Introduction

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Contemporary Perspectives on Adaptation: Definitions and Theoretical Issues

In the last decades of the twentieth century, and at the beginning of the twenty-first, adaptation has come to the forefront of theoretical debates about the limits (or lack thereof) of our engagement with the classical past. At the same time, the adaptive process takes on an increasingly performative character, moving away from the text-centred approaches that had dominated earlier eras and towards new idioms that privilege visuality at least as much as textuality, or enhance the text through its scenic realisations and refractions. Theorists are now careful not to 'treat performance as merely a derivative citation of the text';[1] text and performance are viewed as being in a state of constant interaction, complementarity, and mutual redefinition, in which performance may actuate in numerous ways the performative potential of the dramatic text, while the text may be conceptualised afresh as a result of being performed. In particular, to study the adaptation of Greek tragedy in both textual and performance media is not only to explore intertextual or 'intervisual' relations but also to map out the various avenues through which plays once considered sacrosanct, qua indisputedly part of the Western cultural paradigm, are increasingly being appropriated into different performance and cultural contexts, value systems, and conceptual frames, and are as a result often challenged, questioned, contested.

Definitions: Adaptation, Translation, and Related Modalities

Typically, 'adaptation' comprises a large gamut of activities that may range from the rather modest exercise of abridging the source text to make it

[1] Quotation from Mee and Foley (2011), 11.

suitable for audiences or performance conditions different from the original ones to more ambitious projects, such as expanding, enriching or otherwise crucially altering the source text. Frequently, adaptation involves the transcoding of the source text into a different medium (e.g. drama into film) or genre (e.g. fiction into drama), although adaptation within the same generic boundaries is also possible. Rather inevitably, a degree of re-contextualisation is inherent in adaptation. Such is the case of, e.g., 'updated' versions of classical dramas transferred into modern settings, or of classical plays relocated into different cultural contexts (see further Sanders 2016, 3). By committedly engaging with the source text, adaptation is more thorough and systematic than allusion or quotation, and may come across (though not necessarily) as more conspicuous in its respect for the source text than parody:[2] these are merely a few of many boundaries that can be posited between adaptation and related modalities.

The question of definitions is treated in detail by Katja Krebs in Chapter 1 of this volume ('Definitions: Adaptation and Related Modalities'), which explores the notion of adaptation both in terms of recent theoretical positions claimed within adaptation studies and in relation to the theatre-making process. More precisely, Krebs attempts to establish what we mean by 'adaptation' when discussing classic Greek tragedy in performance and to what extent such terms as 'translation', 'version', '(re)writing', or '(re)imagining' can or indeed should be distinguished from one another. In addressing some of these questions, Krebs investigates whether notions of performance of the classics and notions of adaptation are in a constructive relationship with each other. In order to do so, she adopts a case-study approach: looking at (inter alia) recent theatre adaptations of *Medea*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and *The Persians*, Krebs explores the relationship between performance of the classics and notions of adaptation.

It is also imperative to think about translation as adaptation. Even when 'faithful' to the source text, translations involve a degree of re-encoding not only into a different language but also into a different cultural framework, involving 'a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria'.[3] Etymologically, *translatio* is a transfer, a process of transplanting both a text as a verbal event and its underlying cultural assumptions into different contexts. Qua re-contextualisation, a translation can and (at its best) does become a creative work in its own right. As Lorna Hardwick shows in Chapter 3 ('Translation and/as Adaptation'), translations of Greek tragedy in particular, by reconfiguring and resignifying the originals for modern audiences, can address and

[2] Cf. Sanders (2016), 6–7. [3] Quotation from Bassnett (2002), 22.

even shape modern sensibilities. In transferring dramatic texts from an ancient culture that is both fundamentally alien and (by virtue of its classic status) partially similar to that of the modern West, translations of Greek tragedy can both affirm and challenge feelings of cultural rootedness or superiority. Contrariwise, by foregrounding cultural disparities or by drawing on non-mainstream linguistic communities (such as sociolects), translation can revitalise texts whose classical-ness may be taken to imply immobility and fixedness. In the context of this dual opposition, Hardwick explores the relationship between vernacular and source language, both in terms of the details of the formal and lexical aspects of rewriting and in terms of the sociocultural contexts and the epistemological and affective impact on the new texts. Hardwick situates the translation/adaptation of drama in a broader context, to include an investigation of the ways in which it bears on the dialogical relationship between ancient and modern, especially since it invites an acute awareness of the palimpsestic effect of the mediating traditions, texts, and performances. In this connection, Hardwick provides a critical commentary on changes in assumptions about what the term 'translation' covers in its literary forms and in its mediation of ancient texts to the modern stage.[4]

