



## Recreating Jane Austen's World on Film

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**I**N THE BEGINNING, in literature, there is the word. In the beginning, in Hollywood, there is the “pitch.” Consider:

Scenario One: Lady Butterfly is pressed by her ambitious mother to wed a pedantic bureaucrat in the entourage of Lord Kurihana. She risks spinsterhood by refusing him, but she is noticed by a rich, handsome samurai whom she once overheard disparaging the quality of her kimono. He wins her by performing good works to overcome her initial resentment.

Scenario Two: Marie-Cosette, an avid reader of sentimental romances, visits the chateau of a suitor; she cannot help imagining nefarious deeds his father, the mysterious duc de Bercy, might have committed.

Scenario Three: Yentl of Chelm refuses a marriage proposal from peniless Yankel the tailor on the advice of a trusted aunt. Seven years later, now proprietor of fashionable women’s emporium in Vienna, he returns to their village. He flirts with other eligible girls, but returns to Yentl, who shows her steady head in an emergency.

Scenario Four: After 1917, Communist rhetoric inspires one of two middle-class, displaced sisters to become a soldier of the Red Army. She lives dangerously and engages in wild and crazy love affairs. The other, a nurse, selflessly supports her widowed mother and younger sister. The nurse wishes later that she had taken more risks and lived a more colorful life; the soldier, suffering from venereal disease, wishes she had been more careful.

Two more make six: A foundling taken in by high caste, rich relations in Delhi wins the heart of the son of the house through her understated goodness; a spoiled young beauty in Beverly Hills learns to stop interfering in other people's love lives.

Tolstoy's art may require Russia. Dumas's may require France. But Jane Austen's world, like Shakespeare's, need not be constrained by time or place. Neither the particular circumstances nor the details of a Jane Austen novel—the exterior world—makes it a work of genius. One can love and appreciate Austen's novels without knowing what a “ha-ha” is, or how to make “white soup.” Was she a woman of her time and place? Certainly. But that is not why we still read her novels, or why, during the 1990s, she was reputedly the most powerful woman in Hollywood, never mind that she died in 1817. Frankly, I doubt any of my “pitches” would have sold unless I promised—*Flourish of trumpets!*—that the screenwriter would be Jane Austen.

Flaubert, who would never allow his novels to be illustrated, said, “A woman drawn resembles one woman, that's all. The idea from then on is closed, complete.” But is it, really? In the movie in your mind, do you see Greer Garson as Elizabeth Bennet? Do we create a personal image of Elizabeth? Do we “see” as we read? Some readers do translate what they read into Technicolor images. Some visualize merely the letter-symbols before them. Others, especially self-taught readers like myself, may not *see* much at all, but they *hear* a narrative voice. Some combine modes of perception. As Joy Gould Boyum concluded, we all create “individual resymbolizations” of the books we read (6). Some authors, like Austen, with a few significant details, do not so much direct our “seeing” as liberate it. They open wide-ranging possibilities for visualization by a reader and, by extension, a filmmaker.

We all bring unique personal skills, experiences and interests to our reading. I'm a literary person, not a historian, anthropologist, art historian, or sociologist. What I love is Jane Austen's *writing*. I have become familiar with her milieu, the historic events of her time, her family, and other elements of the external world around her; but I don't love her novels more for these details.

As a lover of her novels, I am intrigued by cinematic adaptations, particularly some films I call “wild cards” because I, along with other writers and critics, find them problematic and interesting.<sup>1</sup> Having reviewed all the available films and critical reactions to them in the specialized libraries of London, Los Angeles, and New York, and having begged, bought, or borrowed a library of books and articles on adaptation from literature to film, I have reached one definitive conclusion about trying to recreate “Jane Austen's

World” faithfully and authentically on film in a way to satisfy Janeites. In a single word: Don’t!

Why? No filmed adaptation *can* fully satisfy dedicated Janeites, by which I mean *readers* of Jane Austen. I, for one, prefer not to watch actors flashing authentic sets of blackened or missing teeth unimproved by modern dentistry. I can do without the trash that would routinely collect along Regency highways and byways. I prefer clean costumes, unsoiled by food, the elements, or over-long wear. I prefer not to struggle with the authentic but dismaying array of British accents that regional and class differences would require in a film with pretensions to linguistic authenticity.

I recall plaintive whispers of “What did he say?” in the first 25 minutes of the BBC’s 1995 *Persuasion* as a group from JASNA-New York attended a Sony private screening of this made-for-television film, which was released in the U.S. as a feature film. Its gritty authenticity, with particular attention to the cows on the lawn of the Elliot estate, was much praised.

Robert Giddings calls what was actually achieved in that film “synthetic historical realism” (x). This is a filmmaker’s presentation of an authentic “look,” doctored to suit contemporary tastes, prejudices, and expectations. What is retained or eliminated constitutes a statement as much about the era of the filmmaker and the audience as the age portrayed. So, when Anne Elliot ventures outdoors without a head covering, I smile at the breech of etiquette, but do not e-mail an outraged complaint to the filmmaker. When Ciaran Hinds as Captain Wentworth kisses Amanda Root as Anne Elliot in daylight on a public street in Bath I smile again, recognizing the screenwriter’s bow to the romantic expectations of the consuming public.

