Vivat Jane Austen!

WHY, I once asked students, do you think you should in the twenty-first century be reading *Pride and Prejudice*, first published in 1813? Too often, the exam answers I’d read seemed to suggest there would be very high-minded replies to such a question, replies to do with Jane Austen’s moral insights, the wisdom of choosing marriage partners with care, and the like. Nothing much wrong with that certainly, but it does seem to me that there are few novels which less deserve the stultifying reverence of the ‘great classic’ treatment – and that might apply to filmmakers as well as students.

Perhaps it doesn’t sound serious enough to come right out and say that this novel is enormous fun, that one might value it because it is wonderfully witty and entertaining as it goes about its more serious business. There is razor sharpness about Austen’s wit that is equalled in English literature, in my view, only by the great twentieth-century novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett, but you don’t find Dame Ivy cropping up on Year 12 syllabuses or on multiplex screens or lounge-room plasmas, do you? The next point to be made about *Pride and Prejudice*, then, to account for its enduring popularity (not just the niche market there might be for Compton-Burnett), is its...
sheer accessibility. Of all the famous nineteenth-century novels, it may be true to say, none makes so immediate an impact, none so easily delights with its sustained wit at the same time as it renders exactly the emotional lives of its characters. We shouldn’t assume that what is amusing or easily entertaining is a lesser piece of work than a novel more obviously serious in its approach or one that is more obviously tackling Major Issues. 

Pride and Prejudice is basically serious in its approach, and it is concerned with major issues, but its being so doesn’t make it less immense fun, and its being immense fun doesn’t make it less serious. I’d go further and say that all the best comedy is serious.

Mind you, Austen herself may be partly to blame for confusing solemnity and seriousness in regard to this novel when she mischievously wrote: ‘The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had, if not, of solemn, specious nonsense.’ It is light, bright and sparkling but the notion that it ‘wants shade’, that it is short on serious matters, is surely ironic. We don’t need an explicit commentary ‘of sense’, let alone ‘solemn, specious nonsense’, to make us feel that important things are going on in it; in fact, some of the most important things that can go on in a novel.

In order to see how the latest adaptors of this most popular novel have gone about their work, let us look briefly at what some of these ‘important things’ are and how the novel presents them. This is a novel about money and marriage, about why people marry each other, and the factors, frequently economic, which complicate progress towards marriage and make for difficulty within it. For Austen, while it may be wrong to marry for money, it is foolish to marry without it. But in spite of the unsatisfactory marriage with which the novel opens (Mr and Mrs Bennet’s) and the two unwise ones that occur in the course of the book (Lydia and Wickham’s and Charlotte and Collins’s), there is never any doubt here (or in any of Austen’s novels) that marriage is the desirable end, that it constitutes an arrangement in which people can find fulfilment. Virtually everything of significance that happens in Pride and Prejudice has to do with marriages, and it is Elizabeth and Darcy’s unsteady movement towards marriage which provides the novel’s central narrative line, a ‘line’ introduced in the brilliant opening chapter.
The famous first sentence of this opening chapter, ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife’, introduces the twin ideas of marriage and money, and their connection, which will underlie the whole novel. There is irony in the word ‘must’ but Austen is also unflinching about the connection: whatever single men of ‘good fortune’ might have in mind, there is not much alternative for single young women of a certain class and of limited means. If the Bennets’ marriage – of an intelligent man to a silly wife – sets up a negative standard of reference, every other pairing, interesting in their own right, in fact acquire their real importance necessary to maintain the novel’s emotional momentum. All these arrivals and departures have the effect of expanding the narrative, of giving it a richer texture, chiefly because of how they bear on the novel’s preoccupations with marriage and money.

