

12-1-2018

Scottish Demotics and Russian Soul: Liz Lochhead's Adaptation of Chekhov's Three Sisters

Ksenija Horvat

Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Horvat, Ksenija (2019) "Scottish Demotics and Russian Soul: Liz Lochhead's Adaptation of Chekhov's Three Sisters," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, 29–36.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol44/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

**SCOTTISH DEMOTICS & RUSSIAN SOUL:
LIZ LOCHHEAD'S ADAPTATION OF CHEKHOV'S
THREE SISTERS**

Ksenija Horvat

Anton Chekhov's plays indicate that he recognized the effect that socio-political and cultural changes would have on their reception over time. As Nina expresses succinctly in *The Seagull* (1898): "Only one spirit in the universe remains constant and immutable,"¹ but readings and interpretations of source texts from past cultures can never be immutable, nor can they forever remain constant.

Translation of such texts into another time and culture is not a simple task, and identification of one's target audiences becomes a significant factor in determining the type of translation, the level of faithfulness to the source text, and the nature of its reception. Stage translations, particularly when they are specially commissioned, undergo a complicated process of negotiation between writer, translator and director, and the success or failure of this negotiation may impact considerably on how the final product is perceived by theatre spectators, as the text's ultimate consumers.

Taken further, this process of translation to the stage can become more complex, when, in Gerard Genette's terms, Chekhov's original play becomes through the transformative process of adaptation the hypotext to a newly-imagined work or hypertext.² The product of such a process may evoke its starting point fairly loosely. While the hypertext may not directly comment on the hypotext, it does enter into communication with it in ways that depart from the hypotext's original intention.

More so than translations in other literary genres, dramatic adaptations offer or invite many points of departure from their source texts, and adaptors may seek to deconstruct the past in order to converse with the present. For some adaptors, this may point to a reclamation of the freedom

¹ Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*, in *Plays*, translated by Peter Carson (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 92.

² See, e.g., Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

of creation, while for others it may become an insurmountable problem, risking a defamation of the source text. Does the concept of “original intent” have any currency in contemporary theatre? Is the past adapted only in order to make a point about the present?

Liz Lochhead’s adaptations unwrap these questions through the continuous interaction they represent between the author and his play on the one hand, and the adaptor and her craft, the stage, and the target audience on the other. They reside in a space where contradictions and transitions are not only possible but inevitable. Thus, for Lochhead, the works of other playwrights become a starting point for engagement with and commentary on the social, political and cultural permutations of her and our own time. The characters in Lochhead’s *The Thebans* (a conflation of *Oedipus* and *Antigone* by Sophocles and *Jokasta* by different sources, but mainly Euripides, which draws modern parallels with conflicts in the Middle East), in *Educating Agnes* (based on Molière’s *L’Ecole des Femmes* and weaving “references to Kinsey and Cosmo on to Molière’s 17th-century frame”)³, and in *Three Sisters* (based on Chekhov’s play and first performed at the Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh, in 2000) represent, in different ways, Lochhead’s dialogue with Scotland, Scotland’s ambiguous relationship with England, and more than a single nod to recent events such as the independence referendum.

Lochhead’s understanding of these hypotexts and the agility with which they are transformed through adaptation processes are both indisputable. Her writing exists between two realms – the poetic (demotic and auditory) and the plastic (visual and tangible). As an artist who performs her own poetry, she is aware of the active role of the writer in performance, and of the continuous need for dialogue with director and actors. In her reworking of Chekhov, she also acknowledges the dialogue of the adaptor with the author who is no longer here to approve or challenge the adaptor’s choices.⁴

Lochhead was neither the first nor the last adaptor to remould Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* with these questions in mind, and each repositioning the play in a different place and time. Brian Friel’s adaptation for Field Day, in 1981, which moves the play to Ireland, provides an earlier example of how a hypertext can transform *realia*, setting and characterisation. It translates English versions “redolent of

³ Mark Fisher, “Educating Agnes” [Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh], *The Guardian*, 12 April 2011: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/apr/12/educating-agnes-review>

⁴ This paper uses the unpublished performance script of Lochhead’s *Three Sisters* from the 2000 premiere, which was changed in part in rehearsals, and also refers where relevant to the cut version, as it featured in the original performance.

either Edwardian England or the Bloomsbury set” into Irish rhythm and phrasing that flows better off the Field Day actors’ tongues, or as Friel himself say: “It’s all the question of music, the audience will hear a different music to anything they have heard in Chekhov before.”⁵ More recently, in 2014, John Byrne’s version places the three sisters (Olive, Maddy and Renee) in an Argyllshire Dunoon naval base during the 1960s.

