

The Well-Tempered Anachronism, Or The C(o)urse of Empire in Percival Everett's *For Her Dark Skin*

Michel FEITH
University of Nantes
CRINI

For Her Dark Skin is the first of Percival Everett's takes on classical myth. At first reading, this parodic rewriting of the legend of Medea may not have the poetic and philosophical depth of *Frenzy*, *Glyph*, or *The Water Cure*, which respectively revisit Euripides' *Bacchae*, the figure of the trickster-god Hermes, and Pre-Socratic philosophy. Yet, as often with Everett's more reader-friendly novels, simplicity can be deceptive. *For Her Dark Skin* initiates a pattern that the following works will develop at leisure: a narrative exploration of the confrontation of the West, from its earliest moments of self-conscious identification in Ancient Greek culture, with its Other. As a matter of fact, all the figures that act as starting-points for these textual revisions are more of less outsiders: Medea is a dark barbarian princess brought to the Peloponnesus; Dionysus, an embodiment of foreignness and strangeness, heavily associated with Asia; Hermes, a newcomer who had to trick his way into the highly selective club of the Olympians; and most pre-Socratic philosophers hailed from either Asia Minor or Sicily, the colonial margins of the Greek world.

If the complex narrative that is myth can be subdivided into shorter units of meaning called "mythemes"¹, here are the main mythemes of the Jason-and-Medea cycle featured in the novel: Jason and the Argonauts embark on a quest for the Golden Fleece in Colchis; with divine assistance, they secure Medea's help; she flees with them, and is married to Jason; in Corinth, where they have found refuge, Jason wants to marry Creusa, daughter to king Creon; Medea's jealousy has her send the princess a poisoned dress and crown that kill her and her father; she then murders her own children to feast on Jason's despair. Medea's apotheosis, in which she is carried away in a dragon-drawn chariot sent by her grandfather Helios, the Sun-god, is not featured in *For Her Dark Skin*. Everett's version reconfigures a long literary tradition, the cornerstones of which are *The Argonautica*, written in the 3rd Century B.C., in Greek epic verse, by Alexandrine poet Apollonius Rhodius²; Euripides' tragedy *Medea*, first produced in 431 B.C.³; and Roman poet-philosopher Seneca's tragedy with the same title (63-64 A.D.)⁴. Due to the hazards of conservation and transmission, the only extant version of the epic first part of the cycle, the *Argonautica*, is paradoxically posterior to Euripides' rendition of the second part.

The symbolic matrix of Everett's revision may well be encapsulated in this depiction of Jason and Medea's wedding ceremony, in the words of their friend Polydeuces: "Side by side, they were a parody of something. Jason wore white robes. Medea, black. The contrast was startling, comical, tragic, prophetic" (*FHDS* 58). This

¹ Claude Lévy-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris, Plon, [1958] 1974, p. 241.

² Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, Trans. R.C. Seaton, 1912, Electronic Classics Series. Pennsylvania State University, 2012. <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/apolloni/argonaut.pdf>. Visited 10/22/2012.

³ Euripides, *Medea*, Trans. Rex Warner, New York, Dover, 1993.

⁴ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Medea*, Trans. Frank Justus Miller, Theoi E-Text Library, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaMedea.html>. Visited 10-22-2012.

self-reflexive utterance is steeped in contemporary concerns with gender and race, which provide a critical ground for the parodic revision of the original myth. There is an archaeological dimension to the novel, as explained by Kathie Birat: “Postmodern rewritings of myths revive them not simply as narrative background or poetic metaphor. On the contrary, by exploring the nature of the relation between myths and the contemporary context in which they survive at an unconscious level, these rewritings lay bare the desires and fears on which the survival of myths relies”⁵. Parody in the work at hand imprints an “othering” twist to a foundational narrative that helped codify otherness in the first place. This critical shift is operated through a deft use of anachronism, which we could define, for our present purposes, as a “misplacement in time”: an event, or word, belonging to one period is projected into another one, thereby causing a breach of verisimilitude. If used voluntarily and consistently, this short-circuit between heterogeneous timelines may amount to a breaking of the frame, reflexively drawing attention to the artificiality of narratives and the ideologies they convey. In *For Her Dark Skin*, the story of Medea is reinterpreted in the light of American modernity, and in its turn sheds a light on the contemporary period. This layered, palimpsestic mode of reading actually foregrounds the fact that all hermeneutics are situated in time and space: consciously or not, we read our preoccupations into an ancient text, just as history can be said to be written backwards, posing to the past the questions made urgent by our present. “A reading of the past, controlled though it might be by the analysis of documents, is driven by a reading of the present”⁶. As fictional discourse in dialectical resonance with social discourse, myth is no longer the province of unadulterated, “atemporal,” universality.

We will attempt to discern several uses of anachronism in the novel. First, a comic one, in which an incongruous, or even gratuitous, conflation between ancient story and prosaic present can result in a debunking of the aura of the Classics, or a satire of contemporary American society. Then, what we could call a “well-tempered anachronism,” a more “serious” form of cultural critique: envisioning the Argonauts’ expedition as also a myth of Empire brings into relief a veiled criticism of Western – and American – culture, imperialism, and relations to their Others. Given Everett’s similar preoccupation in his recurrent treatment of the American West and Manifest Destiny in several other novels, one might jokingly propose to read *For Her Dark Skin* as a “Western in toga.” Could then the tragedy of Medea be one of those moments when “the Empire strikes back”?