**On screens large and small**

Given the novel’s popularity, it is perhaps surprising that it was only once in the twentieth century adapted to the screen. This was Robert Z. Leonard’s handsome MGM version of 1940, starring Greer Garson, then at the start of her serious wartime fame, as Elizabeth, and Laurence Olivier, already famous on stage and making headway on screen as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (William Wyler, 1939), as Darcy. Like all MGM productions of the period, and especially its literary adaptations, this is a high-gloss affair, in which everyone always appears immaculate. Though it works, more or less, as a romantic comedy (described by the *New York Times* as ‘a merry manhunt’), it broadens much of the comedy, turning Mrs Bennet, Collins and Lady Catherine into mere caricatures. It also sentimentalizes Austen: ‘I can still dream,’ purrs Jane wistfully, when she thinks she’s lost Bingley, and at the end Lady Catherine is cast as an unlikely fairy-godmother who brings Darcy and Elizabeth together. I don’t want to suggest that the film fails because it is not being ‘true’ to Jane Austen, only that I think it works on a less rigorous, less stimulating level, that it settles for the conventional Hollywood manoeuvres, and that, as a romantic comedy, it isn’t in the same class as several others of its period, such as *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937) or *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940).

Until 2003, this was the only film version of *Pride and Prejudice*, but there have been six television versions: in 1938, 1952 (with Peter Cushing, later to be famous as a Hammer horror star, as Darcy), 1958, 1967 (with Australian Lewis Fander as Darcy), 1980 and, most famously, 1995. Only the latter two are currently available on DVD or video. From the 1980 version, Elizabeth Garvie’s sprightly Elizabeth Bennet and Moray Watson’s sturdy Mr Bennet, less cruel than Jane Austen’s but possibly more believable, stay in the mind, but it is the 1995 miniseries that any new film will be measured against. The six episodes of this TV adaptation were greeted with a reverence not altogether deserved.
in my view. You could see why Austen pur-
ist would approve, as it follows the book
with the assiduity of someone painting by
numbers. To change metaphors, as I’ve
said elsewhere, ‘it seemed to me the work
of an industrious bricklayer rather than an
architect, with one event from the novel re-
morelessly following another, without any
sense of shape or structuring, without any
apparent point of view on its material’. It
is no doubt carefully researched as to pe-
riod authenticity, but it seemed to have
nothing to say dramatically about its
material, except perhaps that sexual attrac-
tion was more potent than class or wealth –
and we knew that if we’d read the nov-
el, possibly even if we hadn’t. It was as if
the Jane Austen Society was breathing
down its neck, waiting to seize on any di-
vergences from the original.

Oh, I forgot to mention in the preceding
paragraph that this is the version in which
Colin Firth emerged from a cooling dip in
Pemberley’s river and became an instant
sex symbol. Firth is actually a considera-
brle actor and deserves to be remembered
for more than his torso clinging to a wet
shirt; his playing of another Darcy, Bridg-
et Jones’s light-o’-love in two recent mov-
ies, ought to have been seen as a parod-
ic comment on his impromptu swim, but
try telling that to his legion of female fans.
In fact, Darcy has always attracted impos-
ing performances, and I shall later make
claims for the newest incarnation of this
role of the rich, proud, sexily seething aris-
tocrat.

The big-screen drought of adaptations of
this classic tale of love thwarted and fi-
antly triumphant was broken in 2003, with
a ‘latter-day’ (as the US posters appar-
ently, and wittily, announced) version that
seems to have been Mormon-financed in
Utah, and which, as far as I can find, has
had only very limited screenings in the US
and Thailand, and on Hungarian TV. 2005,
though, saw the Australian release of two
new films inspired by the novel: the Bolly-
wood extravaganza, Bride and Prejudice,
and the new British version for Working Ti-
tle Films, which is the main subject of this
essay.

