

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Janeites for a New Millennium: The Modernisation of Jane Austen on Film.

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Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has recently been earmarked by the South African Department of Education as a possible prescribed text for Grade 12 English Home Language learners. In happy anticipation of an influx of first year university students well-versed in the Bennet family's exploits, I decided it was time to give my dusty copy of the novel an airing. However, upon my return to the text, much loved in some measure *because* of its easy familiarity, something was different: try as I might, I could not banish Colin Firth's image from my mind.

When did Colin Firth become Mr Darcy? The easy answer is, around 1995 when he starred alongside Jennifer Ehle in a BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* and again in 2001 and 2004 when he appeared as Mark Darcy in the film adaptations of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. The ubiquitous Mr Firth has thus established himself as the Mr Darcy of the new millennium, and his charismatic presence has undoubtedly influenced many others' readings (and re-readings) of the original text as powerfully as it has mine.

It is not, however, only Colin Firth's portrayals of the character that reintroduced Austen to the popular imagination. The nineties saw an unprecedented surge of silver screen Austen adaptations. These included Douglas McGrath's production of *Emma* (1996) with Gwyneth Paltrow as Emma Woodhouse; a British television production titled *Jane Austen's 'Emma'* (1996), starring Kate Beckinsale; Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999); *Persuasion* (1995); Columbia Pictures/TriStar Pictures' *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) which was scripted by Emma Thompson; and *Clueless* (1995), a modern day adaptation of *Emma* which reinvents Emma Woodhouse as Cher Horowitz, a spoiled Los Angeles teenager.

More recent Austen-inspired films include, among others, *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), a film about five women and one man who get together once a month to discuss Jane Austen's six novels in relation to their own lives; *Becoming Jane* (2007), a fictionalised account of Austen's life; the Gurinder Chadha musical, *Bride and Prejudice* (2004); and the 2005 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Keira Knightley.

These many cinematic adaptations have given rise to a new type of Janeite:¹ modern-day women (and undoubtedly a fair number of men) who identify with Austen's heroines as depicted on film and may even consider themselves admirers of Jane Austen, but do not necessarily *read* Austen. As example of such a new millennial Janeite, I offer

¹ Whilst well aware of the debates surrounding the term, 'Janeite', it is used here merely to suggest 'Jane Austen enthusiast'. For a more in-depth discussion of the term and its various connotations, see Deidre Lynch, 'Cult of Jane Austen' in *Jane Austen in Context* ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 111-121.

the case of a relative, who is by all accounts a successful, intelligent young woman. After watching the 1995 BBC mini-series version of *Pride and Prejudice* (which of course stars Colin Firth) a number of times, said relative declared herself quite addicted and eagerly rented *The Jane Austen Book Club*, *Becoming Jane* and the Keira Knightley rendition of *Pride and Prejudice* from her local video store. Although not in the least inclined to read *Pride and Prejudice*, having once briefly attempted the project, she still refers to the text as 'my favourite book that I've never read'.

It is not altogether surprising that a large number of Austen film enthusiasts are non-readers. After all, those who know and love the Austen novels are less likely to appreciate directors and screenwriters tinkering with their favourite characters. In *Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptations*, Sue Parrill states:

Ironically, the viewers one might expect to be the most pleased with the Austen adaptations – the readers who have made the novels their own – have often been the most critical of the films. Their complaints vary, but a common theme is that 'It's not as good as the book.' Fidelity to the story, the characters, the ideas, and the language is their main criterion. Some of them feel that since the film is not exactly the same as the book, it is not only inferior, but amounts to criminal trespass. Often readers have formed such strong visual conceptions of Elizabeth Bennet or Emma that no actress can live up to their expectations.²

Of course, where no such familiarity with Austen's novels exists, the viewer is more likely to accept, or perhaps even fail to notice, changes to dialogue, plot or scene. Viewers who are not guided by the desire to remain faithful to the Austen of their own imaginations are also likely to demand a more recognisably *modern* heroine, as well as a concern with issues that are more closely related to modern-day life. Production companies, it seems, are happy to oblige, and Austen has become increasingly modernised on film.

While the notion of a Janeite culture based purely on motion picture renditions of the original novels is sure to displease literary purists,³ the purpose of this discussion is not to initiate a debate regarding our responsibility to remain faithful to Austen in her original form. Rather, this article identifies the *type* of cinematic alterations and emphasises which render Austen films more appealing to a certain caste of modern-day Janeites than the original novels.

² Sue Parrill, *Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptation* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2002) 7.

