

adaptation in
theatre and
performance

adaptation and nation

theatrical contexts for
contemporary english
and irish drama

CATHERINE REES



Adaptation in Theatre and Performance

Series editors

Vicky Angelaki

Department of Film, Theatre & Television

University of Reading

Reading, UK

Kara Reilly

Department of Drama

University of Exeter

Exeter, UK

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Catherine Rees

Adaptation and Nation

Theatrical Contexts for Contemporary English
and Irish Drama

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Catherine Rees
Loughborough University
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For Dan and Edward

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Introduction: “Adapt[N]ation”

Gilles Deleuze opens *Difference and Repetition* by asserting that “Repetition and resemblance are different in kind—extremely so” (1968: 1). Read within the context of adaptation studies, this statement encourages us to view the process of adaptation as one in which transposition between one text and another necessarily involves gaps as much as it involves duplication. Indeed, the *resemblances* between texts, the places where they are similar but not exact, are the spaces in which adaptation can occur—these fissures are the moments into which a new writer can pour new and divergent narratives, creating new contexts and posing different questions, shifting the audience’s focus between the original text and the adaptation.

It is the intention of this book to explore two concepts within recent theatrical performance—adaptation and nation. In essence, this book aims to explore theatrical texts that have been adapted from one national context to another. This means that this book will focus on contemporary dramatists who use theatrical stories or narratives from other countries and transpose them into their own culture. Often this also involves a temporal shift, and the writer will place the story in a more modern context. This book will focus on the contemporary British and Irish playwrights Brian Friel, Marina Carr, Sarah Kane, Patrick Marber and Martin McDonagh. All these dramatists have created plays that have some relationship with older theatre or film, and the examples selected also demonstrate that there has been a shift in national context too; put simply, the ‘original’, older version, is set in a different country to the one the

contemporary dramatist chooses for their location. In doing this, the playwright throws the focus onto some important national questions, which will be unpicked in each chapter. These playwrights have been selected because they are prominent and important writers working in the British Isles but also, perhaps more importantly, because the plays they have created in adapting earlier texts tell the reader or audience something significant about the state of their own nation at that time. They also demonstrate a wide variety of different perspectives on adaptation, and what that might mean within a theatrical and national context, and therefore offer a diverse discussion here. Often, although they are well-known playwrights, in some cases not very much has already been written on them from the perspective of the way in which they approach adaptation. Even if it has, the plays under consideration here are not frequently discussed or are considered minor works compared to their other plays. They offer, however, some interesting and diverse positions on adaptation, demonstrating just how slippery this term can be to apply. This Introduction will seek to offer some definitions and present problems with the term ‘adaptation’. It will then look at ‘nation’ and discuss how that can also be a troublesome concept. Then it will explore the idea of national theatre, and discuss the relationships between theatre, nation and adaptation. Finally, we will look in more detail at what this book aims to do, and the playwrights it will cover.

THEATRE AND ADAPTATION: I

So what is adaptation? What do we mean when we use in this term in relation to literature and the arts? Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* seeks to answer some of these questions, often through analysis of film. Hutcheon suggests that adaptation can be described as “An acknowledged transposition of a recognisable other work or works” (2006: 8). There may be many different reasons for this endeavour. Hutcheon argues that adaptations are appealing because they arouse a pleasure in the viewer “from repetition with variation” (4) and that we “seem to desire the repetition as much as the change” (9). This chimes with Deleuze’s words at the start of this Introduction, and describes a rather complex relationship the viewer may experience between the original text and its adaptation. We enjoy the adaptation because we can see the familiar story through the lens of the new format. We want there to be a clear and obvious relationship between the new text and the old

that inspired it. Without that link, the pleasure of seeing the old familiar reflected through the new cannot be appreciated. What this pleasure presupposes, of course, is that the viewer is fully conscious of the origin of the new text. Is it possible to enjoy Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), for example, without knowing that it is inspired by the events of *Hamlet* (2006), and that the two plays share characters and plot? Of course, it may be possible to experience this play without knowledge of its inspiration, but the viewer could not appreciate the knowing in-jokes, the sense of irony and destiny, the reversal of focus away from the major protagonists and onto the hapless minor characters, that make the point of Stoppard’s comedy. Knowing that Stoppard has deliberately inverted the action of *Hamlet* to explore the events from a much humbler point of view is the purpose of the play. So this is a key aspect—the adaptation is not an act of sly plagiarism; it is a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to engage with an original text and offer a new approach or direction.

