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### The politics of adaptation: contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy

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## Conclusion

... only that which has no history is definable

—Friedrich Nietzsche

From the mourning women of Owu to the defiant Antigones, my aim throughout this study has been twofold: to examine Greek tragedy's contemporary political relevance within African contexts, as well as investigate the politics that those cultural translocations perform. Rather than revisit my chapters, in this epilogue I want to briefly reflect on what my analyses have revealed about adaptation and tragedy more generally.

I hope to have demonstrated that adaptation, which refers not only to a cultural object but also a cultural process, holds considerable potential. I identify three main explanations for that. To begin, adaptation performs politics. Athol Fugard, Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, Mark Fleishman and Yael Farber turn to existing texts to engage with their political presents: Antigone acquires relevance within contexts of political oppression; Dionysus transforms into a revolutionary leader; the reconciliatory politics dramatised in the *Oresteia* trilogy echoes in post-apartheid South Africa; and the mourning of the Trojan Women resonates in and beyond contemporary Nigeria. Claiming ownership of texts that are supposed to belong to the West, the playwrights also challenge the ways in which Europe or the West has appropriated Greek tragedy as its property, foundation and legitimisation.

Furthermore, my analyses reveal that adaptation does more than merely emphasise a pre-text's contemporary relevance. Adaptations may also recover hidden aspects in the texts they rework, challenging assumptions that the traditions embedding these texts sustain. For example, focusing on Clytemnestra's history of suffering in

their South African adaptations of the *Oresteia*, Fleishman and Farber challenge her traditional representation as demonic and adulterous, revealing the gender politics that she embodies. Their refigurings of Clytemnestra demonstrate that the migration of antiquity to the present always involves new perspectives, also on the pre-text itself. In this way, adaptation brings to light the fact that texts are not stable objects but function as objects-in-movement, their meaning extending through each re-reading. To repeat Tina Chanter, “[t]here is no returning to a Greek text somehow outside the political genealogy of its multiple translators”—and, I would add, that of its adapters (2010: 46).

For this reason, it is crucial to take the adaptation, and not its pre-text, as the starting point for analysis. This stress on the present helps to emphasise history while avoiding the trap of historicism, my second observation about adaptation’s potential. Rather than stressing a pre-text’s enduring relevance, adaptation sets up a non-hierarchical constellation of different, yet interrelated texts and traditions. African adaptations of Greek tragedy force Western readers, such as me, to consider the tradition in which they are inserted not as the authoritative origin, but as one of many horizontally aligned traditions; to consider one’s tradition from a more ambiguous perspective, that is, no longer solely from within, but also from outside to some extent. The politics of adaptation is also a politics of comparison, compelling readers to reflect on the terms they use in comparing one culture to another or, more accurately perhaps, in comparing another culture to their own.

A final observation about adaptation I find important is that it exceeds counter-discourse. I have argued that, despite the role canonised texts have played within Eurocentric traditions and ideologies, African adaptations of Greek tragedy—or Shakespeare, or any other text that holds canonical status for that matter—should not be reduced to mere *reactions* to these traditions and ideologies. That perspective would suggest that canonised texts are exclusively located in and owned by the West, alien to non-Western contexts. In turn, this denies the history of colonialism that brought these texts to different places, where they now form an integral part of cultural tradition. To define adaptations primarily in relation to the texts they adapt reduces their complexity, placing the pre-texts rather than the adaptations at the centre of analysis. While the adaptations discussed engage with the dominant Eurocentric discourses that have contained their pre-texts, they are nevertheless primarily concerned with their particular contexts. In Fugard’s *The Island*, the black character Winston begins his performance of Antigone while wearing a blond wig, but soon discards this prop. He does so not to distance himself from Antigone, but to show that her supposed Western origin is of relative importance compared to her contemporary potential.

Despite what the word “conclusion” suggests, bringing a study to a close inevitably elicits new questions and speculations. With regard to adaptation, I wonder whether

changing global processes might press for a re-evaluation of the ways in which adaptation proceeds and may be theorised. Perhaps it will become increasingly important to take analyses beyond the relationship between object texts and pre-text, as has been my focus here, and find ways to incorporate other aspects into the constellation of adaptation. Future research might, for example, take into consideration not only the location of the “adapters,” but also of the theatres that commission the adaptations and the audiences that see them performed; of the publishers who print them and their targeted readership; of the scholars who analyse them and the students who in turn study these analyses—in short, it might extend adaptation as cultural process, tracing how adaptations travel as cultural and intellectual capital.