Bride and Prejudice, directed by Gurind-
er Chadha, who had a popular success
with the engaging but soft-centred girls-
in-football comedy Bend It Like Beck-
ham (2002), has relocated Austen’s plot
to present-day India, with excursions to
Europe and the US. It begins with im-
ages of rural activities and the teem-
ning city of Amritsar, where Darcy (Mar-
tin Henderson) asks his friend, the UK-
based Balraj (Naveen Andrews): ‘Where
the hell have you brought me to?’ He re-
sists the charms of the Bakshi family who
are looking for wives for their four daugh-
ters. The film claims to be ‘inspired’ by
Austen’s novel and there is minor if irrele-
vant fun in spotting parallels with the nov-
el and the kinds of modernization it prac-
tises. The sleazy Wickham, for instance,
is now a backpacker, rather than a sol-
dier, who dishes the dirt on Darcy. Darcy
is not an English aristocrat but an Amer-
ican hotel magnate. When the Elizabeth
character, Laila (Aishwarya Rai), is im-
pressed with the size of Darcy’s LA ho-
tel we recall the original Elizabeth’s nuet
sense of what she might have been mis-
tress of when she first sees Darcy’s an-
cestral home, Pemberley.

But the film never really grabs the novel by
the throat, as Clueless (Amy Heckerling,
1995) did when it relocated Emma to LA
and a world of dating and mobile phones.
Instead, Bride and Prejudice tends to cling
to bits of Austen, including odd lines of di-
ologue, but this only exposes the empti-
ness of the rest. The film seems to think
that a lot of noise and colour and some
appallingly banal songs (‘We’ll be friends
together’, ‘Show me the way, take me to
love’, etc.) will take the place of Austen’s
rigour and wit, but it doesn’t work out
like that, and the film, a pastiche of Bolly-
wood musicals, is closer in tone to the old
MGM film than to Austen. This is not to
suggest that the only satisfactory version
of the novel would be one that followed it
slavishly, but more nearly the opposite:
the film would have been tougher, tight-
er and funnier if it had picked up the novel
and run with it. Philip French puts his fin-
ger on the trouble when he writes: ‘Chad-
ha, as she has shown in her previous pic-
tures – Bhaji on the Beach, What’s Cook-
ing?, Bend It Like Beckham – is a crowd-
pleaser, and the chief characteristics of her
new film are populist cheek and cosmo-
politan chic rather than subtle social ob-
ervation.’ Chadha just wants us all to be
happy rather than satisfied.

So, how hard is Austen to adapt?

As George Bluestone, pioneer scholar of
film adaptations of novels, pointed out
nearly fifty years ago, the cinema is bet-
ter at presenting ‘physical adventure rather
than interior adventure’. This may help to
account for the screen’s tendency towards
melodrama as a mode which expresses its
conflicts in external action rather than in
the intricacies of thought processes.

From this point of view, Pride and Prej-
udice is well-suited to filming because it
emphasizes the outer, social mores of its
period. It is very much concerned with so-
cial life, with the conduct of relationships
in a social setting and within clear so-
cial conventions. Such matters are read-
ily susceptible to the camera’s lens. On
the other hand, it is ill-suited to film-
ing (that is, if we have in mind the tedi-
ous idea of ‘faithful’ filming) because much
of the novel depends on Elizabeth’s cen-
tral consciousness and this is much hard-
er to render on film. For most of the time,
Austen seems to be speaking through Elizabeth (‘But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them forever’ or ‘I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.’) – but not always. Clearly Elizabeth is sometimes wrong and we have to learn to discriminate between these occasions and those when Austen wants us to identify with Elizabeth’s views. This is something a novel can do more easily and subtly than film can. This is not, however, to suggest that film has not its own kind of, and access to, subtlety or complexity; only that I suspect those are less readily at the service of the interior life than is the case with the novelist.

On the matter of the physical appearances of persons and places, Austen is notably reticent. In one sense, this may be said to give the adapting filmmaker greater freedom; in another, it may mean that readers have transferred to the screens of their own minds their particular, individual idea of what Elizabeth or Darcy or Pemberley look like, and, if they are hoping a film version will replicate their reading experience, they are almost certain to be disappointed when filmmakers try to impose their images of people and places. Many films and TV versions of classic novels go to endless pains to recreate times and places remote from present-day life, but ‘What was a contemporary work for the author, who could take a good deal relating to time and place for granted, as requiring little or no scene-setting for his readers, has become a period piece for the filmmaker.’

