Postcolonial *Sparagmos*: Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Wole Soyinka' s *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*

Abstract:

This article argues that the Greek idea of sparagmos *(tearing apart) offers an illuminating metaphor to describe creative artists' engagement with antiquity. The violence and fertility innate within* sparagmos *are particularly appropriate to postcolonial receptions of classical literature, as will be demonstrated by examining Toni Morrison's novel,* Sula*, and Wole Soyinka's play,* The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite, *both published in 1973. While the latter proclaims its debt to antiquity in the title, the former plays a more elusive game by engaging with a number of ancient Greek texts (none explicitly), before going on to defy our classically-infused expectations.* Sula*'s primary classical antecedent is Sophocles'* Ajax*, but that tragedy is ripped apart and its dismembered remains scattered throughout the novel before being 're-membered' in a form of* compositio membrorum *(gathering together of limbs). Soyinka's engagement with Greek tragedy is more direct, and the* sparagmos *is seen not so much in his approach to classical literature as in the action of the play, as well as in his critique of Nigeria's contemporary political scene. Together, these two case-studies demonstrate the potential inherent in the trope of* sparagmos *as a metaphor for classical reception, particular in the sphere of postcolonial literature.*

The metaphors used to describe creative artists' engagement with antiquity are diverse and multiple, from Martindale's 'chain of receptions', to Hall and Macintosh's

'subterranean' receptions, to Billings' 'erotics of reception' (Martindale 1993; Hall and Macintosh 2005; Billings 2010).[1] Another deserves a place within the lexicon of classical reception theory: that of *sparagmos*. The Greek idea of mythical *sparagmos* is particularly pertinent to postcolonial receptions of classical literature, with all the violence, fertility, and dislocation that *sparagmos* entails, but also has much to offer classical reception theory as a whole. This article will argue the case for the adoption of *sparagmos* as another metaphor for classical reception before demonstrating its aptness and potential by two case-studies: Toni Morrison's 1973 novel, *Sula*, and Wole Soyinka's play, *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite,* which was first performed that same year.[2]

Adopting *sparagmos* as a metaphor for classical reception points to something more than the kind of 'dispersal' model of classical reception with which we are familiar, whereby we catch glimpses of classical literature in modern works but do not necessarily find them sustained throughout. *Sparagmos* suggests a more conscious and fundamental engagement on the part of the creative artist: it connotes both a very deliberate kind of activity - one which is fundamentally violent – and also a fertility that is born of that ripping-apart action. The latter is in keeping with the traditional linking of *sparagmos* with fertility, as we see in the Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis, or folklore surrounding 'vegetation deities', or James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.[3] While two of the most famous examples of *sparagmos* in classical literature - that of Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* and Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (11.1-66) - do not focus on the fertility

[1] Hall 2008: 5-6 offers an alternative list, from Derek Walcott's fertilizing excrement of 'Greek manure', to Wilamowitz's necromancy and Oliver Taplin's 'Greek fire'.
[2] The coincidence of date is striking; only one year earlier, Morrison had edited a volume, *Contemporary African Literature*, in which Soyinka was included. As Roynon 2013: 167 has argued, Soyinka and Morrison's views on the affinities between ancient Greek and African cultures are closely aligned.
[3] The fourth volume of the third edition of *The Golden Bough*, entitled 'The Dying God' and first published in 1911, is particularly relevant here.

that it can bring, it is worth noting that Soyinka's *Bacchae* does. Staged at London's National Theatre in 1973, the subtitle of Soyinka's play is 'A Communion Rite', and the radical innovation that he makes (in addition to an extra chorus of slaves) is that the blood streaming from Pentheus' head turns out to be wine, which Agave, Teiresias, Cadmus and all the Thebans partake of, in an evocation of Catholic Communion. Four years previously, Pier Paolo Pasolini had made a similar connection in his film, *Medea*, starring Maria Callas: for he has a ritual dismemberment in which the victim is willingly tied to a cross and then ripped apart and his flesh scattered on the fields and, it is hinted, eaten in a form of cannibalistic *omophagia*. In the context of a discussion of *sparagmos* as literary metaphor, it is similarly worth recalling Oswald de Andrade's renowned *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928) which posited cannibalism as a metaphor for Brazil's cultural escape from colonial domination: in 'eating' works from abroad, Brazil's digestion of these creates its own culture.

The idea of *sparagmos* as a mode of engagement has already been posited by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her recent book, *Dionysus Resurrected* (Fischer-Lichte 2014).[4] She argues that modern theatre practitioners enact a kind of dismemberment of Euripides' text when they adapt it for the stage; this is then followed by an *omophagia* as they incorporate the remaining parts of the text into their performance.[5] The ancient ritual, then, is alive and well in contemporary responses to the *Bacchae*: in their mode of

[4] Earlier, Fischer-Lichte 2004 had also discussed the prominent role of dismemberment in the reception of Greek theatre.

[5] Fischer-Lichte 2014: 206-224, in particular, discusses Peter Steadman's 1996 *Bacchae*, which was intended to be devised in collaboration with the National Beijing Opera. However, Steadman forcefully over-rode all Chinese traditions and insisted only on those which he saw as belonging to ancient Greece, and thus the production enacted a kind of *sparagmos* on Chinese culture: 'By bestowing universality on Greek tragedy and, at the same time, appropriating it as a common heritage of Western cultures – thus including North America – Steadman succeeded in conquering the embodiment of Chinese culture. As such, it was dismembered' (215). Clearly, in such an instance, the *sparagmos* is destructive rather than fertile, as a result of the aggressive imposition of one culture on top of another; far from being collaborative, such action reeks of culture imperialism, as Fischer-Lichte discusses.

engagement, as well as in the plots of the productions themselves.[6] Earlier than this, Glenn Most had likewise turned to the motif of *sparagmos*, but in a rather different way. He argued that the prominence of dismemberment in the work of Seneca and Neronian literature more widely, particularly in their reception of ancient Greek literature, may be a reaction to the feelings of fragmentation and smallness that the vastness of the Roman Empire was engendering in its people at the time (Most 1992). As he suggests, the use in antiquity of vocabulary of the body to discuss literary texts, most famously seen in Horace's *Satires* 1.4.62 ('*disiecti membra poetae*'), is an ancient deployment of *sparagmos* as a literary metaphor (Most 1992: 407). Indeed, the Neronian period saw 'the sadistic enactment of dismemberment upon fictional bodies and the bodies of fictions' (Most 1992: 409). Froma Zeitlin, meanwhile, approached *sparagmos* from a different angle, focusing on gender, and on reception only in as much as all Classics is 'reception' and Euripides was responding to the myths around him. Zeitlin argues that the Bacchants' dismemberment of Pentheus in Euripides' play (and the power of Maenadic women in the ancient Greek imagination more widely), often signifies a female 'undoing' of the male body; having determinedly opposed itself to the feminine, the masculine finds itself torn apart in a ritual dismemberment (Zeitlin 1990: 75).

