinction between domestic and foreign is

difficult to maintain, as Greek tragedy's presence in Africa, now part of African cultural traditions despite its contested history, complicates that distinction to begin with.

For the French classicist Nicole Loraux the political potential of classics is located in the domesticating or familiarising gesture to which Venuti refers. In opposition to Jean-Pierre Vernant, who through what he described as a "historical anthropology" sought to historicise the Greeks so as to respect their alterity, Loraux finds it politically dubious to make the Greeks other or distant. It ignores the position and tradition from where we speak and refuses to allow the Greeks to speak to the concerns of the day (Leonard 2006: 125). Hence, Leonard explains, different from Vernant, Loraux "relocates the political in a domesticating rather than a foreignizing gesture" (125). Her analyses of ancient Greek practices of remembering, forgetting and mourning, to which I refer in the following chapters, testify to this awareness and allow readers to critically consider how similar practices operate within their contemporary political contexts.⁶

Loraux's argument that the political potential of "the Greeks" depends on their familiarisation is persuasive, because it puts emphasis on the present. Any analysis, no matter how temporally removed its object of study may be, inevitably departs from the present and should do so consciously and explicitly. Bal expands on the importance of the present in a book that deals with contemporary re-visions of past objects, *Quoting Caravaggio* (1999). As she explains, analyses that depart from the historical precedent and view this precedent as a dictating source for what comes after, imply passivity. Analyses should, instead, take the present as a starting position:

[The] input from the present is—emphatically—not to be taken as a flaw in our historical awareness or as a failure to distance ourselves from our time, as is the case in naïve "presentism." Rather it is to be taken as an absolutely inevitable proof of the presence of the cultural position of the analyst ... In fact, to take that presence into account makes the analysis more, rather than less, historically responsible. It also makes the works, as well as their continuing presence, still matter. (Bal 1999: 15)

Similarly to Loraux, Bal emphasises the importance of acknowledging history so as to enable responsible analysis and to allow for cultural objects to speak to us (politically) today. This observation applies to adaptations as well, as these exemplify and reinforce the "continuing presence" of the texts they adapt, but also—and this is how they perform politics—continuously re-determine this presence.

A term that has often been used to denote the "continuing presence" of classical texts is "Nachleben," German for "afterlife." Through this concept, cultural historian

⁶ Loraux's books include *Mothers in Mourning: with the essay of Amnesty and its Opposite* (1998), *The Mourning Voice: An Essay on Greek Tragedy* (2002) and *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens* (2006).

Aby Warburg (1866-1929) sought to understand how in certain epochs, such as the Renaissance, elements of classical culture are suddenly remembered and reactivated, while in other times they are forgotten. Georges Didi-Huberman, a French art historian and philosopher, explains that Warburg assumed a new temporal model for art history, introducing “the problem of memory into the *longue durée* of the history of motifs and images: a problem that ... transcends turning points in historiography and boundaries between cultures” (2003: 273). Taking Warburg’s theory as a starting point, Didi-Huberman conceptualises “Nachleben” to envisage a “dialectic structure of survival,” departing from both positivist historiography, which is reductively chronological, factual and discursive, and idealist (especially Hegelian) historiography, which is reductively abstract, systematic and fixated on truth (281-283).

Craig Kallendorf, in a similar vein, proposes a “theoretically enriched approach to Nachleben” which “is still *Nachleben*, but of a different kind from the traditional one, since there is no longer any unchanged literary meaning to banish the ‘afterlife’ of a text to a supporting role” (1994: 141; 156). As Kallendorf states, this takes into account that “[s]ometimes ... meaning flows backwards when we take into account the reader as well as the text” and that “the afterlife of a classical text is not a bit part, but the best part in the still-unfolding drama of Greece and Rome” (156). While I concur with Didi-Huberman’s and Kallendorf’s theorisations of “Nachleben,” I have chosen not to employ the term in this study, because I find it difficult not to view the *nach* (or *after* in *afterlife*) as a negative marker signifying that an adaptation always comes second and is primarily an addendum to an original, thus adhering to a chronological conception of influence and suggesting inferiority.

To escape that value judgement, it is helpful to return to Bal’s observations in *Quoting Caravaggio*. She conceptualises her objects of study, re-visions of baroque art, as anachronistic in a positive sense, because they “neither collapse past and present, as in an ill-conceived presentism, nor objectify the past and bring it within our grasp, as in a problematic positivist historicism,” but rather “demonstrate a possible way of dealing with ‘the past today’” (1999: 6). For this reversal that, as Bal explains, puts what came chronologically first as an aftereffect behind its later recycling, she suggests the concept of “preposterous history”: “a way of ‘doing history’ that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating highlights” (7). Bal’s theorisation of history offers a valuable way of approaching contemporary adaptations of Greek tragedy. Only by departing from the presence of these texts and conceiving of them as anachronistic in the sense that they, in turn, affect the texts they draw on, does it become possible to capture the complex and often ambiguous relation between adaptations and pre-texts.

The overlapping problem with concepts such as “reception” and “Nachleben,” or “pulling” and “domestication,” is that they are not fully able to catch the double gesture of adaptation. The important question is not to decide whether adaptations of

Greek tragedy enact either foreignising or familiarising gestures. The extent to which Greek tragedy can speak to us today is located in a constant shifting back and forth between those positions. Adaptation comprises *both* foreignising and familiarising gestures, which may coincide with or work against one another, moving beyond the mere historical and temporal, drawing in such issues as geography, culture and race. As my analyses in the following chapters will hopefully demonstrate, the political potential of adaptation is located in this double gesture. This potential exceeds a pre-text's relevance within the present. It also pertains to recovering aspects that have remained hidden or are lacking in these texts, or with highlighting or challenging possible assumptions that these texts contain or that the dominant traditions in which they are embedded have sustained.