These are just a few of the issues relating to adaptation that one might have in mind when considering the new film version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Certainly, it is first and foremost a film and requires to be judged as such. Equally, though, there is no point in pretending that we put aside all our previous knowledge about the antecedent novel or earlier versions we may have seen. It is most useful to have these in mind as part of our intertextuality: that is, those other ‘texts’, in a variety of media, which may bear on how we respond to the new film. If you want to replicate the experience you had in reading the novel, you will be more likely to do so by rereading the novel.

**Move over Colin Firth: the new *Pride and Prejudice***

I had better be clear at the outset: for my money, this is the most satisfying film version of *Pride and Prejudice* I have ever seen. This is not because it clings desperately to the novel as if that would give it respectability, but because it hangs together as an entity. There is about it the feeling that its director and screenwriter have worked in tandem with their other collaborators to present a unified view of the action. It is essentially Austen’s ‘action’ but it feels intelligently true to its own reading of the novel and of the world in which it is set.

As directed by Joe Wright, who has a background in realist television drama,6 and written by Deborah Moggach, a novelist as well as screenwriter,7 the film follows the contours of the novel’s main events. The main arrivals in the confined world of Longbourn, the Bennets’ home, and the neighbouring village are (1) Darcy (Matthew Macfadyen) and Bingley (Simon Woods), the latter having taken a lease on a handsome local country house, Netherfield; (2) the dashing soldier Wickham (Rupert Friend), who denigrates Darcy while ingratiating himself with Elizabeth (Keira Knightley); and (3) the Reverend Collins (Tom Hollander), who is set to inherit Mr Bennet’s estate in the absence of a male heir. Bingley falls in love with Jane Bennet (Rosamund Pike), but is persuaded by Darcy that she doesn’t return his affections, and the Netherfield party leaves. Collins, advised to marry by his patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh...
What gives Wright's film its distinctiveness is this concern to offer a realist approach to Austen: realist, that is, in terms of physical and social setting as well as the psychological realism of which Austen may be seen as the great pioneer and exemplar in English literature. In physical terms, this is the first version of the novel where I've ever had the slightest sense of Longbourn as a working farm. In the novel, when Mrs Bennet sends Jane off to Netherfield on horseback, confident that it will rain and that Jane will have to stay the night, Jane says she'd rather go by coach, but her mother says the horses can't be spared: 'They are wanted on the farm, Mr Bennet, are not they?' He replies, 'They are wanted on the farm much oftener than I can get them.' I quote this here, not to draw attention to Mrs Bennet's ingenuity but to the word 'farm'. As far as I recall the word is not used in the film, but Wright and his brilliant production designer Sarah Greenwood have established at the outset that this is a farm which provides the means of support for the Bennet family. Elizabeth is first seen making her way through flapping laundry dry at the back of the sturdy farmhouse on which the untidy remains of breakfast are still on the table. When we finally see the façade of the house, it is revealed as pleasant, well-proportioned but not all at grand, and there is throughout the film the suggestion that the farming activities are never far away. Geese are seen through the open back door (imagine either the glossy MGM film or the picturesquely sanitized 1995 BBC version even acknowledging a back door), and a pig with formidable testicles waddles by. The vistas of field and farm work recall the paintings of John Constable: they are aesthetically fine but they also serve a realist purpose.