Turning to modernity, it is impossible not to make a mental connection between mythical *sparagmos* and the all-too-historical racial terrorism of lynching which has devastated so many African-American lives.[7] This very association has been made by Theophus H. Smith in terms of scapegoating rituals and the psychology of lynching, and by Patrice Rankine to explore how ancient myths can resonate in modern situations (Smith 1994: 96-100; Rankine 2006). The latter has gone on to argue that recognition of

[6] See especially Fischer-Lichte 2014: 83 for her discussion of dismemberment both as an approach to literature and a motif within it, in Teat(r)o Oficina's *Bacantes*, which was staged in São Paulo, Brazil in 1996.

[7] On lynching as racial terrorism, see the article of that title in the Opinion Pages of the *New York Times* (11 February 2015): A26.

the way black writers have engaged with Classics enables us to perform 'a ritual dismemberment of the status quo in reading classical and African American literature' (Rankine 2006: 179). Yet the same metaphor has also been used more ominously by Harold Bloom in his discussion of *Othello*, in which his reference to Othello's tragic fall from grace as a *sparagmos* appears to be uncomfortably race-specific (Bloom 1998: 438).

I propose a third and different way of thinking about *sparagmos* in a postcolonial context. This reading is constructive and forward-looking, but without suppressing traces of the contested history of the term and its potential evocations of racist violence. This approach is more akin to that advanced by Rankine in the context of meta-scholarship: that the dismemberment of the status quo can be highly beneficial. My focus here, however, is on that work having been done not by scholars but by creative artists. This deployment of the trope of *sparagmos* enables the racist accretions that have attached to dismemberment to be stripped away, and a new rite of anti-racist *sparagmos* to be seen. Indeed, by retaining the Greek word *sparagmos*, rather than adopting the English word 'dismemberment', I intend to prioritise the mythic, ancient Greek form of the rite, rather than the devastating modern connotations of dismemberment, which are now inextricably entwined with lynching.

Nevertheless, there is another important, political way in which *sparagmos* resonates with the era in which both Morrison and Soyinka were writing. The March on Washington which took place on 28th August 1963 may be most famous for Martin Luther King, Jr's 'I Have a Dream' speech, but the young activist John Lewis also spoke that day, and although A. Philip Randolph and King persuaded him to tone down his speech, his original text had been leaked the night before. It included the proclamation, 'We shall fragment the South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of

democracy';[8] ideas of *sparagmos* and *compositio membrorum*, then, held sway in the Civil Rights Movement as a way to combat racism and social injustice.

Similar notions also underlay the Black Arts Movement, which was so influential in the 1960s and '70s. There was no shying away from the idea that in order to create a 'black aesthetic', the old aesthetic must be dismantled; as Larry Neal phrased it,

> The Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure. We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed. (Neal 1968: 29)

Adopting a quite different approach, Ralph Ellison (whose closing line of *Invisible Man* (1952) and the universality it posits, encapsulates all that infuriated African-American critics at the time),[9] nevertheless also adopts the metaphor of *sparagmos*. As Patrice Rankine has discussed, when Ellison writes of the jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker in his essay 'On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz' (1962), he sees the musician as undergoing a ritual dismemberment at the hands of his primarily white audience who are ravenous to consume his work, but also at his own hands through his self-destructive tendencies and drug use ('While he slowly died (like a man dismembering himself with a dull razor on a spotlighted stage) from the ceaseless conflict from which issued both his art and his destruction' – Ellison 1995: 227) (Rankine 2006: 169-172). Kimberly Benston too, writing of the great African-American jazz musician, John Coltrane, observes that we witness in his work 'the mystery of the Orphic dismemberment and restitution: the destructive-creative threat to and recovery of Expression itself' (Benston 1977: 771).

[8] Lewis 1998: 219-221 reprints the original draft speech.
[9] Ellison 2002: 439: 'Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?'

Orpheus, rather than Dionysus, lends himself more directly to discussion of a musician, with the same fundamental ideas of *sparagmos* and *compositio membrorum* being evoked.

Sparagmos, then, clearly resonated in the 1970s. Within the context of this article and the two writers under discussion, we see two intertwined but different approaches: applied to Morrison's writing, the violence of the metaphor of *sparagmos* is purely literary; whereas for Soyinka, reflecting not on the United States with which the Black Power and Black Arts Movements were concerned, but with his homeland of Nigeria, *sparagmos* is a fitting metaphor to describe the kind of political change he sees as necessary - which is indeed akin to that advocated by Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement. More broadly, postcolonial responses to the canonical literature of Europe often employ a kind of necessary violence, which is neither reactionary, unthinking, nor wholly destructive, but which breaks down the colonial accretions that this literature acquired as imperialists used it as part of their regime of cultural and political domination.[10] As Frantz Fanon said, 'decolonization is always a violent phenomenon' (Fanon 2001: 27). The approach of Morrison, Soyinka, and other postcolonial writers who respond to classical antiquity may not be as wholehearted or physical as that advocated by Fanon in the middle of the twentieth century, but it is nonetheless related to the stance which he argued was both required and justified.[11]

We may also recall the ways in which writers in antiquity deployed *sparagmos* as a literary trope. Plato, for example, used the word metaphorically of the wild attacks of young philosophers on old philosophical arguments (*Republic* 539b). Notwithstanding his perspective on such an approach, the genealogy of *sparagmos* as a metaphor for the way in which a modern generation may question an older one is very long. Meanwhile, it

[10] On the United States as a postcolonial nation, see Gilroy 2004: 31-64; Goff and Simpson 2015: 30-33; King 2000; McConnell 2015: 475-476; and Ray and Schwarz 1995.
[11] Interestingly, in Soyinka's *Bacchae*, the chorus of slaves express horror at the violence that has been used to win their freedom – see Soyinka 1973: 300 and Wetmore 2002: 94.

is also important to remember that in both Euripides' *Bacchae* and Seneca's *Phaedra*, *sparagmos* is followed by the *compositio membrorum*. The literary metaphor I am proposing here includes a *compositio membrorum* that aims not to *re*-create that which has been torn apart, but to offer a new version of it for a new era. Thus the metaphor encompasses not only the fertility of *sparagmos* identified by Frazer, but also the creation indicated by the *compositio membrorum*, making the metaphor a primarily creative, rather than destructive, one. It is thereby in keeping with Véronique Gély's recent work on a new paradigm for classical reception and comparative literature based on '*partage*' in its dual sense of both sharing and dividing (Gély 2012).

