

GOING BEYOND “FIRST IMPRESSIONS”*: JANE AUSTEN ON THE SPOTLIGHT

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Abstract:

The last decades has seen a proliferation of Jane Austen’s novels for television and cinema. Despite being an important movement for the popularity of her literary work that has also brought some problems for a serious understanding of Austen’s literary project. The purpose of this essay is to point out the need of considering the changes, preferences and omissions, apparently not very important or carried out because of some demands of the translation from a novel to the cinema, that occur when her work is revisited. We will try to show some choices made in the transference from her novels to film may erase part of the writer’s fictional project which is among other things to portray women’s role in the nineteenth century patriarchal English society and try to change women’s condition of invisibility that had been created and spread since Enlightenment. In order to illustrate our point the 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice* for the cinema will be used.

Keywords: Jane Austen, adaptation, gender, periodization.

Jane Austen, differently from most women writers of her time, has had her work known and praised since her first writings. This

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popularity, however, has increased with both proliferation and adaptation of her novels for television and cinema in the last decades. Troost and Greenfield¹ believe that it has happened mainly because of our global technology era as well as the marketing work of the Hollywood adaptations of her books.

This constant revisitation of her fiction has been considered a positive movement especially because of the access more readers may have of her novels via these types of media.² In Brazil, for instance, that may also mean a starting point for a literary literacy at public schools. By using the films and TV series – those directly adapted from the books as well as those which are based on the novels – teachers can draw their students' attention to some of the subjects presented by Austen and stress their contemporary meanings.

Besides, the translation and adaptations of Austen's novels into movies or TV series may provide the viewers with some historical facts of Regency as well as make them think about their own context. Nixon writes the differences between the novel and the film's vision on male characters, for instance, "reveal how we today use Austen to reveal ourselves to ourselves"³.

Despite these positive aspects of Austen's popularity and constant revisiting of her work, some problems emerge. Shifting elements from Austen's books either to the big or small screen may have some implications which must be examined when dealing with her novels. In the process of socio-temporal adaptations some characteristics of her fiction are changed, overvalued or omitted, which affects the novels meanings and causes misrepresentation of the writer's literary project.

The purpose of this essay is to point out the need of considering the changes, preferences and omissions, apparently not very important or carried out because of some demands of the translation from a novel to the cinema, that occur when her work is revisited. We will try to show some choices made in the transference from her novels to film may erase part of the writer's fictional project which is among other things to portray women's role in the nineteenth century patriarchal English

society and try to change women's condition of invisibility that had been created and spread since Enlightenment.

By bringing up these topics, I do not intend to say that one type of media should be privileged nor that novels are preferable to movies. In fact, even her books have been made attractive to the mass public. Some of them had more appealing covers so that people might buy them⁴, and the books may be read by more people. The aim is to indicate that Austen's literary project should be considered when dealing with the novels.

To show our point, the 2005 American version of *Pride and Prejudice* will be used. This most recent film version - directed by Joe Wright and with the screenplay by Deborah Moggach - has been successfully acclaimed by the critics; nominated for four Oscars - among them one for leading role actress by Keyria Knightley - and responsible for many communities on the Internet.

Despite being very successful, this adaptation - mainly in its American version⁵ - has both portrayed and denied Jane Austen's concerns about the nineteenth century English women. On the one hand, the film presents the pressures the female characters had to deal with, their dependency on marriage to have some financial living; on the other hand, it minimises the tensions present in the book in order to amuse the audience. As in a pendulum, it shows some commitment to the novel subject as well as an escape from its main ideas. This dual characteristic makes the 2005 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* a place in which the question raised here may be observed.

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Cheril Nixon e Rebecca Dickson⁶ state that most adaptations of Austen's books do not consider temporal differences between the audiences and the texts, which are very important to understand their meanings. Dickson adds that "if one does not understand women's role of that time, one may overlook the feminist movement achievements." Debora Kaplan⁷ writes that some modifications made

from Austen's books to movies may change the novel value and prevent the reader from reaching social awareness that such novel may bring.

