

Melodrama and the "Political Unconscious" in Two African Plays

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SINCE ITS INCEPTION at the very end of the eighteenth century, melodrama has been the dominant dramatic genre, its suzerainty reinforced in the present century as it extended itself from the stage to film and television. In its "classic" form, melodrama is marked by a rhetorical extravagance or excess, the characters giving uninhibited utterance, whenever and wherever possible, to their innermost thoughts and feelings. Not that these usually reveal any psychological depth or subtlety of characterization: melodramatic characters are typically constituted of a few simple and unmistakable traits that unambiguously signal their natures and prescribe our attitudes towards them. The action is usually sensational, frequently involving the apparently irresistible threat to innocence posed by evil and the eventual triumph, against all the odds, of the former. This conflict between good and evil, presented in clear-cut and absolute terms, is at the heart of the melodramatic vision and its dramatic form. They are projected as indubitably real and essentially unproblematic forces, playing out their eternal antagonism through human agents whose moral natures are whole and unambiguous. Not only is melodrama a drama of morality, in which the immanence of moral forces is insisted upon, it is also a moralistic drama in the sense that the ethical *agon* typically culminates in the triumph of good over its antagonist. Despite appearances, this is true even in the "melodrama of defeat"²¹ whose ending offers the pathetic spectacle of the suffering, and usually death, of the virtuous protagonist(s): though the particular embodiment of good may have been destroyed, the evil agent is frequently also vanquished, and if only negatively the enduring power and superiority of virtue is asserted.

The intense emotionalism of "classic" melodrama and its presentation of a clear-cut ethical conflict are inseparably linked. Melodrama makes its audience feel; and what it characteristically feels is sympathy and admiration for the personification of good and fear and hatred for the representative of the forces of darkness. The spectators are encouraged to participate in a fundamental, highly personalized and affectively charged moral drama, in which the existence of diametrically opposed ethical forces is identified and asserted. This is as true of the melodramatic products of the contemporary studios of Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Calcutta as of their nineteenth-century theatrical predecessor, however much the subject-matter, style and texture may have changed. It remains very largely true, I believe, of that "superior" but nevertheless popular drama on television and in the cinema which combines, in a complex and often ambiguous way, elements of the modern traditions of both melodrama and naturalism. For even in sophisticated melodrama, where cognizance is taken of the actual complexity of ethical and psychological experience, it is not that the real presence of right and wrong is rendered problematic, or that the pleasures of empathy with persecuted virtue are withheld, but that the identification of the ethical forces with individuals or institutions or classes is unorthodox, or allowed to be to some degree questionable or uncertain.

By virtue of its characteristic conjunction of intense moralism and heightened emotionalism melodrama seems to offer a particularly fruitful approach to that area of social existence where the most basic hopes, anxieties and inhibitions reside. If melodrama is "the Naturalism of the dream life," as Eric Bentley declared,² it must surely provide a window through which we can scrutinize those normally obscure places in the collective audience psyche which respond so powerfully to the affective charge carried by successful melodrama. For this reason, if for no other, melodrama in its theatrical and other artistic and more generally cultural forms deserves more sustained and detailed study than it receives. One reason for its relative neglect is perhaps that its ostensible simplicity of form and effect conceals the underlying complexity of its nature and functions. Most melo-

drama may seem, psychologically, to be little if anything more than collective wish-fulfilment and its ideological function to be restricted to the manipulation of affective assent to ethical attitudes of a fairly straightforward if variable nature. If this were really the case critical indifference to the genre would be understandable, even justified. But Eric Bentley's piquant phrase suggests that there is considerably more to it than this; and in any case such a characterization does not go far in explaining why a clearly identifiable form of drama came into being when it did and has flourished, in a recognizably generic evolution, ever since, or why it is that audiences have so strong a proclivity for the moralistic emotionalism that typifies the genre.

In his thought-provoking study of melodrama in the nineteenth-century theatre and its influence on the novel, Peter Brooks has argued that melodrama

starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue.³

The beginnings of modern theatrical melodrama in France coincided with the dissolution of the hierarchical, traditionalist state and its institutions and ideological myths with the Revolution. Melodrama comes into existence as a recognizable modern genre

in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern. (p. 15)

Having lost what Brooks calls its "traditional Sacred," "the explanatory and cohesive force of sacred myth" and its implicit ethics, society must identify and articulate the continued presence of the psychic certitudes by which men live through the exercise of the moral and spiritualist imagination. The melodramatic mode, claims Brooks, "becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era" (p. 15).

