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Jane Austen in contemporary film: Interpretations and reflections of Austen's novels in contemporary culture

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Jane Austen in contemporary film: Interpretations and reflections of Austen's novels in contemporary culture

Abstract

There is no escaping Jane Austen. Though it has been nearly two hundred years since her death, Austen and her work continues to capture the minds and hearts of readers worldwide. Our fascination with her novels continues to grow, finding new expression in literature, television and film each year. What makes this phenomenon so interesting is the reality that Austen's novels are so firmly "dated" – that is, so rigorously cemented and relevant to the age in which it was written. Why do readers and viewers continue to find Austen's works so relevant, given that it is so bound to this particular late eighteenth and early nineteenth century period and its social and cultural structures and values? This question is best explained through the examination of contemporary film that has so determinedly adapted her works over the past fifteen years. While these films labor to interpret Austen's novels to film, at the same time they communicate through various departures how our perspective, both culturally and about Austen's work – and period of history – has changed. Yet even in these departures, the films resonate dynamically with values which, over the course of two hundred years, remain unchanged. Despite the numerous and apparent shifts in culture, values and structures that have occurred in our world over the past two centuries, the core of what we value – what we hold to be most true and important – remains timeless.

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JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEMPORARY FILM:
INTERPRETATIONS AND REFLECTIONS OF AUSTEN'S NOVELS IN
CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Biography of Jane Austen	4
Thesis	6
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	8
<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>	12
<i>Mansfield Park</i>	16
<i>Emma</i>	20
<i>Persuasion</i>	24
Conclusion	27
Bibliography	28

Introduction

There is no escaping Jane Austen. Though it has been nearly two hundred years since her death, Austen and her work continues to capture the minds and hearts of readers worldwide. Our fascination with her novels continues to grow, finding new expression in literature, television and film each year. What makes this phenomenon so interesting is the reality that Austen's novels are so firmly "dated" – that is, so rigorously cemented and relevant to the age in which it was written. Why do readers and viewers continue to find Austen's works so relevant, given that it is so bound to this particular late eighteenth and early nineteenth century period and its social and cultural structures and values? This question is best explained through the examination of contemporary film that has so determinedly adapted her works over the past fifteen years. While these films labor to interpret Austen's novels to film, at the same time they communicate through various departures how our perspective, both culturally and about Austen's work – and period of history – has changed. Yet even in these departures, the films resonate dynamically with values which, over the course of two hundred years, remain unchanged. Despite the numerous and apparent shifts in culture, values and structures that have occurred in our world over the past two centuries, the core of what we value – what we hold to be most true and important – remains timeless.

Biography of Jane Austen

Jane Austen, daughter of Rev. George and Cassandra Austen, was born on December 16th, 1775 (Ross 5). Their second daughter and seventh child, Rev. Austen declared the intention of raising Jane much as they had raised their previous six children: developing in her ‘a natural judgment of what is right’ (qtd. in Ross 4). Their mother, a woman of fair beauty and elegance, valued in her children what was ‘good, amiable and sweet-tempered’ (qtd. in Ross 4). However both parents placed a high value on lively, entertaining company, and this would make the Austen household the perfect environment for Jane to develop her natural affinity for creative writing. From an early age, as young as eleven or twelve, Jane displayed a natural gift for writing elaborate, surprisingly skilled, highly amusing comedies and satires, to the enjoyment of her family and in particular her older sister Cassandra (12). This love of writing combined with her love of reading and encouragement from her family, particularly her older brother James who filled the role of her unofficial tutor, acted as the perfect beginning to Jane’s road of published authorship (13).

Jane wrote the first of her six great novels in 1796 at the age of twenty-one, though it was not published until 1813 in revised form (Squire viii). *Pride and Prejudice*, originally titled *First Impressions*, was rejected by the publisher Cadell, and did not find its way into the world until seventeen years later (viii). Though most of her novels experienced major gaps between writing and printing, Jane completed *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* all between 1797 and 1816 (viii). The maturity in the latter three works, coupled with her relatively young age, was made all the more astonishing by the fact that nearly all of her efforts remained unknown to the public