The methodological issues raised by Hardwick's chapter may be complemented by Adam Lecznar's 'The View from the Archive: Performances of Ancient Tragedy at the National Theatre, 1963–1973' (Chapter 6), which shows how archival material can augment our understanding of modern adaptations of ancient Greek tragedy, while simultaneously opening up new avenues of creative interpretation. Lecznar focuses on the National Theatre of Britain and its production history of adaptations of Greek tragedy over the first ten years of its existence (from 1963 to 1973), by discussing three case studies: William Gaskill and Keith Johnstone's version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (1964); Peter Brook's production of Ted Hughes' translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* (1968); and Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973). Thanks to insights drawn from these case studies, Lecznar broadens his chapter's focus to explore more general issues attendant on viewing modern performances from the vantage point of the archive. On the one hand, he argues, such a perspective can historicise the adaptations in question and locate them more securely in their immediate sociocultural context; on the other, it can disrupt received scholarly ideas about the significance of these adaptations

[4] See also Hardwick (2007b).

by drawing attention to the different, and sometimes hidden, investments of the various parties involved.

Adaptation as a Problematisation of the Canon

In most cases, adaptation involves, at least to a degree, a reconfiguration of the source text's semantic properties, which it reframes by interposing perceptual filters between classical texts and modern consumers, and by forcing the latter to re-evaluate both their perception of the source text (especially when it has the status of a 'classic') and their own cultural assumptions. This rearrangement of the constituents of the source text is presupposed even in relatively uncomplicated adaptations, such as those based on abridgement or expansion, let alone in more wide-ranging reworkings. Thus, adaptation openly breaks the illusion of textual autonomy by establishing itself as an intertextual act and by advertising its 'derivativeness' as one of many possible ways of actualising meaning at the point of reception.[5] Precisely by virtue of its 'derivativeness', adaptation constitutes a particularly appropriate lens through which to view tensions, ambivalences, and inconsistencies.

Indeed, adaptation often contests the notion of the classic as an inviolable, authoritative model, one relying on (or imposing) specific cultural, semantic, or interpretive assumptions. Adaptation of Greek tragedy, in particular, engages in a variety of ways with an inalienable part of Western cultural capital, which is historically invested with significations that are perceived as familiar qua constituents of a specific (Western) identity. But precisely because it has played a central role in shaping our perceptions of the classical world as a defining paragon, Greek tragedy is especially suitable for often dissonant rewritings (both textual and performative). On the one hand, adaptations of Greek tragedy play on the audience's presumed familiarity with foundational texts of the Western canon, thereby seeming to perpetuate its existence; on the other, they may proceed to perform 'a dissonant and dissident rupturing' of the value systems and hierarchies associated with canonical writing.[6] In the latter case, they may set themselves up as rival readings of the source text and its

[5] Especially in recent years, when the proliferation of media (film, television, radio, musicals, electronic media, graphic novels, video games, etc.) has dramatically increased the number and quality of suitable outlets for adaptation, routine dismissals of adaptation as a derivative activity have increasingly given way to serious critical attention and to attempts to reconsider its cultural valuation. See Hutcheon (2006), xi–xii.

[6] See Sanders (2016), 12, whence the quotation.

associated values; or as rereadings that configure afresh the source text's established meaning(s); or as new points of departure that privilege ambiguity, problematise the source text's current valuations, and question the dominant discourse about what constitutes 'the classic' in literary, performative, or cultural terms. In other words, modern reworkings of classical myth presuppose and build on the notion of authoritativeness in order to negotiate or even negate the very idea of a monumentalised manifestation of the classic and the concomitant notions of semantic fixity and originary meaning. As pointed out by Lianeri and Zajko, the very notion of what constitutes a classical text is far from stable; on the contrary, it 'continues to be mediated and configured by changing historical circumstances, which present the construction of the classic as a historical relationship between past and present'. By negotiating 'the contradiction between the two mutually oppositional sides of the classic, the timeless and the contingent',[7] adaptation at once asserts the death of the classic and promotes its transhistorical, perpetually redefinable identity.