Another attraction of adaptation is the opportunity it offers for presenting texts in a new context. Hutcheon points out that writers may not wish to celebrate the original text, but rather to challenge it: “They are just as likely to want to contest the aesthetic or political values of the adapted text as to play homage” (2006: 20). For example, we may be very familiar with Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and its story of the marital woes and triumphs of the privileged aristocracy. However, we should also be mindful of the myriad of voices that are elided in Austen’s original version, for example, the silent or barely visible serving staff. Jo Baker’s (2013) novel *Longbourn* adapted Austen’s original, maintaining the main plot and characters, but reversed the focus, telling the story of the ‘above stairs’ romance between Elizabeth Bennett and Darcy from the perspective of her maid. For example, the famous scene in which Elizabeth treks through the mud to see her sister, which is celebrated in Austen’s novel as evidence of her free-spirited independence, is more wryly noted by her maid whose job it is to wash her petticoats. Taking a broadly Marxist approach, this novel deliberately elevates the status of the unseen servant, and makes her the focus of the narrative. Thus, Julie Sanders’ *Adaptation and Appropriation* makes the point that “a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to re-interpret a source text” (2006: 2). In the case of one of the plays discussed in this book, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997), we can see that Martin McDonagh has taken the film *Man of*

Aran (1934) and problematised the presentation of the Irish islanders as primitive and simple by creating a play which pokes fun of the image, and demonstrates how such representations are constructed artificially by Hollywood. This approach engages with the original in a considerably ambivalent way, asking the viewer to question the assumptions and ideologies of the earlier text. Similarly, Patrick Marber's *After Miss Julie* (1995), also discussed in this volume, explicitly re-locates the action of Strindberg's original play *Miss Julie* (1888) into an overtly political situation—the 1945 General Election. This decision changes the way the audience can understand and engage with the politics of the play, by giving the characters space to explore the actual political climate of Britain in the 1940s. This, in turn, has resonances for the political climate at the time of adaptation as well; in 1995, Marber's play arrived during a time of political sleaze and scandal in the Conservative Party and, with its focus on the unexpected landslide victory for Labour in 1945, seems to pre-empt the same result in the 1997 election. As Hutcheon points out, “Major shifts in a story's context—in national setting or time period—can change radically how the transposed story is interpreted, ideologically and literally” (2006: 28). The aim of this volume is to examine these major shifts in national context, and to explore some of the ways in which this shift affects the way we read and understand the new text.

We have seen that an adaptation usually declares an overt relationship with the original. However, this engagement with other works can be sustained or partial, it can be clear and direct or it can be oblique and distant. One key question is whether or not the title of the original is used. Clearly Sarah Kane meant audiences to know that *Phaedra's Love* (2002) has a relationship with earlier accounts of the Phaedra myth. Similarly, in the case of two of the Friel adaptations considered in this volume, *Three Sisters* (1981) and *Uncle Vanya* (1998), he uses that same title as the original Chekhov plays, indicating a very obvious connection between his versions and the original texts. Sanders points out that “most formal adaptations carry the same title as their source text” (2006: 22). However, some writers prefer to express a rather more covert relationship with their source material. The two Marina Carr plays that this book will explore use completely different titles and make no clear reference anywhere to the plays that inspired them. This places the audience in a rather unusual position. Some will no doubt recognise the inspiration that Carr takes from Euripides' *Medea* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Others will not. It is, therefore, possible to enjoy these plays and

