Austen Novels and Austen Films: Incompatible Worlds?

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I was amused to hear that Jane Austen was being taught as a “Neglected Topic” this year at a prominent graduate program in English literature, and that a petition had been necessary to see that the course ran in spite of an enrollment shortfall. Austen, possibly the greatest novelist in the language, has had a large general readership over the years and been neglected only in English departments. Recent dramatic productions again show Austen’s popular appeal. And yet, with one exception, these productions make certain elemental changes in the material the nature of which indicates that aspects of Austen are perceived as unsuited to the tastes of the age even outside of English departments.

In the novel Sense and Sensibility, Elinor points out to Marianne that “the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety” (68). The disregard for propriety shown by Marianne and Willoughby in their pursuit of romantic pleasure, in scene after scene in the novel, is integrally connected with their cruelty and unfairness in judging others and their heedlessness of the pain and inconvenience they cause those around them. This social context for their behavior (behavior that is romantic both in the common sense and Romantic in reflecting a literary alignment) is crucial.

The novel, unlike the movie, strengthens the sense of a wider field of play by presenting characters whose language and behavior are not always—or ever—centered on love stories. The main problem with the excessive individualism embraced by Marianne is not that it robs those who live by it of rational pleasure and peace of mind, even unto “self-destruction,” as Marianne herself calls it (345). It does that, but by itself such is an argument to and from individualism. And we are certainly not to disapprove of Marianne’s behavior because it violates merely conventional social rules. Again, that rather contributes to the behavior’s seductive appeal, as Austen makes clear. In its focus on Marianne’s broken heart and resulting illness, the film emphasizes Romantic individualism over the wider, and most important results of the character’s defiant selfishness: she causes pain ranging in intensity from mild but continual embarrassment to piercing grief to those whose welfare should be paramount with her.

Jane Austen recognizes the irresistible appeal of the Romantic, particularly as it is manifested in a disregard for societal rules in pursuit of the heart’s desire. A Romantic is swallowed up by passion, and “cannot help” acting on his feelings. Of Marianne the narrator of the novel says: “She was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself” (82). Criticism of Marianne’s wilfulness is softened, perhaps in deference to an audience assumed to believe that when the heart wants what it wants, there is no higher rule. This alteration is unfortunate not because we lose a moral lesson but because most of the best humor in the story is thereby lost. From her literary beginnings, from parodies of the Sentimental and Gothic novels of her youth to continual jokes at the expense of the contemporary Romantic literature of her adulthood, Austen skewered—hilariously—the speech and behavior of the self-obsessed. Romantic individualism is just one form of self-obsession, albeit the most insidiously attractive one, even to Austen. Self-command and a sense of propriety are in themselves not enough to compose an attractive alternative: they must be coupled with a quick mind and curling golden hair, a sense of humor, good manners and a strong will, as they are in Elinor, Elizabeth Bennet (Pride and Prejudice), Anne Elliot (Persuasion), et al., but they are the sine qua non in Austen’s world.

