

# H-Net Reviews

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Linda Troost, Sayre Greenfield, eds. *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. 240 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-2084-3.

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## Opening Line

It is a truth universally acknowledged that film adaptations of classic novels reflect the society of the time as much as the society of the novel's setting. This collection of essays examines why Jane Austen's novels are so popular for visual adaptation in the 1990's. The result of this new-found popularity is that although more people would recognize the appropriate style of dress for Austen's time, the films cannot guarantee that more people would recognize the source of this article's opening line. Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield have collected a set of essays that will interest the neophyte as well as the devoted Austen enthusiast.

The essays cover a variety of material, but tend to focus on the most widely released films—Emma Thompson's adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*, the most recent BBC/A&E version of *Pride and Prejudice* and Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*. What is missing is a detailed discussion of the two most obviously comparable adaptations—the two miniseries based on *Pride and Prejudice*. Such a discussion would have produced more evidence for the oft-repeated thesis that key male roles in Austen's novels (Darcy in particular) have been adapted to suit the "Sensitive New Age Guy" of the 1990's. Lisa Hopkins examines this changed vision in the aptly titled "Mr. Darcy's Body."

The "fleshing out" of the male leads is also articulated by Cheryl L. Nixon in "Balancing the Courtship Hero." Thompson and Davies add an "extra Edward" and an "extra Darcy" to their adaptations to create a sense of emotional balance for the male characters. The advantage of

Thompson's approach is that readers of *Sense and Sensibility* finally understand why Eleanor would fall in love with Edward. Nixon notes that there is too much sensibility in the film adaptations. In Austen's novels those who exhibit emotional extremes (especially the men) are punished in the worst way—they have unfulfilling marriages.

These writers also note that in the Hollywood photoplays, Austen's men are played by very attractive actors, which makes them more aesthetically and emotionally appealing. In "Jane Austen, Film, and the Pitfalls of Post-modern Nostalgia," Amanda Collins discusses the impact of marketing on motion picture adaptations. Perhaps *Persuasion* lacked an audience because its actors were not physically beautiful enough. Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility* was certainly not guilty of that error.

Deborah Kaplan utilizes a romance novelist's "tip sheet" to analyze the changed roles of men and women in the recent adaptations of *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*. In all of these works the courtship plot takes precedence over Austen's complex female characters. As a result, considerably less attention is given to the casting of Austen's women. Rebecca Dickson's "Misrepresenting Jane Austen's Ladies" notes that Nick Dear's *Persuasion* turns the elegant Elizabeth Elliot into a slouching spoiled brat. One topic that should have been addressed is the vastly different interpretations of Harriet Smith in the two recent *Emma* versions. And the question must be asked, was no one else bothered by the fact that the beautiful and charming Harriet Smith in Douglas McGrath's

1996 production was portrayed as clumsy and plain? (a fault of the production and not the actress, Toni Collette).

Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* is also nearly unrecognizable. As Dickson observes, Elinor evolves into an overly emotional creature, even crying in public. In the novel, Marianne learns from Elinor. The film reverses the process. This author observes that Andrew Davies provides a similar disservice to Elizabeth Bennet in his adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. The key scene at the end of the book, when it becomes clear that Darcy first fell in love with Elizabeth because of her lively wit, is cut. A line that has long symbolized Elizabeth's common sense among snobs ("Keep your breath to cool your porridge") is transferred to her flighty sister Lydia. Not only have Austen's men become more emotional, her women have traded sense for sensibility.

*Clueless* is considered by Suzanne Ferris in "Emma becomes Clueless" to be truest to the spirit of Austen's sense of satire. Nora Nachumi's "As If: Translating Austen's Ironic Narrator to Film" echoes the observation that Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* are not really about romance, but the film adaptations are. Perhaps the reason for the successful sense of satire in *Clueless* comes from Amy Heckerling's use of Cher as a narrator. This use of a narrative technique also makes Fay Weldon's *Pride and Prejudice* the truest adaptation of that novel.

The potential of using film to interest today's stu-

dents in literature is explored in an essay by M. Casey Diana. A college class was split into two groups. One segment saw *Sense and Sensibility*, the second group read the novel. Their test scores were compared and the film viewers scored higher. This makes a convincing case for using motion pictures to introduce and reinforce a piece of literature. However, Diana does not consider that the students may be visual learners.

Why do Jane Austen's works still appeal in the 1990's? For an intelligent female reader she provides the best of all possible happy endings—a woman of good character, strong intellect, and fine wit wins the matrimonial prize (Northanger Abbey excepted). The beautiful Jane in *Pride and Prejudice* may marry Mr. Bingley, but Elizabeth gains Mr. Darcy because of her lively mind (and fine eyes). The recent film adaptations provide a different perspective as developed in this essay collection. Hollywood has altered this vision so that the lovely heroine wins the handsome and emotional hero. It will be interesting to see how Miss Austen's works are adapted by the next generation of filmmakers.

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