during her lifetime, and even some in her family were left unaware of her authorship until after her death (Ross 34). Her sister Cassandra and those in her closest confidence were fully aware of her well-known desire not to be made a 'wild beast' by the world (34), and thus lose her privacy, which she so highly prized. Eventually, however, as result of her brother Henry's propensity to talk, word spread about the identity of the feminine author of *Pride and Prejudice*, whose popularity had reached its height in the summer of 1813 (34). But throughout her life, Jane enjoyed a comfortable distance between herself and her readers (34). She relished a quiet kind of existence, and funneled her energies nearly exclusively into her family and her writing (41). Jane died at the age of 41, on December 17, 1817, of what is now believed to have been symptoms of Addison's disease. Immediately following Jane's death, Cassandra told a friend, "she was the sun of my life...the soother of every sorrow...it is as if I had lost a part of myself" (43). The loss to literature is not mentioned in this exchange, of course, but Jane's death was indeed a great loss to the reading world as well. Over the course of a life that lasted only 41 years, through her astonishingly complex writing, Jane Austen changed the face of the novel forever and gave the world characters that remain alive to millions of readers today.

Thesis

Not only are her novels still widely popular today, Jane Austen is a name that also now resounds in the film and television industry. As film and television directors and producers have discovered, particularly over the past fifteen years, there is a ready audience of “Janenites” – impassioned fans of Jane Austen and her work – ready and willing to experience her novels on the screen. Yet the popularity of many of these films transcends merely the Austen-educated. There exists in our culture today a living fascination with Austen, the period in history she inhabited, and all its cultural, social and structural surroundings. To put it succinctly, even those who wouldn’t know Jane Austen from Jane Fonda find it intriguing to watch eighteenth and nineteenth century English realities unfold inside these fictional settings. The explanation for this fascination can also be attributed to the complicated relationships between the original novels, the creators of these films, and the culture out of which the films are emerging. These films are not straight adaptations; they only rarely lift exact narration, dialogue and scenes straight out of the novels. And rightly so – the two forms represent completely different mediums, and interpretation is necessary. But what – and where – are the justifications for the interpretations these adaptations make on behalf of the novels? And how do these films interact with our contemporary culture and Austen’s period as we understand it now? Exploring some of these films and the ways in which they relate to Austen’s novels, and more importantly some of the significant ways in which they depart from her text, illuminates our changing – and differing – understandings of the culture, social realities and structures of Austen’s period. It illuminates as well our connection to the period; despite our technologically and socially advanced culture, many of our basic

twenty-first century goals, values and truths remain constant with Austen's eighteenth and nineteenth century realities.

Pride and Prejudice

With the exception of *Northanger Abbey*, all of Austen's novels have been adapted into films and miniseries multiple times, and have garnered a multitude of diverse critical reactions. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is widely regarded as her most beloved novel, and the film adaptations have been met with general pleasure as well. The characters of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy are Austen's most likeable pair, and their story is as a whole the stuff of good, lighthearted fun. Austen experienced some anxiety about this; in a letter to Cassandra, she apologized on behalf of *Pride and Prejudice*, acknowledging her fears that it was "too light, and bright, and sparkling," quite possibly in need of "shade" (qtd. in Ross 32). However, she also acknowledged her belief of Elizabeth Bennet as "delightful a creature as ever appeared in print" (33). This is, for many, as true today as it was in 1813 for Austen.

In 1995, screenwriter Andrew Davies, along with director Simon Langton, developed Austen's most popular novel into a six-episode television mini-series. *Pride and Prejudice* took form in actors Jennifer Ehle as a pretty but clever Elizabeth, and Colin Firth, who portrayed the handsome but proud Mr. Darcy. The mini-series went on to become a hit; within a year of its airing, the BBC sold over 200,000 video copies of the film. In many ways, this adaptation (nearly six hours in length) adhered quite closely to the novel, yet in other aspects it made wild departures from its source material. The most striking departure it makes is in its treatment of Mr. Darcy. In their introduction to *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, scholars Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield refer to the Davies and Langston version of *Pride and Prejudice* as "the wet-t-shirt-Darcy mini-series" (1). They are referring, here, to possibly the most memorable scene in the entire six hours; after a

particularly physically exerting journey, Darcy takes a swim in the pond at Pemberley, his entirely impressive estate. Rising up out of the water, he is spotted by Elizabeth and her party, in a white shirt, in all his wet glory (Nixon 23). The significance of this scene is manifold; it is perhaps an obvious point that no such scene occurs in Austen's novel. But the inclusion of this scene in the mini-series is quite deliberate, and it has very interesting connotations attached to it.