GREEK TRAGEDY AND (POST)COLONIALISM

A discussion of the relationship between African adaptations and Greek tragedies necessitates closer analysis of the relationship between adaptation and pre-text, but also of that between contemporary Africa and ancient Greece. A number of recent studies explore this relationship. Examples are Kevin J. Wetmore's *Athenian Sun in an African Sky* (2002) and *Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre* (2003), Barbara Goff's *Classics and Colonialism* (2005), Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie's *Classics in Post-Colonial Words* (2007) and Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson's *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (2007). In their analyses of African or African diasporic adaptations of Greek tragedy, authors frequently turn to postcolonial theory to analyse the engagement between classical and contemporary texts and contexts. Sometimes, this engagement is viewed in terms of distance or even opposition, sometimes the emphasis is on correspondences. In many of the analyses "colonialism" is given a central position, something I want to consider critically. I am, of course, well aware that the genre's association with colonialism cannot be disregarded, and I want to make it clear from the start that, despite my objection to making African adaptations of Greek tragedy first and foremost "about colonialism" and my wish to place emphasis on Greek tragedy's relevance within contemporary African contexts, I do not propose to sidestep or ignore the long history of colonialism.

That in modern times Greek tragedy came to the African continent through colonialism is a historical fact that inevitably informs the complexity of the cultural exchange involved in African adaptations of tragedy. Greek tragedy was on every African syllabus. In line with the objectives of colonial discourse, schoolchildren and students in the colonies were taught not African but European literature and culture.

In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) the Kenyan author and scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o analyses the Eurocentric nature of African education systems. It is worth quoting him at length:

The syllabus of the English Department for instance meant a study of the history of English literature from Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton to James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards and the inevitable F.R. Leavis. Matthew Arnold's quest for the sweetness and light of a hellenized English middle class; T.S. Eliot's high culture of an Anglo-Catholic feudal tradition, suspiciously close to the culture of the "high table" and to the racial doctrines of those born to rule; the Leavisite selected "Great Tradition of English Literature" and his insistence on the moral significance of literature; these great three dominated our daily essays. How many seminars we spent on detecting this moral significance in every paragraph, in every word, even in Shakespeare's commas and fullstops? ...But here I am not looking at which writer or critic was more suitable to our situation or even the difference in their world outlook: What was more important was that they all fell within English tradition except in the study of drama where names like those of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristotle or Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg and Synge would appear quaint and strange in their very unEnglishness.... But their literature, even at its most humane and universal, necessarily reflected the European experience of history. ...African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world, even the world of the immediate environment, as Eurocentric. Europe was the center of the universe. The earth moved around the European intellectual scholarly axis. (1994: 90-93)

Wa Thiong'o demonstrates the extent to which Eurocentric objectives, exemplified by British literary texts, dominated the curricula in African schools. It is interesting here that he refers to the "unEnglishness" of Greek tragedians (and other non-English authors). I will look at this qualification in more detail towards the end of this chapter. For now, it is important to note the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum in African schools, a curriculum in which Greek classics in general, and Greek tragedy in particular, took up an authoritative position. Wetmore further explains that Greek tragedy also formed a significant portion of the plays performed by touring European groups and by indigenous school, university and church drama groups (2002: 30).

In analyses of African adaptations of Greek tragedy, this prominent position of the European classics should be borne in mind, because it means that for African playwrights, Greek tragedy is part of their upbringing and their culture. This is also why I prefer the concept of "adaptation" over "appropriation," because etymologically the latter implies that playwrights make the texts "their own" and thereby suggests

an original ownership of these texts that is located elsewhere, namely in the West. Wole Soyinka explicitly refers to his classical education in the acknowledgement to his adaptation of the *Bacchae*, where he acknowledges “a twenty year rust” with classical Greek (1973: 234). Greek tragedy, then, cannot simply be viewed as “alien” to Africa. At the same time it should not be disregarded that during colonisation, Greek and Latin classics were used to legitimise Britain’s dominancy. The British elite conceived of the classics as foundations of the British literary tradition and civilisation at large. As Paula Makris explains, “[a]s the rightful inheritor of the cultural capital attached to both Homer and Shakespeare, the British empire could claim to be the representative of the universal values that its educational system valorised in canonized literary texts” (2001: 2).⁷

Not only was colonialism the decisive factor in Greek tragedy’s migration to the African continent, it also informed the society from which Greek tragedy sprung. In the centuries preceding the rise of tragedy, Greece had expanded to Italy and Sicily. During the sixth and fifth centuries BC, Greece’s territory expanded further as the Athenian empire settled colonies in Asia Minor, around the Black Sea and surrounding the Aegean (Wetmore 2002: 8-10). It is tempting to draw analogies between both colonial eras. Wetmore describes Athens as “the first European colonial power,” claiming that Greece during the age of Athenian imperialism resembled nineteenth century Europe in practice and philosophy, similarly believing it was bringing civilisation to unoccupied lands and imposing its languages on conquered peoples (2002: 8-10).

Although parallels can indeed be drawn between Athenian imperialism and nineteenth century European colonialism, it is problematic, warns Irad Malkin, professor of ancient Greek history, to observe ancient Greek expansionist practices through the prism of modern imperialism and colonialism (2004: 363). Those analogies can be misleading, because they disregard political, religious and cultural differences. While British colonialism relied on nationalism, for example, Athenian imperialism was based on its distinctive identity as a polis; and while European colonialists perceived other peoples’ gods as a contradiction and threat to the “true religion” of Christianity, ancient Greeks recognised and respected the polytheistic mind-set in the peoples they encountered, because they had one themselves (348-350). Those political, cultural and religious differences complicate simple analogies and make it questionable to place Greece at the origin of European colonialism.

Malkin’s warning not to project contemporary cultural categories and practices onto ancient Greece equally applies to theories that place Greece at the origin of European constructions of “otherness.” Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is perhaps the

⁷ A good example is the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas. A popular myth derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* claims that the English descend from Aeneas. As Makris states, this line of descent could easily be utilised to insist on Britain’s innate superiority and legitimate its imperialist practices as part of a civilization-bringing project (2001: 1-2).

most famous example of this. There, Said traces the demarcation between “West” and “Orient” back to ancient Greece. He cites Aeschylus’ *Persians* and Euripides’ *Bacchae* as early examples of how Europe articulates the Orient: in *Persians*, Aeschylus presents Asia as defeated and distant, while in the *Bacchae*, Euripides presents the East from where Dionysus comes as a place of dangerous excess. For Said, these tragedies are examples of how in classical Greece, as well as Rome, “geographers, historians, public figures like Caesar, orators, and poets added to the fund of taxonomic lore separating races, regions, nations, and minds from each other” as well as of how “much of that was self-serving, and existed to prove that Romans and Greeks were superior to other kinds of people,” not just to the east but to all directions (2003: 57).

