New West Indian Guide
Vol. 83, no. 3&4(2009), pp. 281-289
URL: http://www.kitlv-journals.nl/index.php/nwig/index
URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-100126
Copyright: content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License
ISSN: 1382-2373

EMILY GREENWOOD

A TALE OF TWO O'S: ODYSSEUS AND OEDIPUS IN THE BLACK ATLANTIC

Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora. BARBARA GOFF & MICHAEL SIMPSON. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xii + 401 pp. (Cloth US$ 150.00)

Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey. ROBERT G. O'MEALLY. New York: DC Moore Gallery, 2007. 116 pp. (Cloth US$ 45.00).

Commenting on cultural imperialism under European colonialism, Frantz Fanon (1990:39) remarked that "The settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey." In Fanon's analysis the settler's sense of history derived from the history of the "mother country," rather than the history of the colony that he or she inhabited. But history did not stop here: the reference to the *Odyssey* reminds us that behind the modern colonial metropolis was a fictional line of descent reaching back to a Greco-Roman cradle, such that the European settler could lay claim to an even more ancient cultural inheritance. The two books examined here make short work of these classical imperial fictions; O'Meally demonstrates how Romare Bearden's collages of the *Odyssey* collaborate with Homer, jazz style, to produce an epic that Black America can recognize as its own. If the voyage of Odysseus is sometimes taken to symbolize the migration of ancient Greek civilization toward the West, Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson interject the troubled figure of Oedipus, who plays Poseidon to the settler's Odyssey, disrupting the voyage and confusing the trajectory (p. 268).

Both studies are timely and speak to a wave of recent research on Black Classicism – an examination of the work to which the classical tradition has been put in Africa and the African diaspora, ranging from the hegemonic appropriation of Classics by colonizers and slave-owners to the use of Classics as an ironic counterdiscourse that writes back to racism and impe-

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access

rialism, or as a source of mythopoiesis in the formation of modern black identity.[1]

The two works reviewed here propose different but complementary models of Black Classicism: Oedipal struggle and Odyssean improvised blues narrative. In *Crossroads in the Black Aegean*, Goff and Simpson examine the dramatization of postcolonial identity as it emerges through adaptations of the Theban plays (*Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*) by the Athenian tragedian Sophocles. Through an intricate discussion of six plays and one epic poem from Africa and the African diaspora, they argue that these works challenge European culture's smooth colonial transmission of itself from classical antiquity to modernity by substituting a model of violent transmission (p. 4) based on the incestuous family ties of Oedipus and Antigone, at once father and daughter and brother and sister. In one of many arresting statements, they claim that, in the works surveyed, "the wretched of the earth have adopted Oedipus and Antigone to make a family and a working identity" (p. 19). Unpacking this counterintuitive claim will give readers a good sense of the scope and ambition of the work.

As his father's killer, mother's lover, and the genitor of his own siblings, Oedipus becomes, in Goff and Simpson's study, a symbol of the complex relationships occasioned by colonialism. The incest and endogamy that haunt this myth serve as "a sign for the forced amalgamation of cultures" under plantation slavery in the Americas (p. 9), while this incestuous endogamy also speaks to the inextricably intimate relationship between colonial and postcolonial societies in Africa and the African diaspora (p. 6). Throughout the study the shorthand term "dramas of African descent" is used to refer to plays that originate in different locations in the African diaspora, but this term does double duty, since all plays use the myths of Oedipus and Antigone to reflect on how the violent incursions of slavery and colonialism interrupt literal lines of "descent" in Africa.

Goff and Simpson are aware that positing Oedipus and Antigone as explanatory figures for postcolonial identity is a provocative move. Both figures might appear to carry the risk of colonial regression, reaffirming a Western order of knowledge and trapping postcolonial productions in unequal dialogue with the classical past. The way in which they address and negate this objection is subtle and compelling and deserves to become an important discussion for all scholars engaged in thinking about the uses of Greco-Roman classical texts in postcolonial literature (pp. 19-77). First, they reject the idea that Greek tragedy, and ancient Greek civilization more generally, is a European possession. Instead, they argue that European imperialism deter-