Filmmakers do not adapt Jane Austen’s novels to gratify Janeites, the collective memberships of the Jane Austen Societies of Britain, North America, and Australia yielding a total of 8,000 souls and therefore hardly constituting a “niche” market. Masses of others will buy tickets to any entertainment labeled, accurately or not, “Jane Austen.” Year-end gross domestic box office statistics in *Variety* for 1995–96 show the BBC *Persuasion* grossed \$5,286,380. A fairly “faithful” *Sense and Sensibility*, with the star power of Emma Thompson and Hugh Grant, grossed \$42,873,725. *Clueless*, Amy Heckerling’s “take” on *Emma*, earned a whopping \$56,286,380 (that sum does not include residuals such as videotapes and television showings).

On fidelity, I must quote the immortal, sanitized words of Ang Lee, director of the Emma Thompson *S&S*, when he was rebuked for deviating from the novel (by someone claiming to represent the British Jane Austen

Society): “F—the Jane Austen Society.” The “unfaithful” script won a well-deserved Academy Award for Emma Thompson.

Joseph Epstein, editor-emeritus of *The American Scholar*, said it more decorously in a piece called “Reel Literature” in *The Wall Street Journal*: “Perhaps the time has come to lower our expectations about movies, the vast majority of which, let us face it, are on the level of comic books. True, every so often, through a concatenation of the mad and the inexplicable, everything comes together and a swell movie results. When it does, it doesn’t figure to have anything to do with being faithful to the work on which it’s based or for that matter on anything else. It’s magic, baby, pure magic” (16).

The “fidelity” issue bothers ardent Janeites, not filmmakers. Many critics demonized Janeites and Jane Austen societies as purists, prudes, fanatics, and fools when *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* opened. Their “truth universally acknowledged” was that Janeites *must* object to whichever “contemporization” was under scrutiny. In reality, a good many Janeites actually prefer them, especially to costume films that—to borrow Deborah Kaplan’s term—“harlequinize” the novels; that is, reduce them to simplistic, one-dimensional love stories devoid of irony, complexity or sense (177–87).

I proposed in *Persuasions No. 21* some possible disclaimer credits for films that play fast and loose with classic texts: “Based LOOSELY on Jane Austen’s novel,” or “Inspired by Jane Austen’s novel,” or—my favorite—“With apologies to Jane Austen.”

Interestingly, Epstein rates the 1940 *Pride and Prejudice* as “the best movie ever made from a novel.” Its assets include Laurence Olivier, a dazzling supporting cast, and a screenplay by Aldous Huxley. Epstein thinks Austen’s novels work so well as films because “she is above all the novelist of surfaces, subtle and telling surfaces to be sure, with great heaping portions of delicate irony added, but in capable hands it can be—and has been—captured on the screen.” I agree. But Epstein may underrate the power of surfaces to reveal an inner world, as well as the intrinsic theatricality of an author who knew and loved the theater, and created varying roles for her personal “company” of actor/characters in her novels (Byrne xi).

The 1940 *P&P*, progenitor of sixty years of filmed adaptations of Austen, earned never-ending scorn from some, everlasting affection from others. Its glorious life and afterlife might teach us to moderate the demand for “fidelity,” instead of magic, in movies. Kenneth Turan, the authoritative source on this *P&P*, warns viewers “that the 1940 Hollywood movie is not

. . . the Jane Austen novel, is another one of those truths that must be universally acknowledged" ("Informal History" 140). Turan's judgment about the film's tenuous relationship to the novel stands for numerous reasons, including such mistakes as casting the mature Greer Garson as Elizabeth, the use of Victorian costumes, and Lady Catherine's sudden reincarnation as *Eros ex machina*. Yet, despite its many "lapses" of fidelity, that movie *works*; it endures and continues to delight audiences. In important ways the film is true to the comic and the satiric spirit of Jane Austen, if not to her words and "world." As Wiltshire has suggested, "to possess the past it is necessary to remake it" (12).

An anonymous reviewer for the British Film Institute wondered whether Jane Austen would recognize MGM's "reincarnation" of Meryton, Longbourn, Netherfield, and Rosings. He praised Aldous Huxley, the screenwriter, for taking "Jane Austen's canvas" to "gaily hold up to good humored ridicule the mode of life, manners, customs and speech of the whole period." Austen "would undoubtedly feel at first bewildered, but ultimately . . . might have been heard murmuring, 'La, Mr. Huxley, but you do have a pretty wit'" (*BFIN* 131). If filmed adaptations say as much about the era of the adapters and audience as they do about the supposed "source," the commentary may be evident, or it may be in the form of deft subversion, not unlike Austen's treatment of her own society.

