

DISCUSSING JANE AUSTEN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: JOE WRIGHT'S FILM ADAPTATION OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*.*

María Teresa González Mínguez

UNED

mtgonzalez@flog.uned.es

Since the 1940s many *Pride and Prejudice* film and TV series adaptations have been made—but it is Joe Wright's which intensifies the difference between appearance and reality and offers a less romantic view of marriage during the Regency period. My aims in this paper are twofold: first, to show what we gain by rereading Austen's novels and watching film adaptations of them and second, to demonstrate how Wright refashions *Pride and Prejudice* and gives it a more timeless, practical and universal appeal by exploring the politics of dating, social differences, the body, the new proto-feminist mentality and Jane Austen's idea of marriage. The article explains how Austen's characters are expanded into today's common people and how we are powerfully attracted to her because of the way she explores the emotional lives of women in a changing world.

Key words: *Twenty-first century film adaptations, Regency, marriage, proto-feminism, realism.*

Desde los años cuarenta muchas han sido las versiones cinematográficas y series televisivas de *Orgullo y Prejuicio*, pero la dirigida por Joe Wright es la que más intensifica la diferencia entre apariencia y realidad y ofrece una visión menos romántica del matrimonio durante el periodo de la Regencia. La finalidad de este artículo tiene una doble vertiente: primero, mostrar qué conseguimos al releer las novelas de Austen y ver sus adaptaciones a la pantalla y segundo, demostrar cómo

Wright actualiza *Orgullo y Prejuicio* dotándola de un sentido atemporal, práctico y universal explorando temas como el cortejo, las diferencias sociales, el cuerpo, la nueva mentalidad feminista y el concepto de matrimonio de Austen en un ambiente realista. El artículo explica la forma en que los personajes de Austen se expanden en el mundo actual y cómo nos sentimos atraídos hacia la autora gracias a su estudio de la vida emocional de las mujeres en un mundo en transformación.

Palabras clave: *Adaptaciones cinematográficas en el siglo veintiuno, Regencia, matrimonio, proto-feminismo, realismo*

Critics are radically divided over the value of Joe Wright's 2005 Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* film adaptation. Some of them complain that he transformed the novel into an easy visual experiment for a light audience or that Keira Knightley was too young and beautiful for the role, even if she was the same chronological age as Elizabeth Bennet when she made the film. In her review for *The Telegraph*, Sukhdev Sandhu remarks that Donald Sutherland, playing the role of Mr Bennet, is "an uxorious sweetie rather than the hen-pecked soul of previous adaptations" (2005). Others, like Deborah Kaplan, have dismissed Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* as another example of "the harlequinization of Jane Austen's novels" (1998: 178). Meanwhile, Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* describes it as "a brisk affair with a narrative drive that finds relatively little time for reflection" (2005).

I have reread *Pride and Prejudice* many times since I was a young girl. I love book adaptations such as *Awakenings* and *Rude Awakenings of a Jane Austen Addict*, and I have watched the 1940 MGM film starring Garson Greer and Laurence Olivier, the six-part miniseries of *Pride and Prejudice* produced by the BBC in 1995—which seems to have turned the image of Jane Austen into that of a celebrity—and the 2004 Gurinder Chadah's Bollywood musical *Bride and Prejudice* several times. I am aware that lovers of *Pride and Prejudice* might have been skeptical of another adaptation of the novel such as Wright's. Rachel Brownstein, for instance, admires the film's "intelligence and innovative energy" but dislikes its "Brontification of the story" because the passionate

scenes in the rain seem to her out of the tune of Austen's novel.¹ In my view, Wright's production is a reaction to chick-literature and films, one which adds a livelier and more realistic tone to life, intensifies the divide between appearance and reality and offers a less romantic view of marriage in the pre-Regency period of the late 1790s, all without compromising the novel's depiction of late eighteenth-century manners. I imagine that fans of the Jennifer Ehle and Collin Firth's 1995 five-hour BBC miniseries may not be convinced by this version, but those open to a looser adaptation will be stunned by what Joe Wright, scripter Deborah Moggach, production designer Sarah Greenwood, and costume designer Jaqueline Durran accomplished where their predecessors failed: capturing the youthful, sexy, bookish social universe of Austen's novel - a world more representative of the book's eighteenth-century origins than its nineteenth-century publication.²