Professor Cheryl Nixon relates the particular reaction the swimming scene garnered from her students after watching the film as a class: "the exclamation 'I loved when Darcy stripped off some of his clothes and dove into the pond as he returned to Pemberley' was the most universal response" (22). This fascination is not, however, merely a shallow appreciation of actor Colin Firth's physical beauty. Nixon goes on to discuss how important this moment was for her students, in that it literally worked to "flesh out" a character that some struggled not to find too absent and un-lively in the novel (23). Louis Menand, in a review of Austen films in the *New York Review of Books* offers a similar argument; he states that a certain amount of glamorization of Darcy is necessary for a contemporary audience; to give Darcy a significant, dynamic "physical presence" is of vital importance (qtd. in Nixon 23). The point is valid, and is reacting to a significant aspect of Austen's novel. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, we as readers experience Darcy almost entirely through the limited perspective of Elizabeth. Her inaccurate view – and understanding – of Darcy is an important theme in the novel. In C. S. Lewis' words, Elizabeth eventually comes to understand that where Darcy is concerned, she has "courted ignorance" (qtd. in Wolfe 111). Thus, from the novel's perspective, a limited view of Darcy is necessary for us as readers to fully appreciate

Elizabeth's eventual change of feeling about and toward him once this ignorance is overcome. However, the visual aspect of film makes the idea of transferring this concept on to the screen difficult. The vivacious Elizabeth must believably "meet her match" in a mentally and physically dynamic Darcy, and developing the character's physicality is the most significant way Davies and Langston successfully use the mini-series to depart from the novel.

In 2005, British director Joe Wright adapted Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to the screen again, yet this time as a feature film. Garnering nearly unanimously positive critical reviews, one film critic borrowed a line from the end of the movie to describe the reaction of himself and the rest of the audience: "it left us 'incandescently happy'" (Stone 74). However, with a running time of 129 minutes, much of Austen's novel is nowhere to be found in the film. Wright is quite candid about this fact, stating frankly that his goal was to project characters, scenes, and language through, in scholar Alan Stone's words, "the prism of his own imagination" (76). Wright also decided that the most important decision in regards to the making of this film would be the choice in casting Elizabeth, particularly in choosing an actor the correct age (76). Keira Knightly, who plays Elizabeth Bennet in Wright's adaptation, was indeed twenty years old at the time of the film's creation, which accurately reflects Austen's text: in response to Lady Catherine's query, Elizabeth admits to being "not one-and-twenty" (346). Another aspect of this choice was his acknowledgment that with less screen time, he still had the monumental task of putting across Elizabeth as a fully formed, delightful, and authentic character. And Wright's choice is a good one: Knightly, though attractive in her own right, is physically understated compared to Rosamund Pike, who plays Jane, and still reflects

Austen's text, which asserts that Elizabeth "had a lively, playful disposition" (247).

What makes Wright's Elizabeth so appealing to us is not her physical qualities, so much as her "animated intelligence, ready wit, and adolescent fire and vulnerability that come through in her face" (Stone 76). This, nearly all critics of Austen agree, is as accurate to the original text as one can get.

However, Wright's ideas about "authenticity" become complicated when other aspects of the film are considered. For instance, while Austen's text describes Lydia, the youngest Bennet sister as "a stout, well-grown girl of fifteen, with a fine complexion and good-humored countenance" (268), Wright's film turns her into a near-caricature of a screeching, silly, ill-mannered girl. She comes perilously close to mirroring our contemporary idea of a rude, obnoxious teenager. It is difficult, therefore, to imagine either the novel or the film's version of Wickham having the fortitude to spend even five minutes alone with her, let alone run off with her. Yet what Alan Stone describes as the "rollicking energy of the film's five young sisters" has a definite appeal to contemporary audiences (75); the girls in Wright's film seem vibrantly alive, capable of experiencing the emotions of their first attraction, love, and disappointment with a sensibility much nearer to our own. In short, we are able to imagine ourselves much easier in the constrained environments of the novel's late eighteenth-century surroundings, because Wright imagines it for us, and places us inside this world. We just happen to take along a few of our own cultural experiences with us.