Stimulating though it is, there are difficulties with this kind of argument. One is the problem that cultural criticism in general has with arguments asserting a widespread and far-reaching shift

in collective "lived" experience, which is that however plausible the alleged change may be it is notoriously hard to substantiate such qualitative alterations in consciousness with concrete, quantitative evidence. A more serious problem, however, is presented by Brooks' philosophical idealism, his readiness to posit the existence of the "Sacred" or its ethical and affective substitutes as an apparently permanent and necessary feature of social life. Even if one were to grant that all societies everywhere cannot dispense with a system of mythic explanation and the compelling emotional commitment and ethical assent associated with it, or else with an affective substitute for it, it would still be necessary to consider whether the "Sacred" is experienced in essentially the same way by everybody in the society, or whether it is "lived" in a variety of, perhaps, contradictory ways depending on the class position of the subject. The question would be especially urgent, one would suppose, in the aftermath of revolution or in a period of intense social disturbance and conflict.

The notion, itself plausible and interesting, that melodrama expresses both the pervasive anxiety and the desire for ethical certitude in modern, or "modernizing," societies must be tested against, and substantiated by, specific analysis of the historical, ideological functioning of the mode in particular contexts. In what follows I propose to use Brooks' idea, in a suitably modified and extended form, in examining two African plays, both dramatizing moments from the national past which are felt to be of particular historical significance, and both exploiting the melodramatic mode. My interest in the plays, Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, is largely centred on what I take to be their symptomatic significance: though differing widely in intention, tone and effect, they share a dependence on melodrama which strikes me as a pervasive and distinctive feature of much literary African drama. The view that melodrama functions as a substitute for the loss or impairment of the binding force of traditionalist myths and their ethical accompaniments in a rapidly and radically changing society may well be applicable to contemporary Africa and to some of its literature and drama. At the same time, however, I will argue that within this general

function the melodrama of our two plays fulfils quite specific, and quite different, ideological purposes.

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Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, described by its author as "an historical tragedy," tells the story of the downfall of the ruler of the Benin Empire at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ Rotimi's explicit purpose is to correct the bias of colonialist historiography, in which Ovonramwen, according to the dramatist, has been portrayed as "the most abominable sadist" ("Background," p. xi), and to show him as a man more sinned against than sinning. The figure of the Oba, not surprisingly, dominates the play, so that everyone and everything in it is seen in relation to him and through the emotional filter of the audience's relationship with him. That *Ovonramwen* is melodramatic — belongs, more specifically, to the "melodrama of defeat" — can be demonstrated by bringing out the particular nature of the empathy created between the audience and the protagonist, and the characteristically melodramatic affective moralism that proceeds from it.

Ovonramwen's emotional attraction consists in the pathos of a powerful, richly-endowed personality who is undeservedly brought low by antagonists who are physically stronger but not of the same heroic stature as himself. Despite his noble personal qualities, Ovonramwen is defeated by forces outside his control — primarily by what is presented as the white colonialists' insatiable appetite for commerce and profit. The power antagonistic to the Oba is portrayed as inexorable. Just before the murderers of Uwangue Egiebo are hustled away, one of them, Obaruduagbon, calls out to Ovonramwen: "Today is your day: tomorrow belongs to another!"; while a second, Esasoyen, cries: "Indeed: the Whiteman who is stronger than you will soon come!" (p. 6). The divination of the Ifa Priest reinforces this first hint of an eventual reversal in the Oba's fortunes (pp. 14-16), and in the course of the play the Priest's doom-laden words are intoned aloud, as though echoing in Ovonramwen's mind — on one occasion in conjunction with Esasoyen's prophecy (p. 37). Even his final capture and defeat are augured by

his dream, a "fearful" dream, in which he is betrayed by his own chiefs. Through such devices, Rotimi strives to create the impression that Ovonramwen Nogbaisi is the victim of forces that he cannot control or defeat, whatever his efforts.

