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What Jane Austen Doesn't Tell Us

By Louis Menand

Sense and Sensibility

a film directed by Ang Lee, screenplay by Emma Thompson

Persuasion

a film directed by Roger Michell, screenplay by Nick Dear

Clueless

a film directed by Amy Heckerling, screenplay by Amy Heckerling

Pride and Prejudice 1996

directed by Simon Langton, screenplay by Andrew Davies. produced by BBC Television Arts and Entertainment, January 14—16,

The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Diaries: Bringing Jane Austen's Novel to Film

by Emma Thompson

Newmarket Press, 287 pp., $23.95

The Making of 'Pride and Prejudice'

by Sue Birtwistle, by Susie Conklin

Penguin/BBC, 120 pp., £9.99

The six-hour *Pride and Prejudice* now showing on the Arts and Entertainment network is the fourth screen adaptation of a Jane Austen novel to appear since August, though it is by no means the best. This *Pride and Prejudice* is a BBC production; the script is by Andrew Davies, who did the BBC *Middlemarch* shown here on Masterpiece Theatre two years ago. Like the *Middlemarch*, it is a generally dutiful rendition with not the shadow of an idea in sight except the idea that Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy are two uncommonly good-looking people who have simply got to get past all these ridiculous social hang-ups so they can be where they ought to be, which is together.

This is an interpretation not incompatible with the pleasure most people take in the book, of course, and the enhancement it requires of Jane Austen's text is an

enhancement that has probably been made in readers' heads pretty continually since 1813, when it first appeared—which is, the glamorization of Mr. Darcy. Nearly all of Davies's departures from the novel involve Darcy, and are calculated to remind us of something Austen is characteristically elliptical about, which is that Darcy (played here by Colin Firth) has a body. We see him, therefore, in his bath; we see him practicing his fencing (he turns out, not surprisingly, to be a fierce and accomplished swordsman); we watch him strip off his coat and neckcloth and take a spontaneous plunge into what looks, actually, like a rather weedy pool on the grounds of his estate. This is, in short, a *P&P* with extra Darcy. He rides, he strides, he stares, he smolders. Rakish things are done with his hair. So that when he is finally accepted by Elizabeth, we fairly expect him to rip his own bodice before ripping hers.

He doesn't, though. No bodices are ripped at all. Darcy and Elizabeth barely touch hands in the reconciliation scene, and their single kiss, in the very last shot, takes place in the wedding carriage and is a disappointingly decorous and tentative affair, made awkward by the lady's bonnet and the gentleman's unflattering top hat. What a relief, they seem to say, to have cleared up all those misunderstandings. Now let's be sweethearts.

A show that fails to rise even to the height of expectations this soapy is a show in serious trouble, and when Elizabeth and Darcy are off the screen, there is not much else to entertain us. This is principally the fault of the acting, which is misconceived in the minor roles, and of the direction, which is by Simon Langton—who is also, presumably, responsible for much that is wrong with the acting.

Langton has somehow failed to see that although the book's characters are frequently obnoxious to each other, they do not therefore have to be obnoxious to us. The greatest offense in this regard is the Mrs. Bennet, played by Alison Steadman, who has been permitted to affect an unnatural and grating falsetto—it is as though the character were being played by a female impersonator—and to dominate, largely by sheer noise, every scene in which she appears. The intention must have been to show us why Darcy is reluctant to acquire such a mother-in-law; but Mrs. Bennet (in the novel) offends because her manners are undeveloped, not because she is a shrieking harpy. Her struggle, perpetually defeated, to couch her mercenary thoughts in even marginally respectable language is exasperating to her husband and her older daughters, but it is comical to us, because it operates in the story as a measure of the similar, but much more successful, duplicities of many of the other characters—from the unctuous Mr. Collins and the predatory Miss Bingley to the suave deceiver Wickham and the grand dragon herself, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Mrs. Bennet is no more self-seeking than any of these other people; she is only less clever and a lot more desperate.

David Bamber's Mr. Collins, the Bennet sisters' clerical cousin, is likewise overdrawn. His whole person announces his absurdity—the squinting, the handkerchief wringing, the Monty Pythonish gait—when the inspired mixture of servility and bombast which Austen has invented for his speech ought to have been enough. Benjamin Whitrow's Mr. Bennet is more serviceable, but the part is such a piece of cake it's hard to know

how anyone could spoil it. Wickham, the man who attracts Elizabeth but turns out to be an unredeemable bounder, is played by Adrian Lukis as pretty obviously a deadbeat and a sponge from the start, so it is never clear what it was about him that Elizabeth, or any of the other women he has charmed, found so irresistible.

