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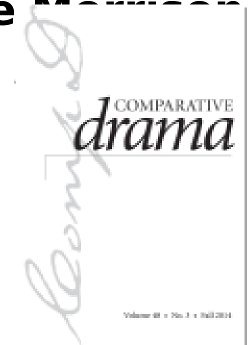

Comparative Drama, Volume 47, Number 4, Winter 2013, pp. 451-472 (Article)

Published by Western Michigan University
DOI: 10.1353/cdr.2013.0048

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After Chekhov: The Three Sisters of Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and Blake Morrison

Verna A. Foster

At the end of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* Olga says, "In time we shall pass on for ever and be forgotten. Our faces will be forgotten and our voices and how many of us there were."[1] This has not happened. So powerful are the shades of Olga, Masha, and Irina that, whatever their later names may be, theater audiences will always remember that there were three of them. In Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1979) their names are Lenny, Meg, and Babe; in Wendy Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1992) they are Sara, Gorgeous, and Pfeni; while in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Break of Day* (1995), April, Tess, and Nina are erstwhile sisters in feminism and longtime friends. In Yorkshire playwright Blake Morrison's *We Are Three Sisters* (2011), more curiously, they are Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë.[2] Henley's, Wasserstein's, and Wertenbaker's plays transpose Chekhov's characters and some of the motifs and themes associated with them to new times and places while ignoring the original dramatic situation and most of the Chekhovian dialogue. Morrison's play, by contrast, despite depicting historical individuals who are well known in their own right, parallels Chekhov's in considerable detail. Except for one brief additional act, Morrison uses the structure, character types, and themes of Chekhov's play as well as numerous echoes of its dialogue and stage action to write a biographical drama about the Brontës.

The bulk of this essay will draw on contemporary theories of adaptation to explain why three important women dramatists have chosen to rewrite *The Three Sisters* and what we might learn about their plays—as well as Chekhov's—from a comparative study of the ways in which they

respond to and exploit Chekhovian characters and themes. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier argue that adaptation is not only a creative act but also "features a specific and explicit form of criticism."[3] *Crimes of the Heart*, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and *The Break of Day* variously illuminate some of the ways in which adaptation operates creatively in producing new works and critically in offering new insights into the adapted work. Morrison's *We Are Three Sisters* is a different case. As a double adaptation—of the historical lives of the Brontës and of Chekhov's play—*We Are Three Sisters* provides an intriguing opportunity to enter from a new perspective and refine the current conversation about adaptation and adaptation theory. As a revision Morrison's play offers an especially interesting take on its source because Morrison was not rewriting *The Three Sisters* in contemporary terms, as Henley, Wasserstein, and Wertenbaker did, so much as using Chekhov's play to write one about the Brontës. The result—a consequence unaccounted for in current adaptation theory—is that any insights that Morrison's play offers into Chekhov's are incidental and the more intriguing because apparently undesigned.

In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as "an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art."[4] All four dramatists have acknowledged their debt to Chekhov, but revisit *The Three Sisters* more or less extensively, in different ways, and for different purposes. *The Break of Day* talks back to Chekhov's play; *Crimes of the Heart* refracts it in a new social environment; *We Are Three Sisters* cannibalizes it. *The Sisters Rosensweig* makes the least sustained use of it and is more simply allusive. Pfeni, for example, quotes Irina's "I've forgotten the Italian for window" and "If I could only get to Moscow!"[5] The terms used to describe kinds and degrees of adaptation have proliferated over the last few years: appropriation, revision, version, offshoot, and so on.[6] "Appropriation," which Julie Sanders distinguishes from "adaptation" as moving more emphatically "into a wholly new cultural product and domain," perhaps best defines the relationship between Henley's, Wasserstein's, Wertenbaker's, and Morrison's plays and Chekhov's, though I also like the term "revision" because, as Sharon Friedman notes, it emphasizes the process of reinterpretation on the parts of both the dramatist and the receiving audience.[7]

Hutcheon has usefully devalued a text's "fidelity" to a source as a criterion of literary evaluation.[8] And clearly there is no purpose in assessing Henley's, Wasserstein's, Wertenbaker's, and Morrison's plays in terms of their faithfulness to Chekhov (though, as we shall see, Morrison makes the concept of fidelity curiously relevant again in an unexpected way). Their plays have different titles and are set in different times and places; their characters have different names, do different things, and have different immediate concerns. Nonetheless the presence of Chekhov is unavoidable. Audience members who know *The Three Sisters* easily recognize significant similarities between Chekhov's play and *Crimes of the Heart*, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, *The Break of Day*, and especially, despite its Brontë content, *We Are Three Sisters*. That recognition informs the audience's reception of the contemporary plays.

Only Wertenbaker explicitly engages in dialogue with *The Three Sisters*. The conversation is enabled and focused because one of her characters, Robert, is an actor who plays Vershinin in a touring production of Chekhov's play.[9] Henley more playfully creates suggestive parallels. (Years later, in her 2006 play, *Ridiculous Fraud*, she was to revise her three sisters as three brothers.) Morrison appropriates *The Three Sisters* for his own unique purpose of writing a play about the Brontës. And in *The Sisters Rosensweig* Wasserstein starts with sisters from her own New York Jewish family, upon whom she superimposes echoes of Chekhov's sisters.[10] None of the modern dramatists critiques or updates for the sake of critiquing Chekhov's play; there is no sense that it has to be made "fit" for the late twentieth century.[11] One of the characters in *The Break of Day*, Tess, does complain that Chekhov's three sisters are not relevant to her own concerns, but Wertenbaker's play as a whole does not endorse this self-centered view. Rather Henley, Wasserstein, and Wertenbaker, all of whom are addressing women's issues, each in her own way adopts and updates recognizable characters and motifs from Chekhov's drama, beginning with the three sisters themselves, to provide a structural model and an interpretive framework for her own new play. *The Three Sisters* gives the audience a way into and illuminates the problems, specifically the women's concerns, explored in *Crimes of the Heart*, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and *The Break of Day*, rather than being reinterpreted by them.