Classicist Edith Hall similarly suggests that *Persians* “represents the first unmistakable file in the archive of Orientalism, the discourse by which the European imagination has dominated Asia ever since by conceptualizing its inhabitants as defeated, luxurious, emotional, cruel, and always as dangerous” (quoted in Vasunia 2003: 89). It is true that in the *Bacchae* and in *Persians* a Greek self is constructed in relation to a distant other; I expand on this aspect in Chapter Three. I wonder, however, whether by tracing post-Enlightenment Orientalism back to ancient Greece, Said and Hall, apart from ignoring contextual differences, are not also at risk of reaffirming Greece as the founding place of European thought, because no matter their critical viewpoint, they still manoeuvre within a tradition in which Greece is constructed as the original reference point.

While Said turns to Greek tragedy as a site where European Orientalism was first articulated, in his *The Idea of Africa* (1994) the Congolese writer and scholar Valentin Yves Mudimbe views the Greeks as the first to invent and represent “Africa.” In *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970) and *Before Color Prejudice* (1983), American Classics professor Frank M. Snowden explains that Africans were indeed presented to Athenian audiences as distant and other (interestingly, played on stage by Greeks themselves), while not the modern concept of race but citizenship determined the extent to which Africans were accepted into society. Malkin similarly argues that in ancient Greece, unlike in modern European nations, identity was not formed on the basis of opposition or dissimilarity to other peoples. Even when, during the later Hellenistic era, imperial practices came to resemble modern colonialism more, great differences remained, for example with respect to the way in which Greekness now started to depend on status and culture, rather than on an opposition between Greek and Barbarian (2004: 348-350, 353).⁸

Here, I do not want to go into the usefulness of tracing modern notions of and attitudes to “otherness” back to ancient Greece’s construction of the barbarian

⁸ Malkin explains that in terms of ethnicity, the idea of the barbarian emerged for the most part only after the Greeks had fought the common enemy of the Persians in the early fifth century BC. Before that, during the Greeks’ expansion, the term barbarian was usually not used derogatory but mainly served to refer to non-Greek peoples (2004: 344-345).

other, as that is not my topic.⁹ Instead of a historical comparison between different “othering” practices, I am more interested in the other side of that dichotomy, namely how “Greece” has been employed in contemporary constructions of otherness. I am interested, then, not so much in the historical reality of classical times, but rather in what Settis describes as “the image of the ‘classical.’” This image is

bound up with the concept of a West with clear and sealed frontiers, typified by extreme dynamism and contrasting with the eternally static East. It is not only determinedly Eurocentric; it also exactly overlaps the concept of Western civilization as superior to every other one, and therefore legitimizes colonialism’s expansionist or hegemonic policies and economic and cultural subjugation. The opposition between Greeks and barbarians is then translated into the one between the West and the others, now given new life and projected onto Asia and Africa. (2006: 103)

Settis calls attention to the cultural politics of the construction of the “image” of the classical and the “concept” of a West, as well as the relation between these two. The discipline of Classics has played an important role in the construction of this relationship and, it could be argued, has existed in part by virtue of it.

Phiroze Vasunia explains how the “European Philhellenism” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries perpetuated the East-West distinction that Said investigates. That distinction led to the “aggressive promotion of *Altertumswissenschaft* in Germany and Classics in England” where Greece was conceptualised as a pure ideal, “uncontaminated by foreign traits” and detached from the Orient “despite all the evidence to the contrary” (2003: 90). The word “classics” denotes much more than a collection of cultural objects from a distant past, more also than a discipline that studies such objects, but primarily refers to an ongoing discourse. This is how Stray views “classics”: as a discourse complementary to orientalism and occidentalism, resting on a similar strategy of legitimation: “orientalism and Occidentalism describe and construct an alien Other, while classicising—as one might riskily call it—produces an account of an original Self” (1996: 78). This is indeed why classics, and classical material such as Greek tragedy, bear such relevance to postcolonial studies.

I want to conclude this section with a passage from Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Franz Fanon’s seminal work against colonisation, *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*, 1961). In this passage Sartre mocks the way in which the “classicising” discourse to which Stray refers has been used to legitimate colonialism:

...from Paris, from London, from Amsterdam, we would utter the words ‘Parthenon! Brotherhood!’ and somewhere in Africa or Asia

⁹ For a study of the concept of barbarism and representations of the barbaric Other in contemporary works of literature and the visual arts, see Maria Boletsi (2010).

lips would open “...thenon! ...therhood!” It was the golden age. It came to an end; the mouths opened by themselves; the yellow and black voices still spoke of our humanism but only to reproach us with our inhumanity. We listened without displeasure to these polite statements of resentment, at first with proud amazement. What? They are able to talk by themselves? Just look at what we have made of them! We did not doubt but that they would accept our ideals, since they accused us of not being faithful to them. Then, indeed, Europe could believe in her mission; she had hellenized the Asians; she had created a new breed, the Graeco-Latin Negroes. (1963: 7)

By ironically aligning the Parthenon, built by Pericles in the fifth century BC and a symbol of Athenian democracy and imperialism, with brotherhood, one of the humanist ideals employed to legitimate colonial practices, Sartre ridicules the way in which contemporary colonialism draws on ancient Greece to legitimate its ideology.

TO *BLACK DIONYSUS* AND BEYOND

Above, I focused on how Classics has been employed to reaffirm the distinction between a Western self and a non-Western other. This distinction plays a key role in different interpretations of the relation between ancient Greek material and contemporary African cultures. In his discussion of African-American adaptations of Greek tragedy, Wetmore discusses three models to analyse this interaction, extending the focus to the African diaspora: *Black Orpheus*, *Black Athena* and *Black Dionysus*.

