



# Adaptation and Deconstruction: Emma Rice's (2022) Adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*

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## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to analyse the adaptation of Emily Brontë's canonical work focusing on Emma Rice's play *Wuthering Heights* (2022) and its transformation of the conventional forms of Brontë's canonical original into more experimental directions. Adaptation is "an acknowledged transposition of a recognisable other work or works" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8). Catherine Rees clarifies the distinctive appeal of adaptation whereby "another attraction of adaptation is the opportunity it offers for presenting texts in a new context" (Rees, 2017, p. 3). Within this context, Emma Rice's play, analysing the original text in a new format, interprets Catherine and Heathcliff as Greek gods. The theatrical version of *Wuthering Heights*, performed at Bristol Old Vic in front of a live audience, retold a canonical story. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* had a great impression on the Victorian community when it was first published. Through studies and the medium of adaptation, Brontë's work has been analysed and discussed in the ages and reached more and more readers and audiences. This study delves into how an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* in the form of performance is represented by Emma Rice. Through music, dance, grief, hope, passion and revenge, Rice portrays a contemporary revenge tragedy by adapting Emily Brontë's magnum opus into a theatrical performance. By referring to the ancient chorus, Rice tries to represent Catherine and Heathcliff as a tragic heroine and a hero. In Rice's adaptation, Heathcliff's adoption is turned into an experimental performance.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Deconstruction, *Wuthering Heights*, Emma Rice, Adoption

## Introduction

Since the emergence and origins of drama and performance, theatre has changed over the ages with geographical, political, cultural and social developments, pushed the fourth wall with avant-garde movements and rejected and deconstructed traditional rules of unity. Although elements such as anachronism, deconstruction of the role of the author, the death of the character, new perceptions and theatrical theories and periodisation are observed in texts and performances, there has not been a complete break from the origins, in that references have been made to the period in which they emerged and returns to those dates have been experienced. As "a literary-historical



event" (Szondi, 1987, p. 6), theatre functions as a supplement without forgetting the past and without breaking away from its roots because "total separation from roots is impossible" (Günenç, 2022, p. 200). Margherita Laera identifies the functional roles of the theatre:

Theatre also rewrites. It constantly does. It rewrites history, relationships, stories and rules. It refashions beliefs, recycles old and used objects and reassembles them into new embodied experiences. Above all, theatre repeats, and incessantly so. It repeats itself and the act of returning and rewriting, as though it were struck by an obsessive compulsion to reiterate and re-enact, again and again, the vestiges of its past. In so doing, it adapts itself to present contingencies and situations, like an animal species struggling to survive through evolution. (2014, p. 1)

Through palimpsest ("our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation") (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8) and adaptation, theatre rewrites the tradition and reshapes classical works both in its texts and performances. "Adaptation" is applied to a wide variety of theatrical operations, uses and contexts, in which a transformation of sorts takes place. It not only refers to the dramaturgical practice of turning, for instance, a novel into a play script, a domain traditionally covered by playwrights" (Laera, 2014, p. 2). In adaptations, playwrights take the traditional space, time, events, and characters to different dimensions and subjects. Emma Rice transforms the novel (*Wuthering Heights*) into the text of a play, an experiential performance with a theatrical operation.

This paper will outline the theoretical background of adaptation before clarifying some critical concepts regarding the distinctive ideas and perspectives created by Emma Rice in her adaptation. The theatrical version of *Wuthering Heights* was performed at the Bristol Old Vic in front of a live audience to retell a canonical story. When Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* was published, it had an impact on the Victorian community. Through studies and the medium of adaptation, Brontë's work has been analysed and discussed over the ages and has reached more and more readers and audiences. This study delves into Emma Rice's theatrical adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* and the shift from novelistic to theatrical representation. Through music, dance, grief, hope, passion, and revenge, Rice adapts Brontë's magnum opus into a theatrical performance and portrays a contemporary revenge tragedy. By referring to the ancient chorus (the Moor), Rice

represents Catherine and Heathcliff as the heroine and hero of a tragedy. In Rice's adaptation, Heathcliff's adoption turns into an experimental performance. The purpose of this paper is to study the adaptation of Emily Brontë's canonical work, focusing on Emma Rice's play *Wuthering Heights* (2022) and its transformation from conventional into an experimental form. Within this context, Emma Rice, analysing the text in a new format, interprets Catherine and Heathcliff as Greek gods in her play.