1. Goff 2005, Hardwick & Gillespie 2007, Rankine 2006, Ronnick 2005, Walters 2007, Wetmore 2002, 2003.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access

ritorialized Greece as well as Africa (p. 49), and that African playwrights and playwrights of African descent recognize this distance from Europe in their postcolonial locations: "in proportion as Africa and ancient Greece are both distant from that modern metropolis, they are close to one another" (p. 31). What is more, Goff and Simpson remind us that, far from the exclusion of Africa and its diaspora from Greco-Roman civilization that was promulgated by colonial ideology, classical Greek drama was part of the inheritance of many of the playwrights whom they study (p. 35). What is more, evoking Wole Soyinka's contention in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, they point out that in several of these plays the playwrights exploit the affinity between African ritual and the ritual of Greek drama, whether Yoruba ritual in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1974), or "Africa-derived traditions of the Pentecostal church" (p. 182) in Lee Breuer's *The Gospel at Colonus* (1993).

The dramatic works discussed in this book are as follows: *The Gods Are Not to Blame* by the Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi (Chapter 2); *The Darker Face of the Earth* by the African American playwright Rita Dove (Chapter 3); *The Gospel at Colonus* by American writer and director Lee Breuer (Chapter 4); *Odale's Choice*, by the Barbadian poet, scholar, and playwright Kamau Brathwaite (Chapter 5); *The Island* by the South African playwrights Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona (Chapter 6); and Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (Chapter 7). Each play is accorded a careful critical analysis that takes into account its performance history and issues of audience and reception as well as the circulation of published play-texts. Although the chapters stand as insightful studies of the respective plays in their own right, the concentration on the adaptation and transposition of the Oedipus myth in the theater of the African diaspora ensures a high degree of cohesion: two plays (Rotimi's and Dove's) are examined as adaptations of Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Breuer's play as an adaptation of *Oedipus at Colonus*, while *Odale's Choice*, *The Island*, and *Tegonni* are analyzed as adaptations of *Antigone*.

This Oedipal schema is complicated by the fact that Goff and Simpson appeal to the concept of "the Black Aegean" as a parallel interpretive framework for their study. In fact, there are two separate theses here that cleave along the lines of title and subtitle. The title, "Crossroads in the Black Aegean," hints at dialogue with Paul Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic (1993), while the subtitle, "Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora," designates a more specific enquiry into the appropriation of Sophocles's plays in dramas of African descent. Both theses converge in the fifth chapter, which features a discussion of an adaptation of Sophocles's *Antigone* by Kamau Brathwaite written and performed in Ghana in 1962 and subsequently re-performed in the Caribbean. This chapter juxtaposes *Odale's Choice* with Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* (1990) and asks

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access

how Brathwaite's conception of the Caribbean as a locus of creolization might help to clarify processes of cultural transmission between Africa and the Caribbean, Africa and Europe, and the Caribbean and Europe. In contrast to the antagonistic model of Oedipal descent that features in the Oedipus and Antigone plays, Walcott's model of Caribbean identity in *Omeros* is seen to involve a reworking of the Oedipus complex in which the son (the narrator of Walcott's poem) adopts a multiplicity of fathers (p. 268). This argument is a welcome addition to scholarship on Walcott, enriching the Bloomian model of the anxiety of influence, recently applied to *Omeros* by Line Henriksen (2006).

Reconciling the complex, multidirectional geometry of the Black Aegean proposed here – itself a supplement to the Black Atlantic – with Goff and Simpson's Oedipal framework requires considerable intellectual effort. As they explain, they envisage the Black Aegean as a further zone within the Black Atlantic (p. 38): "This we postulate as a triangle, projected from within the Black Atlantic and symmetrical with it, but with its third point radiating eastwards so that it links Africa to ancient Greece and Asia Minor as well as to the imperial West" (pp. 38-39). The advantage of hypothesizing the Black Aegean is that it provides a spatial metaphor for mapping "the trade in the representations of ancient Greece, undertaken by the colonizers … and by the formerly colonized" (p. 39). It is crucial to the argument of this work that readers accept not only the idea of the Black Aegean, but also the idea that the Oedipal paradigm is one of the dominant models of exchange within the cultural zone of the Black Aegean.

