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The politics of adaptation: contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy

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Summary

In this study, I explore contemporary African adaptations of classical Greek tragedies, looking at six dramatic texts by South African and Nigerian playwrights. I analyse the ways in which Athol Fugard, Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, Yael Farber and Mark Fleishman turn to Greek tragedies to comment on their respective socio-political contexts. I also demonstrate how, by presenting Greek tragedies as “theirs,” they simultaneously undermine Eurocentric claims of ownership and authority, performing a cultural politics directed at the “Europe” or “West” that has traditionally considered “Greece” as its property, foundation and legitimisation. The main title of this study, “The Politics of Adaptation,” refers to this twofold political engagement. In the first two chapters, I discuss adaptations that dramatise political resistance and revolution. In the second half of this study, the focus shifts to adaptations that deal with the aftermath of such transitional moments. I thus move from a discussion of “tragedy and change” to a discussion of “the tragedy of change,” considering how Greek tragedy offers ways not only to perform, but also to theorise politics.

In Chapter One I set up the framework for my study. I discuss how Eurocentric classicism has informed (contemporary) perspectives on adaptations of classical texts and I explore a number of concepts that have been employed in analyses of such re-readings, such as “Nachleben” and “reception.” After putting forth my own points of departure, I discuss the relationship between Eurocentric classicism and colonialism and look at a number of different models that have been used to theorise the relationship between ancient Greece and contemporary Africa, among them Martin Bernal’s *Black*

Athena. I also examine the notion of canonical counter-discourse, a notion that is often employed in analyses of postcolonial adaptations of Western canonical texts but that, as I try to demonstrate, warrants caution. This introductory chapter is intended to lead to a clearer understanding of what “the politics of adaptation” might entail in the South African and Nigerian dramatic texts that form my corpus of analysis.

In Chapter Two I examine two plays that draw on Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone: The Island* (first performed in 1973 and published in 1993) by South African playwright Athol Fugard in collaboration with the actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, and *Tegonni: an African Antigone* (first performed in 1994 and published in 1999) by Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan. After discussing the relevance and implications of adapting *Antigone* within the contexts of South Africa and Nigeria, I analyse the political potential of literally bringing Antigone on stage, as these playwrights do. I conclude with a consideration of the effects of Antigone’s translocation on her status as a Western canonical figure. Throughout, I am interested in how Fugard’s and Osofisan’s “African Antigones” relate to and extend Antigone’s political legacy.

While Chapter Two is concerned with revolutionary refigurations of Antigone, Chapter Three looks at a play in which Dionysus is transformed into a revolutionary leader: Wole Soyinka’s *Euripides’ Bacchae: a Communion Rite* (first performed in 1972 and published in 1973). I begin this chapter by exploring the ways in which Soyinka draws on Yoruba mythology and cosmology to emphasise the revolutionary potential of ritual sacrifice. After further consideration of Soyinka’s complex ritualist aesthetics, I turn to his theorisation of “Yoruba tragedy.” I discuss the cultural politics that his theory, through the relation it establishes between “African” and “Greek,” performs and demonstrate how Soyinka takes the double gesture of adaptation—establishing similarity *and* difference, familiarity *and* foreignness—to its full potential.

In Chapter Four, I focus on two dramatic texts that rework Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy within the context of post-apartheid South Africa: Mark Fleishman’s *In the City of Paradise* (first performed in 1998, unpublished) and Yael Farber’s *Molera* (first performed in 2003 and published in 2008). Both plays are concerned with the losses and compromises that haunt post-conflict societies as they try to come to terms with the past and make reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I consider the political transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa in relation to the cultural exchange between antiquity and the present, addressing topics ranging from storytelling to theatre, from memory to truth, from forgiveness to justice, and from amnesty to reconciliation.

In the final Chapter Five, I pursue the theme of mourning, inherently related to the genre of tragedy and implicit in the South African adaptations of the *Oresteia* and the other adaptations I discuss. I therefore devote the first part of this chapter to demonstrating that mourning is central to the stories of Antigone and her African

revolutionary refigurations, analysed in Chapter Two, and to the notion of ritual sacrifice in Soyinka's Nigerian reworking of the *Bacchae*, analysed in Chapter Three. After revisiting these plays to delineate what is at stake in practices of mourning, I examine Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* (first performed in 2004 and published in 2006) in order to investigate the implications of mourning in more detail. I demonstrate that mourning not only functions on an individual level, but also plays an important role in the formations of collective (national) identities and in historiographical practices. This makes mourning both complex and ambiguous. I conclude with a broader discussion of the political relevance and promise that mourning may hold.

I end my study by reflecting on the consequences of my analyses for the interpretation of adaptation and tragedy. I speculate whether an increasingly globalised world, in which transcultural processes become increasingly complex and increasingly difficult to trace, may press for a re-evaluation of the process of adaptation. Finally, I address the question whether the discussed playwrights not only present adaptations of Greek tragedy, but perhaps also "adapt" the genre of tragedy.