My aims in this paper are twofold: first, to show what we gain by rereading Austen's novels and watching film adaptations, and second, to demonstrate how Joe Wright refashions *Pride and Prejudice*, giving it a more timeless, practical and universal appeal by exploring in a realistic down-to-earth setting some of the more rigid aspects of the Regency period such as dating and social differences and by highlighting some of the novel's innovative aspects such as a focus on the body, a modern nineteenth-century proto-feminist mentality and Mary Wollstonecraft's idea of marriage.

The really amazing thing about Austen is that people are still worried today about the questions that interest her and still admire her characteristic ways of seeing and her critical view of the world and its inhabitants. Austen anticipates the idea of a film because she lets us watch her characters acting as we would do if we were watching a picture. In my opinion, the great thing about Joe Wright's adaptation is the challenging way in which it not only shows different love stories but also why Austen is still in our minds, how her characters are related to her readers and viewers and how modern nineteenth-century social concerns such as wit, physicality, human relationships or the power of money still occupy our minds.

Jane Austen's and Joe Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* are not just a novel and a film in which two headstrong characters Elizabeth Bennet

(Keira Knightley) and Mr Darcy (Matthew MacFadyen) clean each other's sins by falling in love. Both novel and film delve into serious undemocratic economic matters: Mr and Mrs Bennet's (Donald Sutherland and Brenda Blethyn) inability to produce a male heir will expose the family to future poverty as their farming estate in Hertfordshire will be inherited on Mr Bennet's death by the closest male relative—one Mr Collins (Tom Hollander). "Even my piano stool belongs to him," says Elizabeth/Knightley to her good friend Charlotte Lucas (Claudie Blakely) explaining that, by law, poor females cannot inherit their fathers' property. If Austen fought against undervaluing women's friendships, she also struggled against the social imperative to get married, although sometimes she did so in an ambiguous way because most of her characters treat marriage as a pleasure. Austen lived in a time of war when women outnumbered men because of the Napoleonic Wars on the continent. The scarcity of men dominates the novel and the militia regiment in Meryton provides the community with a male population. Austen's novels aim to showcase the undervalued female self by having the protagonist marry the wealthiest young man while celebrating the author herself as an independent woman who was able to express herself, attain fame, and never marry. In *Pride and Prejudice*, society is concerned about the destiny of unmarried women, not men. A single woman without a fortune is forced to find a husband to support her but Austen had reservations about the universally acknowledged obligation to marry. In fact, as Carol Shields observes, she "wrote not so much about marriage as about the tension between parents and children [and] the inevitable rupture between generations" (2001: 54). Like Austen, Elizabeth/Knightley is not as anxious as her sisters to get married but seems to share her father's ironic attitudes to these feminine delights. The rebellious heroine shows heroic courage by rejecting a marriage of convenience with Reverend Collins even in view of her family's uncertain future.

Austen's view of marriage was, no doubt, Mary Wollstonecraft's. In contrast with Rousseau's ideal of the secluded wife and mother, Wollstonecraft insists that women should connect with the wider world and its questions of politics and morality. Austen shows a determination, new for her time, to describe the predicament that women of her class were in as they had nothing but marriage to rescue