The Sunny Side of Anachronism

The mode of Everett’s rewriting of the mythic cycle is partly that of the travesty, “a reductive or diminishing mode, which translates a particular high-prestige literary model into low demotic or coarse accents”⁷. Such desublimation can be seen in the structure of the novel, a collection of dialogues in matter-of-fact prose, sometimes interjected with crude vocabulary. Such declension of language corresponds to the

⁵ Kathie Birat, “Ordinary Voices: The Mocking of Myth in *For Her Dark Skin*,” JULIEN, Claude and Anne-Laure TISSUT, eds., *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*, CRAFT n°4, Tours, Université de Tours, 2007, p. 87.

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *L’écriture de l’histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 31 (my translation).

⁷ Simon Dentith, *Parody*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 195.

debasement of the figure of the epic hero: Jason, for one, is presented as a dumb, cowardly, conceited leader, a clown more than a paragon of values; Medea, in spite of her lucidity, is unable to resist a love that is both possession and alienation:

“You see, a spell has been put on me. The malicious imp Eros, under orders from a party unknown, or shall I merely say unnamed, shot his disgusting darts into my heart. So, I am in love with a man whom I despise. The thought of his inadequate tool dipping into the life-well of my body sickens me. But I must have it” (*FHDS* 81).

With his gift of the gab, unsubstantiated by real courage, the man is planning to become a politician (83). This sarcastic indictment represents the last step in Jason’s fall into the prosaic: from a means to insure his safety and that of his children in their insecure, fugitive condition, as in the tragedy⁸, his bid to marry Creusa and become heir to the throne of Corinth is reduced to the dimension of base political maneuvering, fit for the lobbies and backrooms of the Capitol. This line of irony culminates in Medea’s jab at Athenian democracy – “Vows. Greek gibberish. Empty words. Like all their words. *Democracy*” (*FHDS* 59). This remark can be interpreted as a satiric charge against both the present idealization of ancient Greek culture, and American political life – a democracy that may not fulfill its promises. Actually, much depends on how you define the “demos,” or people: both Athens and the United States were at some point in their histories democracies with slaves.

In another concession to apparently jocular gratuitousness, anachronistic allusions to life in suburban America abound. Creon envisages a “chariot-tax” to finance the building of parking spaces (75); the chariots are personalized with “wood-cutting of a distinctive design,” including “sloping sides which curved up into fins in the rear” (85), in the purest style of 1950s gas-guzzlers and the contemporary customizing craze. Jason makes love to Creusa for the first time in her chariot, on a ridge above the city lights, just as countless teenagers have done in actual life and TV series. When Medea invites an intrigued crowd to her home to watch the final act of her revenge, on the grounds that “All is public in a Greek city” (125), she is gathering a chorus and pointing out the artifice of Greek tragedy, in which private life is exposed to the audience’s gaze, but also making a jump-cut, through a gap of 2,500 years, to the contemporary encroachments on privacy stemming from the pervading influence of reality-TV and, nowadays, social networks. Most revealing of all, Medea’s description of her house in Corinth reeks of American suburbia:

The house was on a hill. It was a nice house. It was not a palace. It was not a tent on the beach. It was set away from chariot traffic, accessible by stone steps twisting through an unruly garden. The place had some charms, but there were neighbors. (76)

This topography is more reminiscent of a middle-class neighborhood in another Mediterranean clime, California, than of archaeological remains. But the “house on a hill,” a direct allusion to the Winthropian “city upon a hill,” conflates Puritan-derived American exceptionalism with earlier forms of Greek exceptionalism – the conscience of a cultural unity opposed to the barbarian rest of the world. In this context, Medea resembles a 1940s war bride, following her soldier husband home, and finding only disappointment in the middling life of suburbia, the flip side of the American dream. From barbarian princess to desperate housewife, it is a long way down, a progress which helps mark the discrepancy between the myth of America and the humdrum reality of the United States.

⁸ Euripides, *Medea*, pp. 6-18.

These playful anachronisms anchor Everett's rewriting in the actuality of the contemporary United States, reinforcing the resonance of a two-tiered reading of the epic and tragedy. They draw attention to the Greek – and Roman – influences on present-day America, from the classical-imperial architecture of public buildings, including the dome of the Capitol and the Southern colonnade of the White House – as well as so many court houses and libraries – to the (incompletely?) democratic ethos of the country embodied in these monuments.

Far from being only a gratuitous, innocuous pretext for humor, in the spirit of graduate students' pranks against the Classical canon, anachronism in *For Her Dark Skin* is used as a distancing device, drawing attention to artificiality and discontinuity. By exposing, rather than bridging, the rift between the time of the story and the time of the reading, Everett follows trails blazed by a whole tradition of great ancestors. Like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, another adaptation from the Greek, his novel establishes a double irony: debunking the aura of the Ancient canon, and the over-idealized view of life expressed in its "high style," perhaps even denouncing them as an imposition on the present – as did Mark Twain or Emerson, in their declarations of American literary independence; yet also pointing at the mediocrity of a present that cannot support such high-minded genres as the Epic and Tragedy. It is therefore substantially different from the "necessary anachronism" of the historical novel, a didactic rephrasing of past *Weltanschauungen* to foreground continuity of inheritance, "allowing ... characters to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done"⁹.