The film Sense and Sensibility visually favors Marianne and Willoughby, by playing up—perhaps in spite of itself—the Romanticism that the novel relentlessly mocks. Willoughby first appears as a dark, mysterious figure in the storm, evoking terror for a moment on his rearing horse. (“A gentleman carrying a gun, with two pointers playing around him, was passing up the hill and within a few yards of Marianne, when her accident happened. He put down his gun and ran to her assistance” [42].) Willoughby is intended by Austen to be something of a cliché, and the film audience does laugh at the recognition of this fact during the following scene, where Marianne’s response to him is equally conventional. But the Romantic images of Willoughby as Byronic Hero—handsome, charming, dangerous—are not as consistently or effectively undercut as in the novel. Austen’s primary effects are comic, at the expense of Romantic convention and our own susceptibility to it. The balance in the film tips in the other direction. Elinor is meant to be a mere two years older than the admittedly more beautiful Marianne. In the film the latter’s bloom and curling golden hair give her a greater visual edge than she should have. The film, like the book, associates Marianne with the sublime natural world but, again, where Austen makes jokes about the Romantic’s love of dead leaves and gnarled trees, the film focuses rather on the visual splendor of wild, dangerous nature in contrast to all that repressive civilization. In a climactic scene in the movie, Marianne, after reciting Shakespeare, swoons and falls senseless on the hill overlooking Willoughby’s estate during a violent storm. This scene does not occur in the novel (Combe Magna is nearly 30 miles away), and the unironic grandeur of its treatment of Romantic excess is more in keeping with, say, the Brontës than Austen. (Jane Eyre’s Mr. Rochester does make his appearance on a horse.) Combe Magna presents a delightfully Gothic picture, and so does Cleveland, the house where Marianne’s sickbed scene takes place. The gray stone, dark wood panels, flickering candles, white nightgown, unbound hair, deathly fever—the Gothic iconography contributes to making Marianne’s Romanticism so much more interesting—and, let’s face it, more appealing—than Elinor’s more Augustan wit and restraint, whose rewards are to be found in language, not images. (The film also romanticizes childhood in the figure of Margaret, who is an utterly unappealing character in the book.)
Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. She would have been ashamed to look her family in the face the next morning, had she not risen from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it. But the feelings which made such a composure a disgrace, left her in no danger of incurring it. She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it. She got up with a headache, and was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempts at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough!

When breakfast was over she walked out by herself, and wandered above the village of Allenham, indulging the recollection of past enjoyment and crying over the present reverse for the chief of the morning.

The evening passed off in the equal indulgence of feeling. She played over every favourite song that she had been used to play to Willoughby, every air in which their voices had been oftentimes joined, and sat at the instrument gazing on every line of music that he had written out for her, till her heart was so heavy that no farther sadness could be gained; and this nourishment of grief was every day applied. She spent whole hours at the pianoforte alternately singing and crying; her voice often totally suspended by her tears. In books too, as well as in music, she courted the misery which a contrast between past and present was certain of giving. She read nothing but what they had been used to read together. (83)

To be fair, the film sometimes tries to strike this note of irony, but Romanticism wins out. The courting of misery in this systematic and prolonged way receives an ironic treatment that is so funny because of its matter-of-fact tone. The perverse is presented as though it were the normal—which, to a Romantic sensibility like Marianne’s, it is. In contrast, Elinor’s concealment of her misery is deliberate, not merely the result of natural reserve. She chooses not to give pain to her mother and sisters while Marianne appears unaware that she has a choice.

Television advertisements for the film call it “Jane Austen’s most impassioned love story”; print ads quote the reviews: “Easily the Year’s Most Romantic Picture.” But the “passion” of Marianne and Willoughby is presented invariably to be deflated by Austen, and the romance of Elinor and Edward is described with delightful wryness: “they were neither of them quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a-year would supply them with the comforts of life” (369). On a similar note, an ad for Pride and Prejudice that appears in The New Yorker invited us to “Experience the passion of Jane Austen’s classic comedy of manners.” Were they afraid that an invitation to experience the wit of one of the great English comedies would attract no viewers, when wit is so much rarer than passion in art and life? Every moron can be passionate.

Having endured six hours of this production of Pride and Prejudice, however, I know that the copywriter was referring not to any passion actually in the novel, but rather to the improvements the writers made by importing the passion that belongs in the story but Jane Austen left out, that silly old thing. According to Sue Birtwistle, the producer, “the real subjects of the novel . . . [are] sex and money”—emphasis on the repressed and “smoldering” sex, cold showers (well, baths) and all (Grimes 3).