Of course, no dramatic revision leaves its source totally unaffected. That is one of the great pleasures of intertextuality. Though Tom Stoppard uses Shakespeare's characters to explore a contemporary Beckettian universe rather than to revise *Hamlet*, he also makes it impossible for audience members to see the originals of the title characters of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in quite the same way again. *Crimes of the Heart*, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and *The Break of Day* implicitly offer new insights into Chekhov's sisters and by presenting them in new guises suggest that Olga, Masha, and Irina are not only our cultural forebears but our sisters, too. *We Are Three Sisters* offers an even more surprising and illuminating gloss on Chekhov's play because the insights it offers are accidental, activated by Morrison's dramatic needs in creating a stage action for his biographical drama about the Brontës. For this reason I shall set aside Morrison's play to focus on the works by Henley, Wasserstein, and Wertenbaker. I will return to Morrison in my final pages to see what his unusual adaptation can tell us about how adaptation works in general.

* * * *

Like genre, adaptation establishes audience expectations that may be either fulfilled or flouted.[12] Henley, Wasserstein, and Wertenbaker all assume that their audiences are familiar with *The Three Sisters*, and they clearly cue us to make comparisons between Chekhov's play and their own, in the first place because each presents *three* "sisters" who correspond, though sometimes only vaguely, to the Prozorov sisters. Certain other motifs also seem to be indispensable. Irina's name day becomes Lenny's, Sara's, and Tess's birthday, an occasion on which the various sisters meet, reflect, celebrate, look back and forward. All of the plays end with a moment of communion and attempted understanding like that shared by Olga, Masha, and Irina at the end of *The Three Sisters*. All three plays have a reflective or somewhat soulful character who corresponds to Vershinin—Doc in *Crimes of the Heart*, Merv in *The Sisters Rosensweig*, Robert in *The Break of Day*. Sometimes there is an influential deceased or offstage character—the Rosensweig sisters' mother, the Magrath sisters' Old Granddaddy in *Crimes of the Heart*—corresponding to General Prozorov, who formed the lives and ambitions of Chekhov's three sisters

and their brother, Andrey. Natasha, Andrey's ill-mannered wife, has counterparts in at least two of the plays: Chick, the Magrath sisters' ghastly cousin, in *Crimes of the Heart* and the undereducated but more promising Marisa (who is actually referred to as "the intruder" [45][13]), the pregnant girlfriend of Nina's stepson in *The Break of Day*; and perhaps also Tom, Sara's daughter's boyfriend, a pleasant working-class lad whose ignorance of upper-class refinements Sara mocks in *The Sisters Rosensweig*. The absence of an Andrey figure in any of the plays underscores the later dramatists' focus on examining the lives and relationships of women.[14]

All three modern plays combine laughter and sadness in a quasi-Chekhovian manner. Chekhovian tragicomedy gets rewritten as black comedy by Beth Henley, as Neil Simon by Wendy Wasserstein,[15] and as serious drama with comic touches by Timberlake Wertenbaker. One result is that these revisions all conclude more optimistically than their original about what the future may bring.[16]

The Three Sisters explicitly looks forward, inviting the audience to think about what people's lives will be like in a hundred years. Tuzenbakh thinks that fashions may alter but "life itself won't change"; Vershinin more optimistically protests that his generation is "living for, working for, yes and suffering for" a better, happier future, in which there will be more and more cultured people like Olga, Masha, and Irina (Chekhov, 224). Though the cynical doctor and family friend Chebutykin repeatedly asserts that nothing matters one way or the other, the play ends with Olga's longing to know the purpose of their lives and sufferings.

Henley and Wasserstein do not address the prospects of society in general, and Wertenbaker does so primarily as talking points for her characters. But in their different ways they all offer answers to Chekhov's questions as far as women's lives are concerned: Henley by reflecting the still-unfulfilled longings of Olga, Masha, and Irina in a contemporary American context; Wasserstein and Wertenbaker by showing what might or can or does happen when educated women finally do get to "Moscow." By working from a well-known literary predecessor, especially one in the same genre, the contemporary dramatists gain not only "cultural capital" (Hutcheon's term)[17] but also a recognizable template. By writing specifically about women's lives they invite immediate historical comparison and offer a range of (at least *three*) possible contemporary

parallels or answers to questions posed by Chekhov's play. The familiar Chekhovian configurations provide the audience access to the new plays and a way to relate to and evaluate their central characters.

This much said, the ways in which the dramatists use their acknowledged relationship to Chekhov to explore the lives of women in the late twentieth century differ markedly. *Crimes of the Heart* most closely shadows the characters presented in *The Three Sisters*, though Henley's sisters show no consciousness of Chekhov's play as do the better educated women in Wasserstein's and Wertenbaker's plays. *Crimes of the Heart* is set in Hazlehurst, a small town in Mississippi, similar in the narrowness of its cultural life to the provincial town inhabited by the Prozorovs. The Magrath sisters, however, have a sensational and bizarre past, characteristic of Henley's grotesque transformation of Chekhovian tragicomedy into black comedy. After their father abandoned them, their mother committed suicide, taking the cat with her, leaving her girls to be brought up by Old Granddaddy. Lenny, the oldest sister, like Olga, works hard, is a caregiver to Old Granddaddy as Olga cares for her old nanny, Anfisa, and longs for a husband; more fortunate, we assume, than her forebear, she is set to achieve this goal by the end of the play. Meg, the middle sister, who leaves home to pursue a singing career, is, like Masha, the most gloomy (she found her mother's body) and unconventional of the sisters. As a child she would eat ice cream in front of posters of crippled children instead of donating her dime to them, saying, "See, I can stand it. I can stand it. Just look how I'm gonna be able to stand it"as a way of strengthening herself against life's sufferings.[18] In the play she attempts to resuscitate her former relationship with the vaguely Vershinin-like, now-married Doc but discovers she can sing without him. Babe, the youngest sister, who shoots her abusive husband, is not actually very much like Irina except in having several "suitors" and a rather sweet (if eccentric) disposition. Her offstage shooting of Zachary perhaps evokes the offstage duel between Tuzenbakh and Solyony. But no one is killed, and Babe's young lawyer offers the possibility of a hopeful romantic future. Chick, representing all that is repressive in Hazlehurst society, is, unlike Chekhov's ever-encroaching Natasha, finally banished (with a kitchen broom), leaving the sisters to enjoy birthday cake for breakfast and a vision of happiness, even if it is just for "this one moment" (Henley, 63). Compared to Chekhov's sisters, Henley's get more of what they want or at least seem about to do so.

