

Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006. xviii + 232 pp. ISBN (hardcover) 0-415-96794-5. ISBN (paperback) 0-415-96795-3.

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Linda Hutcheon is a marvellous definer and synthesizer. Her works on metafiction (1980), parody (1985), postmodernism (1988), and irony (1994), among many others, have offered indispensable, far-reaching, and nuanced discussions of key terms and concepts of the contemporary literary and theoretical landscape. *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) similarly looks at a term much bandied about, but not always appreciated: the widespread phenomenon of narrative elements overflowing the boundaries of their generic forms, morphing into other structures, or taking up residence in new material environments.

Shakespeareans, of course, recognize the appropriation of existing texts as a time-honored aspect of Shakespeare's own creativity, and readers of *Borrowers and Lenders* know only too well that the transformation of Shakespeare across nations, cultures, languages, genres, and media has in recent years reached flood proportions, with an accompanying rise in the study of such transformations. Such readers, who share the sheer pleasure Hutcheon takes in all sorts of adaptations and her desire to rescue them from the denigration they regularly encounter, are therefore not the primary audience for *A Theory of Adaptation*. They do not need to be convinced that adaptations are "second without being secondary" (Hutcheon 2006, 9), though they can appreciate the author's impulse to offer a coherent account of this phenomenon. In the context of the present issue of *Borrowers and Lenders*, the case of Canada — where, it can be argued, it is through adaptation that Canadians have encountered Shakespeare — offers a lens through which to consider the usefulness of a general theory of adaptation and its relationship to the specificity of Canadian Shakespeares.

Hutcheon's reach is extensive. In keeping with her task, she is purposefully inclusive, insisting on the pervasiveness of adaptation and pushing her discussion to embrace a full range of genres and media with examples that come from many countries, languages, and cultures. She does not follow adaptation into the hidden crannies of allusion and citation that, with respect to Shakespeare, Richard Burt calls Schlockspeare — "mass media-driven ephemera of the trivial and discardable,"

including such things as advertising, cigar brands, gift wrapping, greeting cards, shopping bags, T-shirts, beer labels, rubber duck bath toys, or business management guides (2002, 15, 5). She does, however, insist upon going beyond the more frequently discussed relationship between movies and novels to examine the to-ing and fro-ing among "videogames, theme park rides, Web sites, graphic novels, song covers, operas, musicals, ballets, and radio and stage plays" (Hutcheon 2006, xiv), including even historical enactments and virtual reality experiments. This broad reach, as the present issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* suggests, is perhaps especially unsurprising in the Canadian context (out of which Hutcheon writes), where the ongoing Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (CASP) and the "Shakespeare — Made in Canada" exhibition (January-June 2007) embrace not only written and performative modes of adaptation, but also the computer game *Speare* and other popular culture forms.

For Hutcheon, adaptations are interpretive and creative acts that retain the aura of the adapted text and contain within them a palimpsestic doubleness. They are "deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works" (Hutcheon 2006, xiv), not replications or reproductions, but rather repetitions with variation. Embracing the poststructuralist redefinition of textuality that insists on the intimate interpenetration of the adapted text and the adaptation, she refuses to prioritize an "original" and resists the hierarchizing of genres and media. In addition, the motives of adaptation are complex, and the pleasures of its reception many. Hutcheon therefore insists upon considering adaptations *as adaptations* (an italicized phrase that frequently recurs), even though those unfamiliar with or unable to recognize the adapted text in the adaptation can still appreciate the adaptation as an autonomous work. She also discusses adaptation as not only a product, but also a process of interaction and negotiation with the adapted text. Such an approach to adaptation will be familiar to readers of Richard Burt (2002), Christy Desmet (1999), Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (2000), and many others who have, in more narrowly focused work, developed its theoretical and practical implications at greater length and in greater detail than Hutcheon is able to do, given the extensive reach of her book.

To impose some order on this wonderfully proliferating mass of material, Hutcheon engages the task she has set herself in an interrogative mode. In the organization of her book she draws upon the familiar journalistic questions, each of which is used to define and map a part of the total field she examines: What? (Forms), Who? Why? (Adapters), How? (Audiences), Where? When? (Contexts). Such parsing of adaptation and isolation of its elements in individual chapters allows her to cast her net wide and put multiple forms of adaptation side by side, though it also lends itself to fragmentation, with frustratingly brief descriptions of the formal elements of multiple examples and discussions of different aspects of a single adaptation appearing in different chapters.

By way of compensation, three sections under the rubric "Learning from Practice" offer more in-depth discussions of successive adaptations. In the chapter on Forms, she considers adaptations of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* as a Broadway play, as a film version of the play, and as Benjamin Britten's opera; in the chapter on Adapters, she focuses on treatments of the historical narrative of sixteen Carmelite nuns from Compiègne, France who faced the guillotine in 1794 as an epistolary novella, as a film scenario that eventually resulted in the film *Dialogue des Carmélites*, as a stage play called *Dialogues des Carmélites*, and as an opera by Francis Poulenc; and in the chapter on Contexts, she discusses the multiple incarnations of the Carmen story.