The dramatist is careful, however, to show the Oba doing everything in his power to respond effectively to the threat against Benin, and to distance him from responsibility for, or participation in, the actual process of defeat. There is an indication at the beginning of the play, through the one character — Uzazakpo — who is able to speak bluntly to Ovonramwen, that his rule depends too much on fear rather than loyalty, and that he deals too harshly with his own chiefs when some of them plead for mercy on behalf of the prisoners. Even so, he is shown as acting wisely in the conflict between the Elders and the new Enogie of Ekpoma. And as the Ifa Priest advises, Ovonramwen tries to exercise caution so as to counteract the dire prophecies of fire, blood and dead bodies. He also takes the necessary military precautions against the possibility of a surprise attack by the white men, and he follows Uzazakpo's advice in making a wise political union with Ologbosere by marrying him to his daughter. Rotimi is careful to dissociate Ovonramwen from the failure of these precautions. His chiefs are shown as acting incautiously and on their own initiative, against the Oba's declared policy: Ovonramwen's reaction to the spectacle of the white men's severed heads is "*lethargic horror*" (stage direction, p. 37) and the warning that "Benin . . . has this day swallowed a long pestle; now we shall have to sleep standing upright" (p. 37).

Without blame for the fall of his empire, Ovonramwen displays an admirably stoical attitude in defeat. He refuses to leave his palace until the last moment. When he comes out of hiding and surrenders to the British, he undergoes the humiliation of being made to "pay homage in native fashion" (p. 53) and of having Consul-General Moor driving home his powerlessness by ordering the deaths of seven chiefs in revenge for the killing of seven white men. Ovonramwen's response is to remove his crown and pay homage "for Benin" (p. 54), and to make a dignified speech emphasizing his friendship to the white man but justifying his fears when he became aware of their seizure of other chiefs

and their obsession with trade. His conclusion, that his "chiefs did wrong in killing your people" but that the white men brought the killings on themselves by their foolish behaviour (p. 60), is unexceptionable. The audience's sympathy for Ovonramwen is reinforced by his decision to escape and resume the struggle rather than accept ignominious exile in Calabar. And the sense of pathos is heightened by such details as the nature of the hut that the Oba has to hide in, which is a mere yam house hastily constructed by the watchman, and his accepting reaction ("It does not matter") despite Uzazakpo's indignation. Betrayed by his own chiefs, as his dream foretold, he is heroically stoical even at the moment of capture: he refuses to run and assures his captors that he will not struggle, but in spirit he remains defiant enough to make a sarcastic comment which stings his white conquerors (p. 78). The final mimed tableau with its poignant lament recalls the suffering of Ovonramwen's prisoners in the "Prologue," and points up the pathetic irony that the mighty ruler of the Benin Empire has now been brought comparably low.

The dramatist reinforces the audience's emotional identification with Oba Ovonramwen through his portrayal of the white men. They are shown as at first concealing their real intentions beneath a display of friendship, though Gallwey and Hutton are unable to hide their bewilderment when Ovonramwen refuses to sign the trade treaty. Their deceptiveness is revealed by their trick of hiding their weapons as they approach Benin (p. 29); and their real motivation is made quite clear by Vice-Consul Phillips in answer to his colleagues' reservations about trying to enter Benin in haste and in spite of the Oba's objections:

Commerce, Mr. Campbell! That is your answer! The conduct of trade in the Colonies demands direct contact with the interior that produces the goods! . . . for how long, gentlemen, must British trade policy remain crippled by the whims and ritual taboos of a fetish Priest-King? Forever? What then are we in Africa for? What object brings us here? Commerce, gentlemen! Commerce brought us to Africa; commerce determines our actions in Africa! And action means: taking risks, gentlemen! Now get that into your heads! (pp. 31-32)

At the fall of Benin the whites are depicted as rapacious in the

extreme: Moor and his men are shown as ransacking the Oba's palace, "*greedily removing elephant-tusks, carvings and bronze-work from the palace shrine*" and leaving furtively, "*overburdened by the looted treasures*" (stage directions, p. 45). They are also hypocritical and vindictive, their high-minded sentiments belied by their overbearing arrogance and punitive treatment of Ovonramwen, his public humiliations and the decision to kill his chiefs in retaliation. Indeed, Moor behaves almost maniacally when his prisoner escapes, threatening to burn down all the houses in Benin and kill all the chiefs unless he is brought back.

The audience's emotional sympathies are thus enlisted on the side of Ovonramwen in his struggle against the colonialists. And this emotional response is linked to the manipulation of the audience's moral sentiments: empathizing with Ovonramwen, we are invited to see him as embodying "right"; despising the British, we are encouraged to identify them as "bad." Our ethical as well as emotional sympathies are thus set in motion, with implications that we must now consider.