Surprisingly, in the past sixty years, only four feature films explicitly based on Austen novels have been produced for the large screen: *P&P*, 1940; *S&S*, 1995; *E*, 1996; and *MP*, 1999; like *Persuasion*, *Jane Austen's Emma* (ITV/Meridian, 1996) was a British made-for-television film that the Arts and Entertainment network aired in North America. Serialized television adaptations were more numerous. After the 1940 *P&P*, at least seven BBC productions of novels appeared, most in black and white (*E*, 1948; *E*, 1960, 6 parts; 1960, 4 parts; *P&P*, 1952, 6 parts; 1958, 6 parts; 1967, 6 parts; and *S&S*, 1971, 4 parts). American networks produced at least four condensed black-and-white adaptations of the novels on such weekly hours as the Philco and Kraft theaters and Camera Three. All of these constitute the second generation of filmed adaptations. They are available only as kinescopes or scripts in specialized broadcasting libraries and museums in England and the United States.

In 1971, BBC and ITV began filming adaptations of Austen's six novels for television. Many of us saw them on Masterpiece Theatre. Home versions of most of these are readily available: *P*, 1971; *E*, 1972; *P&P*, 1979; *MP*, 1983; *S&S*, 1985; *NA*, 1986. Anyone looking for the closest relationship of a filmed adaptation and an original Austen text should look at these, with the exception of the *NA*.

For me, the 226 minutes of *P&P*, with David Rintoul and Elizabeth Garvey in leading roles and script by Fay Weldon, pass all too quickly. Its segments hold together — almost — as a single work. The 174 minutes of *S&S* drag on despite a generous portion of Austen dialogue and some memorable moments. The 257 minutes of *E* and the 225 of *P* cry out for editing, despite some winning scenes. I have only once had the stomach to watch the scant 90 minutes of *NA* through to the end. I shall present The Fanny Price Endurance Award to anyone who voluntarily repeats the experience of watching the 261 minutes of *MP* at a single sitting. Actors in that production strike me as notably unattractive, and their performances leave me unmoved, although the novel has commanded my attention for decades.

We have only the single, rather curious *NA*, the BBC version that re-Gothicized the plot that Austen “deconstructed” in her satire. The first, but not the last filmed adaptation to be reviled as Austen *a la Brontë*, it possessed much melodrama but little irony. A *NA* script by Andrew Davies was purchased by Miramax to suppress so that another Martin Amis screenplay could be produced. Both projects were shelved indefinitely when the commercial failure of Patricia Rozema’s *MP* seemed to signal the end of surefire profitability for anything labeled “Jane Austen.”

Neither Hollywood nor London produced a feature film adaptation of an Austen novel between 1940 and 1995. During the heady years from 1995 to 2000, the fourth generation of adaptations for both large and small screen made Jane Austen a household name and an icon of popular culture. People who have never read a word she wrote are assumed to know who she is, although a moment might be required to identify her as the “Virgin Genius of Hampshire” (Hitchens 149). Feature films during this period included the Ang Lee/Emma Thompson *S&S*; the Gwyneth Paltrow *E*, and Patricia Rozema’s *MP* (2001). In 1995, the BBC produced another *P&P*, a serial version that was as good or better than the first, as well as the critically lauded *P*, and in 1996 ITV made the television film *Jane Austen’s Emma*. Thus, there are thirteen explicit filmed adaptations of Austen novels currently circulating.

About the 1990s versions of *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, little controversy exists: each was a critical and commercial success in its way. Neither *Emma* entirely succeeded. Gwyneth Paltrow’s film was little more than a rich, handsome, not-quite-clever-enough vehicle that jumpstarted her career as a superstar. In its bright wake, Kate Beckinsale, in *Jane Austen’s Emma*, spoke many of Jane Austen’s best lines charmingly, but the low-cost production lacked the sparkle of the Paltrow competitor or the

bite of Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*. Elements of the three combined might have resulted in a definitive film *Emma*.

I looked forward to the *Mansfield Park* of the Canadian writer/director Patricia Rozema because I admired her earlier work in *I've Heard the Mermaid Singing*, and because I perpetually struggle with that novel, particularly its protagonist, Fanny Price. Claudia Johnson, who loved Rozema's *MP*, praised the portrayal of Austen's implicit subversiveness in what she called "a stunning revisionist reading of Austen's darkest novel" (16). Similarly, Troost and Greenfield admired Rozema's "dramatic makeover" of Fanny into an energetic protagonist who uses writing as her "road to self-determination" (193). For the silent, acquiescent, problematic, ultimately triumphant Fanny Price, Rozema substituted an attractive, lively, assertive, pro-active, aspiring young writer whom we are meant to identify as a Jane Austen surrogate. She speaks lines, according to the credits, from Jane Austen's journals, which, of course, never existed; those words were drawn from Austen's juvenilia and letters. Sir Harold Pinter graphically portrays Sir Thomas Bertram as the brutal colonialist exploiter of slaves. He has a lecherous interest in young Fanny. Mary Crawford's gestures toward Fanny suggest lesbian interest. This sharp, seething image of Austen is one that D. W. Harding, John Halperin, and others, particularly feminist critics, have found most—"congenial"? Their image of Austen's outlook is one Harding famously described as "regulated hatred."