It is in the juxtaposition of different kinds of adaptation that the originality of Hutcheon's approach lies. For example, Chapter 2, called "What? (Forms)," describes the gamut of moves to and from and between print, performance, and interactive forms. For the confines of genre and medium, Hutcheon substitutes a seemingly simple division of adaptations according to what she calls their modes of engagement — telling, showing, or interacting, a concept she revisits in greater depth in the chapter on Audiences. Such a formulation excitingly implies a sensorium of adaptational experience, potentially a rich field for further research. There remains much to be learned about the physiology and psychology of reception, and what it is about different modes of engagement that contributes to the different experience of an adapted text and its adaptation. Shakespeare scholars are well placed to contribute to this discussion, especially with respect to the specificities of theatrical performance, which is more multi-channelled than Hutcheon is able, in a brief space, to acknowledge. As Daniel Fischlin and Marc Fortier write, "Theatrical adaptation is an intertextual apparatus, a system of relations and citations not only between verbal texts, but between singing and speaking bodies, lights sounds, movements, and all other cultural elements at work in theatrical production" (2000, 7).

Most theories of adaptation, according to Hutcheon, assume that the story (the *fabula*) is the common denominator. Hutcheon, of course, recognizes that adapters may well select narrative fragments or such individual elements of an adapted work as characters or themes on which to focus, and recognizes as well differences between different genres and media and the importance of motives of adaptation and contexts of creation and reception. Nevertheless, perhaps due to lack of space, her privileging of narrative elements, even in the extended "Learning from Practice" sections, tends to flatten out the sense of how adaptations, especially theatrical adaptations, communicate. Also, her focus on story leads her to exclude from her definition elaborations of elusive but important resonances, which she dismisses as "spirit," "tone," or "style" (Hutcheon 2006, 10) as well as, citing Marjorie Garber (2003, 73-74), such things as sequels and prequels: "There is a difference between never wanting a story to end . . . and wanting to retell the same story

over and over in different ways. With adaptations, we seem to desire the repetition as much as the change" (Hutcheon 2006, 9). In the case of a Canadian work such as *Harlem Duet*, a "rhapsodic blues tragedy" written by Djanet Sears to "exorcise [the] ghost" of Shakespeare's *Othello* and "[to explore] the effects of race and sex on the lives of people of African descent" (Sears 1998, 14), it is "change" — the story that Shakespeare didn't write — that offers a necessary reflection on the one that he did. Sears imagines for *Othello* a first wife named Billie (Sibyl) whom — in scenes set in 1860, 1928, and contemporary Harlem — he leaves for a white woman, of whom we only see "brief glimpses of a bare arm and a waft of light brown hair" (47). In addition, *Harlem Duet* accomplishes its cultural work not only through its very remote riff on the "story" of Shakespeare's play, but also through complex musical arrangements of blues, jazz, and gospel music, voice-over readings of documents such as the American Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, or Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem," and the voices of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Paul Robeson, among others.

While the necessarily brief treatment of individual works inevitably disappoints, I particularly enjoyed the sections in which Hutcheon gets down to the nitty gritty of adaptation. In Chapter 3, which focuses on Adapters, for example, she disentangles the complexity of relationships and roles in those forms of adaptation — such as film, television, and stage performance — that are of necessity collaborative, discussing, in the case of film, the contributions of screenwriter, composer, designer, cinematographer, actor, editor, and, of course, director. I found fascinating her discussion of the legal constraints upon adaptation and the relationship between adaptations and copyright law. And I found refreshing her willingness to swim against the critical current in reinstating intentionality as central to the process of adaptation:

The examination of the different versions of the nuns' tale . . . suggests that the political, aesthetic, and autobiographical intentions of the various adapters are potentially relevant to the audience's interpretation. They are often recoverable, and their traces are visible in the text . . . [A]daptation teaches that if we cannot talk about the creative process, we cannot fully understand the urge to adapt and therefore perhaps the very process of adaptation. We need to know "why." (Hutcheon 2006, 107)

By situating Shakespeare adaptation in a broader field, *A Theory of Adaptation*, which cites Shakespearean examples only occasionally, reminds us that Shakespeare is not always "Shakespeare." In the case of the complex postcoloniality of Canada and Québec, however, one might ask whether Shakespeare can ever not be "Shakespeare." As Denis Salter has written, "For postcolonial actors [and one might say the same of postcolonial readers and spectators],

Shakespearean texts are not value-free, atemporal, transcendent masterpieces that can yield up their meanings through direct and transparent . . . readings" (1996, 114). Indeed, Irena Makaryk suggests that we "categorize the hundreds of adaptations of Shakespeare as distinctly Canadian examples of what is 'mainstream': a text that simultaneously both embraces and rejects classical literary models, a text that is both here and elsewhere" (2002, 37). In Canada, and especially in Québec, where language — and in the case of English, Shakespeare — has been perceived as an agent of power, and where thinking about national identity remains a recurring preoccupation, adaptation participates in the combination of resistance, accommodation, and negotiation that characterizes Canadian cultural life. Shakespeare adaptations in Québec, such as Robert Gurik's *Hamlet, prince du Québec* (1968) or *Les Reines* by Normand Chaurette (1991), and in Canada, such as Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1998) or Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (1990), have created their own canon because they have, of necessity, engaged the iconic status of Shakespeare. As Hutcheon trenchantly concludes, "Adaptations disrupt elements like priority and authority . . . But they can also destabilize both formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations" (2006, 174). While her general study cannot replace more focused and contextualized studies, it usefully reminds us that Shakespeare adaptation is part of a broader cultural phenomenon.

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