Almost by definition, adaptation raises important questions of canonicity and dissidence, authority and provocation, deference and confrontation. These are some of the issues discussed by Peter Meineck in chapter 2 ('Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation'), which seeks to identify the cultural and even political stakes involved in the act of adaptation. Meineck interrogates the fidelity discourse as applied to Greek drama and explores the ways it has sometimes led to adaptation being treated dismissively. Meineck challenges the oft-unquestioned premise that we have access to the original versions of the Greek plays and suggests ways in which we can approach adaptation as a positive act of creativity, which has enabled the work to survive. Further, Meineck illustrates how the fidelity discourse continues to exert a negative influence on the adaptation of Greek drama, by using examples from his own work on adaptations with the Aquila Theatre, whose target audience is the veteran community in the United States. By describing these performance projects, Meineck demonstrates how an informed approach to adaptation can produce new ways in which to increase engagement with, and knowledge of, ancient dramatic works.

One of the most exciting vehicles of the aforementioned renegotiation of the canon is the association between Greek and non-Western performance traditions. Such associations, which frequently focus on the nonverbal elements of performance, often aim to re-establish a sense of

[7] Both quotations from Lianeri and Zajko (2008), 4.

'otherness' by alienating modern audiences and their Stanislavskian sensibilities. In his epoch-making *Trojan Women* (1974) and *Clytemnestra* (1986), director Suzuki Tadashi challenged Western theatre traditions by creating his own Eastern ritual from elements of traditional Japanese theatre, such as Noh drama, as well as from his own intensely contemporary sensibilities.[8] In Ninagawa Yukio's *Medea* (1978), the merging of Eastern and Western traditions was effected by the use of an all-male cast and of (sometimes subverted) dramatic techniques borrowed from Kabuki, thereby reinforcing a sense of traditional ritual.[9] More recently, there have been attempts to tap into other Asian traditions, for example by Yanna Zarifi, who utilised modern Tajikistan dirges in staging the chorus' lamentation in Aeschylus' *Persians*; by Sadanam Balakrishnan, who adapted *Alcestis* and *Helen* into the Kathakali idiom; and by China's Hebei Bangzi theatre, which adapted Medea as a *hebei bangzi* opera in 1989.[10] Western-derived versions of Greek tragedy have also been in dialogue with non-Western cultures. A famous case in point was the gospel version of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* by Lee Breuer and Bob Telson (*The Gospel at Colonus*, 1983), which brought Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* alive as a sermon performed by African American singers and actors before an African American gospel chorus.[11] One of the most prominent points of contact between Western and Oriental theatre traditions is provided by Ariane Mnouchkine's work (notably *Les Atrides*), whose narratives are mostly derived from the Western literary canon and history but systematically absorb from, and interact with, Oriental presentational and distancing elements in movement, costume, mask, and make-up to add a more global sensibility to her stage, as well as foregrounding (in league with Artaud) non-Western modes of representation as an alternative to word-dominated forms.[12] Finally, an important example of adaptation of Greek tragedy from a distinctly non-Western point of view was the Alaskan *Yup'ik Antigone* (1985), which included a shaman Tiresias and tribal masks and music that enhanced the heroine's stirring defence of traditional Inuit mores.[13]

Issues of identity and alterity are treated in detail by Erika Fischer-Lichte in Chapter 10 and by Elke Steinmeyer in Chapter 11 of this

[8] See further Goto (1989), 108–19; Foley (1999), 8; Carruthers and Takahashi (2004), 124–79.
[9] See further Smethurst (2002).
[10] See Tian (2008), 193 and cf. Fischer-Lichte, this volume.
[11] Further on *The Gospel at Colonus* see Goff and Simpson (2007), 178–218.
[12] On Mnouchkine see J. G. Miller (2007); particularly on her *Les Atrides* see Goetsch (1994) and Glynn (2015).
[13] See Foley (1999), 2.