³ Incidentally, one of Austen's heroines, Emma Woodhouse, is not unlike these new millennial Janeites in the sense that she admits to having an aversion to 'heavy' reading. In *Emma*, Mr Knightley, comments on Emma's lack of perseverance when it comes to reading and asserts that he has "...done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma." (22).

In *Emma Adapted: Jane Austen's Heroine from Book to Film*, Marc DiPaolo undertakes to judge the film renditions of *Emma* 'on their own terms, as readings of the novel rather than as complete recreations of the novel.'⁴ If such an approach is extended to apply to all film adaptations of Austen texts, the question is no longer whether Austen should be adapted for a modern audience, but rather whether there are elements within Austen's original texts which allow for readings that appeal to a specific modern-day audience.

Numerous scholars have attempted to account for the nineties' Austen mania. Some have suggested that Austen remains a popular source for adaptation because these projects tend to be relatively inexpensive. Sue Parrill asserts: 'Since Jane Austen's novels are in the public domain, it is not necessary to pay the author for their use. It is relatively inexpensive to film an Austen adaptation. It requires no expensive special effects, no exotic locations and only a small cast.'⁵

While financial concerns undoubtedly influence filmmakers' decisions to adapt Austen novels for film, it certainly does not account for the zeal with which these films are received by modern-day audiences. In an article in *The New York Times* titled 'Austen Powers: Making Jane Sexy', Caryn James considers Jane Austen's continuing popularity:

[Jane Austen] has entered pop culture more thoroughly than other writers because she is almost spookily contemporary. Her ironic take on society is delivered in a reassuring, sisterly voice, as if she were part Jon Stewart, part Oprah Winfrey. Beneath the period details, the typical Austen heroine offers something for almost any woman to identify with: She is not afraid to be the smartest person in the room, yet after a series of misunderstandings gets the man of her dreams anyway. It doesn't take a marketing genius to spot a potential movie audience for that have-it-all fantasy.⁶

James notes that audiences are likely to overlook the restrictions placed on Austen's heroines because they are easily seduced by the films' lavish costumes, romantic plot-lines and breath-taking scenery. In this sense, Austen adaptations are the ultimate 'chick-flicks', selling happily-ever-after fantasies which offer 'a respite from today's fraught, slippery world of quick hook-ups, divorce and family counseling.'⁷ James further asserts: 'Sexual attraction is the least anyone would expect in a marriage today. In Austen's time,

⁴ Marc DiPaolo, *Emma Adapted: Jane Austen's Heroine from Book to Film* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007) 8.

⁵ Parrill 3.

⁶ Caryn James, 'Austen Powers: Making Jane Sexy,' *The New York Times*, 29 July 2007, 12 January 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/movies/29jame.html>>

⁷ James

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when arranged marriages of convenience were common, her extraordinary heroines held out for love, another reason they speak so directly to modern readers.’⁸

In addition to grand romance, James suggests, ‘many new adaptations are adding what [Jane Austen] was too ladylike to mention,’⁹ i.e. sex. Indeed, Mr Darcy has never been this sexy. Colin Firth and Matthew Macfadyen have given the stoic character an injection of sex appeal, the latter proposing to his Elizabeth Bennet (Keira Knightley) during a spectacular downpour with all the intensity befitting a Byronic hero.

If the aforementioned scene sounds suspiciously like the type of encounter to be found in the final pages of a paperback romance novel, it should also be said that the majority of Austen adaptations constitute feminist readings of the original texts. It is exactly *because* new millennial Janeites want their heroines to have it all – love, sex, wealth and a reasonable degree of independence – that Austen’s nascent feminism is often emphasised in film adaptations.

Austen’s heroines maintain a fine balance between stubborn individuality and feminine compliance. They may reject the marriage proposals of lesser men such as Mr Collins, Mr Elton and Mr Thorpe, they may even resolve never to marry, but ultimately they remain reliant on a patriarchal system for comfort and security. In short, Austen heroines aspire to a certain degree of independence, but not so much as to be offensive to their male counterparts. Even Emma Woodhouse, who is not strictly required to marry, is only granted such a choice because of her *father’s* protection, social standing and wealth. When asked by Harriet Smith how she will occupy herself as a spinster, Emma lists a number of ‘female’ activities and crafts. Acquitted from marrying purely for survival, Emma is nevertheless restricted to the domestic sphere, the most she can hope for being needlework and caring about her sister’s children. Emma states:

‘Woman’s usual occupations of eye and hand and mind will be open to me then, as they are now; or with no important variation. If I draw less, I shall read more; if I give up music, I shall take to carpet-work. And as for objects of interest, objects for the affections, which is in truth the great point of inferiority, the want of which is really the great evil to be avoided in *not* marrying, I shall be very well off, with all the children of a sister I love so much, to care about. There will be enough of them, in all probability, to supply every sort of sensation that declining life can need.’¹⁰

In order to satisfy a twentieth century audience, however, Austen’s women must be submitted to a process of modernisation. They must be more fiercely independent, more active and must challenge their male suitors more passionately. Many of the adaptations

⁸ James

⁹ James

¹⁰ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Stephen M. Parrish (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) 56.

impose a late twentieth century feminist framework, constructing additional scenes which highlight the restrictive circumstances against which their spirited heroines must struggle.