appreciate them on their own terms, and not as forms of adaptation, which troubles the definition of adaptation given above—how does ‘repetition with variation’ operate when the ‘repetition’ aspect is obscured? This also makes us question the importance of fidelity to the source material. If a writer is to adapt it so fundamentally that little trace of the original is obvious, is that a problem? And what is the point of Carr’s appropriation of these classical myths? In the author’s note at the beginning of *After Miss Julie*, Marber tells readers that this play is a “version” of the original, and that “I have been unfaithful to the original. But conscious that infidelity might be an act of love.” This explicit declaration of infidelity is of course tongue in cheek; Marber’s plays frequently explore acts of sexual, if not textual, infidelity and in many ways the final play is actually not too distant from Strindberg’s original. But what Marber is doing here is to alert the reader to the slippage in the adaptation process, and to suggest that there are many different ways to engage with a source play. While Marber uses the original in his own title, Carr creates new names for her plays, and does not make this relationship clear. What these two plays attest to, is the variety of ways a writer can use original material. At one end of the scale, they can offer a direct and formal adaptation, which may not aim to highlight many differences between the two plays. They may choose to shift or re-locate the action, like the plays discussed here, in order to discuss their own political or social concerns and ideologies. Finally, there may be only a tentative connection between the two plays. Sanders uses the term “appropriation” to describe a process whereby “the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process” (2006: 26). This allows a writer to take a more informal and perhaps creative approach to the original, and to forget about questions of fidelity. However, it is perhaps also controversial, as a sustained appropriation of another text, without due acknowledgement, could be criticised as plagiarism. However, there are scholars, as will be explored below, who believe that all texts are linked and that it is impossible to be wholly original. They would claim that all texts and narratives speak to each other in a whole network of citations, references and recycled images. We have already looked at adaptation and appropriation. Here I will suggest that a third term, intertextuality, provides a key approach to these texts and their relationship with each other.

INTERTEXTUALITY

The linguist and philosopher Julia Kristeva is generally credited with creating the term intertextuality in her essay “The Bounded Text” (1980). Here she describes texts operating with each other as “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality; in space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize each other” (36). This image is suggestive of a web, whereby texts speak to each other and are necessarily connected and related. For Kristeva, this structure is social and cultural, whereby culture is “the general text” (1980: 36) and other texts are placed within this system, “giving it its historical and social co-ordinates” (36). Therefore, to describe a text as intertextual, allows us to “consider [...] it as such with (the text of) social and history” (37). Kristeva is describing a text of culture and society which forms all other textual utterances, creating a “mosaic of quotations [where] any text is the absorption of another” (66). In this way, it is unavoidable that all texts will carry the imprint of others that have gone before them. No text can be truly original, and each one speaks to others in a complex web of citation and reference, rendering it “an absorption of and a reply to another text” (69). In this way, texts are inevitably adaptations of earlier texts—they reflect and exist in relation to others in a wider system of culture and history that helps us all “understand intertextual relationships” (69).

Other theorists, linguists and philosophers have also engaged with the concept and the term ‘intertextuality’ over time. Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure and M. M. Bakhtin all contributed to an understanding of the way in which language works in relation to textual ‘signs’ and that understanding or interpretation can be transferred, or deferred, across a network of possible ‘meanings’. Jacques Derrida, in particular, formulated theories of language and meaning that posited the idea that texts were never isolated or unconnected, but rather that meaning was endlessly deferred in a system of never-ending networks he saw as ‘signs’. So, whereas Saussure suggested that meaning could be located in understanding what the ‘sign’, or word, meant, Derrida contested that signs could never finally be decoded or understood. A dictionary might aim to define a word, for example, but it merely contains more and more words, each one resisting final closure or completeness. Derrida argued that instead of seeing understanding as Saussure did, as ‘signifiers’ that gesture towards final comprehension or a ‘signification’, rather, we should understand meaning as a more circular process whereby “the signifier of

the signifier” refers to the “movement of language” and the “circulation of signs” (Derrida 1967: 7) whereby meaning is endlessly deferred in a system of yet more texts and words. The famous “There is nothing outside of the text” or “there is no outside-text” (172) quotation is not a metaphysical or ontological statement to deny external reality, but instead underlines that there is no final referent outside of the network of deferred or postponed meaning, nothing “signified outside the text” that might offer closure to that text. These theories impact upon understandings of intertextuality because, as Derrida’s translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, “Any act of reading is besieged and delivered by the precariousness of intertextuality” (2016: cx); as texts cannot be finite or complete in themselves, they must refer to a system of other texts and words, endlessly deferring final meaning and, as Saussure would put it, ‘signification’.