Lochhead’s own revisionist alterations to the setting, characters and language follow the same logic as Friel’s. Lochhead sets her adaptation in a Highland boarding school during the immediate post-World War II period (1946-1950). As the production director Tony Cownie explained, Lochhead’s transposition of the original setting to the North of Scotland works because

There’s a mystique that lingers around Chekhov ... and this is a way of breaking it down. First, it’s that standard English translations tend to produce standard English productions, and secondly that there are aspects of Chekhovian social milieu that are unhelpfully obscure to a modern audience.⁶

With regard to the latter, Cownie gives the example of a samovar that Chebutykin brings as a present to Irina. Traditionally given by a husband to a wife on their twenty-fifth anniversary, the gift causes consternation in the other characters; but what would have been self-explanatory to contemporary Russian audiences is not easily interpreted by modern Scottish viewers. In discussions with Cownie, Lochhead decided to replace the samovar with a string of pearls, an object closer to the new audience’s cultural understanding.

Such methods prove rewarding in drawing texts from previous eras into modern contexts, but while they may resolve a number of issues with the play’s currency and relatability to Scottish audiences, they can also bring forth new problems with regard to authenticity and relatability to the source text. This is seen above all in the area of political applicability. In her unpublished PhD thesis, Minka Paraskevova notes of this play that Lochhead’s choices are not accidental, in the same way that “to start a new historical beginning (devolution) does not seem accidental either, as the question of Britishness becomes the central theme in the adaptation.”⁷ The play’s setting in the 1940s and 1950s may be particularly telling:

⁵ Francis Charles McGrath, “Brian Friel and the Politics of the Anglo-Irish Language”, *Colby Quarterly*, 26.4 (December 1990): 241-248 (245-246): <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol26/iss4/7>

⁶ Mark Fisher, “Director with his Finger on the Impulse,” *Herald Scotland* online, 8 February, 2000: <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-23783100.html>

⁷ Minka Paraskevova, *Undoing Scotland after Devolution in Liz Lochhead’s Dramatic Adaptations of Classical Texts on Page and Stage* (unpublished PhD thesis, Queen Margaret University, 2014), 195.

Paraskevova cites Angus Calder's assessment of these as the most unionist decades in Scottish history.⁸ For the audience to hear a Scottish "music" in Chekhov, and the resonances of Scottish national developments in the voices and attitudes of his characters, Lochhead needed to rework the class-centred patterns of the source script.

The most obvious case in point is Lochhead's transformation of Chekhov's Ferapont and Anfisa, who represent the serfs oppressed and ignored in the old tsarist regime, into Fergus Pow and Nanny, Scottish common folk whose realities are far removed from the British establishment at Westminster. Chekhov wrote his play during tsarist Russia's final years, with the provinces still reeling from the 1891 famine, the death of Alexander III in 1894, and the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. By the time the play was staged at the Moscow Art Theatre, the 1905 Russian Revolution was already underway. Chekhov's sisters thus live in a state of flux, lamenting and mythologizing the past, and unable to see their place in the new society. Irina expresses the sisters' frustrations explicitly in Act II when "*left alone and overcome by longing,*" she exclaims "Moscow! Moscow! Moscow!"⁹ In Lochhead's version this becomes:

RENE

To Get Back to Oxford! To sell the school as a going concern, pack up everything –

IRENE AND LIVVY

And go back to Oxford!¹⁰

The sisters' suffocation by the narrowness of their provincial environment in Chekhov's original, and their yearning for past *glorious* times in culturally diverse Moscow, are here replaced by Irene and Livvy's snobbery towards the rural Highlands and longing for the cultured university environment of Oxford.

Chekhov's Natasha undergoes a similar shift, to become Lochhead's Nettie. In the original play's unflattering portrayal of the fast-rising bourgeois class, Natasha develops from a shy and self-conscious character to one who is self-absorbed, controlling and manipulating. When Nettie appears in Lochhead's Act I, she speaks in Scots and seems lacking in confidence but eager to be accepted by the sisters, who dismiss her as

⁸ Angus Calder, "By the Water of Leith I Sat Down and Wept: Reflections on Scottish Identity," in *Acid Plaid: New Scottish Writing*, ed. Harry Ritchie (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 218-38.