The first, Wetmore explains, can be traced back to Sartre’s essay “Orphée Noir” (*Black Orpheus*, 1948), the preface to Leopold Sedar Senghor’s anthology of Francophone poetry by writers of African descent. In this essay Sartre claims that, as opposed to European poets, “[t]he blacks of Africa, on the contrary, are still in the great period of mythical fecundity” (quoted in Wetmore 2003: 16). Of course, this romantic celebration fixes Africa in an idealised past, so that Sartre’s admiration of African poetry is ultimately of a condescending type. As Wetmore states, *Black Orpheus* was a way of explaining African poetry to a European audience, by using a European myth (of Orpheus and Eurydice) with which this audience was familiar. In this Afro-Greek connection, the African is explained through the Greek.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Black Orpheus* was also the title of a journal edited by Uli Beier (a German living in Nigeria who founded the journal in 1957) and of the 1959 film *Orfeu Negro*, directed by Marcel Camus set in Brazil during carnival. See Wetmore (2003) for further information on this, and for discussions of other Eurocentric models that set out to explain African culture through the metaphor of Greek culture, such as Black Odysseus, Black Ulysses, Black Venus and Black Apollo.

The *Black Athena* paradigm works counter to that Eurocentric discourse and comes from Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, published in 1987.¹¹ Bernal does not conceive of Greece as the origin of the invention and representation of Africa, as Mudimbe does, but as African in origin. For Bernal, Greek tragedy proves that Greek cities were originally colonies of the Egyptians and Phoenicians, so that Greek culture was shaped by African influences. He contends that this African connection has been denied by European scholars who, for racist reasons, have rewritten classical history and replaced it by an "Aryan model" in order to "keep black Africans as far as possible from European civilization" (emphasis in text, 1987: 30). Bernal sets out to re-establish the "Ancient Model" and return Greek culture to its authentic Afroasiatic origins.¹²

Bernal's *Black Athena* has far-reaching implications, because it implies that Western civilisation is partly African in origin. For Bernal, this is a step forward:

I think it is an important one for blacks, who have been told, "There are no—and never have been—black civilizations." The implication is that there never can be: "You blacks are inherently uncivilized, and if you want any civilization you must become like us whites." I think recognition of Egypt as an African civilization with a central role in the formation of Greece—the critical culture in the making of European civilization—changes black self-perception. To put it another way, I hope to oppose this view to negritude—Leopold Senghor's notion that black Africa is feeling and Greece is intellect. (Cohen 1993: 7)¹³

It is interesting to note that the full title of Bernal's work, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, preserves so many of the problematic signifiers his theory itself seeks to challenge ("roots," "Classical," "Civilization"). Looking back, Bernal explains that he is now ashamed at this aspect of both the title and the book itself: "I should never have left *Classical* unmarked; and *Civilization* implied both Eurocentrism and progressivism—the implication that Afroasiatic 'cultures' had only the teleological function of leading to European civilization" (Cohen 1993: 21).

Bernal's theory has come under a lot of debate. Most famously, Mary Lefkowitz in *Black Athena Revisited* (1996) and *Not Out of Africa: How "Afrocentrism" Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (1996) criticises Bernal for his predetermination

¹¹ This book was followed by a second volume with *The Archeological and Documentary Evidence* (1991) and a third volume with *The Linguistic Evidence* (2006).

¹² Wetmore also cites Edward L. Jones who, in *Black Zeus: African Mythology*, asserts that "Egypt was Africa; that the origins of the gods was Africa; and that since the gods were started by Africans and named by them, then the gods were surely black like them" (Wetmore 2002: 17).

¹³ Négritude was a literary and political movement that developed in the 1930s by a group of writers who found solidarity in a common black identity and turned to the pre-colonial past in order to emancipate the black Africans' position in the (colonial) present.

with race, which she considers a methodological flaw of Afrocentric classicism in general, and insists on the distinction between ancient Athenian and contemporary perceptions of race, ethnicity and skin colour (see Wetmore 2002: 17). Wetmore dismisses Bernal's theory with the deprecating phrases "circumstantial evidence," "conspiracy theories," "faulty logic" and "fuzzy thinking," arguing that Bernal "would have Greece seen as the stepchild of African parents whom later (European) historians claimed was self-generating, born fully formed like Athena from the head of Zeus, and not of African origin" (2003: 16-17). By tracing Western civilisation back to (black) Africa, Bernal indeed reverses the genealogical logic that Eurocentrism constructs and promotes. However, I think that this is precisely why *Black Athena* deserves more credit than Lefkowitz and Wetmore allow for. Viewed in relation to the Eurocentrism it is intended to challenge, Bernal's reverse genealogy could be seen as a useful strategy to reveal this Eurocentrism as an ideological construct. Hence his declaration that "my enemy is not Europe; it's purity" (Cohen 1993: 23).

From this perspective, Bernal's strategy can be compared to that of Soyinka in his theory of Yoruba tragedy, which I discuss in Chapter Three. By introducing the Yoruba god Ogun as "the elder brother" of Dionysus, Soyinka uses a simple phrase to play politics of an ambiguous kind. Not only does he establish a relation of brotherhood between the two gods, emphasising their affiliation and kinship, but he also undermines the traditional Eurocentric view, in which the relation always prioritises Europe as the "elder" and "wiser" brother. Like Bernal, Soyinka reverses, thus inevitably adhering to, a genealogical model, which may be a useful political strategy in relation to the dominant model.

