2.3.1 Adaptation and continuation

**Adaptation** deals with how texts are transformed from one genre or medium into another, often nowadays from novel to play or film (page to stage or screen), sometimes the reverse. The novels of Jane Austen, the Brontës, Dickens and Forster turned into tv serials or one-off films are the classic contemporary instances; as are the tv and film versions of Shakespeare. But in principle texts can be adapted across any kind of interface: poem into radio play; song into video promo or advert; fairy tale into video game; and so on. The defining feature of adaptation is that texts should be not just communicated in a different form but substantially changed in the process; transformed as well as transferred (translation is a special case we pick up later) – in short adapted not just adopted. Questions about adaptation typically begin with the matter of ‘how faithful’ the adaptation is to ‘the original’ (Is it a ‘close’ or ‘loose’ adaptation?) and then judged according to taste. If ‘close’ it may be reckoned ‘faithful’ or ‘slavish’; and if ‘loose’ it may be reckoned ‘free’ or ‘unfaithful’. Either way, the assumed original is taken to be a measure and yardstick for the presumed success of the adaptation. In more subtle and sophisticated approaches to adaptation it is recognised that different media (and by implication genres) simply have different material capacities and formal properties, with different contextual and communicative ‘affordances’ – that a film or radio play demands to be treated on its own terms not those of print and paper. In many cases it also turns out that the supposed ‘original’ is itself not the ‘first and only’ word on the matter but simply the latest surviving text or the most famous one. Other versions lurk in the background. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a classic literary case, existing in two earlier and shorter versions (the First and Second Quarto, 1601 and 1603) before the Folio version (1623) on which most modern editions are based; and there are other people’s ‘Hamlets’ before (see below and 2.2). The Four Gospels of the Biblical New Testament are the canonical religious instances: none of them is absolutely ‘original’ (the manuscripts all date from well after Christ’s death) and they are far from identical in substance or style. In these respects it’s not just a matter of Shakespeare and the Bible being adapted later on. In a certain sense they are adaptations.

**Continuation** usually takes the form of sequels, following up with what happens next or later on, and may be by the same or a different author or director (e.g. *Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* / *Baron Von Munchausen* and *The Godfather*.
Sometimes the continuation takes the form of a ‘prequel’, casting back to what happens before. Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is the classic novelistic example, charting the back-story of the supposedly mad Mrs Rochester of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) to the Caribbean. Rhys gives her a distinct name and identity (Antoinette the young West Indian creole woman), and charges the relationship with her husband, Edward the young Englishman, with a specifically interracial and colonial as well as female-male dynamic (see 5.2.3). *Star Wars IV* is a classic film prequel in that it presents the pre-history of the Empire before the events of *Star Wars I, II and III*; while *Dr Who* pops about time with gay abandon and approaching ten ‘Doctors’ to date. A third kind of continuation takes the form of a parallel history or interlude part way through, in which case it serves to present known events from a different point of view or in a different dimension. Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) is perhaps the best known theatrical example of this. The play puts two minor characters from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the messengers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, centre-stage and in the foreground, while the main characters Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet himself are relegated to the background and glimpsed only intermittently and from afar. The effect of this essentially simple background-foreground switch is to expose the most profound problems and throw up some intriguing possibilities. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it’s not just a matter of ‘losing the plot’ (they never really knew what was going on in the first place) but of lacking a fully developed ‘role’ or ‘character’ of any kind. Stoppard’s version – in effect an ‘inversion’ – makes for poignantly funny theatre as well as a kind of pervasive existential crisis.

Yet other common kinds of continuation include telling the story through a different narrator and transposing the action to a different time and place. A couple of examples of this in Part Five are modern re-tellings of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719; see 5.2.2). One is through the eyes of the slave Friday, Geoff Holdsworth’s ‘I call him Monday Afternoon’ (1994), which subverts and sports with the white narrator’s presumption about his power to name and control (‘I call him Friday’). The other is J. D. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986), which adds a female castaway as narrator, a tongueless and enigmatic Friday, and a teasing guest (dis)appearance by the original author (hence the ‘Foe’ of Coetzee’s title). (The notion of ‘continuation’ is further complicated by the fact that Defoe’s fictional novel is itself in part a
continuation of factual accounts based on the life of Andrew Selkirk and other stories and histories of ‘desert island’ castaways. The formula is mythic and magnetic, as witnessed by the endless cartoons and the long-running and popular format of BBC Radio’s *Desert Island Discs* (1942). Celebrities get to discuss their life, play their favourite music and take a favourite book. (They can take ‘Shakespeare and the Bible’ anyway – though it doesn’t specify which editions/adaptations.) And so the continuation story goes on. Wherever you look, you tend to find one or two and more. Lloyd Jones’s *Mr Pip* (2006) is another contemporary example in the Anthology (5.3.1). It takes Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectation* (1860—1) and places the novel in an expressly modern, semi-literate context on a Pacific Island in the throes of an armed struggle. Here the narrator is a young native girl and the reading of the novel serves to counterpoint her personal development and that of her family and community as well as the fate of her white European teacher of English. Something similar in strategy, though different in substance, takes place in Azar Nafisi’s, *Reading Lolita in Teheran* (2003).