The audience's attachment to Ovonramwen is more than sympathy directed at a particular individual vanquished by a physically superior antagonist. Ovonramwen Nogbaisi was the ruler of the Benin Empire, and this historical fact is emphasized, and given a careful dramatic treatment, in Rotimi's play. In the course of the action, Oba Ovonramwen comes to be identified with certain values with which the audience is encouraged to identify in proportion with its empathy for the protagonist.

In the first scene, for example, a powerful impression of Ovonramwen's character is created by his ruthless treatment of the rebels and his resolve to take a firm line with troublemakers in future:

Let the land know this: Ovonramwen Nogbaisi is henceforth set to rule as king after the manner of his fathers before him. Some men there are who think that, by honour of years, or the power of position, or by too much love for trouble, they can dull the fullness of my glow and bring darkness on the empire! But they forget. . . . They forget that no matter how long and stout the human neck, on top of it must always sit a head. Henceforth, a full moon's, my glow — dominant, and unopen to rivalry throughout the empire. (pp. 6-7)

A speech like this, taken in conjunction with the impact of the scene as a whole, forcefully conveys a suggestive set of associations: the Oba as a "firm" ruler; strong leadership as a natural necessity; a tradition of strong leadership in Benin; Ovonramwen as a "firm" ruler in that tradition. In the course of the play this set of associations, and others, are dramatically reinforced and extended. For example, we see Ovonramwen combining strong rule with political wisdom in promoting Benin's political unity when he takes Uzazakpo's advice and marries his daughter to Ologbosere. And the Oba's identification with his empire and its well-being is reinforced by the scene in Act Two in which he bears the "ada," the symbol of the Benin empire, to his son-in-law with the solemn words:

I put in your hands,
the spirit of the empire.
Let it live,
let it breathe . . .
This is the life of the nation. (p. 41)

In this manner, Ovonramwen comes to embody values which the audience, without being consciously aware of it, is seduced into favouring as a sort of side-product of its empathy with the Oba: the values, in short, of a traditional, hierarchical society with its "natural" head, who gives strong, paternalistic leadership and who is seen as embodying the life of the nation.

Rotimi does not define very precisely what these values are, nor does he create dramatic room for discussion or debate about them. His impulse is more vague, but also more insidiously powerful in its effect: for his purpose is not to consider the nature of the values of traditional society but to arouse in the audience a regretful nostalgia for its passing, for the loss of a settled, "natural," hierarchical, essentially "right" society which was brutally destroyed by an alien force. The Oba and Benin stand for everything that the white men do not: for the contrary of their alien commercial rapacity (tribute being a different thing), their fanatical will to dominate others in the pursuit of profit (which is not to be compared with the central authority of the Oba), their vulgar obsession with inner tubes and tires (in contrast with the spirituality of the traditional way of life). Rotimi's

stated aim is to correct “the biases of Colonial History” (p. xi), but one wonders if the desire for historical accuracy was uppermost in his mind, even if the play is generally faithful to the facts of history. For his concern with the past seems to have been primarily animated by the desire to create a fictional dramatic world which is the scene of a stark conflict between a recognizable good and an equally recognizable evil. Even though “right” must be shown as historically defeated, the audience is invited, through its empathy with Ovonramwen, to identify itself with it, to see in the historical conflict the existence and operation of unambiguous ethical forces.

If the forces of evil are necessarily shown as victorious, there is nevertheless a sense in which, despite its historical defeat, the melodramatic mode of the play permits “right” to triumph. For the drama itself functions as the medium through which the vanquished social and cultural tradition lives on as a sympathetic ideal in the audience’s mind, manifestly superior in everything but physical strength to its historical antagonist. Central to this process, as we have seen, is Rotimi’s skill in presenting Ovonramwen as a strong dramatic character, who can dominate the stage and make an impressive, if essentially simple, impact on the audience. (This is so in spite of the absence of psychological complexity in the character; indeed, precisely because of the lack of such complexity.) The values of the society of the Benin Empire, the values of “before colonialism,” are epitomized in the personality of Oba Ovonramwen. Like Kurunmi, in another of the dramatist’s “historical tragedies,” Ovonramwen is both the advocate and the embodiment of “tradition.” The “richness” of the Oba’s character, like that of the Yoruba generalissimo’s, cannot be separated from the “richness” of the tradition of which he is the bearer. In the process of empathizing with both characters, the audience identifies emotionally with “tradition” and its vague but compelling values, and aligns itself ethically with them against the historical villain, in the case of *Ovonramwen Ngbaisi* the brutal, alien force that destroys tradition and its noblest representative.