I disliked the film. I felt Rozema's agenda stifled Austen's, which I find more complex and more subversive than Rozema's revisionism. No courage is required today to oppose colonialism or slavery; to champion a heroine in our era (or Austen's) as virtuous, acquiescent, long-suffering, and possibly passive-aggressive would certainly represent courageous defiance of conventional wisdom. Jane Austen, living in a lively, intellectually sophisticated family, surely knew about both slavery and colonial exploitation. For her own artistic reasons, she chose not to dwell or even focus on political issues in her novels. Did Rozema try to "improve" Jane Austen? I felt she betrayed the spirit of Jane Austen's fiction. Her use of early, immature writings—never presented or intended for publication—made me entertain, almost, the *very* subversive wish that Cassandra had burned more.

Audiences stayed away from *Mansfield Park* in droves. *Variety* reported its total domestic gross earnings in 1999–2000 at a paltry \$7,068,308. By contrast in 2001–02 *Bridget Jones's Diary*, based on Helen Fielding's best-selling novel, published in England in 1996 at the height of Austen Mania, earned ten times as much. With the commercial failure of *MP*, the Austen

Mania phenomenon ebbed. Yet Jane Austen has not vanished from the scene; rather, she ascended to another level of visibility as an established literary presence, not unlike Shakespeare. There are now what some critics call “homages” to Jane Austen’s novels, that is, feature films that have been variously labeled “versions,” “readings,” or “recreations” of Jane Austen’s novels. I call them wild cards. Had they been verbal rather than cinematic texts, they would most accurately be classed as “imitations” of Jane Austen’s novels.

In the eighteenth century, when imitation was esteemed, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope were proud masters of the genre, but the imitative mode declined in reputation during the Romantic period in England when originality and spontaneity were esteemed. Anything deemed derivative was scorned. Traditionally, however, the imitation exercise begins as an act of appreciation, but the imitator must then establish a liberated, more free-form relationship with the predecessor or “parent” author. Wiltshire, drawing on Harold Bloom, offers psychoanalytic theories of the child/parent relationship between the imitator and the original author, involving aspects of both bonding and rejection. A dimension of destruction of the original may be necessary in the act of imitation, for the imitator must know the original work well and possess the courage to change it, play with it, and make something new of it (Wiltshire 41).

The writer of a classical imitation of Jane Austen does not presume to *be* Jane Austen as he or she transports character types or character surrogates and elements of style and tone, to a new milieu, one which would be strange to Jane Austen, but familiar to the audience. The intention may be to demonstrate, celebrate, or universalize the original, or just to entertain by connecting to the original author’s work. The new creation should work on its own, with or without the connection to the reference work. Some examples from the world of art can enhance my meaning: Andy Warhol used the Botticelli *Venus* as the reference point for his famous suite of four prints. He clearly understood and appreciated the original, for both the serenity of the goddess’s expression and the graceful fluidity of the lines that create her image are retained. But Warhol played with the composition, utilized techniques of advertising art, super-imposed lines in electric neon colors and once even reversed the composition onto a black background to astonishing effect. Is the Botticelli *Venus* then “spoiled” by the imitation? Warhol’s results may jar or offend some lovers of the original painting; others may find the painting energized in a new way and will therefore enjoy the interplay of established conventions and new techniques.

Does *West Side Story* ruin *Romeo and Juliet*? Does Tom Stoppard ruin *Hamlet* with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*? Does John Updike decrease pleasure in *Hamlet* with his *Gertrude and Claudius*? Masterpieces can and do endure, unscathed and perhaps even enriched by imitators' work—if they are good enough. Austen's works certainly meet that test. More destructive attacks in the history of Austen adaptations have been the variables of "harlequinization" in which the complexities of Austen's work are eliminated or reduced in order to focus exclusively on the heroine and her romantic destiny (Kaplan 178). I shall commit my own act of reactionary subversion and revive the term "imitation" in the time-honored eighteenth-century context that Jane Austen would certainly recognize.

"Imitation," scorned and derided under its rightful name, continues to thrive in our day with subversive energy. Consider just a very few well-known imitations from among the many that Shakespeare's plays have stimulated. *Romeo and Juliet* inspired *West Side Story*, and *King Lear* inspired Akira Kurosawa's classic film *Ran*. Jane Smiley moves the same play to rural America and novelizes it as *A Thousand Acres*. *Humble Boy*, a hit in London in 2002 slated to open in New York in 2003, reworks *Hamlet* yet again. A work of imitation, as defined here, can be expected to have its own artistic value despite being derivative. Familiarity with the earlier work can add an additional dimension of appreciation, comprehension, piquancy, or pleasure. I am, for instance, a Janeite who found herself laughing at points in *Clueless* while the rest of the audience was, inimically, clueless. An imitation is not a sequel or pre-quel. The imitator does not presume to write with the source's pen or occupy her chair. She is knowledgeable enough and free enough to play with the source material, an act that may have an element of destruction in it. But the imitator has not tried to *be* Jane Austen, even though she may harbor a secret ambition to—just maybe—supersede her muse. Of course she will not succeed when that muse is Jane Austen.

With Wiltshire and Brian Southam, I exclude a peculiar 1980 film, *Jane Austen in Manhattan*, among the Austen imitations. Scriptwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala used as her reference point Samuel Richardson's novel *Sir Charles Grandison*, not an Austen text. That this was the same novel that the young Jane Austen transformed into a playlet for family amusement is of interest, though, for the abandon with which she excised, transposed, and revised characters and events from the original for her own artistic purposes. This piece of juvenilia may carry a message for purists about fidelity in film adaptations.