The metaphor is also especially apt for discussion of postcolonial literature, particularly that by writers of the African diaspora, because it keeps in the forefront of the mind the important theoretical work done by Hortense Spillers and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, among others, on the effects of slavery, colonialism, and diaspora as dismemberment, (Spillers 1987; Ngũgĩ 2009).[12] What is more, *sparagmos* and the *compositio membrorum* not only resonate with Ngũgĩ's theory of 're-membering', but also with Toni Morrison's own, earlier articulation of the very same concept. In her 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, she begins to give explicit form to this notion of 're-membering', as she writes a story dedicated to the 'sixty million and more', the 'disremembered and unaccounted for' (Morrison 1987: epigraph; 274): the history of slavery having so often been inscribed by white men, the novel's protagonist, Sethe, must author her own history from the 'rememory' (e.g. Morrison 1987: 36) that she has. The very processes of slavery worked to 'dismember', to rip apart, in fact to enact a kind of *sparagmos* on slaves,

[12] For example, Ngũgĩ 2009: 5: 'Europe's contact with Africa in particular since the beginnings of capitalist modernity and bourgeois ascendancy […] is characterized by dismemberment' and Spillers 1987: 67: 'That [New World] order, with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile'.

tearing them from their families, their homelands, and their senses of self.[13] 'Re-membering' begins to undo these processes and to heal some of the wounds of slavery. In a not dissimilar way - and following a necessary dismemberment of classical literature which requires none of our sympathy (unlike the metaphorical dismemberments of slavery) - Toni Morrison goes on to 're-member' literature, to put it back together, into another form:[14] one that can include and testify to the experiences of people of African as well as European descent. And as it happens, bring the two together again in a way that – as we know from the work of Martin Bernal *et al*. - they were intermingled in antiquity too (Bernal 1987; Diop 1989; James 1954).

When Toni Morrison rips apart the ancient literature and scatters it throughout her work, she gives it a renewed creative potential, which echoes the words of Sixo in *Beloved* when he explains of his lover:

> She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. (Morrison 1987: 272)

Likewise, Morrison's 're-membering' fulfills the same kind of uniting role for her readers as Patsy's love does for Sixo; in his 1992 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 'The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory', Derek Walcott too would articulate a similar notion.[15]

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[13] As well as Spillers and Ngũgĩ mentioned above, see Henderson 1991: 71, Wyatt 1993, Lawrence 1997, and Terry 2013: 133; 143; 172-173 for consideration of this impact of the Middle Passage and slavery in the context of *Beloved*. Also see especially Morrison 1997: 6 on finding exactly the right word on which to end *Beloved* in order to enable 'the process of re-membering the body and its parts, re-membering the family, the neighborhood, and our national history'.

[14] Etymologically the two words are not connected, with 'remember' being derived from the Latin *(re)meminare* (having acquired the 'b' via medieval French), while 're-member' derives from the Latin *membrum* (limb). According to the OED, the first to make this pun was Herbert Spencer in *Principles of Psychology* (1855), I.iii.51: 'Mind… is a thing we can form no notion of without re-*membering*, re-*collecting* some of our mental acts'.

[15] Walcott (1998), 69: 'Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is

As I will show, the Sophoclean Ajax is scattered throughout Morrison's novel: despite one of her characters being named Ajax, he is not the primary Sophoclean descendant. Indeed, the ancient Ajax remains nowhere 'whole' within the novel: instead he has been ripped apart and his bloodied self is effectively scattered throughout the story.[16] In Soyinka, on the other hand, the dismemberment is a feature of the plot, rather than of his approach to it; yet that *sparagmos* nevertheless signifies Soyinka's political commentary on contemporary Nigeria, and on decolonization more widely.

Toni Morrison, Classics, and *Sula*:

Just before turning to the novel *Sula* itself, a little bit of background on Toni Morrison and her engagement with classical antiquity may be useful. Morrison 'minored' in Classics when she was at Howard University, where Frank Snowden (of *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970) and *Before Color Prejudice* (1983) fame) was teaching. Tessa Roynon has shown that Morrison's novels are extensively imbued with her classical knowledge, notwithstanding the writer's own uneasiness with such parallels being read as a deliberate action on her part.[17] Most famously, *Beloved*, is inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery in 1856 with her family, but upon being recaptured shortly afterwards, killed her own daughter in order to prevent her being taken back into slavery. Garner came to be known as 'the modern Medea'.[18] Other novels by Morrison also intricately engage with classical antiquity: *Song of Solomon* (1977), for example, is heavily involved

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the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars'.

[16] Sophocles' *Ajax* itself is also concerned with the disintegration of the hero: it both depicts a *sparagmos* of the hero coming undone, and enacts a dismemberment and 're-membering' of the figure of Ajax as portrayed in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

[17] Roynon 2013: vii quotes Morrison saying, '"Nothing is deliberate… but everything I have read seeps in. It all seeps in."'

[18] See Thomas Satterwhite Noble's 1867 painting, *Margaret Garner, or The Modern Medea*.

with 'the Ulysses theme', as Patrice Rankine has argued (Rankine 2006: 103-118).[19] And most recently, her 2012 novel, *Home* is intricately concerned with both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Sula's classical engagement, meanwhile, is with a number of ancient texts, from Homer, to Sophocles, to Lucan. Set in the first half of the twentieth century, in a small impoverished neighbourhood called Medallion, it tells of the lives of the place's inhabitants, most particularly two young girls, Nel and Sula. Yet it is not with these two that the novel begins. Rather, it is with Shadrack,[20] a veteran of the First World War, who returns to Medallion. Shadrack is suffering from a kind of combat trauma, or, as Morrison describes it, he is 'Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917' (Morrison 1973: 7). The events he has witnessed at war are described with an Iliadic or even Lucanian graphicness:

> He turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back. (Morrison 1973: 8)

[19] See Roynon 2013: 2-3 for a representative list of Morrison's engagement with antiquity throughout her works, and *passim* for more in-depth discussion of each of these.