them from their parental home and save them from starvation. Wollstonecraft depicts the family as a fundamentally political institution which transports liberal values into the private sphere by encouraging the ideal of marriage as friendship between intellectual equals. Her defense of female emancipation is based on freedom, equality and education for women. Darcy is a gentleman and Elizabeth is a gentleman farmer's daughter so they are social equals. Like Wollstonecraft, Austen sees "the trope of the coquette as exclusive evidence that women accept their inferiority" (Ferguson 1992: 90). That is why Elizabeth/Knightley does not take much care of her personal appearance—muddy petticoats, loose hair, shabby clothes—but thinks instead about the books she cannot stop reading when the film starts at sunrise or those boring conduct manuals such as *Fordyce's Sermons* (1766), which Austen always tried to avoid in her novels but Elizabeth/Knightley rereads at Hunsford Parsonage. Darcy/MacFadyen's idea of an accomplished woman includes reading, of course, and he is aware that Elizabeth constantly improves her mind by doing so. In fact, her voice is mixed with the omniscient narrator's and she possesses the language which distinguishes elegant people from vulgar ones at the same time as she laughs at those, such as Lady Catherine (Dame Judy Dench) or Miss Bingley (Kelly Reilly), who both take themselves too seriously. Wright clearly expresses the heroine's mental superiority with a long shot of Elizabeth/Knightley high on a hill in Derbyshire observing the world from an elevated position. With Knightley, "It is foolish to imagine Elizabeth would be anyone's second choice" notes Stephen Holden (2005), but when Darcy/MacFadyen says that she is "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me," the heroine's public humiliation and embarrassment makes her start a series of dialectical battles with him that positions these characters' wit at the same level at the Assembly Rooms in Meryton, at the Netherfield ball and at Rosings sitting-room. The couple's backchat by Lady Catherine's pianoforte anticipates Darcy/MacFadyen's insulting first proposal, a Brontë-like episode in a picturesque ruin out in the wilderness in the pouring rain, where Darcy/MacFadyen and Elizabeth/Knightley have an angry argument which clears up misunderstandings. If not powerful enough to make them fall in love, wit allows them to discover that they can understand each other through friendly virtues such as goodness, sincerity, and bravery. As soon as Darcy enters the ballroom in Meryton, everybody

knows that he will marry Elizabeth but, due to most women's lack of education, rational men like him are also disadvantaged, for women are not educated to value their minds and merits. Two fashionable actors such as MacFadyen, with his beautiful voice and arrogance, and Knightley, with her idealism and forthrightness, are an example of how the old games of courtship can return and be found in the pages of a novel which, as Holden remarks in *The New York Times*, "speaks wistfully to the moment" (2005) by rejecting obsessions with class and money and encouraging human relationships through mutual understanding. Wright emphasizes the protagonists mutual sexual attraction, friendship, love, reciprocal kindness and intellectual equality but also keeps in mind the obsessive social formula of marriage-to-property. In the end, marriage for Austen does not mean free passion as in the story of Lydia and Wickham but the idea that emotion and property are interwoven. The author is aware that one marries not only a partner, but also society.

It is not so surprising that Elizabeth should reject Darcy's first proposal of marriage - as she did Collins's - since both are very similar. Collins is physically revolting for Elizabeth but, at first, it is difficult to love the handsome Darcy because there is always a sense that he, like the reverend, is sacrificing himself by falling in love with her. In turning down a prudential marriage with Collins/Hollander in the most unromantic environment for a proposal (they are at the breakfast table with a haunch of pork dominating their tense dialogue), Elizabeth/Knightley shares part of Jane Austen's rebelliousness and contrasts with the rules of Regency femininity as she does not operate under the same parameters as Rousseau's secluded woman—a marriage with Collins would be a total loss of integrity and a moral disaster for both. "You could not make me happy and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who could make you so," Elizabeth/Knightley tells Collins, cutting him off. On the contrary, Charlotte/Blakeley's attitude about marrying such a fool as Collins/Hollander in her late twenties was one of desperation but also of compromise, good sense, calculation and practicality as well as her only chance to escape the dominion of her parents, establish her own home and achieve a little sphere of sovereignty for herself. Although she never breaks up with her friend on account of that marriage, Elizabeth/Knightley is never reconciled with the idea that her friend

is the wife of “her comic monster” (Harding 2001: 299). Exposing marriage as the solution to the desperation of economic survival, Austen and Wright *do* remind the viewers of Mary Wollstonecraft’s idea of marriage for support as legal prostitution.³ “Not everyone can afford to be romantic,” says a grown-up Charlotte/Blakely to a more immature Elizabeth/Knightley in a heartbreaking scene in which she claims the need to become part of society and possess her own home as a way to “psychological security” (Shields 2001: 80).⁴

In the novel the experience of twenty-three years of marriage has been insufficient to make Mr Bennet’s wife understand his character. On occasion the Bennets have been described as “a dysfunctional family” (Bronwstein 2011: 5). In the film Mr and Mrs Bennet do communicate and seem to love each other, a characterization which is far away from the source text. In that shift, Wright passes over Austen’s critique of the patriarchal family and improves Mr Bennet, perhaps because his role is performed by Donald Sutherland. The Bennets’ marriage is not that bad at all, maybe because Wright wanted to remark that it was eventually based on friendship.