## Definition of Adaptation and Adaptation in Theory

Adaptation is "an acknowledged transposition of a recognisable other work or works" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8). Catherine Rees identifies the distinctive feature and attraction of adaptation as "the opportunity it offers for presenting texts in a new context" (Rees, 2017, p. 3). Texts are presented in new contexts because the nature of knowledge changes, the cultural structure changes, and society changes, and within this general context change cannot exist without transformation. In order for change to adapt to new channels and become operational, the concept of adaptation is needed. Adaptation as "both process and product" (Hutcheon, 2016, p. 31) is the reflection of connection; a new format can be created from old versions with new resources, new literacy and new interpretations of literature. Adaptation is an on-going process rather than "a new practice; authors, playwrights, directors, composers, choreographers, and designers have been adapting material since civilizations arose" (Kinney, 2013, p. 7) and for that reason the author/director/creator should know stories, characters, plot, events, and many other things that help to create radical stories, new characters, and events. As readers, viewers, scholars and audiences, we can engage with alternative texts, films, events and performances.

Adaptation also questions whether it is original because "rewriting" helps to reformat the original text and even to create a radical form by using characters or distinctive dialogue from the old text. Through theoretical tools such as intertextuality, irony, pastiche and palimpsest, previous and contemporary works are brought together as "bounded text", a term that describes "the process by which any text" (Sanders, 2016, p. 2) is "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 36) that deconstructs "notions of the original and godlike authorial control" (Nicklas & Lindner, 2012, p. 15). As Rainer Emig puts it, "Adaptation has from its inception been regarded as an intertextual phenomenon. Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Roland Barthes are the godfathers that accompany Julia Kristeva on the path to coining the term "Intertextuality"', (2012, p. 15). Authors

analyse or revise earlier works and intertextuality helps to derive the story, characters and space from one text to the new format. Through palimpsest and intertextuality, the author can re-interpret hidden events, stories and characters' feelings and deconstruct the original story.

Catherine Rees writes of the idea of adaptation, "We enjoy the adaptation because we can see the familiar story through the lens of the new format" (2017, p. 2). Within this framework, it is not possible to analyse Tim Crouch's *I Shakespeare* without knowing Shakespeare's distinctive plays and their old format. Crouch evokes and revitalises a canonical playwright and his works. Otherwise "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" (Rees, 2017, p. 3). In *Contemporary Approaches to Adaptation in Theatre*, Kara Reilly suggests that "By knowing the stories and adapting them, new generations revivify them and breathe life into them, making them afresh, exciting and unique to the moment in which they are staged" (2018, p. xxii). As a member of a new generation, Rice reorganises and revivifies a canonical work and reshapes it with performances for new audiences.

Adaptation also reflects the political aspects and understanding of societies, periods and cultures. Political understanding is shaped by revolutionary changes, imperial rule, race, gender, economy, geography, and ideology. Adaptation therefore plays a functional role across cultures and societies. Shakespeare's distinctive plays have been translated, rewritten and adapted at different times to analyse ideology (e.g. Marxism, Socialism), gender politics, post-colonial apprehensions and political issues. Therefore, "Adaptation studies is a field of increasing importance in media, film and literary studies" (Nicklas & Lindner, 2012, p. 1). Such an increase in importance also affects canonical artefacts. Within this context, Emily Brontë's source novel *Wuthering Heights* has become one of the most favoured "Victorian novels for screen adaptation, with a long list of versions" (Barbudo, 2015, p. 45). Maria Isabel Barbudo proposes that "*Wuthering Heights* is one of the novels whose adaptations are being approached within this vein, with the analysis of themes deemed central and recurrent in the novel" (2015, p. 46). Rice actually reflects Klein and Parker's description of an approach to adaptation that "retains the core of the structure of the narrative while significantly reinterpreting or, in some cases, deconstructing the source text" (1981, p.10). While retaining the basic ideas of the canonical work, Rice's experimental adaptation introduces the original text to social issues and brings to the stage a universal problem that has been rejected. The Victorian era actually portrays

“repressed and oppressed modes of sexuality; criminality and violence; the urban phenomenon, the operations of law and authority; science and religion; the postcolonial legacies of empire” (Sanders, 2016, p. 176). Themes of love, home, devastation, otherness and revenge are exemplified in different adaptations. Focusing on themes such as refugees, otherness, love and revenge and deconstructing the source text, Emma Rice adapts Emily Brontë’s masterpiece into a theatrical experience. This study explores Emma Rice’s *Wuthering Heights* (2022) as an adaptation of Emily Brontë’s canonical work.