When my friend Judy called while I was watching Pride and Prejudice I said I would call her back during the commercial. She had forgotten Pride and Prejudice was on and went to watch it. When I called her at the break, she pleaded, “Can’t we wait until the show comes back on?” This production manages, somehow, to get everything wrong. Along with the superadded passion comes a gravitas (heard in the very intonation of the title at every break when the production aired on A&E) that is absolutely unsuited to a novel Austen herself called “light, and bright, and sparkling” (Letters, 299. To Cassandra, Feb. 4, 1813). Jennifer Ehle, who plays Elizabeth, went to the Meryl Streep school of mannered overacting, biting her lips, casting her eyes about meaningfully, doing bits of business with her hands. Even the role of Jane, played in the Hollywood version (which had its flaws but at least got the casting right) by lovely Maureen O’Sullivan, is oddly cast. I wouldn’t say Susan Harker “could benchpress Bingley” as Judy delicately put it, but I did find her graceless and plain—although extraordinary beauty is the character’s primary attribute and everyone in the production, as in the book, keeps referring to it. Jane is also meant to be sweet-tempered; Harker simpers and looks blank. In another departure, Mr. Collins is not allowed to let his idiotic speech supply the humor, as in the novel, but must improve Austen with physical comedy. I watched this program and marvelled at how it had managed to make Pride and Prejudice so dreary, a thing I couldn’t have imagined possible. There are some unintentional laughs, for example when Darcy appears in Elizabeth’s mirror, like an apparition from A Christmas Carol. The things passion will conjure up.

Of course a dramatic production will necessarily differ from a book, but here there is no attempt to retain the spirit of the original. Everything is dumbed down and coarsened. After Bingley has hurt and humiliated Jane by leaving Longbourn, this Elizabeth urges her to chase him to London. As if. The false Elizabeth, in reference to Wickham’s mercenary engagement to marry Miss King, speaks not to her aunt but to Wickham himself when she notes wickedly that “handsome young men must have something to live on, as well as the plain” (150). During the visit to Hunsford, we are not allowed to gather how Charlotte copes with having Mr. Collins as a husband, but must have the answers laid out in the clearest terms. Lest we miss Elizabeth’s change of heart concerning Wickham, she must soliloquize, “Go, go. I would not wish you back again.” All of the many alterations and additions to the original are in the service of exposition and clarity—and, of course, what is most vulgarly and ludicrously “exposed” is all that Romantic passion.

Unlike this production of Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility is an entertaining film, often funny, but the humor is much broader than in the novel. Humor in Austen’s writing is a matter of verbal style. The absence of the narrative voice is a decided and largely unavoidable deficit when the novels are translated to film, and we miss for example these lines after Edward Ferrars has walked in on Lucy, the woman to whom he is secretly engaged, and Elinor, the woman he loves, and the three have just been joined by Marianne, who pointedly says:

“I think, Elinor ... we must employ Edward to take care of us in our return to Barton. In a week or two, I suppose, we shall be going; and I trust, Edward will not be very unwilling to accept the charge.”
Poor Edward muttered something, but what it was, nobody knew, not even himself. But Marianne, who saw his agitation, and could easily trace it to whatever cause best pleased herself, was perfectly satisfied and soon talked of something else.

“We spent such a day, Edward, in Harley-street yesterday! So dull, so wretchedly dull!—But I have much to say to you on that head, which cannot be said now.”

And with admirable discretion did she defer the assurance of her finding their mutual relatives more disagreeable than ever, and of her being particularly disgusted with his mother, till they were more in private. (243)

The film nicely captures what is funny in the situation, but the greater humor in the narrative voice—again, mostly at Marianne’s expense—is lost.

Certain characters in Austen echo the narrator’s witty, ironic voice: Elizabeth Bennet and her father; Emma, Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey; et al.* But there is another kind of humor in Austen, where the characters are simply allowed to speak self-centered, obsessive nonsense in contrast to the standard of reason, wit, elegance and variety set by the novel itself. These characters typically go on at length and repeatedly throughout the novels, talking on matters not directly concerned with the main storyline. Such a form of presentation—static, “repetitive”—does not lend itself to straightforward narrative. It is patently verbal, not visual, not obviously filmic. In the novel *Sense and Sensibility,* the dialogue between John Dashwood and his wife Fanny at the beginning is developed at such great length that exposition is suspended, and the absurd speech of minor characters is presented without concern for forward movement,—i.e., for the plot. The film limits itself to snippets of the dialogue and we get one aspect of the joke: how John Dashwood rationalizes is way out of the annuity. But the original length of the dialogue is crucial to the full effect of Austen’s comic art.