Although in my analyses I set out to demonstrate the reductive nature of genealogical thinking, I do think that (strategic) approaches such as those of Bernal and Soyinka have helped to create space for more nuanced analyses of cultural influence. Without recounting the *Black Athena* debate, here it suffices to say that, despite its flaws, Bernal's alternative theory about ancient Greece has succeeded in challenging Eurocentric classicism, forcing scholars to rethink what has conveniently been taken for granted. More generally, Bernal's discussion of how racism and anti-semitism have affected classical scholarship gives, in Vasunia's words, a "salutary reminder about the socio-political conditions in which knowledge is produced" (2003: 92). Here too, it is important to extend the analytical focus beyond the historical accuracy of Bernal's theory and turn to the cultural politics that this theory performs, which also means acknowledging that the latter does not necessarily depend on the former.¹⁴

¹⁴ The conference "African Athena" held at Warwick University in 2009, which concentrated on historiographical and theoretical issues around *Black Athena*, demonstrates Bernal's study's ongoing relevance to both classics and postcolonial studies. See also *African Athena: New Agendas*, eds. Daniel Orrells, Gurinder Bhabra and Tessa Roynon, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

At first sight, African adaptations of Greek tragedy could be understood as artistic expressions of the kind of claim that Bernal makes with his *Black Athena*. Performing “Africanised” versions of Greek tragedies could be viewed as a strategic way for playwrights not so much to re-appropriate what colonialism has enforced, but rather to re-claim what was rightfully “theirs” to begin with. However, to view ancient Greece as exclusively African would ignore the hybrid nature of (classical) culture, a hybridity that Bernal in fact takes great care to emphasise, something that tends to be ignored in many critiques that label his work as Afrocentric.¹⁵

The adaptations I discuss are characterised by a mixture of different theatrical, mythological and cultural traditions and through this mixture effectively challenge the essentialism of both Eurocentric and Afrocentric positions. They move beyond oppositional politics and, as cross-cultural texts, call attention to the fact that, in classic times too, African, Asian and European cultures, intimately connected to one another by the Mediterranean Sea, intermixed. In this respect, the adaptations could be seen as a corrective to the ways in which, as Wetmore states, “much of the cultural continuum of the classical world has been appropriation and representation without true knowledge of the actual, original cultures” (2002: 19). Before expanding on the model Wetmore proposes as an alternative to Bernal’s *Black Athena*, I would first like to add a critical remark. Wetmore’s use of the words “continuum,” “true,” “actual” and “original” in the above quotation point to a similar problem as I discussed in the first section of this chapter, where I commented on Settis’ endeavour to save the classics from instrumentalisation. Without wanting to get lost in endless relativism, it is important to acknowledge that any “true” knowledge of antiquity is unattainable to begin with. Knowledge of the classical world, like all knowledge, is inevitably mediated and informed by the multiple presents that superseded it.

Although it is easy and at times tempting to get caught up in lengthy examinations of what is and what is not historically accurate about analyses that deal with the relationship between classics and colonialism, or between Greece and Africa, the discussion of similarities and differences is not only beyond the scale but also beyond the purpose of this study. The playwrights I discuss are not engaging in comparative historical analyses. When they explore themes in Greek tragedy that bear a relation to colonialism, their objective lies not with the historical reality of ancient Greece but with their respective presents. This does not detract from the fact that they can shed new light on the context of ancient Greece. But the importance of this “preposterous,” anachronistic influence (to refer to Bal’s concept) is located within the present in which these texts are read, not within the past.

¹⁵ Bernal does not conceive of himself as an Afrocentrist, but admits that he has a number of points of agreement with them and that, with respect to Afrocentrists’ appropriation of the name “Black Athena,” in some ways, he is “very pleased to provide ammunition for them” (Cohen 1993: 7).

I concur with Malkin that ancient Greeks are too often “treated as though they were both ‘white’ and ‘European,’ the people who both put together and kept rocking the cradle of Western civilization” and that “the fact that Europe defines itself in terms of the ancient Greek world does not, of course, mean that the ancient Greeks owed their self-definition, in terms of either racial prejudices or national units, to categories important to modern Europe” (2004: 343). Again, however, it is not the historical accuracy of those racial or ethnic or cultural claims that are most relevant to me. I am not concerned so much with what it would mean historically that ancient Greeks were not “white” or “European”, but with what this means for contemporary definitions and appropriations of those categories. When playwrights put black Antigones or African refigurations of Trojan women on stage, it makes no sense to understand this as claims for ancient Greeks’ blackness or Africanness. Rather, through their emphasis on Greek tragedy’s presence in and relevance to their contemporary contexts, playwrights call attention to the “fact that Europe defines itself in terms of the ancient Greek world” and possibly challenge the terms on which that definition rests.

Let me return now to Wetmore’s alternative model for analysing what he describes as “the Afro-Greek connection” (2003: 13). As an addition to *Black Orpheus* and *Black Athena*, he offers *Black Dionysus*, which he describes as a:

Post-Afrocentric formulation of drama that is counter-hegemonic, self-aware, refuses to enforce dominant notions of ethnicity and culture, and uses ancient Greek material to inscribe a new discourse that empowers and critiques all cultures, even as it identifies the colonizer’s power and the colonized’s powerlessness.

Wetmore further explains that in his model,

the foreign (whether cultural or historical) is not a mirror for the reflection of the Self or an object for Othering. Rather, it is recognized and valued in and of itself. Familiarity is celebrated, but not to erase difference. Greek tragedy becomes a means by which diverse communities might be encountered in public space and the historical forces that have shaped them might be exposed. (2003: 44-45)

Wetmore’s *Black Dionysus* model seems, in contrast to *Black Athena*, a more appropriate model to analyse African (or African-American, Wetmore’s focus in this particular book) adaptations of Greek tragedy. It depends less on opposition while still acknowledging the history of colonialism. Moreover, it does more justice to the complex dynamics that cross-cultural adaptations, characterised by their double emphasis on familiarity and difference, entail. I would like to add that, with regard to the term “counter-hegemonic” in the above quotation, it is important to specify to which hegemony (or, more accurately, to which hegemonies) this term is

intended to refer. I expand on this below in my discussion of the notion of canonical counter-discourse and further address this problem in Chapter Two. Also, Wetmore's juxtaposition of the words "power" and "powerlessness" carries the risk of implying an uncomplicated binary opposition between those who do and those who do not have power. This, too, is further addressed in Chapter Two, where I discuss how in *Tegonni: an African Antigone* Femi Osofisan complicates the Manichean opposition of coloniser versus colonised.

