

Astrid Van Weyenberg, *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy*. Amsterdam, Rodopi 2013. Pp. xlix + 215. ISBN 978-90-420-3700-7. €65 / US\$91.

Van Weyenberg (Literary Studies, University of Amsterdam), in an introduction and four chapters examines contemporary African adaptations of Greek tragedies in context. Wisely asking at the beginning how a scholar can 'examine critically a tradition from a position within that tradition' (p. xviii), she considers the complex relationship between a work of art and the sociopolitical context in which it is created. In particular, she is interested in examining how these adaptations demonstrate 'Greek tragedy's potential to inspire and dramatize political change' by dramatizing resistance and revolution and how other adaptations 'reflect on the aftermath of such transitional moments' (p. I).

The first chapter (pp. 1-42) focuses on African *Antigones*, in particular *The Island* by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, and *Tegonni* by Femi Osofisan. Her analysis of the former is problematized by her identification of Fugard as sole author, consistently referring to the play as 'Fugard's *Island*', referring to Kani and Ntshona in passing as 'young black actors'. The author finally explains, '[b]ecause the improvisational acting of Kani and Ntshona determined the script, it has become common among scholars to acknowledge them as co-authors of the published text, whereas in this chapter I refer to Fugard as "the" playwright, this is for brevity's sake only' (p. 11). Brevity does not seem enough of a reason to denigrate Kani and Ntshona's contribution to the script, nor does it excuse the fundamental misunderstanding of the South African practice of workshop theatre during the apartheid era that resulted in such plays as *Born in the RSA*, *Woza Albert* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. This statement, however, does demonstrate van Weyenberg's focus on text, often to the exclusion of performance, ignoring the value to be found in examining the plays *qua* performance texts in context.

On the other hand, her analysis of *Tegonni*, which, unlike *The Island*, is still underrepresented in scholarly literature, is insightful, welcome, and offers a unique way of viewing African adaptations of *Antigone*. She sees Antigone in both of these plays as having 'political potential in the present' and offering a model for resistance and revolution (p. 36).

Chapter 2, 'Ritual and Revolution' (pp. 43-90), focuses on Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*, arguing 'Soyinka draws on Yoruba mythology and cosmology to emphasize the revolutionary potential of ritual sacrifice' (p. 44). While others have also seen the adaptation as a commentary on post-independence military dictatorships (a recurring theme in Soyinka's work – van Weyenberg reminds the reader that 'adaptation is never simply a unidirectional relation from one text to another, but always entails a bi-directional dynamic' (p. 49). We re-read Euripides now through Soyinka, and understand Dionysus as a revolutionary, even as Pentheus attempts to construct him as radical Other. Van Weyenberg also cannily draws upon Soyinka's theoretical writings to explicate the two levels of politics operating within the play.

The first half of the volume concludes that 'the politics of adaptation is played out through the dual emphasis on similarity and difference', rather than an outmoded idea of fidelity to an original (p. 88). Each African adaptation of Greek tragedy shares the cultural specificity of the context into which it is adapted as well as a 'shared sensibility' that allows those outside that culture to experience and understand the plays.

The work then moves to the aftermath of tragic events for the second half of the volume. Of particular interest to scholars of South African drama is Chapter 3, 'Staging Transition: *The Oresteia* in Post-Apartheid South Africa' (pp. 91-140), which offers close readings of Yael Farber's *Molara* and Mark Fleishman's 1998 adaptation *In the City of Paradise*, both of which reframe *The Oresteia* through the form and elements of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). (And, reciprocally, they also reframe the TRC through the narrative of *The Oresteia*.) Again, van Weyenberg demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the subject matter, noting that the TRC asserted a 'distinction between victim and perpetrator', that Aeschylus did not (p. 95). The shared value in original tragedy and South African adaptation is the idea of storytelling embedded in theatre and the inherent theatricality of telling one's story: 'Both Fleishman's and Farber's characters repeatedly insist on telling *their* stories, on conveying *their* subjective truth' (p. 100). Van Weyenberg calls attention both to the highly theatrical nature of the TRC

and the Greek original's subjective truths overridden (and overwritten) by the gods; the hearings of the TRC were 'mediated by commissioners' interruptions and reinterpretations', just as Apollo and Athena reinterpret Clytemnestra's story into one in which she is a mere vessel for the true parent, the father, in Aeschylus (p. 107)

Through *The Oresteia*, 'Fleishman and Farber not only challenge the binary of perpetrator and victim, but they also show that these categories cannot be distinguished along racial lines' (p. 109). In other words, the Greek tragic material is used to construct a vision of the role of the TRC in a changing South Africa. 'One version of justice is privileged over the other versions' in both the TRC and *The Oresteia*. The play 'dramatizes closure but simultaneously performs a critique of closure', she concludes (p. 137).

The final chapter, 'Mourning Remains' (pp. 141-78) proposes to read Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, an adaptation of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, through Nicole Loraux's concept of the 'mourning voice', among others (p. 142). It is important, van Weyenberg argues, that we recognize mourning 'as a political and historiographical practice', but the chapter itself demonstrates the inevitability of politics in such practice, even as mourning resists political action as it is an emotional process: '[t]he mourning voice is not a revolutionary voice, yet it has the power to speak to people's emotions and appeal to a shared sense of humanity' (p. 178). Both Osofisan and Euripides identify the women after a war as the ones charged by society (and by gender divisions during warfare) with mourning. Yet their voices are the only ones left after the violence of the war, and thus mourning becomes an important and gendered tool of social change.

A brief Conclusion (pp. 179-84) rounds out the volume in which van Weyenberg proposes a new way to consider adaptation as process, not product. Adaptation is 'not only a cultural object but a cultural process' in which the politics of the adapting culture is performed through ancient narrative (p. 179). Simultaneously, she observes, 'adaptations may also recover hidden aspects of the texts they rework' (p. 179). In other words, in adapting classical texts to African contexts, not only is the African context illuminated in a new manner, so, too, is the classical text newly revealed.

Overall, *The Politics of Adaptation* is a worthy addition to a growing number of texts that employ adaptation theory and reception theory to analyze how African artists use ancient Athenian texts to create new works that illustrate the complexity of their parent text and context. Van Weyenberg employs a complex theoretical framework and detailed readings of the six works she considers in accessible, clear language. This volume is certain to provoke, prod, and prompt responses to her analysis of these texts. Her focus is on the text and the playwright, as noted above, and the volume would have benefitted from further analysis of the plays in performance, particularly since plays are written to be performed and these dramas especially were written to be performed. Performance is a meaning-making activity separate from reading. This is an excellent book mainly because of the author's concern with the politics of the texts, but it would have been an even more valuable one to students and scholars of African theatre had it focused more on performance, which is a social and communal act unlike reading which is solitary. Saying that, however, takes nothing away from this thought-provoking study, which raises important questions, offers complications to previous analyses of the same and similar material, and which seeks to move beyond Eurocentric and postcolonial narratives and arguments to address the plays as works of contemporary Africa inspired by themes from classical Greek myth. That is something worth embracing and celebrating, and only adds to the scholarly conversation on Afrocentric classicism, adaptation and reception.

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