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There are obvious differences between Rotimi's play and Ngugi and Mugo's *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.⁵ The Kenyan play contrasts sharply in tone: it has a pronounced rhetorical and didactic flavour, and a polemical ardour not found in Rotimi's plays, with their reliance on stronger, conventional "entertainment values." The tonal divergence is evidently related to the different purposes and political auspices of the two plays: *Dedan Kimathi* is an expression of radical left-wing nationalism, vociferous in its denunciation of neo-colonialism and the Kenyan bourgeoisie's collusion in it, and its overt aim is to stir up the Kenyan masses to fight, by violent means if necessary, against it; *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, on the other hand, while certainly a product of cultural nationalism, displays no obviously radical politics and is clearly designed, first and foremost, for the edification of élite Nigerian audiences.

And yet, despite their differences, there is an essential similarity in the way the two plays work on their audiences which relates to the characteristic conjunction of moralism and emotionalism in the melodramatic mode to which, in different tonalities, they both belong. As with Rotimi's play, the emotional appeal of *Dedan Kimathi* consists in the spectacle of the sufferings of a blameless protagonist with whom the audience is invited to identify. Like Oba Ovonramwen, Dedan Kimathi is the victim of an imperialism which he struggles heroically to counteract but which finally destroys him: his only weakness is in any other context a virtue — love and mercifulness to those closest to him, who nevertheless betray him. On trial for his life before a hostile court, Kimathi is like Ovonramwen in his stoicism, which in no way, however, implies resigned submission. He refuses to be influenced by the attempts to seduce him away from the cause he leads: like Ovonramwen, albeit in far more vehement terms, he addresses his captors and acusers, indicting them for their crimes and exhorting the masses to continue the struggle.

The Kenyan dramatists, like Rotimi, reinforce empathy with their heroic protagonist through their portrayal of his enemies. The imperialists are much more full-bloodedly villainous than in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*: they are portrayed as hysterically racist, for example in the outburst of the white settler, whom the stage

direction describes as “foaming with rage like a madman” (p. 29), in the court. Though Moor and his compatriots are depicted as callous in their humiliation of Ovonramwen, they are far from being the brutal torturers of *Dedan Kimathi*. The audience is invited to feel nothing but disgust and contempt for the whites and their black and Indian stooges, whose various attempts to “tempt” Kimathi are shown as obviously determined by economic considerations. Most emotive of all, perhaps, considering the Kenyan audience for which the play was originally written, is Kimathi’s betrayal by his brother and close associates, despite his initially merciful attitude towards him. Kimathi’s torture by the white colonialists and their allies doubtless stirs a black audience; but the spectacle of his betrayal and martyrdom by those who should be his cohorts in the struggle is likely to arouse the strongest emotions and establish an especially powerful empathy.

Like Ovonramwen, then, Kimathi wins the audience’s whole-hearted emotional sympathy, which is inseparable from the arousal of its moral sentiments. In the process, the Mau Mau leader is made to embody certain values with which the audience identifies as it responds to the hero’s emotional “charge.” These values are more specific, and more specifically political, than in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. Dedan Kimathi incarnates the struggle for national liberation and the political values associated with it. To ensure that these values make their strongest possible impression on the audience, the Kenyan dramatists have drawn on Christian mythology and its quintessentially melodramatic narrative and symbols.

Throughout the play, Kimathi is presented as a Christ-figure whose heroic struggle against evil, whose temptations, betrayal, trial and condemnation all parallel the redemptive life and sufferings of Jesus. Kimathi is a doer of miracles, metaphorically if not quite literally, on behalf of the Kenyan masses; faith in his cause can achieve the apparently impossible. The Woman makes an explicit connection between the Christian call and the “call of our people” (p. 19); and Kimathi implicitly likens himself to the Saviour when he accuses his betrayers: “Thirty piece of silver. / Judases. Traitors” (p. 79). During his “temptations” and trial, he is forced to undergo the same humiliations and

sufferings as Christ, and the same attempts to divert him from his redemptive function. And the breaking of the bread in the courtroom to reveal the instrument of redemption, the gun, is an evident allusion to Christian symbolism, and a striking transference of its redemptive theology to the secular, revolutionary arena.