Perhaps the most obviously feminist Austen cinematic interpretation is Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), which was scripted by Emma Thompson. In 'Sense and Sensibility in a Postfeminist World: Sisterhood is Still Powerful', Penny Gay points to the fact that 'Thompson writes the script of the film *Sense and Sensibility* as a late twentieth century, English, middle-class, Cambridge-educated feminist.'¹¹ Gay further suggests:

As a politically aware writer Thompson further ensures that her text spells out the conditions of women's lives in the early nineteenth century, by inventing the early dialogue for Edward and Elinor in which she says to him that she cannot earn a living – 'You talk of feeling idle and useless – imagine how that is compounded when one has no choice and no hope whatsoever of any occupation;' and by structuring it so that it is 'bookended' by patriarchal images – the death of the father at the beginning (and the women's subsequent loss of their home) and the triumph of the soldier-landowner-suitor Brandon at the end, tossing a handful of sixpences into the air for the disempowered (here represented by children and the laboring class) to scramble for.¹²

The impact of Thompson's rendition of *Sense and Sensibility* lies in the fact that it refuses to maintain a disinterested separation between the circumstances of its nineteenth century characters and that of its late twentieth century audience. Penny Gay suggests that Emma Thompson 'is interested in recreating the experience of being a woman, an embodied gendered individual, in a period which is historically different from the audience's but which clearly operates within a very similar discursive field as far as women are concerned.'¹³

Like Emma Thompson's rendition of *Sense and Sensibility*, the 2005 Working Title Pictures adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen as Eliza Bennet and Mr Darcy respectively, sees the alteration of original dialogue in order to highlight the plight of women in the early eighteenth hundreds. For example, the conversation between Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas regarding the latter's acceptance of Mr Collins's marriage proposal is far more frank than the novel allows. Upon hearing the news from Charlotte, Elizabeth exclaims, 'But he's ridiculous!' Charlotte's reply makes apparent the very restrictive circumstances of young women in the early nineteenth century: 'I am 27 years old. I've no money and no prospects. I'm

¹¹ Penny Gay, 'Sense and Sensibility in a Postfeminist World: Sisterhood is Still Powerful,' *Jane Austen on Screen*, eds. Gina Macdonald and Andrew F. Macdonald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 92

¹² Gay 92-93.

¹³ Gay 97.

already a burden to my parents. And I am frightened.’¹⁴ Charlotte’s confession as to being scared of what the future holds for not-so-young, unmarried women who can no longer depend on her father’s indulgence diminishes the chances of being entirely seduced by the grand romance and beautiful scenery unfolding on the screen and creates an awareness of the unequal social dynamics of the era with audiences. Eliza’s new-found boldness in expressing her dislike for her friend’s future husband is also likely to appeal to modern-day audiences.

Eliza Bennet is not the only Austen character to receive an empowering makeover on the silver screen. Patricia Rozema’s 1999 interpretation of *Mansfield Park* re-imagines the rather dull Fanny Price as a promising writer with razor-sharp wit and a liveliness of spirit that is so obviously lacking in the original incarnation of the character. Sue Parrill states:

One of the greatest problems in adapting *Mansfield Park* is creating a sympathetic and believable Fanny Price. In the novel she is sickly, she is passive, she is judgmental, and she is boring. Readers of the early nineteenth century would have accepted her as a plausible heroine, but many readers of the present day cannot. Patricia Rozema did major surgery on this character in her recent film. She made her a satiric writer and a healthy, active woman, but retained the character’s stubborn sense of her own rightness.¹⁵

Penny Gay echoes this view in ‘*Sense and Sensibility* in a Postfeminist World’, asserting that Rozema establishes Fanny Price as

a young woman who writes (and reads to an audience) comically violent satires of contemporary women’s fiction, and to her sister acute and witty letters describing the goings-on at Mansfield Park. Fanny’s narrative, rather than being that of Christian patience, becomes a *Bildungsroman*, its triumphant conclusion being the knowledge that her stories are to be published as the work of a ‘new and original writer.’ Even as she kisses Edmund in the film’s romantic dénouement, we observe her ink-stained fingers. This is an Austen heroine for the twenty-first century, who will manage to have both love *and* work.¹⁶

It would seem, however, as if modern-day audiences are not satisfied with merely providing Austen’s protagonists with a have-it-all lifestyle that combines love, wit, spirit and a promising career. Jane Austen herself was granted an epic romance in the 2007

¹⁴ *Pride and Prejudice*, dir. Joe Wright, perf. Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen, Working Title Pictures, 2005.