volume. In her 'Adaptations of Greek Tragedies in Non-Western Performance Cultures', Fischer-Lichte explores and analyses the increasing interest (by scholars and theatre practitioners alike) in associations between Greek and non-Western traditions of performance. Such associations create unexpected fusions between vastly different theatrical aesthetics, which may invest the source text with fresh political potential – witness, for example, Amitava Dasgupta's 'Brechtian' versions of Greek tragedies in Delhi and elsewhere. Alternatively, cross-cultural adaptations may aim to reimagine the Dionysiac feel of an Athenian performance event, or simply to explore the intrinsic allure of such cross-cultural experimentation. In West Africa, in particular, such adaptations (among which Wole Soyinka's version of *Bacchae* takes pride of place) functioned not only as responses to the centrality of Greek drama in British colonial ideology but also as a means of exploring affinities between the Greek and West African cultures. Fischer-Lichte's scope here is quite expansive: it encompasses, for instance, such notable Japanese productions as Suzuki Tadashi's and Ninagawa Yukio's adaptations of Greek tragedies, as well as tracing the history of adaptations of Greek drama in India and China.

In particular, modern adaptations of Greek plays, as Mee and Foley aptly remark, 'are important for the ways in which they use the Western canon to challenge Western value systems and assumptions about culture, and for the ways in which they decentre Western culture . . . adaptation can be more of a challenge to the "original" than a derivative to it'.[14] From this perspective, it is particularly instructive to look at the topic of Elke Steinmeyer's chapter in this volume ('Cultural Identities: Appropriations of Greek Tragedy in Post-Colonial Discourse'). Steinmeyer looks at how Greek tragedy has been employed by African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American playwrights as a means of offering alternative mythopoeic models of approaching and debating crucial political and social issues.[15] She discusses how the classical tradition, a long-time staple of colonial education, has often been challenged and ironised as an imperial relic, but it has also given rise, in the cultural context of alternative African traditions (both within and outside Africa), to the creation of a distinct corpus of adaptations that both foster and deconstruct encounters between ancient Greece and contemporary African cultures. In particular, Steinmeyer discusses post-apartheid playwrights and stage directors, e.g. Mark

[14] Mee and Foley (2011), 4.
[15] This is a topic on which much of value has been written: see, e.g., Hardwick and Gillespie (2007); Goff and Simpson (2007); Greenwood (2010).

Fleishman and Mervyn McMurtry, who tend to refocus Greek tragic themes on instances in which victims and oppressors face each other, as well as their traumatic past, in the spirit promoted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.[16] In a similar vein, an exciting recent trend in European theatre has been the expansion of theatre culture to the underprivileged outskirts of modern urban sites. The *banlieues*, inhabited mostly by 'new Europeans', immigrants from former European colonies, now often provide venues for the performance of classical plays, which not only cater to the cultural needs of those communities but also encourage questioning and dissent.[17] Among other things, such projects bring out and problematise the narrowness of certain concepts of European (or national) identity.

Adaptation and the malleability of myth

One of the crucial factors that permit the kind of (re)negotiations described in the previous section is the malleability of classical myth.[18] As a traditional, originally oral tale, myth is not only authoritative but also, crucially, susceptible of being constantly remodelled and reformulated through successive retellings and through subsequent readings and interpretations. As Moddelmog (1993) observes, the essential quality of myth is that it initiates interpretive acts by its recipients, involving them in a quest for an essential meaning that is absent (i.e. unrealised) until the interpreting subject recognises it as an object of enquiry. There is thus an 'ontological gap' between the mythic tale and the meaning(s) assigned to it by its recipients – a gap that can never be closed, insofar as 'myth is discourse that generates discourse and thereby brings with it an elaborate literary and interpretive history'.[19] Thus, myth perpetually generates acts of 'interpretation, including the interpretation of retelling and translation', in a constant flux of semiotic mobility, whereby the semantic constituents of myth are selectively privileged, questioned, challenged and/or renegotiated, in a continuous interplay of different versions and reinterpretations.[20]

To the extent that they retain recognisable mythic components, adaptations of Greek tragedy may establish a dynamic relationship with tragic

[16] On this topic see also, e.g., Mezzabotta (2000); McDonald (1999); Steinmeyer (2009); van Zyl Smit (2010).
[17] See esp. Treu (2009).
[18] This section is largely based on Liapis (2014b) 92–3.
[19] Moddelmog (1993), 3–4 (quotations from 4), building on important insights from Gould (1981), esp. 6, 183, 186–7.
[20] Cf. Moddelmog (1993), 4–5 (quotation from p. 4).