[20] Shadrack's name evokes his Biblical predecessor from the Old Testament's book of Daniel (chapters 1-3), who was saved by divine intervention from the furnace into which Nebuchadnezzar condemned him. His name thus foreshadows not only his own survival when so many others die on the final National Suicide Day, but also the motif of death by fire which takes form in the way that both Hannah and Plum die, and is mirrored by the death by water of Chicken Little in the novel. In addition, as I will discuss later (pp.16-17), the Biblical Shadrach was importantly referenced in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail', which occupies such a prominent place in the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

Cutting immediately to Shadrack injured in hospital, the horror of what he has seen has led him to distrust his own eyes, and he begins to hallucinate. The neatly apportioned meal he is given (with the white rice, the red stewed tomatoes, and the brown meat all separated into separate triangles on his tin plate) go some way to helping him dissociate the white, red, and brown mess from the trauma of human flesh he has just seen on the battlefield. Likewise, when he hallucinates that his hands are growing 'like Jack's beanstalk' (Morrison 1973: 9),[21] he is relieved when the nurses restrain him by placing him in a straitjacket. Thus Shadrack develops his coping mechanism: if the chaos can be contained, it can be survived.

So begins his institution of 'National Suicide Day'. Like the Sophoclean Ajax, Shadrack's hallucinations lead him to desperation. But for Shadrack, the solution is not suicide itself; rather the containment of suicide is his route to survival:

> Shadrack began a struggle that was to last for twelve days, a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it. He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day.[22] (Morrison 1973: 14)

[21] Willis 1993: 321 suggests that 'Shadrack's imagined physical deformity is a figure for the equally monstrous psychological and social transformations that capitalism in all its modes (slavery, the military, and wage labor) has inflicted on the minds and bodies of black people'. It is also worth noting the careful aptness of this allusion to the fairy tale of Jack and the Beanstalk, not only in its violence, but in the fact that this moment follows directly from that in which Shadrack's food has closely resembled the mess of corpses on the battlefield. The fairy tale, of course, concerns a omophagic giant with his famous rhyme of 'Fee-fi-fo-fum, / I smell the blood of an Englishman, Be he alive, or be he dead / I'll have his bones to grind my bread' (Jacobs 1890: 63)

[22] This mode of ritual has strong resonances with the Roman festival of Saturnalia, which James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, showed to be a form of festival reproduced throughout a number of

We could be forgiven for thinking that here is our Ajax figure, rewritten for the twentieth century, for pre-Civil-Rights-era America. A man psychologically traumatised by the horrors of war, suffering the kind of hallucinations we now know to associate with post-traumatic stress disorder, and which has been intriguing theatre practitioners in the twenty-first century.[23] Morrison's Ajax is a man who turns to suicide (in a sense) as a way to deal with what he has experienced.

But why, you might ask, should Shadrack be an Ajax? Why not, for example, a Septimus Smith from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, a novel on which Morrison wrote her Master's thesis at Cornell in 1955, and which features the shell-shocked Smith driven to suicide by his mental anguish. The answer must be that Shadrack is inspired by both; but the Sophoclean antecedent is particularly important to Morrison, and in case we have missed it, halfway through the novel she introduces a new character. His name? Ajax.

Much exemplary work has been done on the use of classical names for slaves, from Orlando Patterson's groundbreaking 1982 work, *Slavery and Social Death*, to Margaret Williamson's forthcoming book, *Creole Classics*, on Classics in the nineteenth-century Caribbean. We see it in a poem like Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, where the names Achille, Hector, and Philoctete, are not as incongruous in a modern Caribbean context as a Classicist might suppose. We see it, damningly, in Saartjie Baartman, brought over to Europe at the start of the nineteenth century and displayed as an exhibit at 'freak shows' as 'the Hottentot Venus'.[24]

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cultures itself – see Segal 1968: 8. As Macrobius relates in his *Saturnalia*, on this day, the roles of slaves and masters were inverted, and by such a temporary inversion, the relative status of each to the other was reinforced.

[23] For example, Bryan Doerries' Theater of War, and Peter Meineck's Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives in the United States, and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* in the UK.

[24] For a contemporary account of Baartman's life, see Crais and Scully 2009.

So Ajax's name in Morrison's novel is not a striking anomaly, but it is surely no accident either. If we have missed Shadrack's resonances with the Sophoclean Ajax up until now, Morrison makes sure we are reminded of them as her Ajax comes on the scene. Her Ajax is strong and single-minded, without a doubt, but perhaps his greatest feature of interest is that he is not Ajax at all! This is not only because Shadrack and National Suicide Day may be the closest allusions to Sophocles' tragedy, nor because, as I will discuss in a moment, Sula herself resonates with the Sophoclean Ajax. It is also because, after Ajax has left her, Sula finds his driving licence and discovers that Ajax was never his name at all:

> But what was this? Albert Jacks? His name was Albert Jacks? A. Jacks. She had thought it was Ajax. All those years. […]
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> Sula stood with a worn slip of paper in her fingers and said aloud to no one, 'I didn't even know his name. And if I didn't know his name, then there is nothing I did know and I have known nothing ever at all since the one thing I wanted was to know his name so how could he help but leave me since he was making love to a woman who didn't even know his name. (Morrison 1973: 135-136)

The revelation that Ajax is not Ajax at all is surely another part of Morrison's very serious game: a warning not to assume that the traditions of the 'Western canon' hold the key, or that they can take precedence over the modern story she is crafting. As Rankine explains, 'Morrison's framing of the question of classicism results in the privileging of neither [the Western canon nor African and African American folklore]' (Rankine 2006: 104). If her 1992 non-fiction work, *Playing in the Dark*, demonstrated the ways in which white American fiction has been moulded by its (sometimes unconscious) response to 'a dark,

abiding, signing Africanist presence' (Morrison 1992: 5), then the beguiling presence of her figure named Ajax here demonstrates her refusal to be naively led into its opposite.

