
Astrid van Weyenberg. *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy*. Cross/Cultures 165. Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2013. Pp. li, 215. US\$69.78.

In *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy*, Astrid van Weyenberg examines a collection of African adaptations of Greek tragedies in light of their political potential. This is a well-researched and rewarding book that illuminates its material from an unlikely angle, given that the author is neither a classicist nor an Africanist but is rather interested in the plays' "enduring political relevance and . . . potential to promote change" (van Weyenberg 4). The payoff of this approach lies not in its literary insights but in its attention to the complexities of cultural context.

Van Weyenberg lays out her approach in a carefully worded introduction in which she strives to distance herself from the field of classical studies while also justifying her own focus on plays inspired by classical dramas. In her first main chapter ("African Antigones: 'Wherever the call for freedom is heard!')", she discusses two adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone*. The first is *The Island*, the renowned South African play composed in 1973 by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, and the second is *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, by Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan. Van Weyenberg surveys the adaptations of Fugard et al. and Osofisan, noting that both African plays reduce the "complexity of the conflict" in Sophocles' play to a simpler one in which "[t]here is no doubt about the validity of Antigone's claim" (8). She suggests that this change in both cases is due to the fact that, while "Athenian tragedy sought to instruct" (8) citizens to engage in debate, the oppressive contexts of composition and performance in South Africa and Nigeria¹ did not allow for such ambiguities. Van Weyenberg's analysis of the two African plays is sensitive and well-informed, but her study enters a crowded field: these plays have already received a great deal of scholarly attention in, for example, Kevin Wetmore's thorough monograph on a similar topic and Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson's excellent analysis. Nonetheless, by showing that Fugard and Osofisan use the character Antigone as a "political symbol" (36) and thus as a model for audiences, van Weyenberg brings a new concentration to the

ways that these plays act as cultural tools, meant to have “political potential in the present” (36).

Van Weyenberg’s second chapter (“Ritual and Revolution: Wole Soyinka’s *Bacchae*, a Yoruba Tragedy”) examines *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, an adaptation by Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka first performed in 1972 in London. (The author rightly notes the global nature of all of these playwrights and performances.) Van Weyenberg suggests that Soyinka frames postcolonial Nigeria as being in an analogous position to “imperial Greece” (46) and points to the new themes Soyinka imports into the story of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, such as slavery and class structures. She also shows how the Yoruba background of Soyinka’s play allows for a new sense of human agency that coexists with divine influence. Hereafter van Weyenberg’s analysis become more complex as she raises a potential critique of the playwright, voicing—through the critique of other writers—some disapproval of the seemingly apolitical nature of Soyinka’s cosmic vision. She then, however, spends several paragraphs exonerating him from this charge, declaring that Soyinka’s *Bacchae* may not be political in content but nonetheless does offer “political potential” (88) through its relationship to Euripides’ play and its very existence. For Soyinka and some of his audiences, such an exoneration may not be necessary.

In the third chapter, van Weyenberg discusses two post-apartheid adaptations of the *Oresteia* from South Africa. I found this chapter illuminating, in part because van Weyenberg turns her attention most overtly to the political milieu of the plays she is analyzing. Van Weyenberg’s discussion of memory, storytelling, and justice in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee is informative and insightful—somewhat more so than her critique of two plays from this era, Mark Fleishman’s *In the City of Paradise* (performed in Cape Town in 1998) and Yael Farber’s *Molora* (first performed in 2003). Van Weyenberg’s final chapter, entitled “Mourning Remains: Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu*,” looks at this playwright’s adaptation of Euripides’ *Trojan Women*. She handles some of the same themes as in the previous chapter and skillfully traces the ways that memory and mourning can respond to traumatic events in productive ways, such as through women’s sung lamentation, which she reads as “not only a form of expression but also [as having] . . . active potential” (160) to advance the history of victims. Osofisan’s plays reflect the values that van Weyenberg herself promotes: he writes from an uncontestedly political standpoint, drawing upon contemporary events and making overt reference to race, class, gender, and nationality in his plays. Her discussion of his plays thus bookend the main chapters of the text, and

through his work she displays her appreciation for theater that engages in politics most explicitly.

In this final chapter, van Weyenberg also attempts to interrogate her own dominant rubric—politics. After asserting that the playwrights under discussion view Greek tragedy as “a vehicle to address political issues and inspire change,” she notes that this (alleged) emphasis may “relegate . . . other voices to the background” (145). She points in particular to the voices of Antigone in versions of this play and to the perspective of Agave, the mother of the slaughtered Pentheus in the *Bacchae*: neither of these two characters is allowed to survive into the fictive future. This is a valuable line of investigation but it is a questioning not of the political gaze in general so much as of particular cases of political efficacy, since van Weyenberg asserts that “those voices need to be heard because they may still possess political relevance” (145). In this reading, only political significance bears weight, not literary or artistic merit.

Van Weyenberg makes good use of different theoretical perspectives throughout the book, as when she treats Freud’s work on mourning and its reception in political theory and gender theory. She ends the book with a brief conclusion suggesting that political analyses of drama should consider the readers, audiences, publishers, and scholars who ultimately create the canon. I would welcome such an expansion of the notion of “adaptation as a cultural process” (181), particularly from this author, who brings a lucid and thoughtful voice to questions of historical and political context.

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Notes

- 1 As van Weyenberg notes, Osofisan’s play was first performed and apparently composed in Atlanta at Emory University in 1994, not in Nigeria, but she argues that the state of affairs in Nigeria nonetheless influenced the composition.

Works Cited

- Goff, Barbara, and Michael Simpson. *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.
- Wetmore, Jr., Kevin J. *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2002. Print.