Wasserstein's Sara, Gorgeous, and Pfeni and Wertenbaker's April, Tess, and Nina are all older than the Henley trio—middle-aged in *The Sisters Rosensweig*—and more urbane, sophisticated, and international in their outlook. Their discontents are those of the world in which they live as these affect even successful women. Though *Crimes of the Heart* is set specifically "five years after Hurricane Camille" (Henley, 4), the play does not place the personal concerns of the Magrath sisters in any broader sociopolitical context than that of their own provincial lives. *The Sisters Rosensweig* and *The Break of Day*, by contrast, do evoke world-changing events as the backdrop to the relationships and desires of the central characters. Just as *The Three Sisters* is set, as Wertenbaker's Robert reminds us, at the end of a century "with a cataclysm already in formation" (Wertenbaker, 19), Wasserstein's play is set in London on the eve of the break-up of the Soviet Union and Wertenbaker's in a declining Britain at the approach of the new millennium. Wertenbaker's characters, among them a doctor, a university lecturer in classics, and an actor, complain especially about the erosion in healthcare and education and underfunding of the arts.

Both *The Sisters Rosensweig* and *The Break of Day* establish a (post-Chekhovian) Eastern European background for their actions. Sara (Rosensweig) Goode, an American international banker living in London, has been responsible for deciding how bank loans may help the impoverished descendants of the people who banished her own Jewish grandparents from Poland, and her daughter, Tess, talks about joining the Lithuanian Resistance. In the second act of *The Break of Day* Nina and her husband, Hugh, go to an unnamed Eastern European country to adopt a baby, thereby uncovering political and bureaucratic incompetence and corruption, presented as comically banal despite its potentially serious consequences.[19] There is choric commentary on how such adopted "cross-border children" may help to create a "great European community." But though the old communist Mikhail expresses the hope that babies like the one Nina adopts, "born in one country, loved and raised in another,... will carry on history with broad minds and warm hearts" (Wertenbaker, 86), the play, despite its optimistic title, does not offer a great deal of hope that such warm-hearted internationalism will be high on any of the characters' agenda. Tess, for example, has no idea where her refugee maid comes from, and by the end of the play Nina's baby has had ten nannies, and Nina hardly ever sees her.

Despite their apparently broader implications, in the final analysis Wasserstein's and Wertenbaker's plays, like Henley's, focus on the importance to women of personal relationships, especially women's relationships with men in the two earlier plays and on women's desire for a baby in Wertenbaker's. (The episodic second act of *The Break of Day* shuttles back and forth between Nina's successful adoption adventure in Eastern Europe and Tess's unsuccessful fertility treatments in London.) When Henley's, Wasserstein's, and Wertenbaker's sisters share their moments of communion at the ends of their respective plays, the futures to which they look forward are conceived in purely personal terms.

In this sense, despite their differing contexts, all three modern revisions narrow the focus and also simplify the complex mood of their Chekhovian forebear. At the end of Chekhov's play Olga attempts to make sense of the sufferings of herself, Masha, and Irina by placing them in a broader historical and ontological perspective: "But our sufferings will bring happiness to those who come after us.... We might find out before long what our lives and sufferings are for." Chekhov, however, undercuts Olga's sad optimism with Chebutykin's cynical "None of it matters. Nothing matters" (Chekhov, 265). By contrast, in *Crimes of the Heart* Lenny offers a more simply bittersweet vision of herself and Meg and Babe laughing even if it is just for "this one moment" (Henley, 63). The penultimate scene of *The Sisters Rosensweig* concludes with the middle-aged sisters "*laughing and giggling like children*," and the play ends by focusing sentimentally on a mother-daughter relationship as Sara and her daughter sing "harvest moon"—"For me and my gal" (Wasserstein, 98, 109). *The Break of Day* ends on a more Chekhovian note, as Tess says, "We only want to try and understand what we've done" (Wertenbaker, 98). But the Chekhovian notes here and elsewhere in the play are strained because of the self-conscious comparisons the characters make between their own lives and those of Chekhov's sisters. Earlier, in response to her husband, Robert's, suggestion (in view of their inability to have a child) that they might "accept what has happened, go on," Tess says, "That's fine for the three sisters, they come to terms with their lives, but this is the twentieth century. I won't accept defeat" (Wertenbaker, 94).

The emphasis is on self in all three plays, rather unpleasantly so in the case of the high-achieving but self-indulgent and sometimes self-pitying women in *The Sisters Rosensweig* and *The Break of Day*, or specifically

Sara and Pfeni, Tess and Nina. (Gorgeous in the former play, who remains comically upbeat, and April, the classics lecturer, in the latter, who asserts that she lives "with dignity and some grace" [Wertenbaker, 97] are more attractive.) It is significant that Natasha's counterpart in *The Break of Day*, the lower-class, down-to-earth, life-accepting, pregnant Marisa—"You have to give in to life" (Wertenbaker, 40)—competes successfully for the audience's sympathy with the highly educated but disappointed and embittered friends on whom the play focuses. Tom in *The Sisters Rosensweig* similarly elicits sympathy from the audience in light of Sara's funny but condescending barbs at his expense: "Laurence Olivier, Tom. He was in the movie, *Marathon Man*" (Wasserstein, 49).

