

Classical mythology in contemporary US theater: materials, aesthetics, limitations

In this course, we will engage with adaptation theory in general and zoom in on the contemporary adaptation of classical mythology. In the first half, we will specifically look into the work of Sarah Ruhl, one of the most-produced living US playwrights. In addition to discussing her plays *Eurydice* – currently produced by the University Players – and *Melancholy Play*, we will engage with her aesthetics more broadly and take our cues from her essay collection *100 Essays I Don't Have Time To Write* and Amy Muse's *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*.

In the second half of the course, we will critically address limitations of contemporary mythological adaptation and consider their always already implied Humanist universalism vis-à-vis the discursive and political racial structures they are often intended to critique. Our reading of Jim Magnuson's play *African Medea* will be guided by Jaye Austin Williams and her essay "Medea's (Black) Cast," introducing the participants to the afropessimist lens of analysis. Afropessimism's critique of structural anti-Black violence is radical. If you are wary about discussing afropessimism (and antiblackness as a concept) with a white, male lecturer, please reach out in advance and we will look for ways of addressing this.

At the end of this course, participants will have familiarized themselves with adaptation theory, a range of mythological stories and characters as well as with different forms in which those are presented on the contemporary stage. They will have actively and creatively engaged with various dramatic texts and be in the position to analyze and determine some of the fundamental cultural implications that come with seemingly universal myths and procedures of theatrical adaptation.

Guests

These guests will join the seminar via Zoom for one session each:

- Amy M. Muse, Professor of English at the University of St. Thomas and author of *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl* (Methuen 2018)
- Jaye Austin Williams, scholar, director, playwright, and prospective chair of Critical Black Studies at Bucknell University

Course requirements

Participants are required to watch the University Players production EURYDICE (8/9 and 23/24 May at the Hamburger Sprechwerk, special seminar discount: 8 € per ticket).

Further requirements are regular attendance (2 absences max.) and knowledge of the texts before we enter their discussion.

Course assignments

Possible course assignments include:

- presenting and discussing one of the selected plays, mythological stories, or secondary texts,
- organizing and preparing the Q&A and discussion with one of our guest speakers,
- writing an article for the UP News blog relating to the play EURYDICE,
- producing a podcast episode guided by host Aaron Gowen with a philosophical perspective (*A Million Little Thoughts* / amillionlittletoughts.substack.com)*

Course assignments must be chosen on (April 15th) at the latest. If anything from the reading list below catches your attention already, please contact me in advance.

Reading list

The list may be modified according to participants' interests within the fields of inquiry. Not all participants need to prepare all texts in detail. All materials will be provided.

- Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Mariner 2016. (excerpts)
- Euripides. "Medea." *Medea and Other Plays*, translated by Philip Vellacott. Penguin 2004.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge 2006. (excerpts)
- Ruhl, Sarah. "Melancholy Play." *The Clean House and other plays*. TCG 2006.
- . "Eurydice" in *The Clean House and other plays*. TCG 2006.
- . *100 Essays I Don't Have Time To Write*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2015. (excerpts)
- Magnuson, Jim. "African Medea." *Black Medea: Adaptations for Modern Plays*, edited by Kevin Wetmore, Cambria 2023.
- Muse, Amy. *The Drama and Theater of Sarah Ruhl*. Methuen Drama 2018. (excerpts)
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Translated by Stephanie McCarter. Penguin 2023. (excerpts)
- Wilderson, Frank III. "Afropessimism and the ruse of analogy: violence, freedom struggles and the death of black desire." *Antiblackness*, edited by Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas. Duke 2021.
- Williams, Jaye A. "Medea's (Black) Cast: On Dishonor and the Limits of Freedom Dreams, God's Machines and Narrative Transposition." *Pacific Coast Philology* vol. 56, no. 1, 2021.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument." *The New Centennial Review* vol. 3, no. 3, Fall 2003. (excerpts)