## **Emma Rice’s Adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (2022)**

Emma Rice founded the touring theatre Wise Children and is the artistic director of her own company. Prior to Wise Children, Rice was the artistic director of the Globe Theatre (2016-18). Rice, “after two seasons, had received what amounted to a vote of no confidence from the board that had appointed her, and her departure caused an outcry in the world of theatre” (Kellaway, 2018) because she sought to go beyond traditional structures throughout her artistic direction and to use different techniques in light, sound and stage direction. Neil Constable refers to Rice’s signature style: “We are finishing this weekend a wonderful Emma-style new musical *Romantics Anonymous* which played alongside *Secret Theatre*. A new play and a new musical in the playhouse with technology and support” (qtd. in Bowie-Sell, 2018). Rice brought radical revisions to Shakespeare’s plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Taming of the Shrew* at the Globe. With the same radical consideration and stylistic innovation, she staged her adaptation of Emily Brontë’s canonical work *Wuthering Heights* by deconstructing it. Rice’s version of *Wuthering Heights* establishes a connection with the original, allowing the audience to observe the new performance from the original’s point of view. Rice’s adaptation represents a successful adaptation by deconstructing and challenging the audience with the new performance while offering references to the original. Rice effectively demonstrates her familiarity with the original work by doing her homework well and introducing new themes of the rough and windy moors. John Ellis emphasises that “adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading or as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated memory” (1982, p. 3). Rice’s adaptation is based on her childhood experiences, during which she had the chance to go to the Moors and witness the weather of *Wuthering Heights*, breathe the air and read *Wuthering Heights* several times. As John Ellis highlights, the novel, which is considered one of the classics of English literature, is presented in a different and more lively way with such memories.

The Moor is represented as a character in the form of a Greek chorus in the adaptation. The chorus works as a storyteller and analyst in the play. Rice removes Nelly Dean as the primary narrator since she does not want her production to feel too domestic. Rice wanted her characters to feel more like gods than busy bodies. Rice built a chorus of the Yorkshire moors and layered the structure of a Greek tragedy over the story (Biggs, 2022). Rice's adaptation "shows us the thought of history" and "adaptation presents history's ghosts to us as we perceive and interpret it in the contemporary moment" (Reilly, 2018, p. xxii). Rice, analysing and reinterpreting the ghost, history and character structure, stages a contemporary performance. Her characters are "superhuman; Catherine, Heathcliff and Hareton the Gods of Chaos, Revenge and Hope" (Rice, 2021). Instead of Nelly Dean as a shrouded character in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the Moor witnesses and narrates everything in Rice's adaptation:

I am the Moor  
 Ravaged by the stabbing rain,  
 Wizen'd by the rascal sun,  
 Tormented and mighty.  
 I hold fast.  
 I am the Moor  
 Nothing here can shift me.  
 Nothing here can change me.  
 I stick to the earth and I stick to my story  
 I am the Moor. (Rice, 2022, p. 9)

As Arifa Akbar describes the Moor in Rice's play, "The Yorkshire moors are human – fittingly for a story in which they are such an animate feature – and appear as a Greek chorus" (2021).

Rice's deconstruction is not only a deconstruction of traditional performance techniques, but also focuses on refugee crises, cruelty, revenge and tragedy. Rice is committed to analysing and interpreting the works of very prominent authors in different ways. At the same time, she observes political discourse in a universal sense and what happens around the world. She expresses that "I was... really inspired and moved and angry about what was happening in the Calais Jungle (a refugee and immigrant encampment in France) at the time, and watching politicians argue over how many unaccompanied children we would give safe passage to, and that was when

I had the revelation that Heathcliff was an unaccompanied refugee child” (Ciocia, 2022). The character Heathcliff is an orphan found in the Liverpool docks and is taken by Mr Earnshaw to Wuthering Heights, to his home. In nineteenth-century England, “The plethora of employment opportunities and subsequent prosperity of the middle class also drew immigrants to England. Many of these immigrants settled in city centres such as London, Liverpool, and other industrial towns” (Churchill, qtd in Caywood, 2017, p. 3). Brontë’s canonical work portrays “a perceptible framework in which it is possible to observe different perspectives, multiple complex interrelationships, voices” (Madran, 2009, p. 206) and different political points. Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* tries to draw attention to population growth and unaccompanied children after the Industrial Revolution. According to research, over nine million people travelled through Liverpool between 1830 and 1930 to settle in England. Liverpool was also a major hub for the transatlantic slave trade. (Caywood, 2017, p. 4). Social changes during the Industrial Revolution otherised immigrants and brought racism to the fore. After the industrial revolution, the rise of the middle class was observed alongside racist and abusive attitudes towards dark-skinned immigrants like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*.