We could continue piling up examples of adaptations and continuations, because people keep on writing, filming and broadcasting them. They are also, in passing, the stock-in-trade of headline writers, cartoonists and the makers of adverts: parts of that great and amorphous store of intertextual reference and allusion that most people know even if they don’t know ‘the original’ (which usually isn’t anyway). But you’ve already got the idea. In fact you have probably thought of umpteen other examples unknown to me while reading this. The important – and endlessly fascinating – thing is to pull on a promising textual thread that interests you, grasp it as part of an intertextual fabric, and follow through whatever lines of enquiry open up from there. See where you get and what you make of it. You may even be inclined to write an adaptation or continuation yourself.

**Great, Low, Different and Other Expectations** Here is a simple yet powerful study pattern radiating around Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (first serialised with illustration in *All the Year Round*, 1860—1). Even this is only a beginning; for it traces (and re-weaves) an array of actual lines of descent and possible lines of enquiry in various directions and dimensions. These are here mainly afterwards but a few reach earlier and around the same time; they are increasingly (re)produced and circulate in print, film and/or other media as time goes on; and in terms of authors and
locations they go round the world and back again several ways. Indeed, other people were in on the critical and creative act from the beginning. On the advice of Edward Bulwer Lytton, Dickens changed the novel’s ‘original’ suspended ending, (in which the two protagonists Pip and Estella remained apart) to a conventional happy one in which they meet again. The more you look into them, such things tend to have happened with classics of all kinds. (Ibsen produced, under pressure from a German theatre company, an alternative ending for A Doll’s House in which Nora stayed with her family. Beckett considered an ending for Waiting for Godot in which one of the tramps actually did leave – rather than saying ‘Let’s go’ but both not budging.) As a result, similar patterns – comparable in principle but each time unique in practice – can be found and made for most texts you are likely to be studying. Meanwhile, as with ‘celebrity’, the concept of ‘classic’ is increasingly instantaneous and often managed and marketed. (Even just being a ‘follower’ of a transient tweets changes its reach and status.) So, while time will tell about what eventually lasts, by exploring such processes (however compressed) you can also virtually tell the time about what seems to matter at the moment. Exploring adaptations and continuations – the categories often overlap or blur in practice – is a good way of doing both.

**Compare any of the following originals and adaptations** (and perhaps also explore the ways in which the ‘originals’ are often themselves ‘adaptations’ of yet earlier versions):

- Shakespeare’s play Romeo and Juliet (as a script) with one of the many children’s versions in story book form, with a comic book version (for children or adults), with one of the filmic adaptations (e.g., Romeo + Juliet, dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1996), with the stage musical West Side Story (1957, created by Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein), and finally with the online improvised tweet adaptation Such Tweet Sorrow (at www.suchtweetsorrow.com, created Mudlark and The Royal Shakespeare Company, 2010)
Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* (1955) and one or both of the film adaptations directed by Stanley Kubrick (1962) and directed by Adrian Lyne (1997)


Any English translation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, and the current English stage musical version of the novel adapted by Cameron Mackintosh from the French musical (itself adapted from the French novel).

Go on to consider the following questions:

In the transferral and transformation from the original form to its new version, what has been added, cut, changed or reordered? What clues does this give to the preferred interpretation in each case?

How have any features you consider to be particularly ‘textual’ (e.g. verbal descriptions of setting, scene or chapter breaks) been reworked and refigured for another medium and other modes?

Can you find other adaptations and transformations of the above texts? In what other media and contexts, and perhaps cultures?

What other ‘original’ and ‘adapted’ texts can you think of that you might like to follow up? (Again, be prepared to look earlier and elsewhere in addition to along the lines you first come across.)

---

See 2.3.1 (a) *Great Expectations – Dickens’s and others’*
Also see: Children’s literature . . . revisited (4.4.3); Rewriting Crusoe’s Island (5.2.2); Romance revisited (5.2.3); Writing, reading, response and rewriting (Part Three). Further study patterns for adaptations and continuations of Shakespeare, Defoe, Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Woolf and others – sometimes developed along different lines – can be found @ 4.4.2; also Translation and translation studies, @ 3.

READING: On adaptation, see Hutcheon 2006; Sanders 2006, Cartmell and Whelehan 1999. On novel-film adaptation, see McFarlane 1996; Stam 2002. For fuller arguments on the rewriting of classic texts, including ‘textual interventions’ by students in Hamlet, Robinson Crusoe and Jane Eyre, see Pope 1995; also Knights and Thurgar-Dawson 2006 on ‘active reading’ and Scholes 1985 on ‘textual power’. Many of the ‘classic’ texts are featured in critical editions by Norton, Bedford, Broadview, Oxford, Cambridge and others, which now often include information on adaptations for stage, radio, film and tv, and currency in popular culture as well as sources and precursors. The web, used wisely, is invaluable in these areas, but be careful to use reliable and reputable sites; see 1.2.5.