Wertenbaker has noted that, unlike the Prozorov sisters, her "three women are in Moscow" (literally London); "they have work, independence, intelligent people to talk to." But they are still not happy. They want children, Wertenbaker has suggested, because "they do not feel they are working for the future."[20] The Rosensweig sisters are also "in Moscow" (again London) in the sense that each is successful in her own way: international banker, talk show host, well-known journalist. But they too complain about their lives. However, these women have not been betrayed by their historical and cultural circumstances as the Prozorov sisters and even the Magrath sisters have been. They have been betrayed rather by the men in their lives or they have themselves betrayed their own callings. If they are not working for the future (as Olga and Irina at least believe that they do), it is because they have chosen to focus on their own lives in the present. In *The Break of Day* Tess, once the editor of a feminist journal, now comfortably edits the kind of women's magazine she would once have despised; Nina, a singer-songwriter, has given up composing songs, though she returns to recording after she has adopted her baby (and consequently rarely sees the child she was so insistent on having). In *The Sisters Rosensweig* Pfeni has exchanged reporting the difficult lives of women in troubled areas of the world for lucrative travel writing (though she, too, plans to return to serious work at the end of the play). All three Rosensweig sisters as well as Wertenbaker's April have been disappointed by men unable to make or keep commitments. Twice divorced, Sara is now mistrustful of men, such as Merv, the philosophical purveyor of fake furs with whom she has a one-night stand; Gorgeous's husband has given up supporting his family in order to write detective stories; Pfeni's boyfriend,

Geoffrey, returns to his gay lover; April's boyfriend, Jamie, commits to his work as a doctor at her expense. Only Henley's Magrath sisters, not yet in their respective, if culturally more limited, Moscows, have been precluded from getting there by the restrictive conventions of their environment, and especially by its chief representative, Old Granddaddy.

One obvious reason why women dramatists in the late twentieth century would choose to revisit *The Three Sisters* of all Chekhov's plays is that it offers the opportunity to rewrite in a modern idiom the lives of *three* different women. Each of the modern sisters chooses a different path or exemplifies a different option in relation to the main themes addressed in the play she inhabits: escaping patriarchal oppression and finding self-fulfillment in *Crimes of the Heart*; finding satisfaction in work or family despite unsatisfactory romantic relationships in *The Sisters Rosensweig*; finding ways to face the future through work or motherhood, or despite the inability to have children, in *The Break of Day*. In turn, the modern sisters implicitly invite or perhaps just remind audiences to look again at the ways in which Olga, Masha, and Irina share their difficulties. The Prozorov sisters want but fail to achieve the freedom and self-fulfillment represented by going to Moscow; they want but fail to achieve love and satisfying work. Masha has a husband she does not love and a lover, Vershinin, who has to leave; Olga longs for marriage but remains a spinster; Irina's fiancé (of convenience), Tuzenbakh, is killed in a duel. Because women's career opportunities were limited in nineteenth-century Russia,[21] Olga and Irina have useful jobs they do not enjoy. And while Chekhov's sisters do not mention any desire to have children (so important to Wasserstein's and Wertenbaker's women), Vershinin's repeated sentimental references to his two little girls and Natasha's insufferable obsession with her children at the expense of everyone else emphasize the childlessness of the three most cultured (and, in the case of Olga, nurturing) characters in the play. The Prozorov sisters Olga and Irina will, like Wertenbaker's April, be helping to create a better future by educating other people's children, not their own.

The Three Sisters depicts the limitations and disappointments imposed on intelligent, cultured women by the stultifying society in which they are obliged to live and by the foolishness or thoughtlessness of the men in their lives. Andrey subjects his sisters to Natasha's management and mortgages their house to pay for his gambling debts instead of taking

them to Moscow; Kulygin, though a kind man, is a pedant rather than the genius Masha thought she was marrying; Solyony draws Tuzenbakh into the fatal duel that deprives Irina of a husband. While the Prozorov sisters are by no means exempt from criticism (that they treat Natasha badly, that they might have done more to get themselves to Moscow or to find an alternative),[22] in its broadly sympathetic portrayal of Olga, Masha, and Irina specifically as women, Chekhov's play may reasonably be described as feminist in its own time.

Crimes of the Heart, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and *The Break of Day* may also be considered feminist in their concern with the problems faced by women, even high-achieving women, even in the late twentieth century. But they are feminist in varying degrees and with reservations. Rather than requiring their audiences to reevaluate Chekhov's play in contemporary terms, all three of the modern plays instead draw on Chekhov to criticize, implicitly or explicitly, some strains of late twentieth-century feminist ideology. The women's movement of the 1960s has had no apparent influence on the lives of Henley's Magrath sisters because it has not reached ordinary women living in a conservative cultural backwater. Wasserstein's and Wertenbaker's sisters, better placed to take advantage of it, seem to have benefited from the kind of liberal white middle-class feminism that was unavailable to the Magrath sisters. They had the family support, or the money, or the education, to achieve interesting careers—Sara Rosensweig is "the first woman to run a Hong Kong bank" (Wasserstein, 23)—and prosperous if not entirely happy lives. Wasserstein only mildly criticizes the Rosensweig sisters' class insularity, probably because her specific project was to "write smart and funny parts for women over forty" (Wasserstein, x). Her criticism here is that dramatists (even women dramatists) have ignored intelligent, older women. However, Wasserstein's focus on love and children makes her women seem excessively self-indulgent, given the political problems abroad (Eastern Europe) and social problems outside Sara's door such as the "two hundred homeless people who live under Charing Cross Station" (Wasserstein, 19).

In *The Break of Day* Wertenbaker offers a more serious critique of liberal feminism than does either Henley or Wasserstein and especially interrogates from a materialist perspective the mix of liberal and cultural feminism of the 1970s that formed the lives and beliefs of her three sisters. Nina and April were members of an all-female rock band and Tess was

the only female reporter on a rock magazine, roles that emphasize both the liberal individualism and the cultural essentialism of their version of feminism: "Women were exploding everywhere, with their anger, hunger, confidence," says Tess, only to add, "I felt I had a right to what I wanted" (Wertenbaker, 8, 9). Wertenbaker's "sisters" look back on the 1970s with a mixture of nostalgia and bitterness. Tess and Nina take out their disappointments on Marisa by trying to deny her the choice to have her baby because it would inconvenience her boyfriend, Nick, Nina's stepson, and because they themselves do not have children. They feel no solidarity with women outside their own class. They are surprised to learn that Tess's maid, Natasha, is a lesbian because no one thinks about the sexual identity of war victims. Even April, the most generous of the three "sisters," is more interested in Sappho than in the living Natasha.