Sense and Sensibility

Sense and Sensibility, Austen's first published work, is the story of the Dashwood family, but more specifically, the Dashwood sisters. In 1995, British actress Emma Thompson wrote a screenplay adapting the novel to film, and under director Ang Lee, starred as Eleanor, the eldest Dashwood sister. Both Thompson and Lee agreed, in their creation of the film, that the most important thread of the story needed to be the story of the love between Eleanor and Marianne. For in Austen's novel, they are sisters not simply by virtue of the familial relationship, but also in their profound emotional dependence on one another (Gay 91). This mirrors Austen's experience; the relationship she valued above all others over the course of her life was her relationship with her older sister. Thompson and Lee's film is a fascinating adaptation, one that makes several crucial departures from Austen's original vision.

One of the most noticeable departures is the prominence and development of a character which Austen intended to stay firmly in the background. Margaret, played by actress Emilie François, is the youngest Dashwood sister and plays a key role in Thompson and Lee's adaptation, filling several needs the creators perceived. Thompson places her at the age of eleven, though Austen's novel describes her as a young girl of thirteen (Gay 106). Margaret, as seen in the film, is a rough-and-tumble tomboy, with wild curly hair and a nearly equally unrestrained personality. A significant aspect of her personality is her fascination with maps. This is an interesting characterization for the late eighteenth century, as the reality was the world at large would not have tolerated such a Margaret; a solo female traveler with an adventurous spirit and intrepidity would have had no place in the social construct of the eighteenth century (106). Yet her

energetic passions for the world outside her immediate sphere strikes a chord in the contemporary viewer, who would have no such compunctions about a female traveler interested in seeing the world. Thompson and Lee's Margaret would not have fit into Austen's world, but she fits perfectly well inside our own.

Another aspect of Margaret as a character is her interest in open communication. In one scene from the film, she announces her preference for the loud and obnoxious Mrs. Jennings, because at least "she talks about things" (Dickson 52). No such declaration exists in Austen's novel, yet the perceived need for this is understandable. *Sense and Sensibility* is characterized in part by the withholding of information and confidences, particularly on the part of Eleanor and Marianne. This reflects partly the social expectation that existed in this late eighteenth century sphere that most even slightly uncomfortable topics and realities were simply not discussed. Viewers coming from a twenty-first century society characterized by our tendency to over-share would find this idea foreign and confusing. Margaret bridges this gap by voicing for us what we generally understand to be true in our twenty-first century reality: life is generally easier when one is free and allowed to "talk about things."

Another significant change in Thompson and Lee's film is its characterization of Edward, Eleanor's love interest. In the film, our first real impression of Edward is made through his first interaction with Margaret. Upon discovering her hiding under a table in the library, he – using Eleanor as a foil – manages to coax her from out of hiding to meet him. From this point forward the movie tempers what the novel describes as his "natural awkward...shyness" and obvious social restraint with his open affection for Margaret (Nixon 36). The movie goes on to show Edward and Margaret playing at fencing in the

yard, and creating elaborate fantasies about becoming a pirate-and-cabin-boy duo (36). There are other added scenes which open up his character further; later in the film Edward comes upon Eleanor observing Marianne playing the pianoforte, and the song happens to be their deceased father's favorite. Upon observing her tears, Edward hands Eleanor his handkerchief, which later serves as a physical reminder of Edward's emotional bonds (37). These scenes are nowhere to be found in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, yet their inclusion in the film adds emotional depth to Edward's character that is lacking in Austen's novel.

One of the most significant – and controversial – departures the film makes from Austen's novel, however, is the film's treatment of Eleanor. Whereas Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* does a careful job of differentiating between Marianne's sensibility and Eleanor's wise, restrained sense, portraying Eleanor as the ideal, the film blurs this concept thoroughly. Rebecca Dickson argues that the focus the film pays to Eleanor's silence, especially in regards to her feelings toward Edward, eventually unfurl a theme of repression (52). Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* runs in direct contrast to this: when Lucy Steele makes a point to communicate to Eleanor her intimate connection to Edward, thus dashing all of Eleanor's hopes of his affections, Eleanor chooses to withhold the information from her family: "she was stronger alone, and her own good sense so well supported her" (86). Again and again, Austen holds up Eleanor's emotional and verbal restraint as the human ideal, contrasting her sharply to Marianne's inappropriate emotionality. Yet Dickson argues that nearly all of Eleanor's major scenes of "character growth" in the film portray her as breaking down on some emotional level (52). Indeed, one of Eleanor's final scenes in the film deals with the moment Edward returns with