The struggle for national liberation is thus invested by the Kenyan dramatists with specifically religious connotations, including a martyred redeemer. The affective power of the Christian myth, and of the sacrificial Christ-figure, is exploited to lend emotional and ethical force to the authors' call for a continuation, inspired by the memory of Kimathi, of the anti-imperialist struggle in Kenya. This struggle, and the values that it and its leading martyr embody, are shown as being ultimately successful. Unlike *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, *Dedan Kimathi* offers more than the spectacle of pathetic defeat: it includes a countervailing "triumph" movement, in which the woman successfully politicizes the boy and girl, culminating in the final tableau in which "a mighty crowd of workers and peasants" are seen and heard "singing a thunderous freedom song" (p. 84). There is no nostalgic regret here, as in the Nigerian play, but an assertive presentation of the supposedly certain ultimate victory of right.

For all its differences in tone and mood from Rotimi's play, *Dedan Kimathi* can nevertheless thus be seen as sharing a common method of manipulating the audience's emotional participation in what is presented as a conflict between an indubitable good and an equally indubitable evil. Every moment of the play, every word and gesture, is charged with a heightened sense of this conflict. A fundamental ethical drama is laid bare, brought to declamatory revelation, in every character and situation and speech. And, as in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, the figure of the protagonist performs a crucial function in the articulation of the moral drama. Like *Ovonramwen*, *Kimathi* is a "strong" dramatic character, whose qualities are clearly evident and stridently declared, who embodies right and stands in stark opposition to antagonists who equally transparently embody wrong. If *Ovonramwen* (or *Kurunmi*), to put it summarily, embodies tradition in his capacious though simple personality, *Kimathi* embodies the

national revolution, the anti-imperialist struggle, in his. The attempt to show Kimathi as wracked by doubts about the value and outcome of the struggle, though structurally important, is dramatically unconvincing: in spite of the “temptations” and his “doubts” he never shows the least convincing inclination to deviate from the revolutionary way. The dramatic flaw here seems to be due to more than a failure of technique: the dramatists seem to have been aware, however dimly, that the complication of Kimathi’s character represented by real self-questioning and self-doubt threatened to affect the basic emotional impact and “message” of their play.

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Both our plays, then, in their different ways, articulate and assert the immanence of good and evil in the historical conflicts that they dramatize, and encourage their audiences to empathize with what is identified as goodness, even in defeat (or apparent defeat, as in *Dedan Kimathi*). Neither play can be said to give obvious expression to the putative anxiety feelings of its audience, at least not in the relatively transparent way in which certain melodramatic soap-operas manipulate their viewers’ anxieties — for example, about sickness and death, in certain medical species of the genre. Nevertheless, both plays are concerned with the vanquishing of the indigenous social order and its values by the brutal alien forces of colonialism — *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* directly and *Dedan Kimathi* indirectly, through its dramatization of the struggle to be rid of the victorious colonialist enemy. In both we witness, though at different phases of the process, a “disruption” of history, a brutal overturning or negation of indigenous traditional life, with its own “natural” development and values. In this respect, both plays centrally engage with the historical “rupture” of colonialism and thus cannot help but respond to some at least of the tensions and contradictions which those people under its sway experience, even if unconsciously, as a living reality.

But this way of looking at the matter is speculative and in any case remote from the audiences’ actual reactions to the plays. We need to give some substance to the argument that the melodra-

matic mode gives expression to pervasive anxiety feelings and to come closer, at the same time, to a specific description of what our plays do for their audiences at the psychological and ideological level.

Empathizing with the protagonist, the audience of *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* experiences regretful nostalgia for the passing of the culture and values embodied in Ovonramwen and antagonism towards the colonialists and their ruthless commercialism. This rendering of history, with its muted but powerful emotional effect, does not occur in a socio-historical vacuum. Having its première performance in 1971, its portrayal of history coincides with a period of Nigerian history when the ideal of national independence had been severely compromised, in reality, by the Civil War and the political and economic intervention of the big powers, with both Nigerian and Biafran collusion. With the end of the war and the advent of the oil boom, the Nigerian élite's highly profitable participation in the neo-colonialist economic order was entering on what was to prove an increasingly intense phase, bringing that class, with its already intricate factional conflicts, into complexly contradictory relations with both its foreign capitalist partners and their commercial institutions and agents, and its indigenous proletariat and peasantry.