The character who best represents the benign cross-cultural internationalism advocated by the old communist Mikhail (and I am assuming by Wertenbaker herself) is eighty-year-old Mr. Hardacre, who appears in only one scene at the end of the first act. Identifying television images of contemporary East European war victims walking with their suitcases with those of World War I refugees, including his own wife, Mr. Hardacre declares, "I'm going to march with my suitcase every day for the rest of my life. I'm going to protest against history" (Wertenbaker, 46). Tess and Nina protest only about the imperfections of their own lives.

Explicitly contesting Vershinin's declaration in *The Three Sisters* that present sufferings will enable future generations to lead happier lives, Wertenbaker has commented that, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, history can no longer be seen as "progressive."[23] Consequently, her sisters fall back or try to fall back on the personal fulfillment of motherhood. But though purporting to look with some hope to the future, as they wait "for the dawn" (Wertenbaker, 97) at the end of *The Break of Day*, none of Wertenbaker's sisters has found a satisfactory balance between political ideals and personal ambition or even between professional and family life. The Rosensweig sisters are similarly stymied, though Sara and Gorgeous find solace in their children. The Magrath sisters have not even begun to ask the questions to which the other trios can find no answers, reminding us that even women who have never known "the Italian for window" can find themselves stifled

by a community mindset that fails to value the self-effacing loyalty, the eccentricity, and the ingenuous charm that Lenny, Meg, and Babe do have to offer.

* * * *

Henley, Wasserstein, and Wertenbaker demonstrate both the creative versatility and the flexibility of "adaptation" as a literary mode and its power as a tool of critical analysis. Their revisions bear out as well Marvin Carlson's comment in *The Haunted Stage* that drama, more than other literary forms, "has always been centrally concerned" with "the retelling of stories already known to its public."[24] Morrison's *We Are Three Sisters* provides a new take on adaptation in that it uses one well-known story to retell another.

In *We Are Three Sisters*, first performed by Northern Broadsides in Halifax, England in 2011, Morrison dramatizes the lives of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë and their brother, Branwell, using as a template *The Three Sisters*, which was itself likely influenced by a biography of the Brontës that Chekhov had read.[25] Morrison's title, echoing Chekhov's, comes from Charlotte's explanation—"we are three Sisters"—to her publisher, who thought he was dealing with a single author of the Brontë sisters' novels.[26] Chekhov's characters inflect Morrison's depiction of the Brontës, and at the same time the superimposition of the Brontës on Olga, Masha, Irina, and Andrey Prozorov and of Haworth on the provincial town of *The Three Sisters* invites a rereading of the earlier play.

Morrison makes the most of the correspondences between the Brontë and Prozorov families. Olga, Masha, Irina, and Andrey become (or, one might say, revert to being) Charlotte (the manager), Emily (the odd one), Anne (the dreamer), and Branwell (the drinker and gambler). The Reverend Patrick Brontë and Colonel Prozorov are both influential presences in their children's lives, though the former is still living while the latter is dead. Olga's elderly nanny, Anfisa, becomes the Brontës' faithful old servant, Tabby. For other characters Morrison has to stretch a little. He finds a Natasha in Lydia Robinson, Branwell's former employer, with whom he apparently had an affair and who, unhistorically and quite improbably, visits him at the Brontë parsonage in Haworth, where she

succeeds in turning Anne out of her bedroom much as Natasha disturbs Irina. For Vershinin, the "lovesick major" who philosophizes optimistically about the future, Morrison enlists a similarly philosophical "lovesick curate," a composite version of Patrick Brontë's various curates, especially William Weightman, and gives him an unseen troubled sister instead of a crazy wife.[27] A generic older Doctor, who is in love with Anne, serves for both Chebutykin and Tuzenbakh, and a comically pompous Teacher replaces Kulygin. Charlotte and Anne, though not Emily, long for—and actually visit—London, to see their publisher.

Despite obvious differences in what happens in the lives of the Brontës and the Prozorovs, Morrison stays surprisingly close to Chekhov's motifs and dialogue. In fact, parallel incidents and conversations occur, pretty much in the same order, on almost every page of the two plays. *The Three Sisters* and *We Are Three Sisters* open on Irina's name day and Anne's birthday, respectively. Chebutykin gives Irina an embarrassingly expensive gift of a silver samovar; Morrison's Doctor gives Anne an equally embarrassing gift of a cut-glass decanter. Both Olga and Charlotte think they would prefer being married to teaching. Masha whistles and recites Pushkin's poetry; Emily whistles and recites her own. Vershinin talks about Moscow, and the Curate talks about London. Morrison even preserves some of the peculiar lines of the otherwise absent Solyony by giving them to other characters. The Doctor, for example, makes Solyony's silly joke about the train station: "If it were nearer it wouldn't be so far" (Morrison, 13). In the second act Natasha prevents the invited carnival party from entering the Prozorovs' house; contrarily, Lydia invites some musicians to the Brontë parsonage. Vershinin tells Masha her eyes are shining; the Curate tells Emily (and later Anne) the same thing. The last line of Chekhov's second act is Irina's "Moscow, Moscow, Moscow!" (Chekhov, 235). Morrison's concludes with the repetition of "London," uttered "*rapturous*[ly]" by Anne, "*scornful*[ly]" by Emily, and "*decisive*[ly]" by Charlotte (Morrison, 43).