Austen's original title for the novel was "First Impressions," and although "prejudice" is a more fitting rubric for the story she is trying to tell—it replaces an allusion to individual psychology and sensation with an allusion to social psychology and convention—one aspect of prejudice is still the ordinary inclination to take the appearance for the essence. This is a game in which the reader is naturally involved; almost every novelist plays it, and the reversals are predictable enough. But in a dramatization especially it is important to maintain, precisely, the appearances, since the behavior of the principals is otherwise obtuse. It has to be believable that Mrs. Bennet is possibly just artless and well-meaning, that Wickham is noble and ill-used, that Darcy is indifferent; if it's not, the shock Elizabeth feels when she realizes, in each case, that the contrary is true is no credit to her good sense.

Pride and Prejudice is easily the funniest novel Austen wrote, but it is not a comedy. It is a satire, and this requires maintaining a constant distance between the characters and the audience—the famous Austenian irony. What is funny or absurd to us is not funny and absurd to them; it is simply their world (our world, too, of course, but we are being given the privilege of laughing at it from the outside). The most irritating thing about the direction of the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* is the continual panning, or cutting away, for reactions. Whenever a character says something silly or stupid, another character smirks or snickers or rolls her eyes or in some similar fashion signals to us that a fatuity has been uttered. One begins to suspect that the filmmakers were not used to dealing with this kind of material without the benefit of a laugh track. This constant italicizing deprives us of the gratification of judging the absurdity of the characters for ourselves. But it also breaks the satirist's bubble. Everyone knows how to play *The Importance of Being Earnest*: the more imperturbably solemn the actors, the more devastating the effect. *Pride and Prejudice* ought to be done the same way.

Still, putting all the worst that can be said about this production to one side, the best is quite memorable. She is Jennifer Ehle, who plays Elizabeth. In my judgment Ms. Ehle, even in a silly bonnet, is a deeply fetching actress. (I was a little crushed to learn, from the Penguin book about the production, *The Making of 'Pride and Prejudice*,' that in real life she is a blonde.) Her Elizabeth is charismatic by virtue not only of the flashing eyes and quick tongue everyone imagines in the character but of an unexpected athleticism as well. *She* has a body, too. We see her prancing across the landscape in the opening minutes of the series, and she runs, sometimes just to let off steam, at several other points in the story as well. She is, or she is allowed to be, always the most striking physical presence in her scenes, and this gives her the stature to match Colin Firth's erotically enhanced Darcy.

It is therefore a pity that the scene in which Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth, which is the most sexually charged passage in all of Jane Austen's novels, is directed as unimaginatively as it is. What is great about the moment is that it just keeps going: he proposes, she rejects him, he attacks her, she attacks him, he defends himself, she

rejects him again: they keep astonishing themselves by the strength and the bottomlessness of their own emotions. You cannot get the effect of this wild-fire escalation, though, if you start in a tone of stridency and maintain it all the way through, which is how it is done here. Ehle and Firth have to steal the scene, in effect, from the director; but they do it pretty well. She lashes while he burns. Susannah Harker, as Elizabeth's placid older sister, Jane, and Crispin Bonham-Carter, as Mr. Bingley, the single man in possession of a blah blah blah, are perfect foils to Ehle and Firth. That the story's four romantic leads are so satisfactory makes the shortcomings in the secondary roles more regrettable but, in the end, less important.

One of the many intelligent things about Emma Thompson's brilliant adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*, which opened in December, is the determination to get the secondary parts exactly right. The way to do this is to eliminate duplicative characters (in this case, for example, the self-centered Lady Middleton, who, thematically, just doubles the self-centered Mrs. John Dashwood) and to be uninhibited about reconfiguring the story to suit the screen. Thompson (this is her first screenplay) has used Austen's lines when they work to her purposes and has invented her own when they don't. And every one of the minor roles is given a virtuoso turn by an excellent character actor: Robert Hardy as Sir John Middleton, the sporting baronet who lends the Dashwoods a house when they are turned out of their own; Emilie François as Mrs. John Dashwood, the woman who turns them out; Elizabeth Spriggs as Mrs. Jennings, the tactless romantic meddler; Hugh Laurie and Imelda Staunton as the ill-matched Palmers; Richard Lumsden as the drippy Robert Ferrars. They are all funny, and sublimely ignorant of any reason why.