news of his brother's marriage to Lucy Steele, and his desire to marry Eleanor. In the novel, Austen describes Eleanor's reaction to Edward's proposal as being "overcome with felicity" (226). Yet Thompson and Lee's film has Eleanor break out into "uncontrollable sobbing, full of fits, snorts and roars" (Dickson 54). An implied meaning is the necessity of the strong, reserved woman to be broken, in order to complete her individual evolution (54). For some critics, this emotional addition to Eleanor's character disturbs the balance Austen intended to show of sense and sensibility, and the idea that sense should always preferred. Yet the film, created for a contemporary audience, reflects what Dickson refers to as our propensity toward dismissing self-restraint, and valuing a lack of boundaries (55). In a post-modern age which highly values freedom in all forms, the film's perspective is valid, though Dickson argues just as validly that there is much we could learn from Austen's Eleanor (55).

Mansfield Park

Jane Austen wrote *Mansfield Park* with the express intention of making a “complete change” from the buoyant comedy of her previous novels (Ross 33). In Fanny Price, she created a heroine completely unlike that of witty Elizabeth Bennet, strong and reserved Eleanor, or lively and beautiful Marianne. Instead Fanny is timid and shy, a “grave, shrinking creature” (33). In the novel this idea is given harsh voice by Tom Bertram; Fanny’s oldest cousin calls her in the presence of others, a “creep-mouse” (582). Austen was completely aware of the risk of creating not nearly so likeable a protagonist: her own mother declared Fanny Price to be completely “insipid” (Stove 8). It should come as no surprise that contemporary filmmakers have struggled to adapt this novel to screen; with such an overly-unimpressive heroine, and such strident moral tones, the novel does not easily lend itself to a twenty-first century audience. But in 1999, Patricia Rozema wrote and directed a film adaptation which thrust Fanny Price onto the big screen, albeit a Fanny far different than had ever been seen before. In a bold move, Rozema moved sharply – and unapologetically – away from Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, instead crafting her own unique vision of Fanny and her world.

The most dramatic change Rozema makes in her vision of *Mansfield Park* is to completely rewire Fanny Price. In addition to timid, Rozema declared the existing Fanny to be “‘annoying’ and ‘not fully drawn’” (qtd. in Monaghan 85). In the place of Austen’s Fanny, Rozema creates a character she believed would express “the anarchic spirit of the Jane Austen who wrote scurrilously satirical juvenilia” (85). Indeed, the film indistinguishably mashes Fanny Price and a young Jane Austen together to create an

intriguing portrait of a shy yet self-possessed young woman, obsessed with her immensely clever and amusing writings (85).

In both Austen's novel and Rozema's film, Fanny arrives at Mansfield Park in the beginning of the story as a shy, timid, altogether not unpleasing little girl, desiring most of all to be loved by her new family. Yet where the novel describes Fanny finding contentment at Mansfield Park in "usefulness – serving as playfellow, instructress, and nurse" (Monaghan 87), the film portrays Fanny as finding solace and delight in the writing of her wild, fanciful juvenilia which she shares with only her cousin Edmund and her sister Susan. This deliberate nod to Jane Austen and her childhood juvenilia works as a powerful device in the film; it provides Fanny with an outlet to demonstrate to the film's audience her masterful wit and independence. With only this change the film manages to transform Fanny's character into a far more palatable heroine to contemporary viewers.

Along with this penchant for writing wild, satirical stories, Rozema's Fanny Price also embodies an undeniable physicality. From bounding up and down Mansfield Park's staircases to galloping wildly through the night on horseback, the film's Fanny Price is an active, dynamic force, an idea which contrasts sharply with the Fanny of Austen's *Mansfield Park*. In the novel, Fanny is held up in direct opposition to the "active and quick" Crawfords, whose restlessness and changeability are at the heart of their moral weakness. Fanny's quiet, still and steady nature becomes symbolic of her moral firmness, the quality which Austen most wished to convey through the character (Monaghan 89). In other words, haste, in Austen's eighteenth-century world, is a vice,

and Fanny is meant to exist to throw down a moral challenge to both the other characters and the novel's readers (Stowe 7).