There are still further classical resonances in the novel, particularly related to *Sula*'s 'reception' of *Ajax*. In the novel, Sula herself serves as a type of scapegoat for the community (Royster 1978):

> Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (Morrison 1973: 117-118)

Roynon has discussed how the community's ostracizing and blaming of Sula is akin to the festival of Thargelia, as described by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet,[25] although the people of Medallion are adamant that they will not actually drive Sula out (Morrison 1973: 118). She also illuminatingly examines the Dionysiac in Morrison's novels, but never discusses the *sparagmos*, except to allude to a violence inherent in some Bacchic rites.[26] After the scapegoating comes the *sparagmos* in Dionysiac ritual; not so in the kind of scapegoating which we arguably see in Sophocles' *Ajax* (Segal 1999: 140). In Sophocles' tragedy, the community of Greeks is brought together to some extent by the death of their disgraced hero, as we see in the burial awarded to him at the behest of his former rival, Odysseus (*Ajax* 1318-1401). However, in Morrison's novel, Sula is only an effective scapegoat while she is alive: after her death, the annual ritual of National Suicide Day, which has

[25] Roynon 2013: 114 citing Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (1972), 128.
[26] Roynon 2013: 68-70; 116-117; 156-161 explores the Dionysiac in several of Morrison's novels, including *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997) and *Love* (2003), demonstrating how central this trope is to Morrison's work.

taken place harmlessly for twenty-one years, suddenly becomes deadly.[27] Vividly evoking the wildness and destruction of the Bacchic rituals (*Bacchae* 734-754), the ceremonial procession advances disastrously towards the tunnel on which the black community had long been promised work, only to find it is always given exclusively to their white counterparts.

> Like antelopes they leaped over the little gate – a wire barricade that was never intended to bar anything but dogs, rabbits and stray children – and led by the tough, the enraged and the young they picked up the lengths of timber and thin steel ribs and smashed the bricks […]
>
> Old and young, women and children, lame and hearty, they killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build.
>
> They didn't mean to go in, to actually go down into the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, all of it, to wipe from the face of the earth the work of the thin-armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife-faced men who waved the leaf-dead promise, they went too deep, too far…
>
> A lot of them died there. (Morrison 1973: 161-162)

'The bull-necked Greeks' are surely no coincidence, nor is the communing with nature evoked by the description of the revelers 'like antelopes',[28] or the 'ribs' of steel. Just as Morrison's introduction of the figure of Ajax draws our attention to her Sophoclean

[27] In Soyinka's play, too, a scapegoating ritual will likewise be of importance, both at the start and the end of the drama. Early on, Teiresias upbraids the chorus of slaves who have been flogging him as part of their agricultural fertility ritual: 'Fools! Blind, stupid, bloody brutes! Can you see how you've covered me in weals? Can't you bastards ever tell the difference between ritual and reality' (Soyinka 1973: 241)

[28] As well as the identification with the natural world that this simile evokes, the mention of antelopes reinforces the underlying Dionysiac nature of ritual, recalling the fawnskin (νεβρίς) which is an important part of Bacchic costuming.

predecessor if we have not yet glimpsed it, here the Bacchic resonances of National Suicide Day are unmistakably brought to the fore. Furthermore, this episode draws the reader's attention back to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s poignant evocation of the Biblical Shadrach in his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' (1963), who is hailed as a model of admirable and necessary civil disobedience: [29] necessary under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, necessary during the American Civil Rights Movement, necessary in Medallion where the jobs on the tunnel-construction are only given to white workers.

Morrison's Ajax also abandons his lover Sula in a way that recalls the Sophoclean Ajax's rather different abandonment of Tecmessa. And in a final echo of Sophocles' tragedy, Morrison kills off her eponymous protagonist two-thirds of the way through the book. This could leave us with the very same problem that is often raised of *Ajax*: how to keep the momentum going once the central figure is dead? In Sophocles, the reason for this structure has been contested: the scholia found it flawed, and modern scholars since Wilamowitz have likewise been troubled by it.[30] In *Sula*, Morrison has asserted that,

> I wanted Sula to be missed by the reader. That's why she dies early. There's a lot of book after she dies, you know. I wanted them to miss her presence in that book as that town missed her presence. (Morrison & Stepto 1977: 478)

Finally, on the classical allusions, Roynon has persuasively discussed the way that Sula's fantasies about Ajax echo the Pygmalion and Galatea story of Ovid's *Metamophoses*, with the added element of a foray into the long-standing debate, later made popular by Bernal,

[29] King 1963: 'There is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience'.
[30] See Hubbard 2003 for recent discussion of this, and *n*.1 of the same for older bibliography.

regarding the African roots and influences on ancient Greek culture (Roynon 2013: 165-67). As a postscript to each of these, it should also be noted that Morrison includes easy allusions to classical epic in Sula's ten-year absence from her homeland;[31] and in her query to her grandmother on her return, her '"Don't you say hello to nobody when you ain't seen them for ten years?"' (Morrison 1973: 91), which echoes Odysseus' plaintive criticism of Penelope that she seems unmoved to see him (*Od*. 23.166-170), as well as evoking Odysseus' most famous pseudonym ('don't you say hello to *nobody*?'…).

There is one more element to consider in Morrison's *Sula*, and that is the literal dismemberments that feature in the novel: Sula slices off the top of her own finger to scare off a threatening gang of young, white men (Morrison 1973: 54-55), and her grandmother Eva is rumoured to have amputated her own leg, either under a train to claim insurance money or to sell to the hospital (Morrison 1973: 31; 92-93). These two acts of self-mutilation are carried out in the face of grave threats: threats of violence, and of extreme poverty, respectively. If Morrison's deployment of *sparagmos* as an approach to the canonical literature of Europe is a response to the historical violence and oppression that colonial Europe enacted upon peoples of ultimately African descent, then we see two microcosms of this in Sula and Eva's behavior. Both fictional women go so far as to dismember themselves in order not to be overcome by white, male violence and by the economic desolation ushered in by racial discrimination and segregation. This is a flipside of the psychological fragmentation which Morrison will explore so evocatively in *Beloved*, and which is unequivocally the result of the Middle Passage and enslavement.[32]

So, in one short novel, we have an allusion to an Ovidian myth, to a Homeric epic, and scattered throughout the work we have the dismembered remains of Sophocles' *Ajax*.