Because I say that Jane Austen is not a Romantic novelist like Emily Brontë or Mary Shelley (whose stories improve with dramatic production because where the verbal style ranges from indifferent to abominable there is little of value lost in the translation from words to pictures) let it not be thought that I am suggesting she is a moralist, teaching her audience about the evils of snobbery, vanity, Romanticism, duplicity, etc., in the service of social change. Rather, her prose assumes an agreement about such things. The comic effects of her novels depend upon and prove this commonality. Having taught Austen to hundreds of New Jersey college students from various middle-class backgrounds, I can state as a fact that our language will have to change much more much than it has in two hundred years before these students, excepting the brain-dead and comatose, will fail to get Jane Austen. And they hear the jokes with no more of a context than the books themselves and a shared language. The humor does not have to be explained. Of recent Austen dramatizations, only *Persuasion* recognizes this and pays the audience the compliment of never playing down to them. The production assumes that their opinion is Anne Elliot’s: “My idea of good company ... is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation; that is what I call good company” (150).

*Persuasion,* with one or two exceptions such as a kiss on a public Bath street, has made no concessions to (perceived) contemporary taste with the aim of increasing its appeal, and is therefore by far the most appealing of the lot. *Persuasion* takes chances by allowing the audience to get the story—and particularly the jokes—without insisting on broadcasting (and thereby changing) them. By remaining close to Austen in terms of plot, language, and spirit, *Persuasion* ends up the funniest of the productions, although the book certainly does not hold that honor among the novels.

The reader of the novels hears the joke when language departs from the reason and wit of the clever and well-informed primarily in the speech of those characters with a single-minded focus, a monomania, but also of those more generally sympathetic, like Charles Musgrove and his parents. As always, there is a great deal of speech unrelated to the love plot. Mary Musgrove is obsessed with her ill-usage and Sir Walter Elliot with personal appearance. Captain Benwick’s constant talk of Romantic literature has a certain thematic connection with Anne’s problem but it is also an instance of the more general foolishness. This production of *Persuasion,* by presenting the speech of these characters deadpan, with no special emphasis, no elbows in the ribs, so to speak, comes closest to Austen’s own tone.

The balance between the melancholy and the comic is what makes the film, like the book, so lovely and pleasing. It is sometimes held to be Austen’s Romantic novel, but Marianne’s brand of conventional Romanticism finds its champion in Captain Benwick, not Anne Elliot, and while Romanticism’s influence on Anne is potent, it is as much the object of Austen’s irony as ever. Austen shows that even a sensible, principled character like Anne can retain an affection for a man she has not seen in eight years, but that power of retention can be traced to quite ordinary circumstances: there was “[n]o second attachment, the only thoroughly natural, happy, and sufficient cure” (28). Anne is also convinced of Frederick Wentworth’s continued interest in her. He is not dead, like Fanny Harville, or a base betrayer, like Willoughby. Their mutual attraction is grounded in a similarity of principle and taste, in mutual respect and physical attraction. Most importantly, her love is not fancied the excuse for a ridiculous, showy and anti-social selfishness, the “ruling principle” of Willoughby’s conventional Romantic behavior, in Elinor’s term (351). Anne, like Elinor and unlike the typical Romantic, displays grace under pressure, and as Elinor is the “comforter of others in her own distresses, no less than in theirs,” so too is Anne (261). No conventionally Romantic love story pierces the heart as *Persuasion* does precisely because there is no histrionic exaggeration, no fanfare. But Austen performs a brilliant balancing act even here, pulling us up, kidding us out of every indulgence in Romanticism when it threatens to capsize the boat. Even here, her comic sensibility dominates.