Not just the critics believe it is necessary to go beyond the *manifest content* of Austen's books to get some of the social and historical concerns present in her novels. Keyra Knightley, the young English actress who performed the character of Elizabeth Bennet in the most recent version of *Pride and Prejudice* stated that knowing the only option for Regency women was marriage helped her perform her role. She said that before studying the book better she could not understand why women were submissive⁸ and their getting married so important.

Colin Firth, the acclaimed Mr. Darcy, declared in an interview to A&E Television⁹ that before doing the 1995 BBC TV Series adaptation of the novel, he did not enjoy reading Austen's books; he thought they were for girls. It was after playing his part in the series and becoming famous because of his interpretation of Darcy that he could realise there was more in the novel than what he could see.

Dealing with *Pride and Prejudice* as well as Austen's other novels demands from its readers, directors and screenplay writers to see under the surface of the book and try to grasp those issues which are hidden in domesticity, social relations and the search for a perfect companion; in other words, as Fredric Jameson puts it "rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that that 'subtext' is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact."¹⁰ Jameson adds the critic's role is to be a "social therapist exploring the areas where the painful problems of the modern society have been buried or 'repressed'." ¹¹

It is also need to accept the relation between literature and the social-historical context in which it was produced and perceive a literary text may reproduce that context at the same time it may produce a set of alternatives or new ideas.

In order to read Austen's novels seriously and comprehensively, one should go beyond the love story the books bring and observe that in England of Jane Austen's time money was changing hands, it did not come from properties and inheritance as it used to. A new group of people, the *bourgeois*, was emerging bringing with them a new set of ideas, values and concepts. In that context, being a man or a woman meant the consolidation and maintenance of the new social class. Fidelity in marriage was, therefore, desired and gender matters became important to support the regime.

In literature the novels had the role of describing the emerging class as well as help perpetuate the ideas that support the new social order. Sandra Vasconcelos writes they are fundamental for the young ladies' orientation and education stressing which behaviour is acceptable and appropriate for them in the new social configuration.¹²

Paradoxically, however, the novels were also a way of raising some questions about the new way of living, a place to propose alternatives mainly to women's invisibility in that patriarchal society.

In Jane Austen's writings, domesticity is the chosen way to reveal some aspects of that changing society in the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. World tensions and changes will appear in the balls, in the rural landscape, in character's dialogues and characterisation and mainly in the pursuit of a perfect union. In her novels, women's situation is dramatized and suggestions to change that condition are made. Raymond Williams¹³ writes Jane Austen, followed by other women writers as Emily and Charlotte Brontë, through a genre in which female characters were the major focus, produced an emerging position regarding women's invisibility.

The 2005 film version maintained some of the topics raised by Austen, especially those related to the social disposition of Regency England. By showing the properties, the film makes the audience see the society is divided in different social ranks. Differently from the 1995 TV adaptation, which presents a neutral space, Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* emphasises there were social differences at that time. In

the opening scene, Elizabeth Bennet is seen walking among some domestic animals, some servants in a house appropriate for her position in society. It is not the same as the new rich Bingley's property or Darcy's aristocratic mansion which show a wealthier and larger space. The film shows the way society is organised through these visual elements.

Another important feature kept in the film is the presentation of different types of marriage showing not only their sentimental and moral aspects but also they are the guarantee of both a safe financial future and social mobility. Joe Wright's posture in composing the scenes presents to the audience some perception of women's drama in which marriage was their only salvation from poverty and abandonment.

Another positive aspect of the 2005 version is the characterisation of Mrs. Bennet. Even though it differs from the character in the book, this new Mrs. Bennet is in agreement with Wright's and Moggach's views on the nineteenth century English patriarchal society. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs. Bennet is shown as a frivolous character whose only aim is to marry her daughters. In the film, she is still silly and acts in exaggerated manners but she is shown as having some reason to behave as she does. When saying goodbye to her first married daughter, Lydia, Mrs. Bennet tells Elizabeth she would understand her mother if she had daughters instead of sons. Such statement may demonstrate she had some perception of her daughters' dangerous condition if they did not marry properly. This, in fact, is a case of alteration which conforms to the original meaning of the novel, without changing the author's literary project.

Although the film presents some commitment to the ideas regarding women's position in Austen's society, some elements such as the incursion of desire and passion as well as the humanization of the main characters and an overvaluing of the romantic relationship between the protagonists which is not true for women and men of Austen's time may work as a minimization of those issues. Passion, desire and more human characters will appear later on in British literature in books such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, for instance, when there is the consolidation of some social changes and when roles are established.