Although Kristeva understood the term to refer to the inevitable recollection of earlier texts in new writing, the term intertextuality has been appropriated by others, and its meaning has shifted over time. The editor and translator of Kristeva’s *Desire in Language*, which contains “The Bounded Text” and “Word, Dialogue and Novel”, which also discusses intertextuality, argues: “The concept [...] has been generally misunderstood. It has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another, or with the source of a literary work” (Roudiez 1980: 15). While it is true that Kristeva would not have seen intertextuality as a conscious choice by the writer, and that such connections between texts are the inevitable outcome of textual systems in society and history, where we are all influenced, consciously or not, by elements of the same culture, it is not necessarily problematic that the term has evolved to incorporate a more deliberate attempt to refer to a different text. Indeed, in “Word, Dialogue and Novel”, Kristeva points out that there might be circumstances where “the writer can use another’s word, giving it a new meaning while retaining the meaning it already had. The result is a word with two significations” (Kristeva 1980: 73). This seems to concur with other definitions of adaptation; that a writer might knowingly take on another text and create a new work which both acknowledges the place of the earlier text, and is still a new creation in its own right. Here we can see that intertextuality has its place in discussions of adaptation in that it can refer to the placing of one text in another. There is not such a formal or direct relationship between the texts as there might be with clear adaptation, but the texts exist within each other and therefore can be seen to have an adaptive relationship between them.

The term ‘intertextuality’ thus has a shifting definition, and can be used to refer to observable similarities between texts on a sliding scale of author cognition and acknowledgement. On the one hand, we might suggest that texts from a specific historical or literary period have intertextual links, as they may have similar concerns, styles and structure. These texts speak to each other in wider textual system but might not have conscious or deliberate quotation. At the other end of the spectrum, one text may quote another quite explicitly, in order to make the reader aware of certain resonances between the texts that the writer wishes to expose or examine. Graham Allen argues that intertextuality can be used “by poststructuralist theorists and critics in their attempt to disrupt notions of stable meanings and objective interpretation” (2000: 3). This suggests a more playful and ambivalent relationship between the two texts, whereby a writer may wish to destabilise the concept of an author imposing a ‘finished’ or completed version or reading onto a text. In this way of thinking about adaptation, a writer uses an earlier work to unpick the concept of authority within a text, particularly if that text is canonical. If we remember the previous example of Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, we could argue that Stoppard is deliberately playing with the historical grandeur of Shakespeare as a canonical figure. By re-working his most famous tragedy as an absurdist comedy, he is suggesting that readings of *Hamlet* are never complete and that interpretations are on-going. In this way, Shakespeare does not ‘own’ the text; rather it is part of cultural and literary history, and can be interpreted in endless new configurations. Here we may pause to recall Roland Barthes’ famous declaration of the ‘Death of the Author’, whereby the author is seen to have no interpretative authority over the reading of their texts, and the reader is empowered to create their own understanding. Sanders suggests that in studies of adaptation “the creative import of the author cannot be as easily dismissed as Barthes’ influential theor[y] might suggest. Nevertheless the ability of these theories to destabilize the authority of the original text does enable multiple and sometimes conflicting production of meaning” (Sanders 2006: 2–3). This is a significant point; although adaptation does throw focus onto the intention of the new author, it also often illuminates a desire to critique or re-evaluate the meaning of the term ‘author’ itself, and to trouble the concept of authority over the interpretation of literature. In this way, intertextuality, and adaptation more widely, can offer writers playful and modern ways of engaging with textual systems and of examining their own roles within the creation of meaning and interpretation.

I have explored several ways of defining and discussing adaptation. It is a slippery term, and can be understood across many different relationships between texts. At its most basic level, it is the deliberate adoption, allusion to or use of one text within another. I use the word 'deliberate' here because I think adaptation requires a degree of cognition on the part of the writer. Kristeva's description of intertextuality suggests that slippage between texts is inevitable and unconscious. However, for the purposes of this volume, the playwrights considered here are certainly mindful of their use of other texts. How conscious the audience will be depends where on the spectrum of adaptation the play fits in; basing the plot and characters of a new play on an earlier one may not be clear to all audience members, whereas a playful and ironic use of another requires audience understanding to help form the meaning of the joke. Similarly, taking elements of another play and reworking them to provide a different political context also relies on the audience understanding that an important statement is being made, and that it will probably involve questions of political ideology and social power. Here we are concerned with plays which deliberately shift the national context. This raises another question—what do we mean by 'nation'? Again, this question is not straightforward either.