Although I think Wetmore's paradigm succeeds relatively well in preserving the complexity of the "Afro-Greek connection," I question its title, no matter how tentatively it might be chosen—he introduces it saying "let us term it 'Black Dionysus'" (2003: 44). My hesitation has to do, firstly, with the use of the adjective "Black." Although this adjective might be useful in that it acknowledges and incorporates the history of its use in *Black Athena* and *Black Orpheus*, it is also in danger of perpetuating these models' preoccupation with race as a primary signifier in cross-cultural adaptation. Especially since elsewhere Wetmore demonstrates his awareness that the cultural politics adaptations perform exceeds race, this privileging of race in the name of his model comes as a surprise.

Like in the phrases "Black Orpheus" or "Black Athena," the "African" for which "Black" seems to function as a substitute here is explained in terms of the Greek, or the European. Wetmore notes that "Black_____" is a metaphor explaining the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar and acknowledges that there are always power relations reflected in it: "[t]he unstated assumption in that statement is for whom are these elements familiar and unfamiliar? The answer is, of course, the Eurocentric west" (15). In light of these observations it seems strange that Wetmore does not focus more on the impossibility of describing the complexity of the relationship between African and Greek in a two-word phrase like "Black Dionysus," especially one that privileges race as a primary signifier and maintains a Eurocentrist perspective. Wetmore explains his choice for Dionysus as follows:

Like its namesake, "Black Dionysus" drama is a force that threatens to overwhelm the very things that created it. As Dionysus first seemingly submits to Pentheus, only to rise up and destroy him, Greek adaptations after this paradigm use the Greek culture to threaten the cultural forces that privilege Greek tragedy. (45)

The analogy between the relationship of Dionysus with Pentheus and the relationship between adaptation and pre-text seems somewhat forced. More importantly, however, Wetmore's choice of the word "created" is in danger of reaffirming origin and authority. It seems to suggest that African (diasporic) adaptations of Greek tragedy have their original moment of "creation" in the culture they, through this adaptation, set out to

“rise up” against and “destroy.” These latter two words, moreover, suggest a model for adaptation based on resistance, though Wetmore discusses how the dynamics at play are always more complex than that. At the same time, despite these objections, I appreciate Wetmore’s choice for Dionysus to name a model that seeks to depend less on opposition and difference; Dionysus who is Greek by birth but comes from the East, disturbing the Greek-Barbarian logic and by extension any “othering” discourse; Dionysus who problematises and dissolves difference in his very being.

CANONICAL COUNTER-DISOURSE?

Wetmore’s interpretation of Dionysus as a metaphor for oppositional politics brings me to my final point of discussion in this introductory chapter: the notion of “canonical counter-discourse.” The phrase was coined by Helen Tiffin who, in turn, adopted it from Richard Terdiman’s *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (1985). Terdiman deals with the struggle of nineteenth century French writers to separate from the dominant middle-class discourse. Tiffin views the need for postcolonial writers to contest the hegemony of a colonially constructed literary canon as a similar counter-discursive strategy (Thieme 2001: 3).

The notion of canonical counter-discourse is used in many analyses of African (diasporic) adaptations of Greek tragedy and in analyses of postcolonial adaptations of Western canonical texts more generally. Those discussions tend to put emphasis on the ways in which non-Western novelists, playwrights, and performers deconstruct the literary “classics” that dominated the curricula in their countries during colonialism. They follow the framework set out in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), which analyses postcolonial texts as critiques of Eurocentric ideas about literature. Adaptations are seen as ways of writing back to the Empire, primarily defined in terms of anti-colonial strategies. The phrase “writing back” comes from Salman Rushdie who, playing on the title of the Star Wars sequel *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), named an article on British racism “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance.” The phrase subsequently became associated with the project of dismantling Eurocentric literary hegemonies (Thieme 2001: 2-3). In analyses that view adaptations primarily as strategies to write back, counter-discursivity, then, is the central focus.

Most directly relevant to my topic is Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins’ book *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996). The authors define postcolonial texts as “textual/cultural expressions of resistance to colonialism” and state that the enduring legacy of colonialist education explains the “prominent endeavour among colonised writers/artists” to “rework the European ‘classics’ in order to invest them

with more local relevance and to divest them of their assumed authority/authenticity” (1996: 2-3, 16). In the first chapter, “Re-citing the Classics,” Gilbert and Tompkins define this process of adapting as canonical counter-discourse, whereby the post-colonial writer

... unveils and dismantles the basic assumptions of a specific canonical text by developing a counter text that preserves many of the identifying signifiers of the original while altering, often allegorically, its structures of power. ... These are not, however, strategies of replacement: There is no attempt to merely substitute a canonical text with its oppositional reworking. Counter-discourse seeks to deconstruct significations of authority and power exercised in the canonical text, to release its strangle-hold on representation and, by implication, to intervene in social conditioning. ... counter-discourse actively works to destabilise the power structures of the originary text rather than simply to acknowledge its influence. Such discourse tends to target imposed canonical traditions rather than pre-existing master narratives which “belong” to the colonised culture. (1996: 16)

Although Gilbert and Tompkins’ definition of canonical counter-discourse could be applied to the adaptations I discuss, I doubt whether this label is ultimately not reductive. So let me, again, add a few remarks.

I first of all worry that viewing African adaptations of Greek tragedy as texts that “write back” to the canon could end up reaffirming this canon’s originary location in the West. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the playwrights in question do not engage with Greek tragedy as foreign texts or as the cultural property of the West. Indeed, Greek tragedy is part of hybrid African cultural traditions and to claim that Greek tragedy is alien to Africa is to deny the history of colonialism that brought these texts to the African contexts of which they are now an integral part. It suggests an attempt to either return Africa to a pre-colonial “authentic” state or to freeze it in a set of colonial power relations in which Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, the English language and all other aspects of African cultures that come from colonial, neo-colonial and global cultural exchanges may be located in Africa but remain the property of Western hegemony.