This is no mean interpretative and argumentative feat, and Goff and Simpson pull it off – for the most part extremely convincingly. However, it is of the nature of a complex and ambitious study like this, which is often densely argued, that the argument occasionally overwhelms with its complexity. There were a few passages that I read several times without ever feeling confident that I had fully grasped the point being made. An example is the complex argument about the vertices of the triangle of the Black Aegean (pp. 261-62). However, in spite of dense formulations like this I found the discussion immensely rewarding and frequently groundbreaking.

In terms of the work's theoretical orientation, Goff and Simpson take their bearings from all over the Black Aegean. They are mindful of African scholarship, Caribbean scholarship, and European scholarship, while observing that these traditions are not exclusive and are often interrelated. In the course of their argument they bring Fanon's Oedipus into dialogue with the Oedipuses of Harold Bloom (1973), and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983), and they recognize Caribbean and African playwrights, poets, novelists, and scholars as an important source of theory. Nor is their Oedipal paradigm one-way, since the plays of African descent "project their own cultural

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access

context into the Greek play," leading to a role reversal in which any hierarchy between "original" and "adaptation" is obviated (p. 66).

By any standards this is a remarkable book that speaks powerfully to several different disciplines: (Anglophone) African literature and drama, African American literature and drama, (Anglophone) Caribbean literature and drama, Classics (both Greek tragedy and classical reception), theater studies, and cultural studies. In effect readers get two complementary and mutually reinforcing theses in one book; both theses represent vital contributions to the study of the Black Atlantic, Black Classicism, and the adaptation of the Oedipus myth in literature and drama of African descent.

If Oedipus is an ominous icon for traffic with the past, the hero of the second book under review would seem to be a much safer prospect. The Odyssey is a well-established motif in the literature of the Caribbean and North America, from Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* and Ralph Ellington's *Invisible Man* to Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*. And yet the figure of Odysseus also comes with its own complications. Not only is he a notorious trickster who was often portrayed negatively in subsequent Greek literature, but it is also hard to make the transition from the Greek culture hero of Homer's epic to postcolonial cultural hero, since Homer's Odysseus seems often to be on the side of the colonizer, not least in his encounter with the Cyclops in Book 9 of the *Odyssey* (see Hall 2008:89-100).

Robert O'Meally's *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey* steps into the middle of this debate. The primary subject of the work are the twenty "Odysseus" collages by the African-American artist Romare Bearden, first displayed at the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in New York in 1977. The occasion for O'Meally's book was a commemorative exhibition of the collages, "Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey," thirty years on, at the DC Moore Gallery in New York (November 13, 2007-January 5, 2008). This exquisitely produced book, which features high-quality illustrations of Bearden's collages, watercolors, and other art works, is at once a coffee-table piece and a serious contribution to both the study of Bearden's work and the field of black classicism. As the first book-length, critical study of Bearden's "Odysseus" collages, it is no exaggeration to say that O'Meally's book is an important landmark in the critical literature on Bearden and the reception of the *Odyssey* in the Americas.

The book steers an even course between the expectations of specialist readers and the needs of general readers. The introductory essay provides important contextual information about Bearden's background, situating him in the artistic and intellectual milieu of the Harlem Renaissance and explaining the influence of Picasso and Matisse on his development as an artist. Here O'Meally also relates Bearden's engagement with Homer's *Odyssey* to Black Classicism and the works of Frank Snowden and Martin Bernal (Bernal

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access

1987, 1991; Snowden 1970, 1983). There follow short essays on each of the 20 "Odysseus" collages and their corresponding watercolors, including three watercolors for which no collages exist. O'Meally explains that, following the success of the exhibition of the collages in 1977, Bearden reproduced them as watercolors (p. 11). Each essay is accompanied by a reproduction of the collage and watercolor in question and draws the reader's attention to points of aesthetic interest, the Homeric context, pertinent African-American contexts, and other interpretative avenues. In his analysis of each individual collage, O'Meally breaks down Bearden's method, explaining the division of the canvases into quadrants, inspired by cubism, and demonstrating the symbolism of the scissored silhouettes as "figures in black." In addition, O'Meally shows how color is part of the collages' aesthetic meaning, with "dissonant combinations" contributing to surface tension and depth of field (p. 32). Reading O'Meally's work in conjunction with Bearden's illustrations is akin to strolling through a virtual exhibition with an enchanting guide.