THEATRE AND NATION

When we talk about nationhood, it seems initially that this might be an easy concept to understand. In simple terms, a nation is a community of people living in a single state. However, while we might think of a state as a fixed and unchanging entity, countries are far from stable and are in fact constantly evolving due to different contestations and pressures. A line on a map dividing one country from another may seem formal and immovable, but recent history tells us that maps are in fact much more malleable. A map from the 1980s would show what we now see as Germany as divided into East and West. A map from the early 1990s would show Yugoslavia as a distinct nation state, but it is now divided into seven different countries. Across Africa names of countries have been changing; Zaire became the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997, Zanzibar and Tanganyika became Tanzania in the 1960s and Rhodesia became Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Closer to home, on-going debates about Scottish independence destabilizes our own nation state, and causes us to question how we might define British national identity, fractured into separate English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish identities

or united under a fractious ‘British’ umbrella. And, at the time of writing this Introduction in June 2016, the British referendum on leaving the EU has just taken place, raising many questions about Britain’s relationship with other nations and, crucially, how we might seek to define ‘British’ national identity—as something insular and independent, or characterised by a more collective set of multiple identities. Brexit will also challenge the often fractious relationship between Britain and Ireland, as the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, historically a place of tension and conflict, could be rendered a stressful flashpoint between the two countries again, as they no longer have EU membership to unite them. Such national debates remind us that national identity is never fixed or singular; it is always subject to a series of complex negotiations and, as we have seen with the furious deliberations facing a post-Brexit Britain, the nation is fractured by a multiplicity of voices and views, each seeking to claim British identity meaning something radically different and to redefine our relationship with other nations in new and multifarious networks.

Even if we do generally see national borders as formal and unchanging, we must appreciate the additional difference between a country and a nation. While a country has internationally recognised borders and territory, a nation or a national identity is a more ambiguous and complex concept, suggesting a difference between spatial and cultural forms of identity. Benedict Anderson famously suggested that nations could be conceived of as “imagined communities” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or ever hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1983: 6). The term ‘imagined’ is suggestive of an illusion, or of something that is not entirely real. It is frankly impossible to speak of a single or unified national identity for any country. In Britain alone there are countless different attitudes, beliefs and values, as well as many different languages spoken by people from diverse heritages. It is nonsensical to suppose that an individual would have the same collective identity as their neighbour, let alone someone who lives hundreds of miles away, and whom they will never meet, simply because they happen to reside within the same artificially bounded geographical area. As Edward W. Said argues, “All cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (1993: xxix). Homi K. Bhabha also famously grappled with the concept of a hybrid nation, describing the

“performative nature of differential identities, [...] remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference” (1994: 219).

However, although this is undoubtedly true, we can at the same time account for some sense of shared feelings and characteristics. It is often, no doubt stereotypically, thought that the British national character is reserved, self-deprecating, fond of queuing and neurotic about social class. Although this is a simplification, driven by fictional representations and national stereotyping, we can often observe some of these behaviours in either our own actions and attitudes or in others, especially when in contrast to those from a different nation. There are moments when the nation seems to respond in a united manner too. We may think of the London Olympic Games in 2012, which excited many in Britain. Similarly, we can be brought together at times of national crisis and grief, for example, the way communities move together to search for a missing child, bring flowers to commemorate someone who has recently died or the unified response of defiance after the London 7/7 bombings. Of course, there are many who reject these mass movements and moments, for example, the recent resurgence in interest in the young royal family, particularly after the birth of Prince George, showed a United Kingdom divided into those who passionately cared and those who were baffled by the fuss, but there is often an undeniable movement from people who are unconnected towards a single event or activity, and this can be observed as a national momentum. To return to Deleuze’s analysis of repetition and difference, “Generality [...] thus stands opposed to repetition as universality of the singular” (1968: 2)—we repeat a singular experience of nation that is non-equivalent yet resemblances can be located enabling us to generalise about collective national experience. This is because people who occupy a shared national space also share a national history, culture and heritage; a collective memory of our national past. This can be understood as a benign and benevolent force, whereby we care about others who live alongside us. Alternatively, we could argue that our national identities are created by “ideological means” (Billig 1995: 6), where “the moral aura of nationalism is invoked” (4) to justify violent assertion of nationalism abroad. However it is framed, we are subconsciously linked in many ways by our past experiences, our national media and the way people come together to think about ourselves. Said asserts that “nations themselves *are* narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narrations from forming and emerging, is very important