Since Greek tragedy is part of African cultures, the familiarity of African playwrights with Greek tragedies and their choice to adapt these plays exceeds a comparison of similar religious and mythological systems or cultural and theatrical traditions. This does not mean analogies cannot indeed be drawn, of course. Most of the playwrights tend to stress correspondences between their contexts and the ancient Greek one in their exploration of relationships between classical Greece and contemporary (post) colonial Africa. A good example is Wole Soyinka, who repeatedly insists on the similarities between the Greek and African mythological and religious systems (see

Chapter Three). In the preface to his version of the *Bacchae*, he compares the socio-political changes Africa underwent after colonialism to those Greece underwent as it developed into an imperial society, thus not aligning Greek imperialism with European colonialism and the colonies of Greece with African colonies, as some Afrocentric classicists do, but drawing an analogy between imperial Greece and (post)colonial Africa (1973b: vii).

Those similarities reveal an understanding of “the Greeks” not so much as the products of British imperialism, but rather as its instrument. Wetmore argues that:

Greek tragedy ... appealed to African playwrights and could be utilized without the taint of imperialist Europe and the national literatures of colonial powers. Thus, ironically, Greek tragedy, possibly a means of colonial domination and false representation of Africans, possibly the product of the first European imperial power, was and is considered by African theatre artists to be free from colonial stigma and therefore was and is acceptable material for adaptation and performance. (2002: 21)

This would explain why, at the time that European culture came to be rejected under the influence of post-independence movements, theatre companies stopped performing plays from playwrights who were considered to be part of the colonising European culture, such as Molière or Shakespeare, but continued to stage Greek tragedies, which were not considered part of that culture (Wetmore 2002: 21).¹⁶

It is possible that “the Greeks” were not understood to represent British imperialism in the way that Shakespeare was, which implies that the “Western canon” to which Greek tragedy and Shakespeare are both taken to belong is not as unified as is assumed. Wetmore refers to wa Thiong’o, who cites the “unEnglishness” of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristotle in the extract I included at the beginning of this chapter. According to Wetmore, wa Thiong’o establishes these authors as different, “their humanism distinguishing them from the imperialist literatures of Europe” (2002: 32). However, shortly after noting the “unEnglishness” of Aeschylus or Sophocles, wa Thiong’o includes them in a list of authors whose literature, although belonging to “the great humanist and democratic” European tradition, “even at its most humane and universal, necessarily reflected the European experience of history” (1994: 91). Although wa Thiong’o does set Greek tragedians apart from the British literary tradition, the point he makes is that they too reflected Eurocentrist thought.

It could still be the case that playwrights identify a difference between plays that came to Africa as the products and messengers of British imperialist culture, like

¹⁶ See Gilbert and Tompkins for a discussion of the “ideological weight of Shakespeare’s legacy” and of postcolonial reworkings of Shakespeare (2006: 19). See also Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin’s *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (1998).

Shakespeare's, and those that have been introduced through this tradition but actually "precede" it, like Greek tragedies. Even if this is true, I believe that what counts for African adaptations of Greek tragedy counts for African adaptations of Shakespeare as well: they too should not be defined in relation to colonialism. Like Greek tragedy, Shakespeare too should be recognised as part of contemporary African cultures.

I mainly hesitate to attach the label "canonical counter-discourse" to African adaptations of Greek tragedy because it defines them primarily in relation to the Western canonical texts on which they draw, a definition that reduces their complexity. I think that this places the Western pre-texts, rather than the adaptations themselves, at the origin and centre of analysis. The adaptations I look at do not so much "write back" to the texts they adapt, but rather engage with the dominant Eurocentric discourse that has contained these texts. This is an important distinction to make. Gilbert and Tompkins refer to this distinction when they write that canonical counter-discourse "tends to target imposed canonical traditions rather than pre-existing master narratives which 'belong' to the colonised culture" (1996: 16). However, they do not consider it in their analysis of Athol Fugard's *The Island* as an example of counter-discursive attention to Sophocles' *Antigone*. This is unfortunate, because especially in adaptations of *Antigone* the distinction between the power structures that contain the tragic script and those contained within the tragic script are important in understanding the politics that these adaptations perform. I will expand on this in Chapter Two.

To view African adaptations of Greek tragedy primarily in terms of counter-discourse is to suggest that the texts are first and foremost about colonialism. As an example, let me turn once more to Gilbert and Tompkins to explain what I mean. About Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: a Communion Rite* (which I discuss in Chapter Three) they state that "since it stages so convincingly the destruction of a tyrant by supernatural forces, Euripides' *Bacchae* is an ideal text for appropriation by marginalised groups: Pentheus is easily refigured as an agent of colonialism" (1996: 39). Gilbert and Tompkins do not address that Soyinka's Pentheus is more than "an agent of colonialism," also referring to the many dictators that have held Africa in its grip, indeed to tyrannical leaders in all parts of the world. In other words: the hegemony Soyinka's text is directed against is not as singular as Gilbert and Tompkins' analysis accounts for; his text is about more than colonialism.

According to fellow Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan, such one-sided readings warrant caution. He has objected to using the words "counter-discursive" and "post-colonial" to classify his plays and those of other playwrights, arguing that such readings reduce the plays to mere "strategies to deconstruct the presence of colonization," ignoring the fact that "the Empire," though still an important concern, is no longer a *current* one. According to him, the conclusion Gilbert and Tompkins draw (and which he contests) is the following:

... that all our work continues to privilege the “Centre”—by which is meant a former colonial country in Europe, and that we still take this “Centre” as the focal point of all our activities of resistance in Africa. Thus, all we do is prefigured as a continuous act of “writing back” to an “Empire” ... and hence is perennially a “counter-discourse.” This kind of reading therefore presumes, that is, that we continue to acknowledge the overweening presence of an “Empire,” in which our roles are not only subaltern but are also an automaton gesture of response to the presence of the “Other.” ... It is no wonder, then, that their whole book is devoted to analyzing the plays we write, and all the strategies we employ, as merely strategies to deconstruct the presence of colonization, as opposed to what they really are—attempts to confront, through our plays, our novels and poetry, the various problems of underdevelopment which our countries are facing, and of which the threat of alienation and the potential erosion of ethnic identity constitute only one of the outward signals. It is time to correct this erroneous mis/reading. (1999b: 3)

Although Osofisan’s claim that “the Empire” is not a current concern could be questioned, he makes an important point, which applies to all the adaptations I discuss, namely that the problems that exist and the hegemonies in place are diverse, and not limited to colonialism. To see these texts mainly in terms of resistance makes the history of colonialism their defining force and the “West” their sole term of comparison, a perspective that is ultimately in danger of reducing African literatures to mere addenda to European culture.