O'Meally brings his background as an authority on jazz to his interpretation of Bearden's dialogue with Homer, and gives us Bearden collaborating with Homer "like section-mates in a jazz band" (p. 23). Homer's *Odyssey* was undoubtedly a rich source of tropes for African American artists in the Harlem Renaissance, but O'Meally's analysis also throws up plenty of Black tropes that Homeric scholars might profitably take back to their study of the *Odyssey*. For instance, I found O'Meally's statement about Bearden's conception of Homer as "a now-sad and now-funny blues narrative: a tale of loss and renewal wherein the improvising hero struggles to prevail against life's rush of changes" (p. 56) a valuable and thought-provoking contribution to the play of genres and moods in Homer's *Odyssey*. Nor in my view has anyone diagnosed the condition of the women abandoned by Odysseus better: "in Bearden's hands, she [Nausicaa], like Circe, is also one of the epic's women left behind with the blues" (p. 86). Then there are the insightful explanations of Poseidon's role in the poem, as envisioned by Bearden, in terms of the phenomenon of "antagonistic cooperation" in jazz: "the Sea-God's insatiable anger and power press Odysseus to new levels of improvisation such that, paradoxically, the god who gives him the deepest blues is the very one without whom Odysseus' greatest acts of heroic valor could never have occurred" (p. 14).

In Walcott's *Omeros*, when the narrator quips to Omeros that "Master, I was the freshest of all your readers" (1990:283), one feels like adding "after Bearden" – a point that Walcott would probably concede, given his admission that Bearden's *Odyssey* collages may have been one of the influences behind *Omeros* (1997:229). Oddly, Walcott does not feature in O'Meally's discussion, in spite of the fact that Walcott has spoken passionately about the Odysseus collages. In fact, "the Caribbean dimension" of Bearden's poetry, to borrow the phrase from Sally Price and Richard Price, is not at all clear in O'Meally's discussion (Price & Price 2006). Granted, the extent to which

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access

the Caribbean is a significant context for the "Odysseus" collages is an open question. O'Meally suggests that in most of the collages the landscapes resemble images of Africa. It is only in his discussion of the last collage (in terms of narrative chronology), "Odysseus and Penelope Reunited," that O'Meally appeals to the Caribbean as a cultural crossroads that helps to make sense of the "hodge-podge" of styles in Bearden's depiction of Odysseus and Penelope enthroned in one panel, alongside the port, city walls, and palace of Ithaca:

> Nor should we forget that when Bearden made these collages he frequently flew to his home in St. Martin; indeed, the Ithaca of these collages – with its tropical trees and airy mix of European, African, and Amerindian influences, ancient and modern – has the air of a contemporary Caribbean port (p. 104).

Arguably the Caribbean is a more pervasive presence in the Odysseus collages, which may even be construed as being set in the Caribbean (see Price & Price 2006:24). In this context it is instructive to compare the Prices' discussion of the collage "The Sea Nymph" (1977) with O'Meally's. O'Meally pursues the idea that Bearden's "Odysseus" collages are a "sort of parable of black America (as well as a universal statement)," and suggests that this particular collage, which treats Odysseus's rescue from the ocean floor by the sea nymph Ino (based on *Odyssey* Book 5 *ll*. 333-53), "may ask us to consider where the black communities of the United States would be without the selfless rescuers like Ino – mothers, grandmothers, … all those who make it their business to dive in after the ones who are sinking down" (pp. 82-84). Conversely, citing Walcott, the Prices use this collage to exemplify the influence of the Caribbean on Bearden's art, particularly the colors of the Caribbean archipelago (Price & Price 2006:96-97). Both can be right, providing we allow an enlargement of the African American or black American experience to include African and black experience in the Caribbean, as part of the broader geographical region of the Americas.