The film makes another interesting departure from the novel, in its effort to bring to the forefront a largely unvoiced reality: Fanny and the Bertrams' financial dependence on Sir Thomas' slave plantations (Fergus 71). The novel makes vague references to trouble in Antigua, the reason for Sir Thomas' abrupt departure from Mansfield Park, but leaves out any explicit references to Sir Thomas' slave plantations, and the horrors of the slave trade. But Rozema's film makes what was vague, blatant: in several different scenes, Fanny observes singing coming from the direction of the sea, and realizes it's the songs of the slaves being held on the ships. Our contemporary knowledge of the overwhelming number of slaves who died merely in transport is tapped, and the scenes gain even more cultural and emotional power. The film also depicts several conversations between Sir Thomas, Edmund and Fanny regarding slavery and its realities, scenes also nowhere to be found in Austen's novel. But the most dramatic scene dealing with slavery is the scene between Sir Thomas, Fanny and Tom Bertram.

In both the novel and the film, Sir Thomas and Edward agree that Fanny's refusal to accept Henry Crawford's proposal merely requires a visit to Portsmouth, her humble origins, and her decision will be reversed. But while the novel has Fanny recalled back to Mansfield in the wake of Henry and Maria Bertram-Rushworth's scandalous behavior (771), Rozema's film has Edmund fetch Fanny in the seemingly inevitable reality of Tom's death. While tending to his sick room, Fanny comes across a book of Tom's sketches; it is a book of horrors, depicting the torture and inhumane treatment of the slaves on Sir Thomas' plantations, in several sketches by Sir Thomas himself. Fanny's

horror is instant and total, and only enhances the power of the moment. In this visually visceral way, Rozema makes an aspect of the seventeenth and eighteenth century British social and economic structure a living, breathing thing for contemporary viewers, adding a historical relevance to *Mansfield Park* which is easily missed in Austen's novel.

Emma

In creating *Emma*, Jane Austen, in regards to the title character, stated to a friend: “I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like” (qtd. in Ross 36). Indeed, the creation of such a “handsome, clever and rich” protagonist was inherently risky (Austen 795); it can be exceedingly difficult to make such a character come off as likeable, as opposed to simply entitled. Yet Austen managed to pen a character with an amazing balance of self-awareness, naivety, kindness, thoughtlessness and growth that over the course of the novel, the reader can’t help but like her, or at the very least, find her amusing. Film and television have come up with several interesting adaptations of Austen’s *Emma*, with the different versions revealing unique and at times contrasting visions of Emma and her Highbury village.

In 1996, film director Douglas McGrath penned a screenplay adapting Austen’s *Emma* into a feature film. American actress Gwyneth Paltrow, at the time twenty-three years old, played the title character opposite British actor Jeremy Northam, the film’s Mr. Knightley. At the time of the film’s production Northam was thirty-four years old, and *New Yorker* reviewer Anthony Lane remarked with some amusement at Northam’s “under the hill” representation of a character who Austen intended to be at least thirty-seven years old (Schor 144). This decision in casting makes sense when taking a contemporary audience into consideration; the assumption is that we would rather see Emma matched with a handsome, youthful man whose energy and looks are equal to her own. Yet the seemingly lessened age disparity between the two characters in McGrath’s film does take away some of Knightley’s credibility. Ultimately it is more difficult to believe that his life experience is so much greater in comparison to Emma’s. But a good

deal of this phenomenon has more to do with Gwyneth Paltrow's portrayal of Emma than Jeremy Northam's youthful looks.