This emphasis on rupture can also be interpreted as a statement about the ethos of the modern novel, a genre "fit for democracy." By converting the Epic into the mock-epic¹⁰, and tragedy into a bitter-sweet mixture of pathos and mockery, it presents a crash course in the history of Western literature, so to speak. After all, according to Georg Lukacs, the novel was born of the withering away of the epic¹¹; Mikhail Bakhtin accounted for its rise by the cannibalization and carnivalization of the former "high" genres, accompanied by a generalized debunking of discourses of authority¹². French critic Jacques Rancière, for his part, argues that the modern concept of literature, as it evolved in the early 19th century, ushered in a democratic worldview through the demise of these high genres.

This is what the democracy of writing is about: its talkative muteness abolishes the distinction between the men whose words are acts and the men of noisy, suffering voices, between those who act and those who content themselves with living. The democracy of writing is a regime of free and open utterance, which everyone can adopt for oneself, in order to assume the lives of the

⁹ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* [1937], Trans. Hanna and Stanley Mitchell, London, The Merlin Press, 1962, p. 63.

¹⁰ We will use these terms for self-evident reasons, yet with an awareness that the traditional definition of the mock-epic and the mock-tragic is the comic use of the high style of these genres for the treatment of a trivial situation. According to Dentith, the mock-heroic mode "can be seen as a particular way of negotiating a cultural situation in which inherited prestigious forms continue to carry authority but can no longer convincingly be deployed unironically in the contemporary moment" (Dentith 192); the significance of the travesty seems similar.

¹¹ Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* [1920], Trans. Anna Bostock. London, The Merlin Press, 1971, p. 41.

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 5-6.

heroes and heroines of novels, to become a writer in his own right, or to take part in the discussion of public affairs. It is not an irresistible rise in social influence, but a new symbolic apportionment of reality, a new relation between the act of speech, the world it shapes and the abilities of those who inhabit this world¹³.

In line with Postmodern uses of parody, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s African American theory of Signifyin(g) as "the slave's trope" of critical revision¹⁴, *For Her Dark Skin* exposes the complicity between culture and dominance, especially when embodied in epic and heroic genres. In this sense, the desublimation of the Classics is a democratizing enterprise. Yet, true to the dual nature of parody, the formal choice of a hybrid genre, a linear narrative consisting in a collection of monologues reminiscent of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a "spectacle of voices,"¹⁵ mixing drama and the novel, complements the critical assault with a tribute to Euripides¹⁶. In fact, Medea will once again escape the world of sitcoms and soap operas, by reverting to the full stature of a tragic heroine. But this tragedy is not hers alone: it is played out on the geostrategic stage.

The Curse of Empire

Mutanda mutandis, the Argonauts' voyage is a tale of globalization, a point brought home by Everett's adroit use of anachronism, which forges a parallel between the course of Empire in ancient myth and the history of imperialism in America. If the correspondences between text and history are numerous and convincing enough, they may constitute an allegory, a form of mock-typology. Puritan typology, an allegorical reading of the Bible according to which the Old Testament foreshadowed the revelation of the Gospel, which in turn prefigured the history of the New England Saints¹⁷, was itself an anachronism. It provided a providentialist rationale for the colonization of the New World, later secularized as Manifest Destiny. Replacing Puritan, Biblical rhetoric with an Ancient epic-cum-tragedy, appears as a particularly subversive take on "the concept of *translatio studii*, the classical theory that civilization moves in a westward course, from Greece to Rome to Western Europe –and thence, according to certain seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European thinkers, to the New World"¹⁸. As a matter of fact, the textual history of *For Her Dark Skin* follows such a geographical trajectory, from Euripides to Seneca to Everett; yet, far from the upbeat triumphalism of Biblical, or secular, messianism, the doctored myth appears to sound a warning, turning the "course of Empire" celebrated by painter Thomas Cole, into the "curse of Empire."

How I wish the Argo never had reached the land
Of Colchis, skimming through the blue Symplegades,
Nor ever had fallen in the glades of Pelion
The smitten fir-tree to furnish oars for the hands
Of heroes who in Pelias' name attempted

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature*, Paris, Galilée, 2007, pp. 221-222 (my translation).

¹⁴ Henry Louis, Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 52.

¹⁵ André Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 149.

¹⁶ For an analysis of parody and hybridity in *For Her Dark Skin* as a form of performance, see Vander's recent article.

¹⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975, p. 35-36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 145.

The Golden Fleece! For then my mistress Medea
 Would not have sailed for the towers of the land of Iolcus,
 Her heart on fire with passionate love for Jason...¹⁹