Emma Rice draws attention to the refugee child Heathcliff, his otherness and his revenge on society. Rice attempts to explain why Heathcliff is restricted from social rules and reconciled with society. Christine Brooke-Rose articulates the concept of the palimpsest as a fiction of history itself. Although its historical expression is varied (1992, p. 125), palimpsest in narratives provides “not an alternative world, but an alternative history” (p. 131) and carries the central idea of revealing the voice of the other (Güneç, 2021, p. 304). This alternative historical perspective allows authors to ask cultural, social and political questions. Through asking these questions, Rice creates a “network of politics-history-society-sexuality” (Spivak, 1987, p. 121). In her adaptation, Rice aims to give Heathcliff the identity of nobility that he was deprived of. Stevens clarifies the otherness of Heathcliff whereby “We know only that he is “Other”: Foreign, dark and brutalized. Clearly, Heathcliff stands for a new and rising force in Britain” (2022). In the play, Mr Earnshaw describes Heathcliff: “Look at him! See how he shines. Black granite in the Liverpool rain. Words fall from him like chips from a sugar loaf” (Rice, 2022, p. 13). Rice characterises Heathcliff with a colonial and Indian background complete with a Jamaican accent.

After the Russian invasion, the world has witnessed refugee crises. The war between Israel and Palestine will also cause a new wave of refugee crises. Unfortunately, many innocent people, women, and children have been killed, therefore, we witness many

unaccompanied refugee children. Rice intends to create active observation and empathy in the audience. Focusing on Hutcheon's term "repetition of variation" (2006, p. 4) Rice's play can be said to clarify the purpose of her adaptation, how "political or ethical commitment shapes her decision to re-interpret the source text" (Sanders, 2016, p. 3). Echoing Hutcheon's notion of 'repetition with variation', Rice follows the process of the canonical work and creates an adaptive product. She tries to form a close connection with the original work, coordinates her understanding of the context and period of Brontë's work and reinterprets the urbanisation that started with the industrial revolution. During the Victorian period, people migrated to harbour cities under the effect of the industrial revolution. Both the community and characters in the narrative displayed a sense of transformation. Considering the increase in the rate of migration in this process and the fact that an industrial city like Liverpool was also affected by this migration, it can be concluded that children were left without care and as orphans due to the working conditions. The orphan status of Heathcliff can be explained in this context. The fact that Mr Earnshaw takes Heathcliff to *Wuthering Heights* is an indication that his fate of loneliness and vulnerability will continue. Mr. Earnshaw takes Heathcliff's coat off, picks up and kisses him, and shows his surprise to his children Catherine and Hindley: "Open your eyes! *They open their eyes and look with horror*" (Rice, 2022, p. 14). Catherine and Hindley show their reaction and ask: "What is that? And Mr. Earnshaw answers: 'That' my loves, is a new member of our family! I have called him Heathcliff" (Rice, p. 14). *Wuthering Heights* depicts life without shelter, primitiveness, and defencelessness in harsh climatic conditions.

Heathcliff, portrayed as a villain<sup>1</sup> and gypsy, is characterised by his weaknesses "as well as the weaknesses of the society surrounding him" (Shapiro, 1969, p. 285) in Brontë's masterpiece. Brontë "condemns him when Heathcliff ruthlessly accepts the values of the people he hates and seeks fulfilment through an empty revenge" (p. 285). After Mr Earnshaw's death, Heathcliff is not accepted as a person, he is described as the other/ an object and "as a usurper of his parent's affections and his privileges" (Brontë, 1987, p. 30). Rice's adaptation attempts to give Heathcliff an identity. Rice not only makes us support reprehensible characters, but also tries to make us love a singing Heathcliff. Through her experimental performance, Rice wants to create empathy in the audience. Rice tries to deconstruct the novel's gothic characteristics. Instead of a windy and dark

1 In the play Catherine identifies Nero who "was adopted by his uncle, he was no ordinary man. An actor, a poet and a murderer, he cared deeply and cared not at all" (Rice, 2022, p. 24) Heathcliff: "I like this Nero" (p. 24). As an adopted child like Nero, the nature of *Wuthering Heights* turns Heathcliff into an uncivilised and villainous character.



mood, she adapts *Wuthering Heights* through music, dance, video and “puppetry-notably dogs represented by skulls mounted on scythes- are seamlessly integrated” (Curtis, 2022). In Rice’s adaptation, the childhoods of Heathcliff and Catherine are described with puppets.