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[31] See Stein 1984 on the way that the stock tropes of the epic heroic quest are rewritten in *Sula*. As she argues, 'We find Morrison grounding *Sula* in the epic tradition, but using ironic reversals of epic expectations to create a new definition of heroism that will encompass the lives of black women' (146).

[32] See note 9 above.

It is there in the combat trauma from which Shadrack suffers; in the National Suicide Day which he instigates; in the figure of the modern Ajax himself; in the way that Sula functions as a scapegoat for her community; and in the death of the protagonist quite some time before the end of the work. That Shadrack, who may at first appear to be the Ajax-figure of the novel, turns out to be supplanted by another character actually called Ajax is part of Morrison's refusal to provide easy frameworks that gratify the traditionally-elite readers who have Classics at their fingertips. Simultaneously, it refuses to allow ancient literature to be the controlling force of the novel, while nevertheless granting it an important space within it. This is part of what Roynon has termed Morrison's 'recurring insistence on the affinity between Graeco-Roman and African cultural legacies' (Roynon 2013: 167), and we could add too that the modern American likewise has a place here. Morrison's use of Classics effectively takes ancient literature down off a pedestal and in a democratizing move that rejects the constraints of classical literature and its traditions, she rips it apart and scatters those elements she finds useful throughout her novel. Her *sparagmos* of Sophocles' text is thus carried out to regenerative effect, for her aim was never to counter the historical violence of slavery and colonialism with a new kind of violence that also sought destruction. That is the kind of violence she depicts in the Seven Days brotherhood of *Song of Solomon*, who avenge each murder of a black person by killing a white person at random;[33] but Morrison has written that 'counterracism was never an option' (Morrison 1997: 4). Nevertheless, envisaging the world in which we live as a 'racial house', she affirms that 'if I had to live in a racial house […] it became imperative for me to transform this house completely' (Morrison 1997: 4). In just such a way, Morrison's engagement with classical literature and the *sparagmos* she enacts enables a transformative *compositio membrorum*, one which

[33] Morrison 1977: 155: '"It doesn't matter who did it. Each and every one of them could do it. So you just get any one of them. There are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one"'.

incorporates new elements not present in the ancient text and transforms the classical work from one imbued with the imprint of Western imperialism to one that can be fertile and regenerative; or as Derek Walcott puts it, she envisages Classics as something akin to 'All that Greek manure under the green bananas' (Walcott 1990: 271).

Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*:[34]

The Dionysiac ritual which was reconceived at the end of *Sula*, and the *sparagmos* that Euripides caused to be forever associated with it, is central to Wole Soyinka's adaptation, *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*. However, Soyinka's engagement with the motif of *sparagmos* functions rather differently from Morrison's, and asks a different question. For Soyinka, the violent dismemberment of Euripides' *Bacchae* resonates not so much with his engagement with Greek literature as with Nigeria's contemporary political scene. His play asks whether the outcome would be regenerative or destructive if a colonized African nation or a newly decolonized one, were to be violently torn apart, as Pentheus was. Soyinka's *Bacchae* expresses no doubts: from the decapitated head of the dismembered king pours not blood but wine, around which all the players - previously at odds and in conflict - gather and drink in a levelling ritual that promises the permanent dissolution of unjust hierarchies.

What Soyinka does not do, however, is perform the radical dismemberment of the ancient text that we have seen in Morrison. Despite a number of changes, his play is broadly a close retelling of Euripides' tragedy.[35] This may be, in part, due to the fact that Soyinka's play was commissioned by the National Theatre of a country that only ceded

[34] Soyinka's *Bacchae* has generated a good deal of scholarship in the fields of classical reception and postcolonial literary studies, to which this article's focus on *sparagmos* is indebted. See, for example, Katrak 1986; Baker-White 1993; McDonald 2000; Wetmore 2002; Budelmann 2005; Goff and Simpson 2007; Van Weyenberg 2013; Fischer-Lichte 2014.

[35] Cf. Wetmore 2002: 82-83 who believes that these changes make it, in fact, 'very different from the Euripidean original'.

independence to Nigeria thirteen years earlier.[36] Exemplifying the re-ordering required in Africa before identity and community can be positively reconstituted in a newly-postcolonial world, the motif of *sparagmos* in the play is highly political.

Soyinka entitled his play *The Bacchae of Euripides*, as if he himself had very little creative input into the work. The subtitle, *A Communion Rite*, indicates that this will not be so, but simultaneously opens him up to the charge that he is unduly influenced by European traditions:[37] Christianity and colonialism are, after all, firmly bound together by the hands of the missionaries. Yet this is only true if one mistakenly believes that self-sacrifice and tragedy are peculiarly European phenomena, which is an idea that Soyinka has soundly refuted:

> I remember my shock as a student of literature and drama when I read that drama originated in Greece. What is this? I couldn't quite deal with it. What are they talking about? I never heard my grandfather talk about Greeks invading Yorubaland. I couldn't understand. I've lived from childhood with drama. I read at the time that tragedy evolved as a result of the rites of Dionysus. Now we all went through this damn thing, so I think the presence of eradication had better begin. (Appiah 1988: 782)

Soyinka expounds on this not only within the play, but also in his 1976 essay collection, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. As Felix Budelmann has discussed, the shared characteristics of Greek and African theatrical traditions are numerous, including the use of choruses, masks, music and dance, as well as both traditionally being staged outdoors, and featuring the gods prominently (Budelmann 2005: 133-36). Furthermore, as Barbara

[36] On the National Theatre production, see Fischer-Lichte 2014: 48-71; 59-64; and Lecznar 2013: 26-76.
[37] On this, and the 'double status' signified by Soyinka's title, see Van Weyenberg 2013: 43-46.