It sounds heretical, but the key to the movie's success is the fact that Thompson has made a number of improvements on Austen's original. The chief problem with the book is the stupefying dullness of the men the Dashwood sisters eventually pair off with: the diffident sad sack Edward Ferrars, pined after by the otherwise sensible Elinor, and the stolid sad sack Colonel Brandon, who lucks out by getting the sensitive Marianne on the rebound from the caddish Willoughby. The actors in these parts—Hugh Grant (whose flustered charmer routine is getting a little overworked), Thompson, Alan Rickman, Kate Winslet, and Greg Wise, respectively—are all very good. But to get a credible romance out of the story, at least one of the men has to be made appealing, and this is something Austen seems to have neglected to put her mind to.

Thompson's solution is to provide Edward (Grant) with a lot more business than he is given in the book, which she does by elevating the youngest of the Dashwood sisters, Margaret, who has barely a line in the novel, into a significant character and establishing a rapport between her and Edward. This friendship becomes Elinor's clue to the warm heart under Edward's bashful exterior, and it makes her subsequent yearning a lot less implausible. There are a half dozen other emendations; all of them make for a dramatically tighter story. The direction is by Ang Lee, the production design by Luciana Arrighi, and the photography by Michael Coulter. It's all just about as Englishy and picturesque as it can possibly be. And why not?

Almost the nicest original touch is the Shakespeare sonnet Thompson has Marianne and Willoughby recite from memory together at their first formal meeting, the sonnet beginning "Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments." This is not in the book; but it works effectively because it articulates the neo-Platonic doctrine of constancy by which Marianne's conduct can be explained. Thompson has Marianne repeat the lines later ("Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds") as she stands on a hill overlooking Willoughby's estate after he has abandoned her. The whole scene is cooked—Marianne doesn't get anywhere near Willoughby's estate at this stage in the novel—but it makes the point as well as anything in the book does, for it reminds us that (as Joyce put it) love loves to love love. Marianne is not in love with Willoughby; she is in love with an idea.

Sense and Sensibility isn't really about sense and sensibility, or at least not in the Manichean way the title suggests. The terms (as William Empson pointed out long ago in a chapter of *The Structure of Complex Words*) are so in bed with each other semantically that the title is almost a conundrum. "Sensibility," after all, implies reliance on the senses (as opposed to the intellect), and "sense" means being, in fact, sensible. What distinguishes Elinor from Marianne isn't that one woman is one thing and the other is the other; both are both. What distinguishes them is the different kinds of behavior each of them judges suitable to romantic attachment: Elinor is secretive and passive and Marianne is demonstrative and aggressive. If Marianne gets burned, it is not because "sensibility" is the less admirable quality—it is for her ingenuous impetuosity that everyone, and especially Elinor, loves her—but because it is a quality that is generally wasted on a man.

Austen was indifferent to the men in her novel because she was, as many readers, from Edmund Wilson to Terry Castle, have felt, much more interested in the relation between the two women. The climax of the book is also the climax of the movie. It is when, after Willoughby's perfidy has become clear to everyone, Elinor asks Marianne, who is feeling guilty about her mistake in believing in him, whether she compares her conduct with his. No, says Marianne; "I compare it with what it ought to have been. I compare it with yours." These are the words Elinor has lived to hear. Everything after them—the return of Edward and the triumph of Brandon—is just closure.

Persuasion really is the subject of *Persuasion*, which is, of course, Austen's last completed novel, and a much more sophisticated and beautiful book than *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice*. No film, I think, is likely to capture the inner life of this text, because, even more than in the rest of Austen's fiction (and that's saying a lot), the real work of the book is done in the play of the language.

The manifest sense of the story is against persuasion, since it is because of the persuasion of the affectionate but snobbish Lady Russell that Anne Elliot has rejected Frederick Wentworth's proposal of marriage, seven years before the novel begins—the rejection which she now regrets, and which she doubts she can undo. For in order to undo it, she must, after all, persuade Wentworth—who arrives unexpectedly on the scene again, now a highly eligible captain in the British Navy—

that she is still, at twenty-seven, desirable. This she manages by exercising no arts of persuasion at all, thus inducing Wentworth, contrary to his own announced views on the virtues of unpersuadability, to feel the pleasure of persuading *her*. You can put this action on the screen, but you can't hope to spell out the battle within the concept in the way Austen does when she plays off one sense of "persuasion" against another throughout the book.

The director of the movie version of *Persuasion* that arrived here last fall, Roger Michell, is new to non-documentary feature films, as is the screenwriter, Nick Dear, and the actress who plays Anne Elliot, Amanda Root. With the help of a very accomplished cast, which includes Ciaran Hinds as Wentworth and Corin Redgrave as Anne's father, the preening Sir Walter, and of the music, which is by Jeremy Sams with some Janácek anachronistically but evocatively mixed in, they pull off an extremely intelligent and textured film.