The prelude of Euripides' play, delivered by Medea's nurse, does more than point out the continuity between the Argonauts' epic and the tragedy that is about to unfold; rather than a later stage of the cycle, Medea's crimes appear as a form of retribution for a transgression. After all, the ship *Argo* was the first sea-faring vessel, the ancestor of all maritime trade and expeditions; the crossing of the Symplegades, by miraculously rooting these clashing rocks, did not only open the Pontus to traffic, but also stabilized the features of the land. The *Argonautica* is a myth of origins, unfolding at least partially in a separate, sacred space and time, fixing the boundaries of the world as we know it²⁰. But this gelling into place of an inchoate universe is operated through a form of *hybris*, the spatial and ontological transgression of the previous limits of a closed universe. A parallel can thus be drawn between Jason's expedition and the colonial expansion of the Greek world. According to Alain Moreau, even though the legend predates this expansion, and Aietes' kingdom was originally an imaginary land far away to the Easternmost limits of the world, the successive versions of the myth featured an increasing number of real toponyms, corresponding to ports founded by Greek sailors²¹. The wealth of geographic detail in Apollonius' poem is not only the offshoot of an encyclopedic impulse, but also a reminiscence of the many local legends that traced Hellenic colonies and their ruling dynasties to Argonaut Founding Fathers. Wandering rhapsodists and local historians never failed to flatter their Eastern audiences by reciting these glorious origins, which gave the cities a political identity and a place in the scheme of things. Other parallels can be struck, other bells rung. The Athenian Empire was a naval empire ruling, all over the Aegean Sea, colonies founded by Athens, as well as tributary Greek cities, united in the Delian League. The growth of Empire was concomitant with an expansion of democracy: the former depended on a larger army of citizens, and provided the financial backbone for retributing participation in the assembly; the colonies also served as a safety valve, just like the American West²². If we remember that *Medea* was produced in 431 B.C., the very year that saw the beginning of the second Peloponnesian War, in reaction to Athens' uncompromising defense of its hegemony, we may wonder if the play might not articulate, in a more or less covert form, a vision of colonial backlash, the time when "the Empire strikes back"?

Such themes are merely hinted at in Euripides' tragedy; in Seneca's, on the other hand, they strike a major chord. It is true that the Roman Empire of Nero's times was a State of world-wide dimensions, whose different parts were connected by a gigantic network of roads, sea routes, and commercial exchanges: in a word, an early form of globalization. Small wonder, then, that in the Latin author's *Medea* the second Chorus

¹⁹ Euripides, *Medea*, p. 1.

²⁰ The symbolic, foundational nature of the story might explain and neutralize inconsistencies such as the pursuit of the *Argo* by the Colchian fleet, an impossibility if Jason's vessel really was the first ship. Such ontological heterogeneity—similar to the contradiction in Genesis between the fact that Cain and Abel are the only human beings after their parents, and Cain's shunning by all mankind—can easily become the butt of satire, an opportunity Everett did not shy away from (*FHDS* 26).

²¹ Alain Moreau, *Le mythe de Jason et Médée. Le va-nu-pied et la sorcière*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1994, p. 170.

²² P.J. Rhodes, "Democracy and Empire," SAMONS, Loren J. ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*, New York, Cambridge UP, 2007, p. 29.

(ll. 301-379) should deplore, not merely the advent of the barbarian woman, but the transgression of a cosmic taboo, of a law of nature:

Too venturesome the man who in a frail barque first cleft the treacherous seas and, with one last look behind him at the well-known shore, trusted his life to the fickle winds; who, ploughing the waters on an unknown course, could trust to a slender plank, stretching too slight a boundary between the ways of life and death [...]

Unsullied the ages our fathers saw, with crime banished afar. Then every man inactive kept to his own shores and lived to old age on ancestral fields, rich with but little, knowing no wealth save what his home soil had yielded. The lands, well separated before by nature's laws, the Thessalian ship made one, bade the deep suffer blows, and the sequestered sea become a part of our human fear. (Seneca ll. 301-308; 329-339)

The heroic enterprise is here pictured as a Fall: by bringing into contact hermetically sealed spaces, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, the Argonauts opened a Pandora's box, bringing the Golden Age to an end, replacing the old (Roman) rural, earth-bound ethic of hard work and self-sufficiency with the dangers that come from opulence, adventure, and the fickleness of the sea. As a proof of the truly transgressive nature of the expedition, the third Chorus sings a litany of all the heroes of Jason's crew who were punished for it: "all by a dreadful end atoned for the sea's outraged laws" (ll. 614-615); the captain was himself crushed by falling debris from the ship Argo. Moreover, Seneca draws comprehensive correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm: Medea is as treacherous as the sea, her passion is as consuming as fire, her magic can act upon the elements, and her social solitude, resulting from her estrangement from both her family and new country, is a direct consequence of the fact that her home- and host-lands are too far apart to establish relations of reciprocity and exchange²³.

The prologue of Percival Everett's own *Medea* invites us from the start to read into the classical myth the story of other passages.

To a land of darker-skinned people. The Argo was a good ship that carved strongly through the stiffest seas behind sail or the power of those poor rowing wretches. The slaves were all as fair in complexion as I, the dark men from the south and west being generally too uncooperative and large. And the sea made them nervous; this was my opinion. A dark man from that land might not pull an oar at all, but stare at you blankly as if there were something to be understood. You could flog the poor bastard senseless and still he would leave you the worse, wondering what you had failed to see. (*FHDS* 6)

The association of naval exploration, slavery and color, even though here a recombination of assorted traits, cannot but remind the contemporary reader of the colonization of America and the triangular trade. The tone of the original epic is clearly warped, since one of the claims to posterity of the ship Argo was that it was manned only by heroes and demi-gods. Like the colloquial language, this mention of slaves amounts to a desublimation of the idealized ethos of the epic genre, taking it down a peg or two through the admixture of realistic detail. Ancient Greece was indeed a slave-holding society, a fact which contemporary tributes to the fatherland of philosophy and democracy might tend to eclipse. African slavery was not a Greek institution, and the "blackness" of the Colchians was a symbolic rather than a racial trait²⁴. Yet the

²³ Florence Dupont, *Médée de Sénèque, ou comment sortir de l'humanité*, Paris, Belin, 2000, pp. 21-22.