The first filmed imitation of a Jane Austen novel was the debut film of a remarkable filmmaker, Whit Stillman. With only three works to his credit (*Metropolitan*, 1990; *Barcelona*, 1994; and *The Last Days of Disco*, 1998), Stillman's *oeuvre* was deemed worthy of a celebratory volume of essays, *Doomed Bourgeois in Love: The Films of Whit Stillman*, edited by Mark C. Henrie (2002). *Metropolitan*, nominated for an Academy Award in 1990, is an imitation of *Mansfield Park*. Interestingly, Sue Parill includes *Clueless* in her extensive Austen filmography, but not *Metropolitan*, deeming its relationship to *MP* "too tenuous" (Parill. 9). Yet Stillman confirmed the connection to reporter Geoff Andrew, despite the absence of explicit references in his production notes: "You're right about the Austen thing. Not that I initially set out simply to transpose Austen to New York; that would never have worked. But I wanted to portray this group of wealthy socialites . . . and Austen was exactly the sort of writer they would read and enjoy. . . . The similarity with Austen lies . . . in the tone, point of view and irony" (24). Intriguingly, Sheila Benson of the *Los Angeles Times* has called Stillman "a pointillist, working in the tiniest, most meticulous of degrees" (F10). She might, as well, have cited two (famous) inches of ivory.

The setting and characters of *Metropolitan* can be roughly compared to the "three or four families in a country village" Jane Austen recommended to her niece as "just the thing" for an aspiring novelist. *Metropolitan* follows four Manhattan debutantes and their male escorts—named by Charlie, the philosopher among them, "The Sally Fowler Rat Pack," or SFRP—as they ritually attend coming out parties during the winter school break. Once upon a time these eight young people would, like Jane Austen's characters, have been called "the gentlefolk" (Henrie xi). Manhattan's Upper East Side is Stillman's village, a clearly delineated neighborhood whose denizens would all know that its firmly delineated western border is Central Park. They would also possess such arcane information as which side of Park Avenue is the "right" or better side. *Metropolitan's* charmed enclave is a little world unto itself, much as *Mansfield Park* is a microcosm of an exclusive, enclosed society. Charlie identifies the class to which the rat pack belongs as the "Urban Haute Bourgeoisie" or "UHB." Whit Stillman's film title was originally "Last of the Mohicans," a reference to "another disappearing tribe of somewhat anachronistic New Yorkers."

The outsider introduced into the SFRP circle—one candidate for the Fanny Price of the piece—is Tom Townsend, not a waif but an Ivy Leaguer. Like Fanny, he possesses some of the "right" antecedents: his college plus his

father's address and bank balance. But he lives (*shudder*) not at a "correct" Upper East Side address but in his divorced mother's small, cramped flat on the déclassé West Side (a possible allusion to the Prices' Portsmouth address?) Like Fanny, Tom is penniless; he is painfully superseded by his father's new, younger family. The Rat Pack ostensibly recruits him to fill the shortage of male escorts. Tom seems presentable enough, despite his incipient socialism and a raincoat he claims to prefer to any warm overcoat. Tom goes along because he's curious and lonely, appreciates the free food, and still has a crush on one Serena Slocum, who had previously dumped him but travels in the same circles as the SFRP.

Audrey Rouget, possibly the Edmund Bertram of the piece, but Wiltshire's candidate for Fanny, was Serena Slocum's college roommate. She is a devotee of Jane Austen's novels, particularly *Mansfield Park*. Note this explicit citation of Jane Austen, a hallmark of the filmed Austen imitation. Such a reference to the muse may be presented directly or indirectly, but it is always there. It is a kind of disclaimer that says, in effect: *Yes, I read, appreciate, and love Jane Austen. If you, a fellow enthusiast, can find some of her magic in my work, then we may share a dimension of the comedy that others may miss. But the work is still mine.* Audrey possesses a rare advantage over the other young people of both the film and the Austen novel: happily married parents. They provide good advice, support, and a sense of self-esteem when she worries about her flattish chest and her possibly protruding posterior. Others in the rat pack, like those of *Mansfield Park*, have parents who have absented themselves from their children's lives, and who have abandoned them to their own devices, peer pressures, and other dangerous influences as they approach adulthood, as R. V. Young demonstrated exhaustively in "From Mansfield to Manhattan: The Abandoned Generation of Manhattan" in *Doomed Bourgeois in Love* (49–62). Business called Sir Thomas Bertram away from his family, but in the new tale, divorce, disinterest and narcissism result in dangerous parental absenteeism.

The debutante balls of Manhattan are courtship rituals in the tradition of assemblies at Bath and private parties at Mansfield Park. The film, like the novel, is a "coming of age" fable. The balls are elitist gatherings, without democratic pretensions, like the social events of the Mansfield circle. The rat pack is part of a contrived society, ultimately controlled by adult social authorities for the benefit of their own class and purposes. These same authorities decide who and who may not be included in the circle according to a self-serving, arcane set of values. Only when they serve a need, such as

Fanny's usefulness to her aunt, or Tom's usefulness as an escort in a period of scarcity, are the outsiders admitted.