The playwrights I discuss in this study do not simply ignore or deny the Eurocentric tradition that has embedded Greek tragedy for so long. Rather, by sidestepping it, as it were, they consciously undermine its authoritative status. By forging a connection between Greek and African that entails circumventing “Europe,” the playwrights in a way disconnect “Greece” from the British culture that has used it to reinforce its superiority and (re)connect it to the very cultures to which Britain (and Europe) felt superior. Within the Caribbean context, poet and playwright Derek Walcott plays a similar kind of politics in *Omeros*, a book-length poem that takes the Homeric epic as a model. Walcott merges the Caribbean’s African, Native American and European cultural inheritance and mixes English with Creole languages (Makris 2001: 9). In an interview, he explains that he wants to convey how “the Greeks were the niggers of the Mediterranean”:

If we looked at them now, we would say that the Greeks had Puerto Rican tastes. Right? Because the stones were painted brightly. They were not these bleached stones. As time went by, and they sort of whitened and weathered, the classics began to be thought of as something bleached-out and rain-spotted, distant. (1990, quoted in Makris 2001: 10)

I have chosen this passage as an epigraph to this chapter, because I think that the metaphor of brightly-painted stones that have lost their colour and that have come to be seen as “bleached-out” and “distant,” points to the cultural politics at play in African (diasporic) adaptation of Greek tragedy. Walcott emphasises the affinity between Greek and Caribbean culture, simultaneously differentiating both cultures from Eurocentric views of and claims to these cultures, Greek as well as Caribbean. This “double gesture” is at the heart of the adaptations I look at in this study.

THE CHAPTERS

I have structured my study as follows. In the next two chapters, I discuss plays that emphasise Greek tragedy’s potential to inspire and dramatise political change. I begin in Chapter Two by examining two plays that draw on Sophocles’ *Antigone: The Island* by South African playwright Athol Fugard and actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, and *Tegonni: an African Antigone* by Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan. I discuss the relevance of adapting *Antigone* within the contexts of South Africa and Nigeria and consider Antigone’s representative and performative potential within her new surroundings. Finally, I examine how Antigone’s cultural translocation affects her status as a Western canonical figure. In Chapter Three I look at Wole Soyinka’s *Euripides’ Bacchae: a Communion Rite*. In this “Yoruba tragedy,” Dionysus is transformed into a revolutionary leader. I explore the characteristics and implications of Soyinka’s ritualist aesthetics. I also examine the cultural politics that his theory of Yoruba tragedy, through the ambiguous relation it establishes between African and Greek, performs.

In the second half of this study, I change focus from adaptations that dramatise resistance and revolution to adaptations that rework Greek tragedy to reflect on the aftermath of such transitional moments. Chapter Four focuses on two texts that adapt Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy within the context of post-apartheid South Africa: Mark Fleishman’s *In the City of Paradise* and Yael Farber’s *Molera*. Both plays dramatise the losses that haunt post-conflict societies as they try to come to terms with the past. I consider the political transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa in relation to the cultural exchange between antiquity and the present. In the final Chapter Five I pursue the theme of mourning, inherently related to the genre of tragedy. The theme is implicit in the South African adaptations of the *Oresteia* but also relevant to the other adaptations I have considered. After revisiting these plays to delineate what is at stake in practices of mourning, I examine Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu* in order to investigate the implications of mourning in more detail. I conclude this chapter by addressing the broader relevance and potential that mourning may hold.

The playwrights I look at in this study emphasise the contemporary relevance of Greek tragedy in moments of oppression and transition. By presenting Greek tragedy as theirs, they also enact a form of cultural politics directed at the West that has appropriated “Greece” as its legitimisation. As I explained, the main title of this study, “The Politics of Adaptation,” refers to this twofold political engagement. Importantly, adaptation not only relies on familiarity but by definition emphasises difference or foreignness as well. The title of Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides: a Communion Rite* demonstrates this beautifully, as its main heading emphasises the pre-text, while the subtitle points to Soyinka’s modification of this text to a different cultural context. Each of the adaptations I look at expresses such a difference, in part through a combination of different theatrical and cultural traditions. It does not suffice to regard them as romantic celebrations of cross-cultural hybridity, however, because this would sidestep the actual history of colonialism embedded in the exchange. In fact, the adaptations refuse such analyses precisely because the relationship with their pre-texts remains so ambiguous and “double.” In varying ways and to varying degrees, playwrights establish a two-directional dynamic that opens up a space for politics. It is in the dynamic between adaptation and pre-text, between present and past, and between familiarity and difference, that the politics of adaptation is performed.

Counter to George Steiner’s famous claim in *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) that Greek tragedy has died, African playwrights demonstrate that Greek tragedy is very much alive and holds relevance today, not only within the contexts of South Africa and Nigeria, but within any context of political conflict and transition. This is yet another reason why attaching the labels “postcolonial” or “canonical counter-discourse” to their texts fails to do them justice. It could be, and this is a question to which I will try to find an answer in the course of this study, that the playwrights not only present adaptations of Greek tragedy, but also “adapt” tragedy as a genre. Their emphasis on tragedy as fundamentally political, rather than solely existential or metaphysical, seems to point in this direction. As I hope to show in the following chapters, Greek tragedy never died, nor is it fixed in an idealised and remote past. Adaptations of tragedies do more than simply keeping the texts they adapt alive. They continuously re-examine and add meaning, ensuring Greek tragedy’s ongoing relevance.