Chekhov's third act takes place as a fire blazes in the town. In Morrison's play the disaster is a flood, based on a bog-burst that occurred near Haworth, albeit 24 years prior to the time period (a few weeks in 1848) of Morrison's play.[28] Olga is upset that Natasha has upbraided Anfisa; Charlotte is upset that Lydia has been mean to Tabby. Chebutykin and

Morrison's Doctor are drunk; each breaks an object and philosophizes that perhaps it is not broken at all. And so on. Only Morrison's short interpolated fourth act, dealing with Charlotte and Anne's return from visiting their publisher in London, departs from the structure of Chekhov's play.

Though towards the end of *We Are Three Sisters* Morrison incorporates more details applicable only to the Brontës, to the extent possible he returns in his act five to creating parallels with Chekhov's act four. Just as the soldiers are finally leaving the Prozorovs' provincial town, the Curate, the Doctor, and the Teacher are leaving Haworth. Irina tells Tuzenbakh that her heart is like a piano to which the key has been lost; Anne uses the same metaphor when she tells the Doctor that she does not love him. And though Morrison cannot include a duel in his play, we do hear of a row between the Curate and the Doctor. A bang is heard, and while no one is killed, Branwell has collapsed in convulsions in the street, prefiguring his early death.

The ending of Morrison's play echoes the ending of *The Three Sisters* as Charlotte, Emily, and Anne reflect upon the meaning of their lives. Olga believes that the sufferings of her generation will bring happiness to people living in the future but that the Prozorov sisters will be forgotten. The Brontë sisters are more certain that their lives do have a purpose, which Emily defines: "We've read, we've written, we've imagined, we've picked blackberries and wild flowers, we've walked the tops in sunshine and snow." And, contrary to Olga, Charlotte asserts, "there'll be our books. And in the end, we *will* be remembered" (Morrison, 83). The ending of *We Are Three Sisters* has its own underlying sadness since the audience likely knows that Emily and Anne have not much longer to live, but there is no Chebutykin muttering cynically in the background that "Nothing matters" (Chekhov, 265). What does matter is such moments of happiness as the Brontë sisters have experienced in their short lives and above all their lasting literary legacy.

Morrison has obviously gone to considerable trouble to construct some quite ingenious parallels between his play and Chekhov's, many more than those I have mentioned. *We Are Three Sisters* can be enjoyed without a knowledge of Chekhov's play. But for any audience member familiar with *The Three Sisters* a great deal of the spectating pleasure likely

comes from recognizing the parallels. I say "pleasure," but the parallels are so extensive, showing up at every turn, likely or not, that I wonder whether, if they were all recognized, they might not, like an annoying tick, detract from a full appreciation of the characters of the Brontë sisters. Morrison does, however, try to be as faithful to the Brontës as to Chekhov, using words that appear in Charlotte's letters, Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte, and the sisters' novels.[29]

Fidelity, as I noted above, is an evaluative category that Hutcheon has done much to banish from our critical discourse about adaptations. But in light of Morrison's double fidelity we might want to revisit the concept and ask why faithfulness still seems so important in this particular case. *We Are Three Sisters*, rather more precisely than the plays by Henley, Wasserstein, and Wertenbaker, clearly fits Hutcheon's definition of an adaptation as "an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art," even though adapting Chekhov was secondary to Morrison's chief objective of writing a play about the Brontës. The parallels between the Brontës and the Prozorovs, Morrison says, interested him, and the structure of *The Three Sisters* helped him to focus his own play.[30] Thus his choice to adapt Chekhov was opportunistic and pragmatic. In adapting Chekhov, Morrison does not fulfill any of the classic purposes of adaptation delineated by theorists such as Hutcheon and Sanders. He is not writing back to Chekhov or revising Chekhov to make him more "fit" for a new age; he is not interrogating or updating *The Three Sisters*' sociopolitical or gender concerns. In fact, he is moving them into an earlier period. And while he probably does accrue some "cultural capital" from his use of Chekhov, his gains are primarily dramaturgical. Chekhov gives Morrison content, especially stage business and dialogue, and a point of view for what is a revisionist adaptation of the lives of the Brontës, making *them* more "fit," or appealing, for a modern audience.

Morrison aimed at a less gloomy portrayal of the Brontës than has been customary, focusing on their "resilience," independence, and humor. This revisionist interpretation derives mostly from Juliet Barker's comprehensive biography, *The Brontës*, but Morrison ascribes the "lightness" he has infused into the Brontës' lives to Chekhov's example.[31] As one reviewer noted, the Chekhovian "lightness" is especially apparent in the secondary characters.[32] The Doctor's eccentric humor—he tells Branwell that a round of whist is the best cure for dizziness—and the

Teacher's pedantic jokes about Latin grammar derive from Chekhov, as does Lydia's over-the-top awfulness: "You can have your room back now, Anne. Have you thought of redecorating it? A shade of pink would cheer it up" (Morrison, 56). The Brontë sisters themselves often speak quite wittily and even acerbically. And Emily undercuts the conventional gloomy view of the Brontës when she asserts, "Gloom bucks me up—there's nothing more cheering than a tale of woe" (Morrison, 31).

One notable benefit of the Chekhovian template is the new importance given to Anne Brontë as the Irina figure. Instead of being overshadowed by her more famous sisters, Morrison's Anne, as several reviewers noted, is a strong and significant character.[33] She is enthusiastic, a mover—she wants to work, to start a school, to go to London; she is a feminist: "Just because we're women doesn't mean we can't work" (Morrison, 8). She is a dreamer, an idealist, and a romantic, believing in love, attracted to the eloquent Curate: "When you talk like that, it makes me nervous" (Morrison, 49). In fact, Morrison makes us aware of "the love and passion" in all of the Brontës' lives.[34] In act three, for example, where Masha expresses her love for Vershinin, Emily imagines passionately loving a man like her own Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*: someone "darker and stranger," "someone more myself than I am" (Morrison, 53).