¹⁵ Parrill 11.

¹⁶ Gay 107.

film, *Becoming Jane*. The film proposes a love affair between Austen (played by Anne Hathaway) and Thomas Langlois Lefroy (James McAvoy), a speculation that is not well-supported. The relationship is inevitably doomed, the film not daring enough to invent a happy ending for its heroine. Nevertheless, Jane Austen is given a chance to experience the kind of romantic adventure she creates for her characters, a chance to have both love (albeit ultimately lost) and the kind of successful writing career that was denied Austen in life. Thus not only the various Austen characters, but the author herself is given a modernising tweak on film. The Austen adaptations often highlight the restrictions of life as a woman in the early nineteenth century, but also attempt to circumvent these restrictions by offering Austen and her protagonists the very modern freedom to have opinions, interests and even successful careers outside of love and marriage.

Surprisingly, the most modernised Austen adaptation is also the film most often accused of being frivolous. Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995) re-imagines Emma Woodhouse as Cher Horowitz, a rich Los Angeles 16-year-old who takes a new transfer student, Tai Frasier, under her wing. Tai, a modern reincarnation of Harriet Smith, must be dissuaded from falling in love with the undesirable Travis Birkenstock, a marijuana-smoking, skateboarding version of Robert Martin who holds the record for tardiness in the class.

Heckerling interprets Frank Churchill's affected charm as homosexuality, replaces Harriet's confrontation with the gypsies with a near accident at the mall, and recasts Mr Knightley as Josh, Cher's college-going ex-stepbrother. Emma's love for matchmaking is however maintained. Cher not only attempts to match Tai and Elton (Harriet and Mr Elton) as the novel dictates, but also succeeds in bringing two teachers, Miss Geist and Mr Hall, together as a means of ensuring better marks for her classmates.

Although *Clueless* remains relatively faithful to the basic plot of *Emma*, the connection with Austen is not proclaimed and the film's success is not dependent on the recognition of the Austen association. Heckerling's target audience is not the same set of people demanding independent, witty Austen heroines, but rather a much younger group of moviegoers. Unlike other Austen adaptations, the film is less concerned with portraying Cher/Emma as a strong, emancipated woman, than with highlighting the ways in which she is utterly 'clueless'. Cher Horowitz is naïve, self-centred, spoiled and ignorant. She thinks Shakespeare's sonnets are famous quotes from Cliff's notes, is not very politically conscious and spends most of her time watching cartoons, matchmaking and shopping. Cher's childishness is also illustrated through her irrational emotional outbursts. For example, she reacts with unrestrained anger and frustration when she cannot find the right blouse to wear to her driver's test.

Like Mr Knightley, Josh is quick to point to Cher's apparent lack of social conscience and often reprimands her for frivolous or insensitive behaviour. When Cher assumes that Lucy, their domestic worker, is Mexican (when she is in fact from El Salvador) she is sternly chastised by Josh for her lack of consideration, much like Emma is admonished by Knightley for her ill-treatment of Miss Bates.

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However, in an effort to impress Josh, Cher becomes involved in charity organisations, watches the news and eventually even accepts Travis Birkenstock as a suitable partner for Tai. While she is still shown to be slightly out of touch with the needs of those around her, choosing for example to donate her skis and red caviar to the Pismo Beach disaster relief, Cher gradually begins to acknowledge her own 'cluelessness', and at the same time exposes the classist, patriarchal society which enabled her earlier behaviour for what it is.

The snobbery of Cher's society is revealed not only through her own insensitivity towards Lucy, Travis and Tai, but also through Elton's rejection of Tai as a potential love interest. As in the novel, Elton's main objection against a relationship with Tai is her inferior social standing. Elton's sense of superiority stems from his position within a patriarchal society. That is, his father's success and wealth is seen as a measure of his own importance. When Cher voices her surprise at his sudden advances during a car ride from a party and confesses that she had thought him in love with Tai, Elton asks: 'Don't you know who my father is?' Similarly, Cher's own social standing is dependent on her father's wealth and position as a high-powered lawyer.