Goff and Michael Simpson have identified, Soyinka's title is a kind of deliberate illusion that instantly foreshadows questions of identity to be raised in the drama, which ultimately declares that Africa can illuminate and understand ancient Greece in a way that European colonial powers do not; 'a version of 'Black Athena' *avant la lettre*' on Soyinka's part (Goff and Simpson 2007: 75). Astrid Van Weyenberg's very pertinent point, made with regard to two African responses to *Antigone* (Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona's *The Island*, and Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni*) is also relevant here: she notes that 'it is ultimately […] eurocentrism, rather than the canonical text itself, at which the counter-discursive attention is directed' (Van Weyenberg 2013: 38)

The connection between the *Bacchae's sparagmos* and Yoruba culture was already there, as Soyinka made clear in his essay 'The Fourth Stage': 'Yoruba myth is a recurrent exercise in the experience of disintegration', and 'Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of this severance [from one's 'eternal essence of one's being'], the fragmentation of essence from self'. (Soyinka 1976: 151; 145). Furthermore, Ogun, the Yoruba god with whom Soyinka feels the greatest connection,[38] and whom he portrays as a double of Dionysus, is also directly connected with *sparagmos*:

> Only Ogun experienced the process of being literally torn asunder in cosmic winds or rescuing himself from the precarious edge of total dissolution by harnessing the untouched part of himself, the will. (Soyinka 1976: 30)

In Soyinka's eyes, Dionysus is intimately related to Ogun: even their symbols of worship are similar: the thyrsus for Dionysus, an equivalent opa for Ogun, and the wine and theatre for both (Dionysus as the presiding deity of Greek theatre, and Ogun as the 'first

[38] Soyinka 1967 – the title work of this collection is a praise poem to Ogun.

actor' in Yoruba mythology).[39] They are both paradoxical figures, incorporating within themselves a series of oppositions, so that they inspire both poetry and war. Yet Ogun reaches even further, as Soyinka sees it:

> Ogun, for his part, is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues. Nor is that all. Transcending, even today, the distorted myths of his terrorist reputation […] Ogun stands for a transcendental, humane but rigidly restorative justice. (Soyinka 1976: 141)

Ogun, then, surpasses the Dionysus of ancient Greek myth by incorporating into himself the Apollonian and the Promethean as well:[40] Ogun is a more developed, more complex kind of Dionysus.

Kevin Wetmore observes a further identification: that between Soyinka himself and Dionysus, as well as between Ogun and Dionysus. Soyinka too is a 'native son' who is cast as an outsider by tyrannical rulers; like Dionysus, 'Soyinka brings truth and freedom, but the Nigerian government has imprisoned him, exiled him, and tried to silence him during his career' (Wetmore 2002: 84). While this analysis is apt, the mediating figure of Ogun should not be omitted: Soyinka's fascination with Ogun suggests that he functions in some respects as the writer's personal *orisa*,[41] and is a crucial element in linking Dionysus and Soyinka.

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[39] Soyinka 1976: 140-160; 158-159, 142; Katrak 1986: 81.

[40] The evocation of these three recalls Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), with which Soyinka engages throughout his essay 'The Fourth Stage' from which this quote is taken, as well as, of course, having been inspired by it in his writing of the *Bacchae*. As Fiona Macintosh 2007 has argued, the Nietzschean resonances in Gilbert Murray's translation of Euripides' *Bacchae* were likely to have been part of its appeal for Soyinka, who proclaims his debt to Murray and Arrowsmith (Soyinka 1973: 234) – Macintosh 2007: 148-149.

[41] An *orisa* is a deity which manifests a particular element of the nature of Olódùmarè, the creator of the world, according to Yoruba religion.

Doubling is, of course, to be expected in an adaptation of the *Bacchae*: Euripides' drama is much concerned with that very theme.[42] This is exemplified in the celebrated episode in which Pentheus emerges from the palace dressed as a woman, and hallucinates that he sees two suns and two cities of Thebes:

καὶ μὴν ὁρᾶν μοι δύο μὲν ἡλίους δοκῶ,
διττὰς δὲ Θήβας καὶ πόλισμ' ἑπτάστομον· (*Bacchae*, 918-919).[43]

At this moment, Pentheus begins to increasingly resemble Dionysus: in women's clothing, he is taking on the effeminate traits that he so abhorred in Dionysus. As a result, there is a kind of doubling seen onstage that is completed with the very *sparagmos* of Pentheus, for - as one myth goes[44] - the baby Dionysus was torn apart by the Titans, with Zeus managing to rescue only his heart, and the baby being born again (once more, twice-born) from this last remnant. Thus, in Soyinka's play we see the Euripidean oppositional twinning of Dionysus and Pentheus, as well as the doubling of Dionysus and Ogun.

Soyinka takes this one step further, and employs one more mirror counterpart: his Dionysus is linked not only with Ogun and Pentheus, but also with Christ. Indeed, one of the most striking features of Soyinka's play - for those familiar with Euripides' version - is its communion rite.[45] This moment in the play links Dionysus to Christ via the wine that is part of their worship, as well as their questioned divinity; but in the context of this article, the importance of the communion ritual is not purely a religious one.[46] While this

[42] See, for example, Segal 1982: 27-31 and *passim*; and Goldhill 1988.
[43] 'Oh! I think I see two suns, and a double Thebes, the seven-gated city'.
[44] See Kern 1963: 209-212. Soyinka 1988: 32 references this myth.
[45] It is worth noting that Soyinka's innovation reverses the transformation of wine into blood that is seen in Revelation 14:20, and in Virgil's *Aeneid* 4.452.455.
[46] Connections between the *Bacchae* and Christianity, and the 're-membering' of that ancient Greek drama by a Christian one, can first be seen in the Byzantine play *Christus Patiens*, which

spiritual dimension is crucial, what is also of interest here is communion as the very opposite of *sparagmos*, or as Van Weyenberg sees it, as a kind of *omophagia*.[47]

The connection between Dionysus and Christ follows a prodigious line of similar observances of the close connections between the two, renewed at the start of the nineteenth century by Friedrich Hölderlin. As well as the wine that is so important to the worship of each, other parallels have been drawn, such as the impression that the captive Dionysus's interrogation by Pentheus for claiming that he is divine has similarities with Jesus's by Pontius Pilate. The two also occupy similar roles as mythological archetypes: both fulfilling the function of the 'dying-and-returning god'.[48] However, Pentheus as well as Dionysus takes on features of Christ's role in Soyinka's play, and this problematises the neat mirroring of the one divine figure onto the other. If Pentheus is sacrificed in order to bring the community together, the audience is compelled to reassess this tyrannical king and regard him as eventual, even if unwitting, saviour of his people.[49] Soyinka has elsewhere highlighted Christianity's appropriation of notions of self-sacrifice, and suggested that it is only the idea of individual salvation, rather than that of the self-sacrificing scapegoat, that is peculiarly Christian:

> I completely reject the idea that the notion of the scapegoat is a Christian idea. This scapegoat idea is very much rooted in African religion... I think the obsession

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has enabled modern audiences to 'reconstitute' some of the missing sections from the end of Euripides' tragedy.

