

Re-reading *Medea* Through Femi Osofisan's *Medaaye*

Nigerian playwright and social critic Femi Osofisan is best known in classical reception circles for his two adaptations of Greek tragedies, *Tegonni: An African Antigone* from 1994 and *The Women of Owu*, his 2006 version of Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Both of those plays move the Greek stories into a 19th century African historical and cultural context – *Tegonni* set in the early days of British colonialism, *The Women of Owu* even earlier – but both still manage to offer commentary on the contemporary situation in Nigeria. In addition, both of Osofisan's plays invite a reappraisal of the Greek model, now viewed from an African perspective, and newly interpreted for the stage by a master playwright. Osofisan has now given us a new play, *Medaaye: An African Re-reading of Euripides' Medea*, and once again the play not only offers insights into Nigerian worlds of the 19th and 21st centuries, but also invites us to focus on and reconsider certain key aspects of Euripides' play.

The Prelude of *Medaaye* succinctly introduces the primary theme I'll consider here: the interplay between personal and political motivations. Osofisan's play begins metatheatrically with a story to entertain the cast as they await the arrival of two remaining actors. In the story – not at all about Medea or Medaaye and not, in fact, completed until the interlude – a clever man tricks a beautiful woman into a marriage she doesn't want; and she eventually gets revenge by a trick of her own, but one that involves her own death. Interrupting the story, but still in the Prelude, is the Stage Manager's summary of the 19th century wars in Yorubaland between the cities of Ibadan and Ijaye. The relationship between the personal, as highlighted in the story, and the political develops throughout the play. On the personal level, Medaaye is still very much in love with Atipo, the Jason figure, even as she reviles him for breaking an oath he had made to

remain faithful to her, and to her alone. The play ends, not with Medea triumphant in the chariot of the sun, but, again metatheatrically, with the Stage Manager asking the audience what lessons they/we have learned from the play about love. But this love story plays out in the context of war, a particularly fraught context since both Medaaye and Atipo are exiles from Ibadan, living in Ijaye, the city now under siege by armies from their home city. That conflict gives urgency to Atipo's new marriage into the royal line, since only with that connection will he, an Ibadan native, be trusted to lead forces from Ijaye. Medaaye's resistance to this new marriage thus jeopardizes not only Atipo's individual status in the city, but the entire Ijaye war effort. Complicating matters further is the arrival of Ogunmola, something like Euripides' Aegeus in that he offers sanctuary to Medaaye, but also a warlord from Ibadan.

This is the Medea story, but we are clearly not in Corinth anymore, or Athens. Osofisan's innovations highlight aspects of Nigerian culture and history, but can they tell us anything about Euripides and his play? Can we find in Euripides' play anything like the interplay between the personal and the political in Osofisan's?

Works Cited

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