On the matter of physical realism, the other houses in which the action takes place are all represented with an eye to differentiating class and personal taste, not as merely decorative, as one sometimes feels is the case in what is scornfully dismissed as 'heritage filmmaking'. Compare, for instance, the Bennets' comfortable, somewhat messy middle-class farmhouse with the graceful country house, Netherfield, where all is light and orderly, a house which the upper-class Bingley and his sister and friend might find attractive enough to lease. Turn then to the overwhelming display of wealth in Lady Catherine's mansion, Rosings. As the Collinss and Elizabeth, hidden to dinner, make their way there at dusk, there is a glorious shot of the exterior, stressing its architectural splendours, but once inside we are struck by its grandiose, over-stuffed décor, with a lavishness that seems to preclude human warmth and to reflect not so much taste as dominance. When Elizabeth and the Gardiners fetch up at Darcy's home, Pemberley, there is a subtle distinction between Rosings and Pemberley: here, the painted ceilings and frescoes and the room full of classical statuary point to a taste which has been at the disposal of wealth but not overpowered by it. And this impresssion is intensified by the homely sincerity of the housekeeper who shows them around, and the light and warmth of the room in which Georgiana plays the piano. It is not surprising that when Elizabeth first views its handsome exterior, man and nature having so felicítously combined, she might have pondered wistfully on her refusal of a proposal that could have made her its mistress.

There is not space to do similar justice to designer Jacqueline Durran's costumes, which use fashions of around 1797, when Jane Austen wrote her first draft of the novel, then called First Impressions, because Joe Wright found 'empire line dresses … very ugly', and so settled for the fashions of the earlier period, where the waist on dresses was lower and more flattened. It would be worth considering how the variations in dress provide a further discourse on matters of class, wealth and taste: for instance, to compare the fashionable Miss Bingley with the more plainly-dressed Bennets or Charlotte Lucas, the latter's style reflecting not merely more modest means but a plainness of demeanour and sense of very modest expectations of life. The Assembly Rooms ball early in the film brings together a number of the sorts of considerations I've been alluding to. It is not the usual stiffly elegant Regency ballroom, but a boisterous, cheerful place in which you could imagine an exuberant young woman like Lydia Bennet dispersing herself. When Bingley's party enters, there is a heightening of the prevailing realism as the locals step back to observe their social superiors entering. This movement seems more emblematic than strictly realist, but it makes the point about the arrival of a disruptive element very potently. The upper-class party, immaculately turned out and, in the cases of Miss Bingley and Darcy, constrained in their bearing, contrasts sharply with the preceding high spirits at a lower social level. When Bingley gives a ball at...
Netherfield, prompted by the wishes of the young women, it is an altogether grander affair, and, on this occasion, Mr Collins’s importuning of Darcy and Darcy’s scarcely observing him point again to the ways in which one class might behave towards another.

‘Social level’ and degrees of wealth matter very much in the world of this film and the novel on which it is based. I mentioned Mrs Bennet’s self-justification a moment ago: this seems to me a legitimate extension of what Austen suggests about this woman. She knows, in her muddle-brained way, that her daughters must marry, that they need to find husbands who can support them since they have no hope of fortunes of their own. And so does Charlotte Lucas know this. Her role in the film is necessarily somewhat skimpered, but it is encapsulated in two remarks which indicate her realism and the film’s: ‘Not all of us can afford to be romantic. I’m 27 years old and have no prospects,’ she tells Elizabeth in extenuation of her accepting the absurd Collins’s proposal; and later, when Elizabeth visits her at her chilly parsonage, ‘Oh, Elizabeth, it’s such a pleasure to run your own home.’ These heartfelt remarks are typical of the film’s attention to matters of social and psychological realism.