From the very first chapter of Austen's novel, we learn that Emma is an endearing, comical girl of twenty, more than a bit spoiled, but clever and unarguably "handsome" (795). The meaning of the term "handsome" in Austen's period when applied to a woman was quite distinct: "a woman of a particularly desirable physical size, having a fine form or figure; an attractively voluptuous woman" (Mosier 265). Paltrow's attractiveness is not in dispute, but with her waif-like body she hardly qualifies as "handsome" in this eighteenth-century definition of the term. Another interesting issue is the plausibility of Paltrow as an Emma of only "nearly twenty-one" (Austen 795). The significance of Knightley and Emma's age in the novel is directly related to their initial ignorance of each other as romantic interests. There is no awareness in either of them at the beginning of the story of the other as a partner: in effect, initially, each is romantically and sexually invisible to the other (Mosier 235). McGrath's film, doing so much to level the two characters in age, looks and disposition, removes this barrier. Watching these two characters interact in McGrath's adaptation, it becomes problematic to believe that neither would have considered the other as a romantic interest.

In sharp contrast to this, however, is the BBC four-part television drama that made its debut in October of 2009. This *Emma*, directed by Jim O'Hanlon, puts forth an entirely different sort of Emma. Portrayed by twenty-six-year-old British actress Romola Garai, her Emma is somewhat gangly but graceful: youthful, spontaneous, mischievous, and simultaneously immature and wise. In short, she is entirely plausible opposite Johnny Lee Miller's older Knightley. Their relationship is depicted as playful, and

initially of an entirely sibling feel. His condescension is obvious, yet so is his affection: in a line nearly straight out of the novel, O'Hanlon's Knightley admits to Mrs. Weston, "I have not a fault to find with her person...I love to look at her; and I will add this praise, that I do not think her personally vain. Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it" (Austen 817). In both the novel and O'Hanlon's adaptation, this foreshadows for us his future attraction, which he initially mistakes for familial fondness.

O'Hanlon's film does take a rather interesting liberty with Austen's text; Emma is shown to have a sort of wistful fascination with the world outside of Highbury. It seems to reflect slightly Emma Thompson's treatment of Margaret from *Sense and Sensibility*. Yet what makes this interpretation of Austen's *Emma* so interesting is that, with a couple of minor exceptions, Emma does not stray from the confines of Highbury, one assumes as a reaction to her "nervous" father whose "spirits required constant support" (796). It seems entirely plausible that she would crave to see at least some of the world outside her little sphere. It also works to add dimension to her and Knightley's relationship; in one scene he brings her a book with a sketch of Box Hill, a location she has yet to have seen. His superior knowledge of the world based on his travels and experiences outside of Highbury are areas in which Emma accepts him as her superior, another interesting dimension to the adaptation. O'Hanlon carries this theme throughout the four-part series; the last scene of the final part shows Emma's delighted reaction to her first glimpse of the sea, as she and Knightley ride away from Highbury for their honeymoon. While this theme is an obvious addition to Austen's novel, it effectively works to add credence to Emma and Knightley's relationship in this visual format. One can believe, in watching

the two relate, that for once Emma would accept him as wiser and more knowledgeable, and in this instance, see it as a potential benefit, one she would not resent.

Persuasion

According to Jane Austen's nephew's *Memoir*, one family friend thought Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*, a portrayal of Jane herself, remarking, "her enthusiasm for the navy, and her perfect unselfishness, reflect her completely" (Ross 40). Yet in a letter to Fanny Knight, a family friend, Jane admitted, "you may *perhaps* like the heroine, as she is too good for me" (qtd. in Ross 40). *Persuasion*'s main protagonist does indeed embody all that is sweet-tempered, elegant-minded and eager to please. Yet at twenty-seven years of age, she is by far Austen's oldest heroine, perhaps a result of Austen's increased age at the time of its creation. Whatever Austen's motive, Anne's story is made unique both in her age, and the fact that the novel begins after many of the important events in Anne's life have already occurred. Her courtship by and refusal of Wentworth, her spurned lover, is – at the beginning of the novel – already eight years in the past. Yet Anne's story is one of reclaiming that which has been lost, and rediscovering a relationship thought to have been damaged forever.

In 1995, British director Roger Michell created a BBC television-film adaptation of *Persuasion*, with the help of screenwriter Nick Dear and cinematographer John Daly. 107 minutes long, it debuted on television in Britain April 16, 1995, but was later released theatrically in the U.S, benefiting from increased interest of American audiences after Simon Langton's popular six-hour long adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Starring British actress Amanda Root as Anne Elliot and Irish actor Ciaran Hinds as Captain Frederick Wentworth, the film is marked by a generally minimalist style, in choices of cast, costume and cinematography. Something of a sleeper hit, Michell's understated

style eventually came to be mostly admired from critics. His departures from Austen's novel vary from the subtle to the extreme.