⁹ Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, in *Plays*, trans. by Peter Carson (London: Penguin, 2002), 243..

¹⁰ Liz Lochhead, *Three Sisters*, unpublished performance script (Edinburgh: Royal Lyceum, 2000), 3; capitalization in first phrase in Lochhead.

someone who lacks education and is a bit common. Milly mocks Nettie's appearance and dress sense as

pathetic. Colours that clash like no one's business. She has no idea.
Oh, and the rosy cheeks, the scrubbed face butter-wouldn't melt
country bumpkin look (Lochhead 17).

Her trajectory in Act II mirrors Chekhov's original: now married to Andrew and a mother, Nettie appears commandeering and condescending towards the sisters. Her language changes, and traces of Scots in her speech are toned down – another sign of change in her status.

Lochhead's text explores the notion of altered and displaced identity, and simultaneously mocks outsiders' views of what Scotland may or may not be. The three sisters' English accents are occasionally underscored by ironic use of false Scots: in Act I, just before Captain Vanderbilt (Vershinin in the source text) meets Andrew, Livvy teases that her brother is "a *leetle* bit in love" (Lochhead 17). The outsider's perspective is also symbolised by Vanderbilt, with his strong West Coast American English accent – a nod to those Americans whose nostalgic view of the Scottish past, and inflated pride in their Scottish ancestry, however remote, show little understanding of what Scotland truly is.

The sisters' and Vanderbilt's voices are counterpointed by Fergus Pow's and Nanny's rich working class Doric and dry humour, which they use to puncture Vanderbilt's delusions. Paraskevova points out Fergus Pow's self-ironic view of political and cultural differences between Scotland and England:

FERGUS POW

Same fellae tellt me he heard on the wireless—says that they were
gonnae stretch a rope along the border between Scotland an
England.

ANDREW

A rope? What for?

FERGUS POW

Dinna ken. Bloke tellt me (Lochhead 35).

Doric is used here to underscore political commentary, but Lochhead also often resorts to Scots to imbue her texts with popular tones. We are a long way away from the comedic stage Scotsman of early varieties; Lochhead's use of Scots is a sign of Scotland's cultural and linguistic maturity, and the characters who speak Scots (Fergus Pow, Nanny and Nettie) display vitality and strength that come from familiarity and connection with their environment.

But though there is much in Lochhead's work that contributes to the Scottish national identity debate, politics is not the crux of either

Chekhov's script or Lochhead's interpretation of it. As Joseph Dresen argues, Chekhov

intentionally refrained from delivering moral or political sermons in his literary works or his public statements. Born into the first generation of a family of freed serfs, Chekhov felt that inner freedom was more important than political and social freedom.¹¹

Lochhead's adaptation is also more concerned with the inner life than with sermons, and I would therefore wish to propose a different reading of *Three Sisters*, one that starts not with the politics, but with the characters and the alternate worlds they inhabit in both hypertext and hypertext.

In this alternative view, Lochhead's use of colloquial and demotic registers reflects not just the Scottish national dimension of her adaptation, but also Chekhov's willingness to show sentimentality and emotionality. In a 2012 interview with Paraskevova, the actress Caroline Devlin suggested that Lochhead believed there was "some kind of connection between the Scottish and Russian sensibilities (a kind of openness, reminiscence and melancholy), contrary to the reserved mentality of the English":

I remember as a kid I would be asked to sing a Scottish song and there will be a granny in the corner saying "o, it was a really good cry"—a kind of sentimentality and a willingness to be emotional and that gathering and sharing stories and past that Liz saw was quite akin to the Russian mentality (quoted in Paraskevova, 216).

While critics continue to see Lochhead's play as radical, revisionist or irreparably flawed, it is precisely in this piece that she comes closest to developing characters who are markedly Chekhovian and steeped in the self-doubting, passionate, even self-hating turmoils of *Русская душа* (Russian soul). To nineteenth-century Russian writers, *душа* represents a cultural understanding that the person and her soul (yearning to the point of suffering, simplicity, resignation, compassion that rises out of understanding of human fallibility) are one and the same.¹² For Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "the most basic, most rudimentary spiritual need of the Russian people is the need for suffering, ever-present and unquenchable, everywhere and in everything."¹³

¹¹ F. Joseph Dresen, *Anton Chekhov: The Role of Author in Russian Society* (Washington, DC: Keenan Institute, 2014):

<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/anton-chekhov-the-role-author-russian-society>.