[47] See Budelmann 2005: 135-136, 141-142 and Van Weyenberg 2013: 70-71 on the syncretism of Yoruba, Christian, and ancient Greek rituals, and on *omophagia*.

[48] James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jane Ellen Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* are heavily associated with discussion of this archetype.

[49] This resonates with readings of the *Bacchae* by Richard Seaford (1994: 312-318; 1996: 47, 181, 236) among others, who see Pentheus as occupying a scapegoat role, but Mills 2006: 96 is persuasive in arguing that such interpretations seem overly-optimistic.

> with individual salvation -- which, if you like, is on the opposite end of the axis to self-sacrifice -- is a very European thing.[50]

In keeping with this, the tragic hero in Yoruba tragedy suffers for the sake of the community, and the drama is concerned not so much with what happens to the hero as what happens to the society around him.[51] Seen in this light, it is not Pentheus's Christ-like end that is at the core of Soyinka's 'communion rite'; rather it is the impact this has on the community. As I suggested earlier, communion is in some senses the very opposite of *sparagmos*: it is more akin to Sixo's 're-membering' than to the ripping apart action that we saw in *Sula*. Even Pentheus notes the cohesion that Dionysiac ritual and worship brings; as he hits the old slave he shouts,

> Something is wrong with the old men of this city. It affects freemen and slaves alike. (Soyinka 1973: 263)

Thus Pentheus, whose refusal to accept Dionysus results in his own death is – unwittingly - able to glimpse the essence of Dionysiac worship: that boundaries between people are dismantled and the inclusive communion that closes Soyinka's play is foreshadowed.[52]

Not understanding the true nature of this unity, Pentheus – as in Euripides' original – continually attempts to enforce a different kind of solidity through violent and

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[50] Interview with Louis S. Gates, *Black World* 24.10 (August 1975), 36 - http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/soyinka.htm

[51] Soyinka 1976: 154: 'And what has the struggle of the tragic hero been, after all, but an effort to maintain that innate concept of dignity which impels to action only to that degree in which the hero possesses a true nobility of spirit? At such moments he is close to the acceptance and wisdom of Obatala in which faith is rested, not on the self, but on a universal selfhood to which individual contributions are fundamentally meaningless'.

[52] See Macintosh 2007: 160 on the way, in Soyinka as in Murray and Euripides, the forms of poetry itself (enjambment, sibilance, repetition, and half-rhyme in Soyinka) 'reinforce the Dionysiac unity'. Also see Baker-White 1993: 383 on the way that Soyinka chooses to ignore the warnings against excessive communal festivities which may be contained in Euripides' play.

oppressive means. In Soyinka's version, the shackles and chains with which Pentheus tries to imprison Dionysus evoke the experience of political prisoners, while also demonstrating the limits of the tyrant's power (when the chains prove useless). Once again the motif of *sparagmos* becomes important: it should be seen as a personification of the unchainable, evocative in both the Yoruba and the ancient Greek contexts, making it a particularly pertinent metaphor for Soyinka. His *Bacchae* glorifies this dismemberment by portraying a unifying renewal and regeneration arising from it, embodied in the wine and the communion in which all in Thebes partake.

The extra chorus which Soyinka adds to his adaptation – a chorus of slaves - is his other ground-breaking departure from Euripides' ancient drama. This chorus foreground the contemporary political dimensions of the play, and Soyinka's critique of the regime in 1960s Nigeria. He had already been a victim of his country's ruling powers when he was imprisoned for political activities between 1967 and 1969. As Erika Fischer-Lichte has discussed, at moments the play alludes to the Nigerian civil war and its aftermath quite openly (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 57). At the same time, the chorus of slaves evoke the colonial history that preceded Nigeria's independence, and which forms the history of so much of the world. Testifying to this global anti-colonial reach, Soyinka advised (in the cast list) that the two choruses, of slaves and Bacchants, be 'as mixed a cast as is possible, testifying to their varied origins'.[53] The new chorus of slaves not only aid Soyinka's biting critique of contemporary politics, they also point to the inclusivity of Dionysiac worship. At the same time, they emphasize Pentheus's mindless tyranny and brutal behavior, and represent the political power of the masses.

The Euripidean *sparagmos* enacted towards the end of Soyinka's play may become, in his hands, a metaphor for the decolonisation of Africa from its imperial rulers, but it will have been with a wry smile that he wrote this adaptation for the National

[53] Soyinka 1973: 234.

Theatre of the country that had so recently oppressed Nigeria. Yet perhaps it was also with a sadder smile that he demonstrated that the metaphor could so smoothly be made to apply to the contemporary government of Nigeria, as if only by ripping it apart and beginning again, could the wine flow once more.

Sparagmos, then, is a very rich metaphor for postcolonial responses to classical literature, evoking as it does not only the dislocation of diaspora, but also an active engagement not hindered by overweening deference to a European canon. Furthermore, in the 1970s when both these works were written, the current constitution of the world was not acceptable: a dismantling of the status quo was required in order to achieve the aims that the civil rights activists had fought for, as the Black Power and Black Arts Movements articulated. *Sparagmos* has both political and literary valence in this context, with its political urgency for black writers in the 1970s pointing us to the very reasons why it is a compelling metaphor for classical reception studies. Toni Morrison's response to Sophocles' *Ajax* in *Sula* dismembers the ancient text in order to re-member it in a way that articulates life in twentieth-century America, but this is not done in a spirit of retaliation (it is not, in other words, the kind of action that we see in the Seven Days brotherhood in *Song of Solomon*): instead, her engagement breathes new life into *Ajax* just as a life cycle of *sparagmos*, scattering, and rebirth does. Soyinka deploys the motif in a different way, with *sparagmos* functioning not as a metaphor for Soyinka's artistic process, but instead being enacted within the drama while simultaneously performing a crucial role within the play's political commentary. The deployment of *sparagmos* by these two writers, and the classical context within which they apply it, indicates how enriching the metaphor of *sparagmos* and 're-membering' can be for classical reception,

particularly within the realm of postcolonialism and racial or social injustice, leading us to new and illuminating readings of both ancient and modern works.[54]

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