On the more subtle end, Michell uses food in the film to denote which characters are meant to be bad or ridiculous, and which characters are to be admired (Wooden 23). In the first fifteen minutes of Michell's *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot is present at three different meals, yet altogether she is shown taking only one sip of soup and a couple sips of tea (23). In contrast, Elizabeth, Anne's beautiful yet spoiled older sister, eats constantly throughout the beginning scenes. On one occasion, she slouches in her seat and gorges on a box of chocolates she balances on her belly (23). With her mouth full, she hurls insults, mocks her father, and disregards Lady Russell's suggestions for economy altogether (23). Through this pairing in behavior of overindulgence and wickedness, her ridiculousness could not be made more obvious. Likewise, when we first meet Anne's younger yet equally outrageous sister Mary, she is sprawled out in a prone position, bemoaning the state of her precarious health. Yet within the next two minutes she is methodically working her way through a huge slice of meat, her health evidently fine. In essence, one thing that differentiates Anne from her sisters in Michell's adaptation is her propensity toward self-control, and theirs toward excess. While the specifics of which characters eat what is not chronicled, the traits of Anne's self-control and Elizabeth and Mary's selfishness and excess do reflect Austen's characterizations in the novel. In a sense, Michell uses food to reflect an idea which is suggested or alluded to in Austen's *Persuasion*.

On the extreme end of Michell's departure from the novel is one of the film's final scenes: Anne and Wentworth's infamous embrace on the streets of Bath. In her

novel, Austen describes the couple's public reconciliation and engagement as one marked by "proper alacrity, a most obliging compliance for public view; and smiles reined in and spirits dancing in private rapture" (1413). As always, Austen makes her honorable characters display nothing short of total self-control where public decorum is concerned. Not so with Michell's adaptation, however, which has Anne and Wentworth kissing passionately on the street, with no regard for either their surroundings or reputations. This is an obvious nod to the contemporary expectations of a romantic film; nearly every film starring two characters as romantic interests ends with a physical affirmation of their discovered love. Scholar Paulette Richards argues that cinematography and scene placement do their part to normalize this otherwise eighteenth-century no-no: "the passage of the carnival players through the street at the moment of Anne and Wentworth's kiss creates a liminal space in which propriety may believably be suspended" (124). On the other side of the argument, *New Yorker* reviewer Martin Amis finds no excuse plausible enough to explain the film's scene: "such alterations from the original text ultimately reveal more about the blatant sensuality of our own culture than about any latent sensuality of Jane Austen's culture" (qtd. in Margolis 34). Both arguments are valid, yet Fay Weldon sums up the situation best when she writes that "if Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot need to...kiss, for the sake of a satisfactory ending in a brilliant film, that [is] OK by me" (qtd. in Margolis 34). Weldon's perspective neatly verbalizes a hierarchy of priorities most contemporary audiences of this film would create; far more important than historical accuracy would be a satisfactory, solid conclusion to Anne and Captain Wentworth's rocky relationship. If this requires a blatantly inappropriate kiss, why not?

Conclusion

Adapting Jane Austen's novels to television and film is a tricky tight-rope - walking maneuver. With so many different perceptions and interpretations of these great works, it's impossible to even come to a consensus about exactly who the characters are, and what Austen intended the most important themes of her novels to be. This only makes the move from book to film all the more slippery. There is no way around the fact that, as Gina and Andrew Macdonald reflect, "the movement from literature to film is a translation, and, as with all translations, something is lost and something gained" (2). Ultimately, film is about images, not words, and in this medium of film, much of Austen's linguistic genius is lost, most particularly her narrative voice. Yet the basic themes found in her novels remain at the center of our contemporary era's concerns: marriage, sex, romance, familial obligations, social morality, cultural and structural restraints, and money (Troost 3). This continued relevance of her novels is the basis for why they continue to teach us new truths about ourselves, as individuals and as a cultural whole. The reality then becomes that the films play a vital role in introducing Austen to a new, ever-increasing audience, ideally an audience that would never simply settle for only one medium in which to experience Austen, whether that medium be novel or film.

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