In this context, the primary ideological function of Rotimi's play, achieved with the indispensable assistance of melodramatic affectivity, is to provide the imaginary exoneration of the élite (including its representative audience) from blame for Nigeria's participation in neo-colonialism. Dependent on the economic benefits of this order, participating increasingly in its concomitant social values and life-style, the élite is reassured, through its empathy with Oba Ovonramwen, that it is the innocent inheritor of an historical legacy, not the guilty because willing participant in neo-colonialism. Its noble forebears were unable, despite heroic resistance, to oppose the first encroachments of what, in a later stage of development, was to become this economic and political system. One can then only mourn Ovonramwen's historical defeat, secure in the knowledge that subsequent history, at least in this respect, could not have been otherwise. At the same time, the élite audience can participate,

again through its self-identification with Ovonramwen, in a "pure" and authentic African culture and value-system, despite the cultural and social effects of its collusion in neo-colonialism.

The purpose of *Dedan Kimathi* is obviously very far from being the ideological consolation of the Kenyan élite, which is portrayed as the enemy of Kimathi and the willing collaborator with colonialism. Indeed, the play is a fervent protest against neo-colonialism, a call to renew the struggle for a genuine national liberation. It seems to have been inspired by, and certainly calls forth, an extreme loathing of the white settlers and their black and Asian bourgeois allies. (The portrayal of the Indian banker, with his caricatured accent, seems to reinforce a racism which the authors are purportedly denouncing.) *Dedan Kimathi* thus has an overt polemical intention, in contrast with the Nigerian play; but its very fervour, which at times becomes hysteria, and the dramatists' decision to focus dramatically on the martyrdom of a Christ-figure, in the context of sustained religious imagery, also suggests an unconscious (or only partly conscious) ideological function related to the specific socio-historical circumstances of the play's writing and production.

I suggest that the rhetorical excess of *Dedan Kimathi* is in proportion to the absence of any mass-based political movement in Kenya capable of realizing successfully the political objectives advocated by the play. Unable to make an appeal to any really existing oppositional force in Kenyan politics, unable to delineate or assume the existence of any mass movement dedicated to the overthrow of neo-colonialism, the dramatists resort to an over-compensatory rhetorical mode, in which the affective force generated by the drama breaks through, so to speak, an unpropitious reality to celebrate an emotive but imaginary liberation. As the atheist may say of religious fervour, that it is never so great as when the God invoked is at his most absent, so *Dedan Kimathi* exploits the rhetorical excess characteristic of melodrama to depict and celebrate a kind of liberation which is not within immediate prospect in Kenya. Lacking a real revolutionary party or movement to give substance to their dream, the Kenyan dramatists must resort — like Rotimi, but for very different reasons — to the cult of personality, epitomizing revolutionary strug-

gle and redemption in the person of Kimathi. As Christ-like redeemer, he is possessed of a virtually magical, miracle-working power which in effect transcends historical limitation, even though the authors can truthfully assert that they are making no greater literal claim than that Kimathi's example is an inspiration to the struggling masses.

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The interpretations offered above are meant to be no more than suggestive beginnings, indications of a kind of "political unconscious" which underlies both plays and which is in tension with their ostensible meanings and purposes. A much fuller analysis, dramatic and socio-historical, is undoubtedly required to give substance to the basic argument about melodrama and the particular interpretations of the plays that I have outlined. But my discussion has perhaps sufficed to suggest that the serious study of the melodrama can be an especially fruitful area of cultural investigation, not only in literary works but as it is manifested in such spheres as print journalism, in the presentations of radio and television, and even in the public imagery and spectacle of political life. And if there is any validity in my conviction that melodrama is an especially vital form in African drama and literature (a notion that could only be plausibly argued at some length), then the reasons for this, and the specific psychological and ideological purposes and contexts of the melodramatic mode in individual works and *oeuvres*, offer exciting possibilities for future interpretative analysis.

NOTES

- ¹ The term is James L. Smith's in *Melodrama* (London: Methuen, 1973).
- ² In *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 205.
- ³ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1976), p. 20.
- ⁴ Ola Rotimi, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi: an historical tragedy in English* (Benin City and Ibadan: Ethiope and Oxford U.P., 1974).
- ⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977).