Most of the texts I discussed in my study are known to me only because of the books and articles that refer to them. Within academic circles, some of these plays have acquired a status nearly as canonical as that of the Greek tragedies they adapt. This of course has everything to do with the dominance of the language in which they are written, English. Many other adaptations remain inaccessible to me because they were written in other languages, or because they were never printed, reviewed, or discussed to begin with. In a globalising world, as lines of cultural influence become increasingly difficult to trace, the politics of adaptation will become increasingly difficult to specify. This opens up challenging paths for future investigation.

I concluded my introductory chapter with a question. I asked whether it could be the case that the examined playwrights not only adapt Greek tragedies but also adapt the genre of tragedy. I suggested that their emphasis on tragedy as political rather than existential or metaphysical seems to point in this direction. However, I hope to have made clear that the lack of emphasis on politics is primarily related to a tradition of reading Greek tragedy. As Page duBois explains, in popular culture and in much literary theory, “tragedy has become something of a dead signifier, connoting only these salient features: the great man or woman, the tragic flaw, the fall.” The focus on the individual ignores, duBois continues, “the dialectic between part and whole, between individual and collective, and erase[s], polemically, context and history” (2004: 64-65). Those are precisely what the adaptations stress.

Barbara Goff proposes, in response to Steiner’s proclaimed death of tragedy, that “tragedy died and went to Africa; the forcible export from Europe of the long tragedy or colonization and decolonization was met by the emergence of a new genre which worked to render that process in all its intimate, damaged complexity” (Goff and Simpson 2007: 364). Goff distinguishes between an old European and a new African definition of the genre. However, adaptations work against that distinction. They not only emphasise difference, but also familiarity. Perhaps it is helpful to draw on Olakunle George’s analysis of Soyinka’s Yoruba tragedy, which I discussed in Chapter Three, and argue that the playwrights seize tragedy’s discursive form and fill it with

a different content (2003: 169). George calls attention to the fact that tragedy, like any other genre, does not hold essential qualities, but serves as a vessel that acquires meaning only by being filled with particular content. Rather than adapting the genre of tragedy, or constructing a new genre, my authors expose dominant definitions of tragedy, presented as universal, to be particular. In this sense, the politics of adaptation is not only a politics of comparison, but also a politics of genre.

Exposing the particularity of universalism, might African playwrights perhaps succeed in imparting to tragedy new potential as universal? Soyinka alludes to a universal idea of tragedy: “whether we translate it in Yoruba or Tre or Ewe, I think we’ll find a correlative somewhere in which we’re all talking about the same thing” (1988: 782-783). We can only speculate in very general terms what that “same thing” is; its meaning will always remain elusive. It seems connected to a tragic sensibility sensitive to the paradoxes of existence and the human struggle against bigger forces, be they metaphysical, existential or, as is the emphasis of the adaptations here, political. The themes that run through my chapters—resistance, revolution, transition and mourning—all relate to political struggle. Those themes provide points of entry to the ways in which Fugard, Osofisan, Soyinka, Fleishman and Farber dramatise the complexity and contradiction of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and colonial and postcolonial Nigeria, sometimes with the intention of inspiring change, sometimes with emphasis on the costs and consequences of change.

But my initial question remains: are those adaptations still *tragedies*? Precisely by evoking this question and by leaving it open, I propose, playwrights force readers to reflect on the implicit assumptions on which possible answers would have to rely. Against the idea of a purity of genre, the adaptations reveal that tragedy is situated “in the realms of history and society” (Jeyifo 1986: 94). Williams observes:

Tragedy comes to use, as a word, from a long tradition of European civilization, and it is easy to see this tradition as a continuity in one important way: that so many of the later writers and thinkers have been conscious of the earlier, and have seen themselves as contributing to a common idea or form. Yet “tradition” and “continuity”, as words, can lead us into a wholly wrong emphasis. When we come to study the tradition, we are immediately aware of change. All we can take quite for granted is the continuity of “tragedy” as a word. (1966: 37)

The adaptations similarly present tragedy as a word whose meaning continuously changes, whose yield continuously adapts. Precisely by challenging historicist definitions of tragedy, they insist on tragedy’s historicity.