²⁴ Since Colchis is supposedly situated in modern-day Crimea, its historical inhabitants may have been brown or "dark", but not black. Yet, because of their symbolic association with the Sun, they were sometimes defined as "black-faced," like the Ethiopians (Moreau 92). Still, they were not seen as a different "race" from the Greeks, but merely Barbarians with a different language and culture.

insistence on bringing “race” back into the picture, together with a description of brutal treatment worthy of a Simon Legree, makes it clear that our reading must be stereoscopic, with one eye on the original, and more than one eye on the contemporary history of the world, including the inhumanity of other democracies that indulged in colonization and slavery according to a chromatic principle. Interestingly enough, early in their hectic return from Colchis, the Argonauts decide to free their slaves, not out of an anachronistic belief in the dignity of all humans, but because, in Jason’s words “Our rowing must now be precise and strong. Turn loose the slaves and we will take the oars ourselves” (*FHDS* 24). Jason is no Lincoln, no Great Emancipator: his gesture is motivated by defiance, towards either the loyalty or the skills of the servile class. It is only by a revealingly ironic twist that the novel belatedly mimics the Epic.

The legend of the Argonauts is a tale of Western expansion; even though its aims and scope were widely different from those of the early explorers of the Americas, there were enough parallel traits for it to provide a mythical precedent, a rhetorical justification for their enterprises. As a matter of fact, the analogy did not escape writers and poets, who often compared these pioneers to Jason. For example, in Christopher Columbus’ propagandistic vision of himself, the following extract from Seneca’s play is construed as a prophecy of his discovery of the New World²⁵:

There will come an age in the far-off years when Ocean shall unloose the bonds of things, when the whole broad earth shall be revealed, when Tethys shall disclose new worlds and Thule not be the limit of the lands. (Seneca ll. 374-379)

Another key American myth, that of Eldorado, seems to be prefigured in the Argonautic cycle: if the mytheme of the Golden Fleece, the pretext for the whole voyage, finds its origins in the gold-rich rivers of Phasus²⁶, it is imbued with the same strange mixture of greed and mysticism as its later avatar: American gold could represent both material wealth and an alchemical symbol for the Conquistadors, just as the Fleece was both precious metal and a Zeus- (or Hermes-) given blessing, the spoils of the miraculous golden ram that had carried Phrixus, a Greek royal child who was about to be wrongfully sacrificed, to safety in Aietes’ kingdom²⁷.

One issue that Jason’s opening tirade clearly poses is that of the gendering of tales of exploration and colonization. The conqueror is usually cast as masculine, and the land as feminine; these fantasies of “penetration” and intercourse equate the mastering of the land with that of a native woman. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, for example, Queen Dido of Cartage’s tragic love affair with Aeneas, the ancestor of the Romans, is a mythic projection of the Latin victory over the Carthaginian Empire in the Punic Wars. Seen in this light, Medea, the princess who betrays father and country for the love of a white-skinned intruder, can be reinterpreted as the antetype of those American mediators and conquest facilitators, La Malinche in Mexico, and Pocahontas in Northern America. In his classic essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexican author Octavio Paz traces the hang-ups of the Mexican collective spirit to a historical inheritance of ravishment and betrayal, best allegorized in the figure of Hernan Cortez’ mistress and translator, Doña Marina, La Malinche.

If the Chingada is a representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very

²⁵ Kirkpatrick Sale, *Christopher Columbus and the Conquest of Paradise* [1990], London, Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2006, p. 190.

²⁶ Alain Moreau, *Mythe*, p.223.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 24.

flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortés. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the Conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards. And as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal²⁸.

The parallels are numerous between Malinche's and Medea's fates: both are "barbarian" women who save their pale lovers and help them prevail against their own kind; both were abandoned for better matches. Yet, Marina belonged to a tribe that had been vanquished by the Aztecs, and did not feel any loyalty towards their Empire; her children by Cortez are often seen as the first representatives of the new *mestizo* people, born of the encounter of European and Amerindian, which is so characteristic of South America. This is exactly what Medea's infanticide prevented from happening.

Nor does Pocahontas' story fully fit Medea's. This did not deter Nineteenth-Century American poet Joel Barlow from drawing a sustained parallel between the national epic and, besides the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, the *Argonautica*. His *Columbiad* (1809) takes the form of a prophecy imparted to an ailing, imprisoned Columbus, unveiling the glorious future of the continent he had discovered²⁹. The retelling of the Greek myth stages a contrast between corrupt European mores and American idealism, in the form almost of a reverse typology. Captain John Smith is a peaceful, faithful Jason – "No plundering squadron your new Jason brings; / No pirate demigods nor hordes of kings" (IV, ll. 273-74) – and Pocahontas a generous maid, not a witch:

Your fond Medea too, whose dauntless breast
All danger braves to screen her hunted guest.
Shall quit her native tribe, but never share
The crimes and sufferings of the Colchian fair. (IV, ll. 281-84)

The proper ways to establish an Empire are the work ethic, and the cultivation of the land. The theme of the "promised Colchis fleeced with gold" (IV, ll. 272) compounds Biblical Canaan with classical geography. Everett's parody shares with Barlow's rewriting a criticism of the tale from a modern viewpoint, but departs from the nationalistic epic poem in implying that there is no morally acceptable way to "rear an empire" (IV, ll. 280).