Instead of an intensification of feelings or celebration of love, Austen was interested in the main characters' personal change, trying to propose both man and woman could be morally alike. In the search for the right type of man there was also the pursuit of equality, mutual respect and a new societal organization. Raymond Williams¹⁴ writes Austen did not intend to stress romance in her books but personal behaviour in real contexts which present people trying to fit social rules and positions in a changing society. Behind a love story enclosed in pain, rebellion and humour, there is a gender construction discourse in a patriarchal society.

By stressing love between the protagonists, the proposal of presenting social relations is in danger. Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet are the representation of the proposed new man and woman. The other matches, in their turn, can exemplify what the social relations were at that time. For Austen, the characters' connections and the way this new Darcy and this new Elizabeth see each other and deal with their differences was the way to portray her society and propose alternatives to what she saw. Desire was not her main concern.

The last dialogue between that couple in the novel can give the reader an idea of everything they had gone through to accept they could be together. Darcy was an aristocrat, a wealthy man. Elizabeth is an assertive woman, different from the women she lives with. To be together both of them had to change their views and opinions about money, social rank, and women's duties. Therefore, when asked by Elizabeth about when he started to love her, and Darcy answers it was because of her intelligence, vivacity, there is a proposal to a new set of ideas about roles in society. That statement would not be true in the real world at that time, at least not by most men.

The film version brings a different end for the novel. The American version presents also a dialogue between the couple, but Darcy's declaration is deleted and a love conversation – maybe to compensate the absence of a kiss throughout the movie - replaces it. In a moment of intimacy between them, having Darcy's property as background, they only express their happiness in being together.

The touching scene would be appropriate for the couple's love story if there was not the omission of Darcy's perception of Lizzy's intelligence as the reason for him to be in love with her. Deleting that statement is to delete the characters's reform, Darcy's personal and social change. As an aristocrat, he must choose a wife of his social rank, who behaved accordingly, that is, who played the piano, sang, sewed and did not show any intellectual disposition. Elizabeth Bennet had a different characterisation, mainly with regard to intelligence.

Therefore, Darcy's statement at the end of the novel sums up the proposal of overcoming a set of concepts and discourses which had been valid since Enlightenment. Ignoring that sentence which is disguised in the novel as a love conversation may be a way of not accepting or being aware of what was being debated in the novel. In fact, the chosen end may please the film viewers as well as provide them with the feeling of belonging to a "high culture" consumer's group. However, it also may prevent the spectator from getting in touch with important issues present in the book. Debora Kaplan¹⁵ argues that it may also lead to the *harlequinization* of Austen's novel. She explains that in this case "the focus is on a hero and heroine's courtship at the expense of other characters and other experiences, which are sketchily represented."

Another choice which is in consonance with the deletion of Darcy's statement and its consequences is the presence of Passion in the film. In fact, that is a feeling which is not found in Austen's books because, among other things, that is not her purpose. Charlotte Brontë accuses Jane Austen of not using passion in her novels, of writing 'dry' stories. It has already been discussed that for Austen passion was not the point. Her main concern, as a woman writer, was the proposal of new roles through personal and social changes. The couple's love story was a way of showing this. Besides, contemporary readers are able to perceive that passionate love was not possible to happen in a society that was going through changes and defining woman and man's roles. Writing about passion as the Brontë sister did was possible because of a different context and precursors' work such Austen's. By the time characters the

Brontë sisters wrote some of the ideas spread out by the new social class were consolidate; world had a different historical configurations and some new changes were being made; and some way in female writing had been open by writers such as Austen. In that context, some changes started to be possible such as a Jane Eyre guiding a blind Rochester in the end of the novel or Lucy Snowe, in *Villette* having the possibility of living without her husband or a passionate couple as Cathy and Heathcliff.

A more sensitive, tormented and passionate Mr. Darcy – in a way, similar to Heathcliff - may please the contemporary audience who sees in the film a 21st *übersexual*¹⁶ kind of man. The performance of Macfayden, as a more contemporary Darcy, was responsible for the appearance of several communities on the internet, some of them comparing both versions of the character – the 1995 and 2005 types. The problem is not in Darcy's characterisation as such but in what it brings – a deviation of what should be seen, of some key aspects of the novel. The transformation Austen's characters go through is not of that kind.