Diana Coole observes that “Wollstonecraft favours the calmness of friendships over the passion of sexual love as a basis for marriage” (1988: 123). Collin Firth was unmistakably infatuated with Elizabeth in the BBC series. Matthew MacFadyen loves her “most ardently” with “body and soul,” although, like their cinematic predecessors, they also begin their relationship by spitting poison at each other. In the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation Darcy falls in love at first sight with Elizabeth. That is not so clear in the novel, however, although in the Assembly Rooms ball he is definitely attracted by her looks.⁵ As Steven Hunter points out, Wright fills the film with “Georgian energy” and “the pleasures of the flesh” (2005). The director successfully manages to show the spectators how passion, stylistically concealed but never eliminated by Austen, can be visualized by making the characters expose a new interest in the human body and its sexuality. In her article for the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA), Catherine Stewart-Ber remarks that more than a meeting of minds or intellectual equals, the film is visually oriented to make the viewer sense Elizabeth and Darcy’s mutual physical attraction (2007). It is at

Pemberley where the viewers can best see how eroticism is represented as well as the heroine's "psychosexual awakening" to her own "spiritual development" (Sabine 2008: 16). Bodies in Austen are translated into objects that Grandi refers to as "fetishist component[s]" (2008: 49). This component is crucial for Elizabeth/Knightley's view of Darcy/MacFadyen when she visits his estate, actually Chatsworth House, the home of the Duke of Devonshire. Wright chooses the sculpture gallery instead of the painting gallery and it is there where Elizabeth contemplates Darcy's bust. The housekeeper's defense of her master makes her ready to see the real Darcy, one she can no longer ignore. In the sculpture gallery the miniatures books and portraits become real naked bodies of maidens and warriors with an amazing physical consistency. Again through reaction shots, the close-ups of Raffaele Monti's *Veiled Vestal* find a parallel in Elizabeth/Knightley's face suggesting unmistakably erotic connotations about her own virginity as well as a bride's veil. The view of cold and marble bodies accelerates the end of her inner journey when she reaches Darcy's bust and contemplates not only a metonymy of the man but Darcy himself and his value as a social example to follow. Pemberley is all visual arts and Elizabeth/Knightley is not only marrying Darcy/MacFadyen but his culture and perception of beauty.

Susan Fraiman remarks that Wright introduces Elizabeth/Knightley "as a kind of outsider" (2010). Her sensual energy is visualized when she walks long distances in the open air, when she sits at the foot of a tree instead of on a chair, and, paradoxically, when she shows no concern for physical beauty. For Austen the body "is usually fragmented" (Grandi 2008: 46) and hands and eyes are the vehicles that reveal hidden passions between men and women. In the film the constant references to Elizabeth's eyes are removed as are the dialogues referring to them. They are expertly replaced by constant close-ups of Knightley's face and reaction shots between the lovers which disclose to the audience how the story will develop as well as how the landscape and human activities change through the seasons. Gazing at each other at the Netherfield ball, Darcy/MacFadyen and Elizabeth/Knightley seem to be encapsulated and isolated from the other dancers—"even if they quarrel, in their mutual presence, [they] cannot see anything else but their partner" (Grandi 2008: 48). One

could see the interdependence of characters in a community in the Assembly Rooms or at the street market, but balls were the only places where men and women could have physical contact and talk to each other without being chaperoned. Wright uses takes of Darcy's and Elizabeth's hands as a way of expressing their erotic potential. When the Bennet girls abandon Netherfield after Jane's illness, Darcy/MacFadyen helps an astonished Elizabeth/Knightley get into the carriage by holding her hand. Almost immediately afterwards his hand shivers as if the fleeting physical contact had been electric. At the end of the film, at the moment of his second marriage proposal, Elizabeth/Knightley does not reply but simply takes his hand and says that his hands "are cold." Hands and eyes are a metonymy for the whole body and become the symbol of the couple's physical attraction and the heroine's erotic awakening.