myth, whereby the reader or viewer is invited to pursue the interpretive potentialities of the dialogue between the modern text and its mythic antecedent.[21] This involves a partial 'updating' of tragic myth, a re-contextualisation of the ancient tale for modern concerns and sensibilities, whereby readers/viewers are encouraged partly to detach myth from its perceived 'original' context (in this case, Greek tragedy) and to invest it with qualities associated with subsequent temporal and cultural contexts. At the same time, by grafting its product on the template of ancient (tragic) myth, adaptation invites its consumers to disassociate it from its contemporary time-frame and to imbue it with a temporal depth it might otherwise have lacked. This process initiates an interpretive interplay between modern text or performance and mythic subtext, whereby the modern work is illuminated by ancient myth but also causes us to reinterpret the myth it appropriates.[22]

Questions arising from the contemporisation of ancient tragic myth inform Simon Perris in Chapter 9 ('Violence in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy'), which deals with depictions of verbal and physical violence in modern retellings of Greek tragedies. Perris shows how contemporary adaptations, operating without the constraints of Greek stage conventions, do sometimes embrace physical violence as a nod to its predominance in contemporary visual (especially cinematic) culture. Through a series of case studies – including *Greek* by Steven Berkoff (1980), *Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane (1996), and *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998) and *Ariel* (2002) by Marina Carr – Perris explores the ways in which instances of violence in Greek tragedy, although ostensibly familial (and thus predominantly personal), are overtly politicised in modern adaptations. Thus, Berkoff's play transfers the Oedipus myth to a run-down London suburb in the days of Margaret Thatcher's premiership; Kane's work represents physical brutality in grotesquely extreme forms; and Carr's two plays feature re-enactments of shocking violence that engage with Euripides' *Medea* and Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In these and other cases discussed by Perris, violence and aggression are used as a vehicle for bringing out debates associated with ethnic conflict, social marginalisation, political dissent, gender antagonism, and other issues of contemporary (but also timeless) concern.

Issues of contemporisation are also addressed in Chapter 12 by Anastasia Bakogianni ('Trapped between Fidelity and Adaptation? On

[21] Further on this type of dialogue, see Moddelmog (1993), 16–17.
[22] Cf. Moddelmog (1993), 8: 'if it is true that the myth tells us something about the modern story, it is equally true that the narrative's appropriation of the myth causes us to reinterpret the myth'.

the Reception of Ancient Greek Tragedy in Modern Greece'), which revisits the perennial tension between the 'authenticity' imperative and the quest for updating and relevance in the context of the reception of ancient Greek drama in modern Greece. As Bakogianni shows, modern Greek reception of ancient Greek drama has often been encumbered by a proprietary mentality and a (usually conflicted) sense of epigonalism. As a central part of modern Greece's perceived cultural heritage, Greek tragedy has been a crucial factor in the formation of a poetics and a politics of modern Greek national and cultural identity. Both a privilege and a burden, modern Greece's special relationship with its classical past has generated, in some quarters, an essentialist quest for an ever-elusive 'genuine' meaning to be puzzled out by modern theatrical engagements with Greek drama. By contrast, in other, more recent and non-traditionalist quarters, this relationship has led to approaches which, rather than privileging Greek drama as a locus of crystallised collective remembrance, initiate a dynamic process of cultural and ideological interaction, in which modern concerns are fed into the ancient texts and vice versa, thereby establishing a circuit of reflective debate and self-questioning. Bakogianni's analysis focuses on four representative modern Greek productions of ancient drama from the first two decades of the twenty-first century, namely Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* directed by Vasilis Papavassiliou (2000), Euripides' *Trojan Women* by Sotiris Hatzakis (2015), Sophocles' *Antigone* by Stathis Livathinos (2016), and, at the more experimental end of the spectrum, Nikos Perelis' *Traps and Killings: The Machines of Dolos and Terror* (2000), a collaborative pastiche from five dramas by Euripides. These productions range from the predictably canonical to the provocatively adventurous, and it is the latter (especially Perelis' production) that Bakogianni singles out as paradigms of a creative reappropriation of Greek drama, which can resonate with modern audiences' sensitivities.

Adaptation and/in Performance

When actuated through performance, the various modes of reconfiguration operative during the adapting process become even more complex. In the case of staged adaptations of classical texts, 'the essentially new work that the ... adaptor has brought into being', a work that is already a 'strongly inflected ideological and cultural product', is further filtered through the multiple layers superimposed by the numerous interpretive agents involved in performance (director, actors, stage-set designer,