Besides being historically inconsistent, the 2005 Darcy makes the public concentrate their attention on the love story and, what can be worse, to reduce his importance to a comparison between the character in the 1995 and 2005 adaptations. Questions such as 'Which Darcy is preferable?' or "Do you you love the new Darcy?" appear as the main focus of the film since his more human nature Darcy is closer to its viewer's desires and conception of what the contemporary man should be like. Nixon says that the recent film adaptations of Austen are successful because they, quite literally, 'flesh out' her male characters.¹⁷

By investigating this new film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, mainly in its American version, I neither intended to evaluate the film quality nor to state alteration should not be done. In fact, most changes are necessary in the process of translating the novel into a visual media. Blanks and words have to be filled and replaced by other means so that the history can be told. The point here, however, was to bring up the subject of periodization which is relevant when dealing with literary work such as Austen's.

Scholars, teachers, literary critics, readers, Jane Austen's books admirers as well as film adaptation professionals should have that in mind when revisiting Jane Austen's novels. The audience ought to know that some subjects of the novel such as marriage, love, to be man and woman have to be thought historically in her fiction. Omitting that may be a way of undermining those issues, especially the pressures on women of that society. Dickson says that "given that films are one of the primary educators of the American public [...], one might as well as get a period like *Persuasion* correct. It is awfully unfair to ask that directors get the facts straight, but the lessons of human history may still have meaning after all [...]"¹⁸ For Jameson, the literary critics as well as intellectuals should be "critics of ideology and as the reinventors of Utopias" to make connections for "[...] only when we trace those new connections and global interrelationships will our task of ideological analysis and disclosure be effective."¹⁹

It is our responsibility to indicate to the viewers that this process of representation built or discussed in her texts is important for us to realise what her literary project was and what it has to tell us today even if pleasure has to be re-signified²⁰ and we have to take risks.

Notes

- * *First impressions* was the title of the unpublished written version of *Pride and Prejudice*, in 1813.
- 1. Troost, Linda and Greenfield, Sayre. (eds.) *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. Kentucky, The University Press of Kentucky. 2001. p.2.
- 2. See RICKETT, Joel. "Jane Austen dives between the 'chic lit' covers". In: *The Daily Telegraph*. January 16, 2006. p. 11 and Cheryl L. Nixon, "Balancing the Courtship Hero", p.27.
- 3. Nixon, Cheryl, In: *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, p.27.
- 4. Rickett, Joel. "Jane Austen dives between the 'chic lit' covers". In: *The Daily Telegraph*. January 16, 2006. p.11.

5. The film has two different ends – one for the English audience and another for the American one. The latter is the one seen in Brazil as well.
6. Troop, pp. 22 – 57.
7. Tropp, pp. 22-57.
8. Earwake, Julian. "In Jane Austen Country" In: *Speak Up*. 227, April 2006. (the actress' statement may also be found on the DVD of *Pride & Prejudice* bonus).
9. A&E Television. "Behind the Scenes: Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy." <http://www.aetv.com/scenes/pride/pride3b.html> (20/07/1997)
10. Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1988. p.81.
11. Adam Roberts. *Fredric Jameson*. 2000, p.62.
12. Vasconcelos, Sandra G. T. "Construções do feminino no romance inglês do século XVIII". In: *Polifonia*. Cuiabá, EduFMT, 2, p.89, 1995.
13. Williams, Raymond. *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. 1970, p.86.
14. Williams, Raymond, p.21.
15. Kaplan, Debora . "Mass Marketing Jane Austen". In: *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. 2001, p.178.
16. Term created by Salzman, Malathia and O'Reilly, authors of the book *The Future of Men*, to describe the 21st century man.
17. Nixon, Cheryl, p.23.
18. Dickson, p.50.
19. Fredric Jameson. *On Cultural Intervention*. 2003. [unpublished paper presented in Fórum Social Mundial in Porto Alegre, Brazil].
20. Miller, Joshua. Lecture given at the 3rd US Studies Seminar. Campinas, 2006.

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