Despite the many differences between Emma Woodhouse's quiet Highbury and Cher Horowitz's modern world of cellular phones, malls and plastic surgery, it would seem as if many of Austen's acute observations regarding social protocol, pride and prejudice are as relevant to late twentieth century America as it was to nineteenth century England. Marc DiPaolo suggests:

Inevitably, as a contemporary American film, *Clueless* reflects the social mores of its time and addresses the issues which Austen explores in a very contemporary and American manner. For example, the gulf between 1816 England and 1995 America is readily apparent in the way in which the film deals, overtly and symbolically, with issues of sexuality, drugs, AIDS, and multiculturalism, but *Clueless* demonstrates that as much as a society may change, the essential path that a young woman must follow into maturity and adulthood remains, in many ways, constant.¹⁷

Indeed, the overwhelming success of *Clueless* does seem to attest to the enduring quality of Jane Austen's work. Cher Horowitz's antics have captured the imagination of an entire generation of viewers, and the film remains as quotable today as it was in the nineties. Despite the lack of any obvious feminist agenda, and her apparent 'cluelessness', Cher is well loved by (especially younger) audiences because she remains recognisably modern. Perhaps as restricted as Austen's Emma, the proverbial bird in a gilded cage, Cher nonetheless maintains the appearance of a care-free spirit, enjoying all the modern conveniences that wealth can offer. Cher retains a degree of independence towards the

¹⁷ DiPaolo 128.

end of the film when she indignantly exclaims against the thought of getting married: 'As if! I'm only sixteen, and this is California, not Kentucky.'

Cher Horowitz's cheeky turn of phrase (and Alicia Silverstone's presence) will undoubtedly haunt me the next time I take up a copy of *Emma*, just as Colin Firth will forever be the Mr Darcy of the new millennium. The cinematic adaptations of Austen's great novels remain hugely popular because they allow us access to Austen's world via a recognisably modern route. The characters, settings, plots and even the degree of sexual attraction between the hero and heroine are tweaked in such a way that they satisfy the high standards of modern-day audiences. In an era of instant gratification, information overloads and mass-produced have-it-all fantasies, audiences prefer their Elizabeth Bennets to be lively, fearless women who can do just as well without Mr Darcy than with him. Fortunately Jane Austen's nascent feminism and strong female characters ensure that meeting the very particular demands of these new millennial Janeites is not such an impossible task. By merely exaggerating and emphasising the independent spirit already present within Austen's heroines, usually through additional scenes and dialogue, film producers and directors can easily modernise the novels without necessarily compromising the integrity of the narratives. And, if all else fails, Colin Firth's brooding sex appeal is sure to generate some box office appeal.

Why Jane Austen's Emma Endures. Ahead of this month's new movie adaptation, T&C spoke with an Austen expert about why the author's wit and social insight still resonates today. By Annie Goldsmith. Feb 16, 2020. Courtesy of Box Hill Films. Jane Austen's Emma—the novel about nothing, but also about everything. We spoke with her on Austen film adaptations, gendered audiences, the strength of Emma, and why Austen endures all these years later. What do you think have been the biggest mistakes in Austen film and television adaptations? I think the cons—and I already said I really like the modernizations—the cons might be that those are never taken very seriously, right? That they seem like films for teenage girls alone or, at best, date movies or something like that. A new movie adaptation of Persuasion dropped on streaming platforms this month, but it has sadly failed to impress. What did you think of it? Guardian reviewer Cath Clarke writes that, "the film's fundamental flaw, is turning woman-of-substance Anne Elliot into yet another romcom thirtysomething cat lady sighing dreamily at the Manhattan skyline while waiting for Mr Right." Oof, yikes! Read the Guardian review. If you don't want to miss a beat when it comes to Jane Austen, make sure you are signed up to the Jane Austen newsletter for exclusive updates and discounts from our Online Gift Shop. Posted in: Anya Taylor Joy, Autumn de Wilde, Book shop, Emma, February 2021, Golden Globes, Jane Austen, Leakey's, Modern Persuasion, Persuasion, Regency, University of Sydney. On the many adaptations of Jane Austen's writing.... Films, likewise, are constructed out of images while Austen's novels are notoriously short on visual detail. On the few occasions that she does dwell on the physical world, it is always to illuminate a character rather than a place, as when Elizabeth visits Pemberley in Pride and Prejudice and discovers, in its handsome home and elegant grounds, her own budding affection for its owner. One can't help but suspect that it's the countryside, as much the country houses, that draws contemporary viewers.