Speaking of boats: *Persuasion* ends with the image of Anne Elliot on a ship, a picture that struck me as comical in being so unlike Austen. But it is better than the weddings that end the other productions with a sentimental flourish that is even less like her. Even *Clueless* has its teen-aged heroine catching the bride’s bouquet and getting kissed. That movie’s forebear, *Emma,* ends with a wedding, of course, but the last few paragraphs of the book delight not in the passion of the occasion but the comedy. Mr. Woodhouse is allowed center stage with all his ludicrous concerns: he is
induced to consent to his daughter's wedding only after "Mrs. Weston's poultry-house [is] robbed one night of all her turkies" and he sees the value of having a big, strong son-in-law in the house (483). In the last bit of dialogue in the book and the penultimate sentence, Mrs. Elton is allowed to describe Emma's wedding, and in so doing circles nonsensically yet again around her obsessions. The double wedding that ends the television production of Pride and Prejudice with unabashed sentimentality is narrated this way in the novel: "Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters" (385). Elinor and Marianne end up with husbands, naturally, but Romanticism is again deflated by numerous ironical remarks such as this wrap-up on Willoughby:

that he was forever inconsolable, that he fled from society, or contracted an habitual gloom of temper, or died of a broken heart, must not be depended upon—for he did neither. He lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself. His wife was not always out of humour, nor his home always uncomfortable; and in his breed of horses and dogs, and in sporting of every kind, he found no inconsiderable degree of domestic felicity. (379)

The film, showing Willoughby watching the wedding of Marianne and Colonel Brandon from a distance, alone, rather implies that Willoughby is positioned outside of society, inconsolable. (And the level-headed Brandon himself had to be visually Romanticized during Marianne's illness—agonizing in white shirtsleeves, thundering off on a galloping horse—before he could be deemed suitable to marry Marianne.) In fact, most of the last chapter of Sense and Sensibility sees Austen go off on a hilarious, almost Swiftian riff primarily about Mrs. Ferrars, Robert, and Lucy—again, minor characters only tangentially related to the love stories who take center stage by virtue of their excellence as comic material.

The misconception that Austen is a Romantic or even just a writer of romances in the less specific literary sense is pervasive. In a recent article in The New York Times Magazine, John Tierney discusses the literary conventions of Silhouette and Harlequin romance novels as "Jane Austen's basic formula":

In the female fantasy, the hero is always a one-woman man. Like Mr. Darcy, he may take a while to realize he's in love, but once smitten he remains faithful. (It's especially appealing if his devotion, like Heathcliff's, persists even while the woman is foolishly occupied with another man.) The novel ends with the couple happily committed to eternal monogamy.

Well, yes, Austen's novels, being comedies, end with weddings, as did Shakespeare's comedies. That convention long predates Austen. But to discuss Heathcliff in the same breath as Darcy as though he were an Austen hero (Emily Brontë is never mentioned) is, again, to get it exactly wrong. Heathcliff is the antithesis of the Austenian hero—selfish, uncivilized—in fact, demented. The man hangs puppies just for fun! The kind devotion that persists not only while its object is married to another but at a feverishly violent pitch for twenty years after her death is precisely the Romantic hokum Austen makes us laugh at. Had she lived to read it, Austen would have devoured Wuthering Heights all the while howling at the absurdity of the characters, the dialogue, and the storyline. In fact, Austen's Northanger Abbey—a pricelessly funny book—gets great mileage out of a young girl's taste for similarly spooky, silly literature. Apart from their intrinsic value, there is an additional benefit to all these productions in that they are apparently driving people to read the books. Readers of Austen will have a rather different—and vastly superior—experience discovering (and rediscovering) that Austen wrote not romances but comedies that sometimes take as their subject Romantic passion, sometimes other things, but always depend for their effects on our ability to hear the different ways of speaking in voices that not only tell but are themselves the stories.

WORKS CITED


The fact that Austen wrote only six novels (along with a few other incomplete works) makes the large body of films based on her writing all the more impressive. Clearly, there’s something about her work that clicks with audiences. Where would modern rom-coms be without it? Think of our world without “Sleepless in Seattle,” “Notting Hill” or “When Harry Met Sally,” to name a few of my favorites of this genre. Before we begin with the list, there are a few films not based on Jane Austen’s novels that use her or her work as the basis for a story and the best of these deserve Honorable Mention. For example, “Lost in Austen” takes “Pride and Prejudice” and combines it with a time-traveling modern-day gal who gets transported to 19th century England and is plopped directly into the novel.