The main stigma of the American imperial drive is the problem of "race." The collusion between colonial conquest and racialized thought is to be found once again in Jason's prologue. Not only are narratives of conquest gendered, as discussed above, but they are inextricably linked to an exotic sexual imagery:

She was black and shiny like a coral a boy once handed me before I beheaded his family [...] When I entered her middle I met my beginning and my end [...] So dark. So sweet. Like some fruit that never dries of juice. (FHDS 6-7)

Besides portraying Jason as a Conquistador-like, mindless performer of massacres, the allusion to the saying "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice" taps racial clichés about African American women, inserting the novel within the general context of the aftermath of the slave trade – a past that America may not have fully overgrown – thus changing our reading of Medea's tale. On this issue, the text could be said to harbor

²⁸ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Trans. Lysander Kemp, New York, Grove Press, 1961, p. 89.

²⁹ Joel Barlow, *The Columbiad: A Poem* [1809], Project Gutenberg, 2005, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8clmb10h.htm>. Visited 06/30/2013.

contradictions, or at least complexities. On the one hand, the “racial” hand, Greek prejudices against the Barbarians are ironized upon, as when Jason states: “I had mixed feelings about being married. Medea was certainly exotic and erotic and extraordinarily beautiful, but she was wild; perhaps a function of her complexion” (*FHDS* 69). The wildness associated with the “uncivilized” Other is all very enticing in the sexual field, but when carried over into general demeanor it can become annoying, even threatening. Here, the clichés about black people being oversexed and passionate spring to mind. Similarly, the rumor that “They use magic as we use logic” (124) may echo the association in American culture between blackness and magic, like Conjure or Hoodoo. Uncanny correspondences emerge: Western racial and colonial discourses, including American Frontier ideology, with their clear-cut separation between “civilization” and “barbarism,” eerily echo Jason’s disclaimer in Euripides’ tragedy:

Firstly, instead of living among barbarians,
You inhabit a Greek land and understand our ways,
How to live by law instead of the sweet will of force³⁰.

It is as if an archetypal western structure codifying the rejection of the Other, even when superficially integrated into the mainstream society, had been unearthed. Would it then be too bold to venture the hypothesis that Jason’s shipping Medea back to Greece is a way to unwittingly “bring the war home,” to borrow a formula from the anti-Vietnam war movements? The same violence that is mustered abroad creates injustices that fester at home, leading to outbursts of “domestic” violence. This may be too heavy a semantic load for the original to bear, but it would definitely fit a contemporary reading of the legend, guided by a few controlled anachronisms.

On the other hand, the novel does not condone systematic thinking in terms of “race,” as visible in the distance taken with its proponents, like Apsyrus: “My brother saw the world in a certain way and each new set of circumstances was not only shaped to fit it, but substantiated it. For him, it was a racial thing” (47). The anachronism of this last phrase points at the fact that the modern sense of “race” did not even exist at the time of the original narrative; it is also too simplistic to account for the complexities of human interactions. The reminder, in the prologue, that slavery can be divorced from race only emphasizes the argument. “Race” is a myth, just as the story of Jason and Medea is. Their nature is different, one being a social fiction, and the other a literary one; yet the symbolic power of a canonic work can perpetuate ideologies in a covert fashion, just as the power of ideologies can direct our reading of canonic works. Critical Signifyin(g) on the Classics may therefore amount to a mental deprogramming cure, a sort of “verbal rehab,” so to speak.

The multiple connections established in the text between the myths of Medea and the Argonauts on the one hand, and on the other the historical foundations of American society—conquest and colonization, slavery, racial and gender imbalances—make parody an instrument for the radical criticism of dominance and the failings of “democracy,” quite on the “serious” side. As in the original tale, a tragedy follows from the epic, but in the present world, the propellers of fate are no longer ancient gods, but the “infernal machinery” (Jean Cocteau) of man-made determinisms.

³⁰ Euripides, *Medea*, p. 17.

An Anatomy of “Motivation”

“You are wicked,” he muttered through his tears.
 “No, Jason, motivated” (*FHDS* 152)

The finale of Everett’s novel reads like an anticlimax. No flying chariot pulled through the skies by dragons, no general conflagration, not even the sort of passionate tirades that are supposed to operate a catharsis: the last cues of Everett’s text are terse, matter-of-fact, leading to this ironic, anachronistic word, “motivated.” Medea knows no apotheosis, Jason remains too dumb to understand, too inarticulate to express his grief. After a concession to the classical model of tragedy, culminating in an almost word-for-word rendition of Euripides’ version of Creon and Creusa’s death, it seems that the prosaic, anti-idealistic genre of the novel reasserts its rights by framing the other genres it has ventriloquized. In fact, the whole meaning of the book hinges on this last “motivation,” an overdetermined notion if ever there was one. A first, straightforward acceptance of the word in this context is the strength of the will to revenge, which alone makes the recourse to the extreme of infanticide possible. The reasons for this revenge are couched in double binds, a symbol of Medea’s alienation: the latter is expressed in her hatred and scorn for a husband she cannot help loving, due to a god’s intervention, and in her destructive love for the children, whom she can neither bear to lose nor to leave to the despicable nonentity that is their father. One cannot help feeling that these psychological rationalizations, which would reduce the legend to a mere crime-section news story, even though it is a potentiality that the text often toys with, are incapable of accounting for the deepest darkness of the final deed. Can this “desperate housewife” scenario be motivation enough for Medea’s tragic “furor”?