Like Fanny, Audrey is more intelligent and more virtuous than other members of her circle. She knows the value of conventions and discretion. She cautions against playing the potentially cruel and hurtful game of Truth just as Fanny cautions against *Lover's Vows*. When she succumbs to the majority and plays Truth, she has to reveal that she has loved Tom since she heard Serena Slocum reading his love letters aloud. Tom is Audrey's secret love as Edmund is Fanny's.

A titled rake named Von Sloneker, a Eurotrash version of Henry Crawford, tries to seduce Audrey. Her principles keep her safe, but Tom, unaware, enlists the hapless philosopher, Charlie (also hopelessly in love with Audrey), to be part of a rescue mission. By now Tom recognizes Audrey as a far superior object for his affections than the self-absorbed Serena. At the fadeout, the threesome is seen hitchhiking back to Manhattan together.

A case can be made for selecting Tom, Audrey, or both, as the Fanny reference points. Both are outsiders, though of different sorts. Tom never mentors Audrey as Edmund does Fanny; Audrey, like Fanny, is the moral compass of the work. Entertaining a gender switch does present intriguing new wrinkles in the Austenian "coming of age" fable: boys, as well as girls, can undergo the torments of adolescence and ostracism. Even an insider, like Audrey, may feel like an outsider by virtue of—for want of a better term—her *virtue* in an amoral society.

Stillman, like Austen, is a satirist, and he clearly retains affection for the society he scrutinizes even as he attacks it. If he is subversive—and he is—he is affectionately subversive. *Metropolitan* succeeded not because it was a clever Austen knockoff, but because the director-screenwriter shared with his muse—learned from her, if you will—an appreciation for the allure as well as the foibles and cruelties of the segment of society on which he focused his satiric eye. He portrays mating rituals of his enclave with Austenian panache and style. The movie was a good one; its Austen antecedents made it better.

Arguably the most commercially and critically popular "version" of a Jane Austen novel is Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*. Cher Horowitz is the handsome, clever, rich, and favorite Emma of many critics and movie fans despite the complete absence of English country dancing. Heckerling omitted Austen references in her production notes, but, having planted abundant clues, she cheerfully admitted her source once she was "found out." Heckerling never pretends expertise about the English country gentry or the Regency. She

does know about adolescents. She has an eye and ear for the significant and amusing details that characterize her particular “village,” Beverly Hills, California. Her “three or four families” are students at Beverly Hills High School and their “connections.” Her Mr. Knightley, an older, wiser, college man, is also Cher’s father’s stepson, clearly a “connection,” though not in line with the conventions that connected George and John Knightley to the Woodhouses.

Cher undertakes a “makeover” of the film’s Harriet Smith. The Churchill character is gay rather than dependent and deceptive. Two teachers parallel “poor Miss Taylor” and fortunate Mr. Weston. No valetudinarian, Cher’s single parent father suffers from serial failed marriages and work-a-holism, and may thus be considered comparably dysfunctional. Cher, an expert on trends, does express admiration for Jane Austen—that is, for the films, at least. But it is fidelity to her muse’s purposes, and the delicate tone and effect of her satire—more than plot elements, names of characters, or social situations—that qualify Heckerling’s film as a bonafide imitation.

*Clueless* is not a revolutionary broadside against California girls any more than an Austen novel is a revolutionary broadside (much as some critics might wish it would be) against the England that she saw with clarity, but also with love. Satire is by nature subversive, but Austen and Heckerling launch their attacks as subtle, oblique critiques of their characters’ values. Heckerling puts corrections into place for Cher alongside appreciation of her vivacity, her generosity, and her amazing vocabulary. Against our will, we come to love her pretty monster, Cher, much as we have come to love Austen’s pretty monster, Emma. For Cher has a good heart *and* good looks. Good intentions, as well as hubris, drive her “clueless” interference in the lives of the teenaged and adult members of her circle. She behaves with the sublime confidence and blissful ineptitude of the young when they are shamefully indulged and prematurely elevated to positions of power. Cher is as certain of her own cleverness as Emma, the heroine Jane Austen thought no one but she, herself, would like.

We come to love Emma—in spite of ourselves—because she improves herself, because she entertains us, *and* because Mr. Knightley loves her. Who better than he should appreciate her true worth? We love her because Jane Austen created her so very, very beautifully. So it goes with handsome, clever, and rich girls with good hearts: We wish them well once we get over the impulse to strangle them.

Heckerling and Stillman share with Jane Austen the talent for combining satiric mischief with appreciation of enduring social values and insight

into human psychology. If they have not produced works to equal Austen's, their films surely have artistic merit—the “magic, baby.” Were Jane Austen to attend a screening of *Metropolitan* or *Clueless*, she might find herself momentarily disoriented, but they might very well remind her of Mr. Huxley, who turned a story of hers into an MGM movie years ago.