In fact, building on O'Meally's excellent study, future studies would gain from using Caribbean tropes to further illuminate Bearden's approach to the *Odyssey*. For example, in fifteen of the twenty collages the sea, depicted in various shades of blue, is a powerful narrative thread. Even in those collages where the sea is not obviously present, the blue of the sky acts as a memory cue reminding the viewer of the ever-present sea – "the oncoming cobalt sea" in the words of the Jamaican poet John Figueroa (1976:81). It would be extremely fruitful to apply Kamau Brathwaite's dictum, referring to the cultural unity of a geographically scattered and culturally diverse Caribbean, that "the unity is submarine" to Bearden's "Odysseus" collages (Brathwaite 1975:1; see Dash 2001 and Jones 1995).

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access

For Goff and Simpson's study the way out of the Oedipal nightmare of postcolonial history is to adopt lots of different fathers, rather than fighting them. This is not so different from the methodology of Bearden's collages, in which Oedipus and Odysseus, Africa, Europe, and the Americas are different layers in the same story.

References

BERNAL, MARTIN, 1987. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Vol. I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press.

—, 1991. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Vol. 2: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*. London: Free Association.

BLOOM, HAROLD, 1973. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BRATHWAITE, KAMAU, 1967. *Odale's Choice*. London: Evans Brothers.

—, 1975. Caribbean Man in Space and Time. *Savacou* 11/12:1-11.

BREUER, LEE, 1993. *The Gospel at Colonus*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

DASH, J. MICHAEL, 2001. *Libre sous la mer*: Submarine Identities in the Work of Kamau Brathwaite and Édouard Glissant. *In* T.J. Reiss (ed.), *For the Geography of a Soul: Emerging Perspectives on Kamau Brathwaite*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, pp. 191-200.

DELEUZE, GILLES & FÉLIX GUATTARI, 1983. *Anti-Oedipus*: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

DOVE, RITA, 1999. *The Darker Face of the Earth*. London: Oberon Books.

FANON, FRANTZ, 1990. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin. [Orig. 1961.]

FIGUEROA, JOHN, 1976. *Ignoring Hurts: Poems*. Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press.

FUGARD, ATHOL, JOHN KANI & WINSTON NTSHONA, 1986. *Statements: "Siswe Bansi is Dead," "The Island," "Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act."* New York: Theatre Communications Group.

GILROY, PAUL, 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.

GOFF, BARBARA (ed.), 2005. *Classics & Colonialism*. London: Duckworth.

HALL, EDITH, 2008. *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's* Odyssey. London: I.B. Tauris.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access

HARDWICK, LORNA & CAROL GILLESPIE (eds.), 2007. *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

HENRIKSEN, LINE, 2006. *Ambition and Anxiety: Ezra Pound's* Cantos *and Derek Walcott's* Omeros *as Twentieth-Century Epics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

JONES, BRIDGET, 1995. "The Unity is Submarine": Aspects of a Pan-Caribbean Consciousness in the Work of Kamau Brathwaite. *In* Stuart Brown (ed.), *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*. Bridgend, U.K.: Poetry Wales Press, pp. 86-100.

OSOFISAN, FEMI, 1999. *Recent Outings: Two Plays, Comprising "Tegonni, an African Antigone," and "Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*." Lagos, Nigeria: Opon Ifa Readers.

PRICE, SALLY & RICHARD PRICE, 2006. *Romare Bearden: The Caribbean Dimension*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

RANKINE, PATRICE D., 2006. *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

RONNICK, MICHELE V. (ed.), 2005. *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

ROTIMI, OLA, 1974. *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SNOWDEN, FRANK, 1970. *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

—, 1983. *Before Colour Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

SOYINKA, WOLE, 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

WALCOTT, DEREK, 1990. *Omeros*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

—, 1997. Reflections on *Omeros*. *In* G. Davis (ed.), *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives*. Special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 96:229-46.

WALTERS, TRACEY, 2007. *African American Literature and the Classical Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

WETMORE, KEVIN, 2002. *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky*. Jefferson NC: McFarland.

—, 2003. *Black Dionysus*. Jefferson NC: McFarland.

EMILY GREENWOOD
Department of Classics
Yale University
New Haven CT 06520-8266, U.S.A.
<emily.greenwood@yale.edu>

Downloaded from Brill.com04/06/2021 01:45:57AM
via free access