Emily Brontë’s masterpiece *Wuthering Heights* merges romanticism and realism with gothic elements. *Wuthering Heights* contains elements such as revenge and creates an atmosphere of fear. Indeed, Rice is not only inspired by the events in *Wuthering Heights* but also by one of Brontë’s inspirations, William Shakespeare. Watson elucidates that most readers associate *Wuthering Heights* with *Romeo and Juliet* (1949) because of two distinctive places (Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange) and contrasting families (Earnshaws and Lintons), which disapprove of the protagonists because “Brontë lived in a region where there was a sharp and complicated conflict between landed and industrial capital” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 8). These two tragedies portray the themes of love and death. In both works, the two households are in opposition to each other. In *Wuthering Heights* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the young men and women share similar destinies. “*Wuthering Heights* and *Romeo and Juliet* feature a similar style of double action in which the lovers’ tragic choices mirror one another” (Pinion, 1995, pp. 195-196, qtd in Colvin, 2021, p. 384). Instead of two different societal standards, Rice integrates the two families into their society. In her adaptation, Rice portrays two lovers as the hero and heroine who love each other intensely, as in *Romeo and Juliet*: Catherine: “I love him... Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (Rice, 2022, p. 40). Rice’s adaptation supports Terry Eagleton’s argument about *Wuthering Heights*: “It is a function of the metaphysical to preserve those possibilities which a society conceals, to act as its reservoir of unrealised value. That is the history of Heathcliff and Catherine” (2005(1975), p. 120). To identify the unrealised value, Rice portrays Heathcliff and Catherine as the heroes and heroines of the ancient period.

Adaptation and the palimpsest style offer new direction and inspiration for the author. New direction and inspiration are created by history, ideology, politics and society for theatrical adaptation. Fischlin and Fortier define theatrical adaptation as “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” (2020, p. 7). Rice portrays a new system that contains old and new performance styles, speaking bodies, video, music, dance and ideology. Like Gilles Deleuze’s comments on Carmelo Bene’s radical

adaptation of *Richard III*, which Deleuze understands as deconstructing the major role of Shakespeare and distorting character and plot (Fischlin & Fortier, 2020 p. 6), Rice's adaptation does everything possible to stage a radical performance. She fragments actual characters, adds fictional characters, distorts the plot, and creates political language. Her intention "to disrupt the work of the major author is, therefore, to disrupt the basis of the state and its rulers" (Fischlin & Fortier, 2020, p. 6). Rice's *Wuthering Heights* deconstructs the basis of the ideology of the ruling class in the Victorian period and represents the margins, deconstructing the existing material as well as remaking the canonical work in the contemporary period.

## Conclusion

Theatre is in perpetual motion. It re-evaluates, constructs, defines, and writes history, characters, and events and creates relationships. It reconsiders minor characters, bringing them to life and presenting them to the audience in new experiential performances. Rice's adaptation is structurally characterised by puppets and skeletons as well as many different characters. At the same time, the deconstruction of the fourth wall through techniques such as dance, music and video devices stands out in the adaptation. Narratively, Rice deconstructs the ethics and morality of the nineteenth century and turns to the refugee child through unaccompanied minors. The number of refugee children will inevitably increase with the wars. Rice tries to deconstruct the ethical and moral thought of different kinds of people's choices in the nineteenth century. She tries to restore the ethical and tragic aspects of the society by reading the text closely. Sanders elucidates that adaptation is a practice of transfer, an act of revision in itself, which transforms a given genre into another genre, as well as an empowering procedure dealing with addition, expansion, aggregation and interpolation (2016, p. 18). Adaptation creates two authorships for the performance. Rice, as well as being a playwright, has adopted a new purpose. She not only uses the characters and story of the original work but also tries to convey universal problems to the audience from different angles through a more experiential performance. In her theatrical adaptation, Rice portrays a network of relationships that refer to the past and present, with puppets, songs, and bodies in dialogue, and all the other traditional, social and political components that play an active role in the emergence of performance. Focusing on Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Heathcliff, Rice portrays the tragic side of an unaccompanied refugee child. Like the great Roman emperor Nero, adopted by his uncle, the unaccompanied Heathcliff, adopted by Mr Earnshaw, seeks revenge on both

life and the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights. By giving an identity to the Moor, which narrates the story like the chorus of the ancient period, Rice attempts to represent Catherine and Heathcliff as the hero or heroine in a tragedy. Heathcliff's adoption becomes an experimental performance in Rice's adaptation.

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