Bridget Jones is no Elizabeth Bennet on paper or on film, even if Colin “Darcy” Firth did play Mark Darcy, the human rights lawyer presented as her putative soul mate and potential passport to the uppermost echelons of contemporary London's meritocracy, as elitist a class as the Regency gentry. Helen Fielding, who wrote the novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the film of the same name, cheerfully admitted in various interviews that she filched the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* because its marketability had been well proven over the preceding two centuries and she doubted if Jane Austen would mind. Buoyed by her success, Fielding stole “shamelessly” from *Persuasion* for her next book, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. Wiltshire thought Fielding's book, written as a diary, lacked the “tautness of structure” found in Austen's novels (139). Fielding's prose, facile and funny, reflects her background as a newspaper columnist. The film, which Wiltshire apparently did not see before he published *Recreating Jane Austen*, excised much of the diary and was consequently more focused.

Elizabeth Bennet, despite her lack of fortune and relatively modest social standing, is a superior individual possessed of a delicately tuned moral code, a fine intelligence, a well-honed wit, and exemplary manners. If her marital prospects are limited, her intellectual horizons are wide. Her search is not for personal identity but for true love with a moral and intellectual equal who will appreciate her value. She does not have a weight problem. Nor does she have a drinking problem. Sexual promiscuity is not one of her personal “issues.” Bridget Jones suffers all three.

Like Elizabeth's, Bridget's social standing is more than common, but less than superior. Her parents, like Elizabeth's, are mismatched. Despite her educational shortcomings, Bridget is familiar with Jane Austen—at least she has seen and swooned over Colin Firth as Darcy. When we first meet Bridget, she is an assistant to Daniel, a lecherous, lying Wickham-esque publisher (played by Hugh Grant, whose personal scandals with Divine Brown added piquancy to the casting mix). Like Wickham, Daniel transfers his own sins onto the soul and reputation of his rival. Later, Bridget becomes a television journalist. Neither job requires literary or journalistic skills, although spunk and improvisational aptitude do count. Despite battles with body, booze, and

boys, Bridget exhibits abundant appeal, especially sex appeal. Like Lizzie, Emma, and Cher, she has a good heart. Given the mores and manners of her time, place, and class, she figures as a relatively moral individual. A latent, unarticulated moral code seems to be emerging in her. Her capacity to make moral distinctions develops as we get to know her and she gets to know herself. Neither parents nor a religious or social code fosters Bridget's moral development, which seems to arise intuitively, but it does offer hope for her. Fortunately, her Darcy, somehow discerning that there is more to her than youthful vivacity, a raging libido, and a survival instinct, likes her as she is, and says so.

Only through a suitable marriage can Elizabeth Bennet exit the confines of a mind-numbing family life. Bridget's society and family offer few fixed anchors and a dizzying array of possibilities. They, like Elizabeth's family and circle, press her to find a mate. Elizabeth understands very well where she fits; Bridget is, in a word, clueless.

Fielding's story is about the moral education and emerging self-realization of a young woman of her own time and place. Like Wiltshire, I admire Fielding for not being "prone to the fantasy of inhabiting Jane Austen's mind or imagination." Like Austen's own handling of earlier authors, including Shakespeare, he says admiringly, Fielding's two Jones novels are "expressions of affectionate authorial consanguinity, having fun with and even recreating, Jane Austen" (139).

*You've Got Mail* (1998) was identified by co-writer/director Nora Ephron in production notes as a revival of *The Shop Around the Corner*, the classic 1940 Ernst Lubitsch comedy based on Miklos Laszlo's play *Parfumerie*. While *You've Got Mail* certainly pays homage to that work, I believe a good case can be made for it, as well, as an imitation of *P&P*. Wiltshire mentions the film's references to Austen only in passing as "borrowings" he finds "entertaining, unpretentious, and part of an authentic contemporary context in which lots of other amusing things occur" (139). Ephron may have decided not to draw the Austen connection because of Bridget Jones, or because she sensed Austen Mania ebbing. With the *Shop* reference, and Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan fresh from success in *Sleepless in Seattle*, mentioning more antecedents might have seemed like overkill. Or perhaps she and her sister and co-writer, Delia, left it for us to discover.

I found myself laughing at places in that film when no one else in the audience laughed. *The Shop Around the Corner* follows an epistolary romance between two clerks who work together daily, cordially dislike each other, and

do not recognize each other in their letters. The electronic correspondence between the principals in *You've Got Mail* mirrors this plot element of the play, but not much more, as the Ephrons concede in production notes. The more I watched, the more reference points to *P&P* I identified. With this insight, it became a much cleverer, edgier, and more slyly subversive film than the sweet-surfaced romantic comedy it first seemed to be.

Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) is proprietor of The Shop Around the Corner, a charming, old-fashioned specialty children's bookstore. As the film opens in outer (and cyber) space and pans in on her "village," Manhattan's Upper West Side, we are meant to understand it as a microcosm for something larger. The store, the source of Kathleen's modest, sinking fortune, as well as a legacy from her mother, is an endearing relic of a bygone business era, a small independent bookstore run by people who know and love every volume, but don't discount. Kathleen is surrounded by a surrogate family of liberal eccentrics. Her boyfriend is a liberal Luddite, a crusading columnist for an alternative newspaper who could be Woody Allen's cousin. (He ultimately flips for a fawning TV talk show hostess.) Joe Fox (Tom Hanks), the film's Darcy surrogate, is CEO of the Fox Superstores, his (dysfunctional) family's thriving business. The Foxes market books not reverentially but as commodities. Joe, whose business bible is *The Godfather*, wants from the get-go to put Kathleen and her shop out of business.