While most reviewers of *We Are Three Sisters* focused on Morrison's retelling of the Brontës' story, the parallels between the Brontës and the Prozorovs inevitably invite audiences to rethink as well characters and motifs in *The Three Sisters*. The elision of Chebutykin and Tuzenbakh in Morrison's Doctor invites an exploration of other possible similarities between these two characters apart from their love for Irina. And indeed they enter Chekhov's play together, both speaking lines on an unrelated subject that comment ironically on Olga's desire to go back to Moscow: "Not a chance in hell," says Chebutykin; "Absolute nonsense," echoes Tuzenbakh (Chekhov, 199). Later, disappointed in his love for Irina, Tuzenbakh begins to adopt something of Chebutykin's cynicism. "Oh, what does it matter?" he says twice to Solyony. "I'm going to get drunk tonight" (Chekhov, 229). And he does. Despite his idealistic view of work, in some ways Tuzenbakh, had he not died, seems set to follow in Chebutykin's footsteps, loving Irina without hope of a real return as the Doctor loved her mother. Morrison's omission of Solyony while retaining some of his lines draws attention to the importance of the note of bitter

inconsequence and unpredictability that Solyony's bizarre remarks introduce into the fabric of Chekhov's play, foreshadowing his deadly role at the end. Morrison's Doctor and Patrick Brontë get into a silly argument about poteen, echoing Solyony and Chebutykin's quarrel over *escalope* and shallots, but they conclude amicably, while the more dangerous Solyony has to be told to shut up.

The reviewer for the *Telegraph* remarked that the "tyrannical hold" exerted by the "drunk, disorderly and disastrously matched" Branwell over his sisters "makes one think about the puppyish, hapless Andrey… in a new, invigorating light."[35] Andrey's weakness of will in regard to Natasha and gambling, his failure to protect the interests of his sisters, can be seen as an equally damaging, if passive, form of tyranny. And the "lovesick Curate," flitting from Emily to Anne and then out of both their lives, reminds us not to take for granted the depth of Vershinin's feelings for Masha. As Rose Whyman observes, Chekhov's "text can be read as indicating that Masha may be one in a string of the 'lovesick major's affairs'" and his adultery as "perhaps provoking his wife's suicide attempts."[36] At their parting Masha certainly seems more unhappy than Vershinin. Anne Brontë, by contrast, is saved by her own good sense and Emily, apparently, by the idea of Heathcliff from similar devastation.

Finally, the relative optimism of the Brontë sisters, despite sickness, disappointments, and bereavements, may reinforce the critical view that the Prozorov sisters could have done more to get themselves to Moscow or to find a satisfying alternative if they had been less self-absorbed and more proactive in taking control of their lives. That is the view of Deborah McAndrew, writing in the educational packet provided by Northern Broadsides to accompany their production of *We Are Three Sisters*. "Perhaps the greatest difference of all," she comments, "is that Charlotte, Emily, and Anne were not passive players in a dull, futile existence; they were gifted, passionate and energetic. They worked hard to overcome the difficulties in their lives and, unlike Chekhov's three sisters, history has proved that they prevailed."[37] Such criticism of Chekhov's sisters is not new. It is perhaps unfair. Though their lives may seem futile, they are hardly passive or without gifts. Olga is a teacher and a carer—for Irina, for Anfisa, for the people displaced by the fire. Though Kulygin has disappointed her, Masha tried to fulfill her intellectual passions by marrying the most intelligent man she knew. And Irina repeatedly

attempts to find satisfying work—in the post office, for the town council, as a teacher. What Morrison's play really suggests is that the Prozorov sisters lack the creative genius of the Brontës and the present satisfaction and confidence in the future that their writing brings them. Olga, Masha, and Irina are not more passive than the Brontës; despite their educational attainments and what they themselves may think, they are more ordinary; they can see no clear path to fulfillment for their desires. And that consideration perhaps offers audiences a more helpful insight into their plight than using the Brontës' achievements to criticize the Prozorovs' failure to transcend the limitations of their environment.

His play, as Morrison has said, "really is the Brontës, broadly enacting the plot of *Three Sisters*."[38] Morrison makes his historical figures inhabit a well-known dramatic fiction in order to give them things to say and do that embody and give shape to thoughts, feelings, and relationships mined from a variety of biographical materials. While their performance of *The Three Sisters* gives life to the Brontës, it incidentally casts a rather somber light on the characters from whom that life is taken.

Precisely because Morrison is not adapting Chekhov's play along familiar lines, most obviously by updating its concerns as Henley, Wasserstein, and Wertenbaker do, he points us to an intriguing characteristic of the mode of adaptation itself. For the most part he does not have to invent the basic parallels with Chekhov's play because they are already there—possibly created in the first place by Chekhov himself. But in fleshing them out in terms of the biography of the Brontës, he almost accidentally throws a more unexpected light on *The Three Sisters* than do those dramatists who set out deliberately to explore, engage with, or perhaps just evoke Chekhovian themes in terms of contemporary characters. Morrison's play, ostensibly an homage to *The Three Sisters*, actually allows Chekhov himself to undermine conventional views of his own characters by reproducing in such detail Chekhovian dialogues and stage actions spoken and performed by well-known historical figures. From this example we can perhaps infer that not only does any successful adaptation inevitably change our perception of the work it adapts, but that the source text itself can under the right circumstances be complicit in its own critical interrogation.

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Notes

[1] Anton Chekhov, *The Three Sisters* in *Five Major Plays*, trans. Ronald Hingley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 265. All subsequent quotations from *The Three Sisters* are from this edition and will be referred to parenthetically in my text by page number.

[2] *The Three Sisters* has been rewritten for various social and political purposes by dramatists from all over the world, including, among English-language playwrights, Brian Friel, Mustapha Matura, and the Wooster Group. See J. Douglas Clayton and Yana Meerzon, ed. *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and its Mutations* (New York: Routledge, 2013). This collection of essays does not include any discussion of the plays I am addressing in my essay. On translations and adaptations of Chekhov's plays see also Stuart Young, "Fin-de-siècle Reflections and Revisions: Wertenbaker Challenges British Chekhov Tradition in *The Break of Day*," *Modern Drama* 41 (1998): 442–60.

[3] Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), 8.

[4] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 170.