Two ideas in particular are notable. The first is to show (as none of the other recent Austen films has thought to do) that the many grand piles with the liveried servants in powdered wigs and the formal dinners and the elegant libraries in which some of the characters in these novels (like the Elliots) live are just glorified farmhouses. So that as Sir Walter is being escorted to his carriage by valets in knee breeches, some bumpkin is glimpsed over in a corner of the screen hacking away at the lawn with a scythe. He's harvesting the goods that pay for the carriages and the wigs and the snuffboxes and all the rest.

The other clever idea is to emphasize something Austen did not much emphasize, no doubt because it would have been obvious enough to readers in her own day, which is that an officer in the British Navy in 1814, the year in which the story is set, was pretty nearly the most exalted being on the planet. (Two of Austen's brothers were in the Navy; both became admirals.) A naval officer at the time of Napoleon's defeat was the cultural equivalent of a movie star; and the film makes a point of showing Wentworth and his fellow officers parading around as masters of the universe in full military regalia. Meek Anne Elliot's passion for the valiant captain is very romantic stuff.

Which makes it all the more amusing that this movie feels so French. This is due partly to the person of Amanda Root, with her pursed mouth and her shoe-button eyes, nursing her silent hopes amid a gaggle of chattering relations like a character out of *The Lacemaker*, and partly to the general atmospherics. *Persuasion* is sometimes called a Cinderella story; but this is a twenty-seven-year-old Cinderella who has lost her prince the first time round and who no longer has her looks, so the tonality is distinctly not a fairy-tale tonality. The cruelty of the chattering relations is a palpable cruelty, and Anne does not have Elizabeth Bennet's wit or Marianne Dashwood's spirit to protect herself from it. There is a very un-English wanness about her story, and the movie is faithful to it.

Clueless, which came out last August, is a pastiche of *Emma*, with the story transposed to a contemporary high school in the San Fernando Valley. There is a self-centered Emma character, a callow Harriet Smith character, a coy Frank Churchill character (who is not secretly engaged but secretly gay), and so forth. A

few episodes are recast in ways that are witty enough: Harriet's encounter with the gypsies is staged with a gang of teen-agers in a mall, for example. The second best thing about the movie is the speech, which is unadulterated Valley girl—an entertaining update on the "community voice" which Austen used to tell her story in her characters' own language. The best is the Emma, who is played by Alicia Silverstone. Alicia Silverstone is a Cybill Shepherd who can act. This is a powerful combination. She deserves a slightly less stupid movie, and no doubt she will get many chances to make one.

No one would call *Clueless* an interpretation of Jane Austen's novel, except to say that it is a good reminder that most of the women Austen is writing about are much younger than we usually imagine (or cast) them. Emma Woodhouse is twenty; her protégée Harriet Smith is seventeen. Elizabeth Bennet is twenty when she meets Darcy; her sister Lydia is fifteen when she runs away with Wickham (who had tried to elope with Darcy's sister, Georgiana, when *she* was fifteen). Marianne Dashwood, courted simultaneously by the rakish Willoughby (who already has an illegitimate child) and the thirty-five-year-old Brandon, is sixteen.

In the few remarks about her own art that survive, Austen tended to emphasize the milieu she favored. "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on," as she puts it in one letter; in another, she famously speaks of "the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush." This sort of talk has tended to support the view that Austen is essentially a realist, that her subject is society in extreme microcosm. But a realist is interested in all types, and Austen is interested in only one type, the young woman who is "out."

Attributing opinions to Jane Austen on the basis of her books is a reckless business, but I think it is safe to say that (unlike Dickens or Trollope or George Eliot) she didn't care a bit about what it was like to be a married woman or a landlord or a professional man or even the suitor of one of her young women. She thought an unattached young woman with intelligence and some degree of physical vibrancy was the most marvelous creature in the world, and that the relations between women like these was a hundred times more poignant than the relations any of them would ever have with a man. What must have made this type so appealing to her, of course, was that this was the only time in their lives in which women like that had an absolute power—if only the power to withhold themselves—over the desires of a man. Austen felt keenly the fragility of the circumstance, the strength of the fragrance but the delicacy of the bloom. It was, in effect, better than sex, since sex, after all, would end it. This is what makes the scene of Darcy's first proposal so potent: Elizabeth will never experience again so fine an emotional surge as she does when she spurns him. It is the one context in which she is permitted to say exactly what she feels. It's not a context you can transplant to the San Fernando Valley.