Unbeknownst to Joe at first, Kathleen is also "Shopgirl." As "NY 152," his e-mail handle, he has been unknowingly e-mailing his way into her affections. He says, for example, rather endearingly, that he would like to send her a bouquet of sharpened pencils as autumn comes to New York. Joe discovers who Shopgirl is before she learns his identity, and therein lies the dramatic tension. They have met and offended each other as themselves—as business rivals, proud of their personal heritage and prejudiced against each other's. Once Joe learns the error of his ways—his personal ways, not his business tactics—he must overcome *his* pride and *her* prejudice to earn his way into her affections as himself, Joe Fox, book-selling, iconoclastic multimillionaire, and ruthless, but lovable capitalist entrepreneur. He's no Woody Allen.

When Shopgirl agrees to meet NY152, she carries a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. Yes, Kathleen Kelly reads Jane Austen. Later, Joe puzzles over Mr. Darcy just as he is working his way out of the same kind of romantic quagmire. There is, for example, the book party at which Joe tries to avoid Kathleen. He arrogantly shovels all the caviar garnish from a platter onto his plate. She accuses him of the breach of etiquette and also of spying on her. He belit-

tles her business as “old fashioned, cutesy and sentimental,” paltry competition, clearly not in his class at all. The Meryton Assembly?

Like Darcy, Joe has family connections as peculiar and foolish as Elizabeth’s. His aunt is the seven-year-old daughter of his grandfather, who sings as badly as Mary Bennet does. His half brother, his father’s latest son, is only four. If there is no Lady Catherine de Bourgh among them, there is dysfunction enough.

And Kathleen’s intimates sing their Christmas carols just as far off-key.

Once Joe is victorious and *The Shop Around the Corner* is about to close, Kathleen finally steps into the Fox superstore—Joe’s estate. Her visit is a revelation. Reading children sprawl comfortably among the endless shelves of books. “To be mistress of this would be. . . .”

Ultimately, Joe decides to woo Kathleen as himself, without revealing his electronic identity. The requisite magic develops between them, but Kathleen, enamoured of NY 152, cannot yet commit herself. So, Joe finally arranges for *Shopgirl* and NY 152 to meet in a beautiful garden in Riverside Park (another Pemberley). Joe’s faithful companion is a beautiful Golden Retriever named Brinkley. You will recall that Mr. Darcy, in the 1979 BBC *P&P*, also owned a very handsome dog. Kathleen meets Joe for coffee before the rendezvous. She is visibly conflicted as she is about to meet NY 152 at last, but has now developed tender feelings for Joe, himself.

If I were showing film bits, I would now screen the scene from the 1979 *P&P* when Elizabeth Garvey, as Elizabeth, walks in the garden of Pemberley believing Darcy to be away for another day. A handsome dog springs around the corner of the house. Elizabeth, startled and embarrassed, realizes his master will surely follow him right around that corner. In Riverside Park, Joe’s dog comes bounding around a corner. His master’s voice is heard calling, “Brinkley! Brinkley!” Around the same corner comes Tom Hanks, of course. Meg Ryan’s eyes widen in recognition. The visual pun is complete. This Pemberley also works its magic. I believe there’s a clincher here as well as a clinch. “Over the Rainbow” is heard on the soundtrack, then “I’m So Glad It Was You.” The camera recedes back up into the clear blue sky from whence it descended in the film’s opening seconds.

This sweet film, which made its makers tons of money, contains a sly streak of subversiveness that makes it something more. It dares to suggest that an unapologetic capitalist entrepreneur, who may even vote Republican, could be Mr. Right for a folk heroine of Manhattan’s ultraliberal West Side—a place where anyone tempted to pull a lever to vote for a candidate other than

a liberal must be stricken with immediate paralysis. And where heartless Barnes and Noble superstores draw crowds of readers (and cappuccino drinkers) to buy the same books sold at independents, but discounted. Even if character cannot always trump class, chemistry may. To send such a message under cover of a romantic comedy takes a measure of satiric courage not unlike Jane Austen's in commenting, in her way, about her world and its inhabitants.

What is next? A petition is circulating to revive the Andrew Davies *NA* film project. "Lady Susan" as a film noir? We shall see.

#### NOTE

1. John Wiltshire, Deborah Kaplan, Jan Fergus, Linda Troost et al., Paula Schwartz, and Sue Parrill, among others, have examined the Austen films. John Wiltshire in *Recreating Jane Austen* suggests many conclusions about the Austen films that are close to mine. Wiltshire's book contains an incomplete credit citation: both Nora Ephron and her sister Delia Ephron wrote the screenplay for *You've Got Mail*. Wiltshire had not seen *Bridget Jones's Diary* when he published. Re: Whit Stillman's *Metropolitan*: I have considered several implications that Wiltshire did not entertain. *Metropolitan*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *You've Got Mail* are not included in Sue Parrill's extensive filmography.

For a complete filmography see <<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Set/2484/ob-server.html>>

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