In other matters of character realism, it is worth noting how the film deals with three of the novel’s chief comic delights: Mrs Bennet, Lady Catherine and Mr Collins. I’ve suggested already how Brenda Blethyn’s Mrs Bennet, vulgar, foolish and prattling, is nevertheless allowed a vestige of sympathetic understanding. Though her marriage must still be a wildly unequal liaison, she and Donald Sutherland (Mr Bennet) contrive in fleeting moments to remind us that there must once have been enough affection between them to account for the marriage, and in a brief moment in their bedroom, glimpsed through a window, there is a moment of convincing intimacy as Mrs Bennet talks happily of Jane’s engagement to Bingley. He is less cruelly sarcastic than Austen made him; on the other hand, Sutherland makes him more nearly a whole than some previous film incarnations where the film-makers have seemed to want him to be both cuddly and cruel, without suggesting how these two qualities might co-exist.19 Judi Dench, subduing every trace of her natural warmth, makes a wholly credible bully of Lady Catherine, as vulgar in her way as Mrs Bennet is in hers as she catechizes Elizabeth about her family, while Darcy, watching, is aware of her insolence, and her daughter Anne’s sickly pallor seems a by-product of so oppressive a mother. Dench is far from the comic dragon played by Edna May Oliver in the old film, but she is formidably ruthless in pursuit of her wishes, and, though it is perhaps odd that she descends on the Bennet house at night, this can only increase the sense of her wilful intrusiveness. In my recollection, Collins has never been other than a gawky sycophant who settles into sanctimonious superiority on marriage. He has often been funny (see, for example, David Bamber in the 1995 series), but he has never been so acceptable as a three-dimensional human being as he is here in Tom Hollander’s performance. Hollander’s shortness and obsequiousness of manner still earn their laughs, but there is a gravity about this Collins that, however fleetingly, can make us feel for his being pushed into marriage, almost as much as we feel for Charlotte’s having to accept him.

In spite of Wright’s insistence on realism as the guiding principle of the film, I’d still want to claim that, at key moments, it achieves a very affecting romantic deepening of tone. In particular, the progress of the Elizabeth–Darcy relationship needs to command our attention and emotional commitment. The secondary love story – that between Bingley and Jane – is less complex in that it doesn’t depend on overcoming each other’s failings, only the interference of others, but it is made true and touching in this film. These are kind, pleasant people, attractively played by Woods and Pike, but the real drama is with the other two, who need to overcome the inner obstacles named in the title. Much has been made of the Darcy-standard set by Colin Firth in 1995, but though Firth is an admirable actor Macfadyen is at least his equal, as he has shown several times on television (as in the series Spooks) and in the powerful New Zealand-set drama, In My Father’s Den (Brad McGann, 2004). His is a sombre Darcy, the first real clue to his capacity for affection seen in his greeting of his sister when he returns to Pembury. The first proposal to Elizabeth is a matter of real anger, pain and passion suppressed, both from him and from Keira Knightley’s superb Elizabeth, and when, neither of them able to sleep, they meet out of doors for the second proposal, the effect is very moving and truthful – true, that is, to what we have seen of both of them earlier and to the adjustments each has made. Just prior to this, Elizabeth has run up the stairs of her overcrowded home crying to everyone: ‘For once in your life leave me alone.’ The final meeting with Darcy represents then the overflow of passionate feelings too long held in check.

A magnificent shot of Elizabeth standing on a cliff in the Derbyshire Peak district is pictorially breathtaking, but that is not its function. It is the climax to a series of shots of her depicted reflectively alone, at such a remove from her family as might permit of reflection. In a climax of another kind, the last moments with Darcy are both a romantic and a realistic culmination and release, for both, of a great deal of misdirected intelligence and suppressed emotion. I’m not sure one can ask too much more of a screen version of this intelligently passionate novel.

Brian McFarlane is the editor of The Cinema of Britain and Ireland (2005) published by Wallflower Press, London. The second edition of his Encyclopedia of British Film (Methuen/British Film Institute) was published in September 2005.

Endnotes
7 Moggach wrote the screenplay for the mini-series Love in a Cold Climate (2001).
8 Production notes for the film.
10 This term is sometimes applied (not always fairly) to the Merchant Ivory adaptations of E.M. Forster and Henry James. See Andrew Higson, Heritage Cinema in Brian McFarlane, The Encyclopedia of British Film, Methuen/ British Film Institute, London, 2003, p.304.
11 Production notes for the film.
12 See Edmund Gwenn, most notoriously, in the 1940 MGM film, and Benjamin Whitrow in the 1995 BBC series.