[5] Wendy Wasserstein, *The Sisters Rosensweig* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993), 17, 68. All subsequent quotations from *The Sisters Rosensweig* are from this edition and will be referred to parenthetically in my text by page number.

[6] See Fischlin and Fortier, 3.

[7] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 26; Sharon Friedman, *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2009), 8.

[8] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6–7.

[9] Commissioned by director Max Stafford-Clark, Wertenbaker wrote *The Break of Day* as a companion piece for *The Three Sisters* for Out of Joint, which performed the plays at the Royal Court Theatre and elsewhere in (somewhat occasional) repertory. The same actor, Nigel Terry, played both Robert and Vershinin. See Young, 446.

[10] See Julia Salamon, *Wendy and the Lost Boys: The Uncommon Life of Wendy Wasserstein* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 9, 292–93.

[11] As both Wertenbaker and Hutcheon have noted, one purpose of adaptation is to make the source text more "fit" in a Darwinian sense for new political or social circumstances. See Timberlake Wertenbaker, "First Thoughts on Transforming a Text," in *International Dramaturgy: Translation and Transformations in the Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker*, ed. Maya E. Roth and Sara Freeman (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2008), 36. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 31.

[12] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 121.

[13] Timberlake Wertenbaker, *The Break of Day* in *Plays 2* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 45. All subsequent quotations from *The Break of Day* are from this edition and will be referred to parenthetically in my text by page number. The reference to the "intruder" is noted by Young, 448.

[14] In *The Break of Day* Jamie, April's boyfriend, is Tess's brother, but the fraternal relationship has no dramatic significance.

[15] See David Richards, "Sunday View; Wendy Wasserstein's School of Life," *The New York Times*, 1 November 1992, http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/01/theater/sunday-view-wendy-wasserstein-s-school-of-life.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.

[16] For detailed discussions of the similarities between Henley's play and Chekhov's see Jean Gagen, "'Most Resembling Unlikeness, and Most Unlike Resemblance': Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Chekhov's *Three Sisters*," *Studies in American Drama, 1945–Present* (1989) 4: 119–128; Joanne Karpinski, "The Ghosts of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* Haunt Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*," in *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*, ed. June Schlueter (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 229–45. On the relation of Wasserstein's play to Chekhov's see Gaylord Brewer, "Wendy Wasserstein's Three Sisters: Squandered Privilege," in *Wendy Wasserstein: A Casebook*, ed. Claudia Barnett (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), 119–132. On Wertenbaker's play and Chekhov's see Young; Kristin Johnsen-Neshati, "Chekhovian Transformation: *Three Sisters* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Break of Day*," in Roth and Freeman, 123–33; Sheila Rabillard, "Translating the Past: Theatrical and Historical Repetition in Wertenbaker's *The Break of Day*," in Roth and Freeman, 135–53.

[17] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 91–92.

[18] Beth Henley, *Crimes of the Heart* in *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1 (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2000), 36. All subsequent quotations from *Crimes of the Heart* are from this edition and will be referred to parenthetically in my text by page number.

[19] Young notes that Wertenbaker has been accused of stereotyping East Europeans, but argues convincingly that she is rather sending up popular stereotypes (452–53).

[20] Timberlake Wertenbaker, "Dancing With History," in *Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, ed. Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi (Brussels: P. I. E. Peter Lang, 2002), 19–20.

[21] Rose Whyman, *Anton Chekhov* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 135.

[22] See Laurence Senelick, *Anton Chekhov* (Houndmills: Macmillan,1985), 110–111; Whyman, 138. Young argues that in Tess and Nina's abusive treatment of Marisa, Wertenbaker is rejecting the usual critical concurrence in the Prozorov sisters' treatment of Natasha (449).

[23] Wertenbaker, "Dancing with History," 20.

[24] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 17.

[25] See Douglas Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 515; Blake Morrison, *We Are Three Sisters* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), prefatory remarks, n.p. Quotations from *We Are Three Sisters* are from this edition and will be referred to parenthetically in my text by page number.

[26] See Juliet Barker, *The Brontës, Wild Genius on the Moors: The Story of a Literary Family* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2012), 665.

[27] See Morrison, "Author's Note," *We Are Three Sisters*, 3. On Weightman and Mrs. Robinson see Barker, *The Brontës*, 378–84; 538–55; 581–86.

[28] Ibid.; see also Barker, *The Brontës*, 150–51.

[29] Morrison, "Author's Note," 3.

[30] Morrison, *We Are Three Sisters*, prefatory remarks, n.p.

[31] Ibid.; see also Blake Morrison, "Blake Morrison's Brontë connections," interview by Jim Greenhalf, *Bradford Telegraph & Argus,* 13 June 2011, http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/leisure/leisure_interview/9080414.Blake_Morrison_s_Brontë_connections___/; Lyn Gardner, "Chekhov's Three Sisters: at home with the Brontës?," *Theatreblog*, *Guardian*, 16 May 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2011/may/16/anton-chekhov-three-sisters-brontes.

[32] Ron Simpson, review of *We Are Three Sisters*, by Blake Morrison, Northern Broadsides Theatre Company, *What's On Stage*, 17 September 2011, http://www.whatsonstage.com/bradford-theatre/reviews/09-2011/we-are-three-sisters-northern-broadsides_6971.html.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Gardner, "Chekhov's Three Sisters."

[35] Dominic Cavendish, review of "We Are Three Sisters," by Blake Morrison, Viaduct Theatre, *Telegraph*, 14 September 2011, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/8763498/We-Are-Three-Sisters-Viaduct-Theatre-Halifax-and-Touring-review.html.

[36] Whyman, 131.

[37] Deborah McAndrew, *Northern Broadsides Information and Education Pack*, 17, accessed 19 June 2013, issuu.com/northern-broadsides/docs/wearethreesisters.

[38] Ron Simpson, "Brief Encounter With…Blake Morrison" (interview), *What's On Stage*, 5 September 2011, http://www.whatsonstage.com/bradford-theatre/news/09-2011/brief-encounter-with-blake-morrison_7132.html.