

Sophocles on Race and Power: From Thebes to South Carolina and Nigeria

This paper considers two of the questions at the heart of reception studies as they relate to two plays based on Sophoclean models, both of them from the mid-1990s. The two questions: What, if anything, can the later version add to our appreciation of the ancient model? What difference does it make to the later version that it hearkens back to an ancient model? The two plays: Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* and Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone*. While those plays are very different, they share in their use of a classical model to address, inter alia, problems associated with race and power.

Dove – an African-American poet and playwright, US poet laureate from 1993-95, National Medal of the Arts recipient in 2012, and faculty member at the University of Virginia – sets the Oedipus story (or parts of it) on an antebellum plantation in South Carolina. In the first scene of the play, the white female plantation owner gives birth to a male child by one of her black slaves, and sends him off for adoption. The story picks up some 20 years later when that child, unrecognized by all until the end of the play, comes back to join the slaves on the plantation. Events take an unsophoclean path toward a conclusion we expected all along.

Osofisan – a prominent Nigerian writer, intellectual, and activist – sets his play in colonial Nigeria, with the British firmly in control. Tegonni, a Nigerian on her way to marry one of the colonial officers, learns that her brother has died and that the British governor, a father figure to her fiancé, forbids her brother's burial. Again, we know how this will end, even if we do not know how we will reach that end.

Brief consideration of that first reception question – what insights about the ancient model do we gain from this version? – centers on absences, the things we more fully realize do not play a part, or as prominent a part, in Sophocles' plays. Romance figures in the later plays,

but not between Oedipus and Jocasta, or Antigone and Haemon. Politics in Sophocles' plays is largely personal, despite the involvement of the chorus, while the later versions describe more public movements. And, leading us into the second of our two questions: the matter of race, as in the sharp divide between master and slave, colonizer and colonized, is absent in Sophocles.

What then of the force of the ancient on the modern? What does it say about these plays that they choose to hearken back to models produced by the very culture, broadly speaking, that serves as the villain of the piece? What is the effect of using a white European model to construct a play about the abuses of white people in power? For Dove, the question was pointed and personal. She was working for much of her career in the heyday of the Black Arts movement, when many African-American poets were consciously and explicitly directing their work at social injustices and, in particular, at racism in America. Yet Dove, in response to protests, claimed she was using her art for different purposes, and proudly named white poets, American and European, as major influences. Osofisan has likewise been criticized for adopting the language and literary form of the colonizers, rather than using native traditions.

One response to that criticism is to cite what scholars have called canonical counter-discourse, the very use of a literary form to undercut its originators. Maybe so, but recognizing that no single response suffices, I close with a return to the particulars of these two plays. What makes them work, and makes them worthy heirs of their forebears, is their unwillingness to provide easy answers. Dove gives us not only the horrors of slavery, but conflicts between and among the slaves, and even a sense that the owners themselves are entrapped in a destructive system. Osofisan is critical not only of the historical injustices of the colonizers, but of contemporary Nigerian culture, politics, and politicians as well. Perhaps the hearkening back to

Greek tragedy in these plays is most significant for its distancing effect, thereby allowing for a broader view of the complexities involved.

Bibliography:

Dove, Rita. *The Darker Face of the Earth*, 3rd edition (Story Line Pr: 2000).

Goff, Barbara and Michael Simpson. *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (Oxford U Pr: 2007).

Femi Osofisan. *Recent Outings: Tegonni: An African Antigone and Many Colors Make the Thunder-king* (Opon IFA Readers: 1999).

Rankine, Patrice D. *Aristotle and Black Drama: A Theater of Civil Disobedience* (Baylor U Pr: 2013).

Weyenbergh, A. van. *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy* (Brill: 2013).