That four screen adaptations of novels by Jane Austen have appeared since August have appeared since August is an invitation to punditry it is probably wise to decline. These films have all come out at the same time, it's true, but they were all put together at different times, and the impulse to make them must have been much stronger than the mere impulse to watch them. The BBC *Pride and Prejudice* was conceived two years ago; Emma Thompson started work on *Sense and Sensibility*

five years ago. The shortage of leading roles for women in contemporary screenplays is probably a better explanation for the appearance and the quality of these films than some imagined cultural turn. Another screen *Emma* is supposed to be released later this year, along with a *Jane Eyre* and a *Portrait of a Lady*. Classics are always great choices for movies anyway, because the titles do half the selling for you.

Commentators will always help with the other half, of course, by explaining that we are "returning" to the classics because they reflect moral certainty, a conviction that there are indeed principles by which conduct may be guided, which our society seems to have lost its grip on. Possibly our society has lost its grip, but these novels don't seem very promising places to learn how to recover it. It's not that they are "irrelevant"; their relevance is eternal. It's just that their relevance is the opposite of what it seems.

Austen's novels show good behavior, but they don't show us how to behave, because the notion that there is some knowledge of "how to behave" is precisely what gets most of her characters in trouble in the first place. Every interesting writer attracts interpreters eager to project a lesson onto the text, but among the English writers, Austen is surely the novelist most thoroughly embarrassed by her admirers. "Austen is showing us that..." snobbishness is bad, prudence is good, probity is better than duplicity, appearances are often deceiving. If we needed novels to know these things, we would be in bad shape indeed.

In the fifth chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, there is a brief scene in which Mr. Darcy's pride, just exhibited for the first time at the ball at Netheridge, is discussed by some of the novel's characterological low life: Mrs. Bennet, the pedantic little Mary Bennet, and a few neighboring children.

"Pride," observed Mary, who piqued herself upon the solidity of her reflections, "is a very common failing, I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced that it is very common indeed; that human nature is particularly prone to it, and that there are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or the other, real or imaginary. Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us."
"If I were as rich as Mr. Darcy," cried a young Lucas, who came with his sisters, "I should not care how proud I was. I would keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine every day."
"Then you would drink a great deal more than you ought," said Mrs. Bennet; "and if I were to see you at it, I should take away your bottle directly."
The boy protested that she should not; she continued to declare that she would, and the argument ended only with the visit.

Mary Bennet, who is one of the most authorially scorned characters in the entire novel, has said everything worth saying about pride from the abstract point of view, and young Lucas has said everything worth saying about it from the practical. Any reader who continues the novel in the expectation that further edification is in store will either be disappointed or be making it up.

Edification is, in fact, one of the most satirized of human activities in Austen. Anne Elliot advises the wretched Captain Benwick, who is trying to solace his grief over the recent death of his fiancée by immersing himself in Romantic poetry, to try "a larger allowance of prose in his daily study," in the hope of finding there moral precepts of a sturdier character. The earnest captain accepts the advice, and a month later proceeds to disgust Anne, his former fiancée's brother and best friend Captain Harville, and the rest of the world by getting engaged to the terminally dippy Louisa Musgrove.

The "lesson" isn't that moral precepts are useless. It's that moral precepts are extremely useful, except when they are not, just as the "lesson" of *Sense and Sensibility* is that it's best to be sensible, except when it's better to be sensitive, and the "lesson" of *Pride and Prejudice* is that it is bad to be proud, except on the occasions when it is not. Knowledge of which is the indicated attitude under which circumstance cannot come out of a book. "I will not allow books to prove any thing," Anne says to Captain Harville when they meet to discuss man's constancy in the wake of Benwick's shocking exhibition of altered affections. "But how shall we prove any thing?" Harville wonders. "We never shall," says Anne.

What makes books last is not that the moral truths they contain outlive their time, and are as applicable today as they were in a society radically different from ours hundreds of years ago. It's that the writer has revealed the endless malleability of moral truths in her own time, and the example is always entirely apt in ours, since the principles and conventions of any age can always be shown to be two-sided—or three-sided, or six-sided—affairs. People, for the most part, don't violate moral customs because they don't know any better. They violate them because they think they *do* know better—because they think that the principle is itself unmoral, or that it conduces to what is, from another point of view, morally the wrong outcome. We can't say where the instinct to prefer one outcome to another arises from; but we can say that, as associated beings, we feel a strong incentive to justify our choices in moral language. If there did not always exist a "higher" principle to trump the one we have just found it expedient to abandon, it is hard to know how societies would function.

Virtuous acts are to be praised, but "virtue" as such is a thing impossible to pin down, despite the vigorous efforts of many people today to do it. My own feeling is one with young Lucas's: if I were as rich as William Bennett, I should not care how virtuous I was. I would keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine every day. I really would.