As Paula Byrne says, Austen was one of the first novelists to emphasize the symbolic importance of the English ancestral houses (2013: 235). In his review for *The Guardian*, Philip French notes that the "houses in the film accurately reflect the social gradations of their owners" (2005). The red brick in Longbourn, which the Bennets inhabit, provides the audience with the idea of the scarce Hogarthian comfort the family lives in; Hunsford, Mr. Collins's vicarage in Kent, is darker indicating a repressive character; Mr. Bingley's (Simon Woods) neoclassical Netherfield Park distills its owner's new money; the grandeur of Darcy's Pemberley conveys good taste and a welcoming atmosphere and Lady Catherine's (Dame Judy Dench) Rosings overwhelms the audience with its colossal furnishings and stern servants. Wright takes advantage of the cinematic nature of *Pride and Prejudice* and delicately uses visuals to both comment on economic and class divisions and to single out the different characters. By using the walk-and-talk technique, the spectators go through every room in the houses and follow the actors and actresses, the camera keeping them ever close to the action.

The real purpose of Pemberley is both to bring economic prosperity to the area and to reflect the value of tradition and individualism, which show Darcy as a modern man who is kind to his family and servants. The audience can see how Elizabeth/Knightley contrasts the perfection without pretension of Pemberley with other

deficient worlds where she must live such as Longbourn or Meryton. Moving from room to room and looking at the surroundings from the distance, the female protagonist recognizes her own insignificance and is aware that the responsibilities of adulthood have arrived. In choosing the houses, Wright rejects the concept of an idyllic version of England in the 1700s but presents a time of rural realities where the spectators can appreciate “the play between the sameness and differences of people and groups” (Bronstein 2011: 8). It is true that, even for the gentry and the aristocracy, life in the pre-Regency period was not a bed of roses. It was a loud, impolite, crowded place full of dirt and cattle to be eaten.⁶ However, the director’s takes of Longbourn—represented by the stately seventeenth-century Groombridge Place—*do* exaggerate the Bennets’ poverty in order to highlight Darcy’s wealth. The girls’ shabby clothes and disheveled hairstyles, and the manor’s rural looks contradict Mrs Bennet/Blethyn’s words when she points out that they “are perfectly able to afford a cook”—a fair point, as the audience can see a butler, a servant and a maid helping the family.

Nobody says the famous line about the truth universally acknowledged, but Darcy/MacFadyen’s strong presence epitomizes the importance of this sentence by imposing absolute silence when he enters the Assembly Rooms in Meryton. Although the 2005 Darcy is not good at joking, MacFadyen’s physicality almost obliterates other characters in the film. His beautiful voice and his tenderness distance his character from the more Byronic hero played by Collin Firth. Derek Elley points out in *Variety* that MacFadyen “makes a softer figure than Firth and fits the movie’s more realistic mood” (2005). In truth, Darcy/MacFadyen’s defect is not pride, but rather social awkwardness, a flaw that is closer to today’s sensibilities. When Tanya Modleski refers to male heroes, she notes Darcy’s “blunt masculinity” so appreciated in the nineteenth century (1984: 45). Firth was the kind of sensitive guy valued in the 1990s. Wright’s Darcy is what John Beynon calls the “millennium man” of the twenty-first century, a male who “is happy with his nature, raw scent and rough skin” (2002: 125) and “cares about clothes/appearance, but also wants a well-dressed mind” (Wollaston 1997: 8).