Character motivation cannot therefore be understood as purely psychological, obeying the conventions of literary realism. On the contrary, we might detect another form of motivation: hidden historical and intertextual interferences. May not the situation of a woman who despises her lover and commits infanticide as form of mercy to the child remind one of the plantation system, in which black slave women often tried to frustrate the masters of the future slaves they had fathered on them? Such an act could be seen as both revenge and pity. Let us remember that Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* had been published only three years before *For Her Dark Skin*, and that its influence might have warped Everett’s adaptation. We might even find a hidden tribute to the very complex passage of the “men without skin” in the broken delivery of the children’s birth, in which all of Medea’s anger, despair and love are simultaneously expressed:

I
 will
 hold
 hem in my body. Watch them,
 feel them
 dissolve,
 Jason, you bastard.
 But the bastard is not

 here.
 (108)

This fragmented, elongated squeezing of the text, evocative of modernist poetry, emphasizes birth as a traumatic Middle Passage, cryptically reminiscent of the transgressive crossing of the Symplegades into the Black Sea. Even though its visual

display does not correspond to that of Toni Morrison's "Beloved, she's mine" section³¹, the thematic overtones and the formal break in the novel's prose may justify this association. The violence exerted against language, as well as against the original –in converting an exiled princess into a slave– echoes the violence of slavery, hinting at Everett's not-so-hidden agenda in the transposition work.

Another possible "motivation" for the last word of the text is that of genre determinism. As Medea says: "Tragedy has its obligations" (142): this self-reflexive comment hints at the strictures of genre and plot, governing the process of intertextual reference. While the Argonautic Epic is consistently and comically debunked, due to its dovetailing with a culture of dominance, Everett's treatment of tragedy is more ambivalent: it amounts to both a critique and a tribute. His foray into the realm of canonical Western literature first reflects a refusal to be ghettoized into specifically "ethnic" subject matters, such as African myths. This assertion of a "right of inventory" on the Classics, to be continued in his adaptation of Euripides' *The Bacchae* into *Frenzy*, is both a way to claim an inheritance, and to "Africanize" it. This double take on the target texts is very similar to what Postcolonial literary critics call strategies of abrogation and appropriation:

Abrogation is the refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words [...]. Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience, or, as Raja Rao puts it, to 'convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own.'³²

If myth can be considered a form of language, the fact of claiming it and revising it, in a word of Signifyin(g) upon it, is a mode of asserting a position in the culture of the United States, and of demanding a right to criticize it from within. Since the myth of Medea is structured along the dividing line between civilization and barbarism, revisiting it is a way to probe the persistence in Western civilization of this exclusionary rift, and criticize its present manifestations. A stereoscopic, anachronistic reading can form a sort of archaeology of American colonization, slavery, and racism, with a hope to raise awareness as to the repetition of unconscious ideological patterns. This textual revision from the side of the former slaves and "barbarians" amounts to another case of "the Empire" –or the stranger within– "writing back."

By staging this ambiguous confrontation between the past and the present, between fiction and social criticism, Percival Everett only prolongs what the tragic genre itself used to perform within the frame of the Greek city-State: a representation of society, transmogrified through the prism of myth, and a test of its tenets and values.

Tragedy is not only a form of art; it is a social institution which, through the establishment of the tragic contests, the city places next to its political and judicial organs [...] The city becomes a theatre: it takes itself, so to speak, as an object of representation and performs itself in front of the audience [...] [R]ooted in social reality, [...] it does not mirror this reality, but questions it. By presenting it as dithering, divided against itself, it renders its whole being problematic³³.

³¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* [1987], New York, Plume, Penguin books, 1988, pp. 200-204.

³² B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in post-Colonial Literatures*, London, Routledge, 1989, pp. 38-39.

³³ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce antique* [1972], Paris, La Découverte, 1995, p. 24-25 (my translation).

The dialogical ethos that Mikhail Bakhtin defined as the leading characteristic of the novel also seems to belong to the ancient genre of tragedy, together with its political, critical dimension. Not only are conflicting existential attitudes pitted against each other; part of the diatribe is also a confrontation with the city's cultural past, as embodied in certain literary genres. Everett's novel stands in relation to the antiquated genre of tragedy just as ancient tragedy did to myth and the epic – with of course the added twist that the two antagonists have become three.

So that within each protagonist one can find this already-noted tension between past and present, the universe of myth and that of the city. The same tragic character appears, now projected into a remote mythical past, as a hero from a bygone age, imbued with redoubtable religious power, embodying all the excesses of the old legendary kings – now speaking, thinking, living in the very age of the city, like an Athenian “bourgeois” among his fellow citizens³⁴.