¹² Nikolai Gogol stresses that "to love as the Russian soul loves, is to love not with the mind or anything else, but with all that God has given, all that is within you": Nikolai Gogol, *Taras Bulba and Other Tales*, trans. by John Cuornos (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2011), 120.

¹³ Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Pereistroika* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 83.

Chekhov's characters epitomise these traits. The sisters yearn after Moscow's glittering lights, culture and learning, and their distance from Moscow's sophistication and inability to return to it prevent them from attaining perfect love. Chekhov's characters are always lonely, even when they are in a relationship. Masha throws herself at Vershinin partly because of boredom and partly because she hopes he may fill the void left by her passionless marriage to Kulygin.

Lochhead picks up on this in her characterisation of Milly, whose actions are rash and contradictory, in Irene's growing frustration over her failed attempts to find employment that would free her from the clichéd image of idle middle-class life, and in Livvy's efforts to keep up the appearances of her family's social and cultural superiority by clinging blindly to inflexible rules that govern their daily existence. For Lochhead, all three women are lost souls unable to move away from and overcome their past: there is no great deviation from Chekhovian yearning and suffering here.

But Lochhead's seemingly contradictory insistence on physical humour is also not that far removed from Chekhov's belief that life happens in small mundane moments, rather than in big dramatic conflicts. Vershinin voices Chekhov when he points out in Act I the senselessness of the Russians' tendency to take everything too seriously: "What seems to us serious, significant and really important—a time will come when it'll be forgotten or seem unimportant" (Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, 212). In Lochhead's version this becomes:

VANDERBILT

What we find significant, imagine to be important, it will all be put into perspective by history (Lochhead 15).

Lochhead understands this well, as may be seen in the bathetic rendering of a potentially heart-wrenching moment of separation between the two lovers, Milly and Vanderbilt:

VANDERBILT

I've come to say goodbye!

MILLY STOPS A FOOT OR TWO AWAY FROM HIM.

MILLY

Goodbye.

LIVVY MOVES AWAY AGITATED AND ANGUISHED,
MILLY AND VANDERBILT LOOK AT EACH OTHER THEN
PASSIONATELY EMBRACE.

LIVVY

That's enough!

THEY BREAK AWAY AND MILLY SOBS LOUDLY (Lochhead 89).

Lochhead is at times criticised for turning darker moments of the play unnecessarily into melodrama and farce, but Chekhov would have been unlikely to agree with this accusation. His theatre of mood, as his writing is frequently characterised, is also theatre of the soul, a platform where pathos meets bathos, and where ridiculousness lurks in the darker shades of life. Indeed, the farcical and the melodramatic sit comfortably alongside each other within the hypotext's constant transformations. Lochhead's use of bathos is respectful of Chekhov's style, no matter how much it may depart from his intent. They certainly seem to accord with Chekhov's notion of the role of the tragicomic and ridiculous in his plays.

So, how do we ultimately classify Lochhead's adaptation of *Three Sisters*? Do we call it a hybrid that works hard to blur the boundaries, or a deliberate appropriation of the source text? Can Lochhead's approach be classified as an adaptation at all? Would George Bluestone's idea of paraphrase not be more appropriate,¹⁴ or perhaps Linda Hutcheon's redefinition of adaptations as "re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system ... to another"?¹⁵ There is a range of hybrid forms between the two opposing extremes of, on the one hand, what Hutcheon dubs "spin-offs" and Peter Rabinowitz calls "expansions" (sequels and prequels), and on the other those forms "in which fidelity to the prior work is a theoretical ideal, even if a practical impossibility."¹⁶ Where does Lochhead's play fall on this spectrum? Whatever the answer, her choice to interact with rather than merely re-tell the source text only increases her work's potential and artistic worth.

Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

¹⁴ George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 62.

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 16.

¹⁶ Hutcheon, 171; Peter J. Rabinowitz, in Hutcheon, 248-249, originally published as "What's Hecuba to us?": The Audience's Experience of Literary Borrowing", in *The Reader in the Text*, ed. by Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crossman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 241-63.