Mr Collins appears as a presumptuous monster in the novel. In “Mr. Collins on Screen,” Mary Chan insists that Wright’s adaptation

strays from negative portrayals of Collins by presenting him as a short man. Tom Hollander's height makes him more compassionate—though still ridiculous especially because his figure increases the visual discrepancy between Elizabeth/Knightley's two suitors and her brand new friend Mr Wickham (Rupert Friend). Collins/Hollander's looks suggest that he is an outcast rejected by the rich and powerful. When he proposes to Elizabeth he avoids eye contact and just uses clichés offering a stark contrast to Darcy/MacFadyen's choice of words that attract women despite his cutting remarks.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, lovers are young, beautiful, bookish, and sexy. Elizabeth's youthfulness and freedom is underlined in the 2005 production. In the first five minutes of the film, Wright offers a view of the heroine as a mobile, natural young woman without many social accomplishments. When Elizabeth/Knightley crosses the little bridge to her home, she provides the spectators with the idea of an independent spirit and reinforces Austen's categorization as a proto-feminist in the pre-Regency period.

When Sukhdev Sandhu reviewed the film for *The Telegraph*, she said there was "little spark" between Keira Knightley and Matthew MacFadyen (2005). In my view, both actors outstandingly perform the nineteenth-century rhetorical codes even while updating the story. We like *Pride and Prejudice* because the characters are expanded into today's common people. Like many young men and women today, Elizabeth reveals no urgency to adopt adult responsibilities and cut the cord with her parents. She and her sisters are forced to live with them due to the economic recession caused by the Napoleonic Wars, extending adolescence further into adulthood. We enjoy reading *Pride and Prejudice* because Darcy has that timeless youthful quality of taking himself extremely seriously, being hot-blooded and a little insecure. We are fond of Austen because her style and her writing came to transform generations and became the origin of contemporary romantic comedy. We are attracted by Austen because she explores the real emotional lives of women constrained by their social and financial circumstances and the way she reflects how they adapt themselves to a changing world. We take delight in reading Austen because she likes the spoken voice and the public encounter as we do now in social and business meetings. We love the Bennets because they give the story an

everlasting and universal appeal, that of a family with an interior life that can be expanded. Almost everyone can identify the novel's characters with friends and acquaintances since they resemble others like them—the high and mighty maiden aunt, the indulgent parents, giggling sisters or unsteady partners.

Austen reflects a culture whose institutions are solidly defined by materialistic interests—property, banking, trade and the law that keeps order in these matters. As in today's world these institutions determine the character of family relations, community life, and even emotions. All this helps us to appreciate the contemporaneity of Austen herself. In the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, the individual is unthinkable without a social environment. The novel and the film really conclude when Elizabeth recognizes that “individualism must find its social limits, and Darcy concedes that tradition without individual energy is empty form” (Duckworth 2001: 308).

All in all, Austen flatters us readers into an active complicity with her as we still remain worried about the themes that interest her—how money rules society or how unpleasant people are tolerated, but also how problems can be solved by a pretty new dress or an invitation to a party. As they did two hundred years ago, human beings today need love, civility, decorum and beauty to understand others and themselves. The way Austen provides us with this is an alternative to our way of life.

NOTES

¹ Email to the author. Mon. 17 Aug. 2015.

² *Pride and Prejudice* was written between 1796 and 1797 and published in 1813. The Regency period lasted between 1811 and 1820.

³ In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 1792. Chapter 9 “Of the Pernicious Effects which arise from the Unnatural Distinctions established in society.” In contrast to Austen, Wollstonecraft does not let us see the idea of Lydia's loveless marriage and increasing money problems.

⁴ Keira Knightley is the youngest Elizabeth on screen so far. She was twenty when she made the film, the same age as Elizabeth

Bennet in the novel. Miss Greer Garson was thirty-six when she played the role of Ms Bennet opposite Laurence Olivier. Jennifer Ehle was twenty-six in 1995. Austen's original Elizabeth has an enormous sense of maturity in contrast with the 2005 adaptation's heroine, who, at times, behaves like a child, especially when she declines Lady Catherine's invitation to play the piano at Rosings.

⁵ Martin Amis described Elizabeth as Jane Austen with looks (Brownstein 2011: 48).

⁶ We can observe the lack of silent moments in the film.

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