In a word, the language of tragedy, like that of *For Her dark Skin*, is a Signifyin(g) anachronism. If the heterogeneity of Medea's “motivation” results from her position at the intersection of several of these conflicting generic programs, so does the ambiguous, multi-layered quality of both the original and parodic texts. After all, Euripides – much more than Seneca – draws the audience's sympathy towards Medea, thanks to, among other means, the intervention of a female chorus that becomes a partial accomplice to her deeds. At the same time as it posits the dichotomies between Greek and barbarian, man and woman, rationality and irrationality, the tragedy subverts them, therefore questioning the very values that were at the core of the city's ethos.

Although drama was held to the rules governing all public discourse, its unlimited range of characters both mythical and topical could voice issues, concerns, and arguments that ranged beyond what was possible in other public venues or for which there was no other public outlet at all. While the Periclean democracy championed a public and egalitarian ideology, and kept the private and family worlds as much as possible out of sight, drama focused on households and individuals, who moreover were often sympathetically at odds with the collective polis or its leaders; comedy in particular could voice criticism and advice that was both topical and sharply partisan. And while the democracy prized, and indeed depended on, rationality, self-sufficiency, progress and novelty, drama in the name of the gods and tradition cast all these into question. But in the end, it is hard to imagine that Athenian drama could have flourished as it did under any other system³⁵.

Everett's novel can therefore be considered as a critical parody, from a contemporary perspective, of a traditional vision of the Classics, gloating in the excellence and supremacy of “timeless” Western culture. But it is also a tribute to the complexity and richness of Euripides's writing. Whatever our appreciation of myths, either as irreplaceable glimpses into the human psyche, or as structures of thought that survive for the worse in contemporary ideologies, one common definition of literature seems to stem from the confrontation between Everett and Euripides: a subversive, critical probing of the accepted truths of society, especially when encoded in canonical narratives. Could this not also be an apt definition of the writer's “motivation”?

Works Cited

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

³⁵ Jeffrey Henderson, “Drama and Democracy,” SAMONS, Loren J. ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*, New York, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 192-193.

- EVERETT, Percival. *For Her Dark Skin*. Seattle, Owl Creek Press, 1990.
- . *Frenzy*. Saint Paul, Min., Graywolf Press, 1997.
- . *Glyph*. Saint Paul, Min., Graywolf Press, 1999.
- . *The Water Cure*. Saint Paul, Min., Graywolf Press, 2007.
- APOLLONIUS RHODIUS. *The Argonautica*. Trans. R.C. Seaton, 1912. Electronic Classics Series. Pennsylvania State University, 2012.
<http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/apolloni/argonaut.pdf>. Visited 10/22/2012.
- ASHCROFT, B., GRIFFITHS, G., TIFFIN, H., *The Empire Writes Back : Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London, Routledge, 1989.
- BARLOW, Joel. *The Columbiad: A Poem* [1809]. Project Gutenberg, 2005.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8clmb10h.htm>. Visited 06/30/2013.
- BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 1981.
- BLEIKASTEN, André. *The Ink of Melancholy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- BERCOVITCH, Sacvan. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975.
- BIRAT, Kathie. “Ordinary Voices: The Mocking of Myth in *For Her Dark Skin*.” JULIEN, Claude and Anne-Laure TISSUT, eds. *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*. CRAFT n°4. Tours, Université de Tours, 2007. 81-89.
- DE CERTEAU, Michel. *L'écriture de l'histoire*. Paris, Gallimard, 1975.
- DENTITH, Simon. *Parody*. London, Routledge, 2000.
- DUPONT, Florence. *Médée de Sénèque, ou comment sortir de l'humanité*. Paris, Belin, 2000.
- EURIPIDES. *Medea*. Trans. Rex Warner. New York, Dover, 1993.
- GATES, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.
- GRAY, Martin. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Beirut, York Press / Longman, 1992.
- HENDERSON, Jeffrey. “Drama and Democracy.” SAMONS, Loren J. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*. New York, Cambridge UP, 2007. 179-195.
- LEVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *Anthropologie structurale*. Paris, Plon, [1958] 1974.
- LUKACS, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* [1920]. Trans. Anna Bostock. London, The Merlin Press, 1971.
- LUKACS, Georg. *The Historical Novel* [1937]. Trans. Hanna and Stanley Mitchell. London, The Merlin Press, 1962.
- MOREAU, Alain. *Le mythe de Jason et Médée: Le va-nu-pied et la sorcière*. Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1994.
- MORRISON Toni. *Beloved* [1987]. New York, Plume, Penguin books, 1988.
- PAZ, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Trans. Lysander Kemp. New York, Grove Press, 1961.
- RANCIERE, Jacques. *Politique de la littérature*. Paris, Galilée, 2007.
- RHODES, P.J. “Democracy and Empire.” SAMONS, Loren J. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*. New York, Cambridge UP, 2007. 24-45.
- SALE, Kirkpatrick. *Christopher Columbus and the Conquest of Paradise* [1990]. London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2006.
- SENECA, Lucius Annaeus. *Medea*. Trans. Frank Justus Miller. Theoi E-Text Library.
<http://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaMedea.html>. Visited 10-22-2012.
- VANDER, Robin G. “When the Text becomes a Stage: Percival Everett’s Performance Turn in *For Her Dark Skin*.” MITCHELL, Keith B. and Robin G. VANDER, eds. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. Jackson, UP Mississippi. 2013. 139-151.
- VERNANT, Jean-Pierre and Pierre VIDAL-NAQUET. *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce antique* [1972]. Paris, La Découverte, 1995.