Jane Austen in the Movies

Pride and Prejudice (Robert Z Leonard, 1940, and Joe Wright, 2005); Persuasion (Roger Michell, 1995); Emma (Douglas McGrath, 1996); Sense and Sensibility (Ang Lee, 1995); Mansfield Park (Patricia Rozema, 1999)

Pride and Prejudice

My my, haven’t things got better. Any doubts that films are infinitely superior now to what they were then may be dispelled at once by a comparison between these two versions of Pride and Prejudice.

At the end of the 1940 version, Edna May Oliver as Lady Catherine de Burgh turns to Olivier as Darcy … and reveals that he and she have been allies throughout the film, and that she heartily approves of his marrying Elizabeth, who’s just the kind of girl he needs. Her whole arrogant routine has been an amiable act.

What they didn’t want to understand in Hollywood in the 1940s was how much Jane Austen hated people. This is the film for which they decided, too, that crinolines were prettier than Regency frocks (in fact they’re less sexy, a more likely reason for the choice), and so set it in the 1840s: whereupon Mrs Bennett’s early line “Why, that’s the best news since the battle of Waterloo!” sounds stupid, as later when Miss Bingley says, “A waltz! how modern!” All the actors are a generation too old, and dressed for a script that’s written for a generation too early for their costumes. But then, we’re not far away from the time when Hollywood’s preferred Romeo and Juliet were Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer.

This being Old England (as the title tells us), the ladies perambulate everywhere as if on roller-skates, and all flat “a” sounds are clipped “e”s: “scandal” becomes “scendel,” and “happiness”, “heppiness”. The effect is piss-elegant. “Margate” is, on the other hand, “Mah-gutt”. Someone should have checked with Olivier, but I guess he wasn’t on set that day.

Mr Collins is not a Reverend, to avoid giving offence to church-goers, just as Lady Catherine has a heart of gold, to avoid giving offence to aristocrats.

The title music – culled from medieval ballads, Elizabethan madrigals, and Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition – proclaims the obvious: that this is a movie for people who know nothing, and care less. For people who patronise Jane Austen as an alternative to reading her.
Part of the delight of teaching *Pride and Prejudice* to teenage girls in the time of Tony Blair is that they all identify with Lydia, and none with Lizzie. Lydia, after all, knows what life is about – it’s all about partying and getting laid (try teaching *The Pardoner’s Tale* to a similar class). They can’t reconcile Lizzie’s judgemental detachment at parties with the idea that she has as much, if not more, at stake in partying as Lydia does. Her sense of responsibility – the way she feels the safety of the family rests, at climactic moments, entirely upon her shoulders – isn’t cool. Shouldn’t she just fuck Mr Wickham and get it over with, like Bridget Jones does with Hugh Grant, her Wickham-equivalent? Perhaps, if they saw this amazingly good new version directed by Joe Wright, with Keira Knightley, a Party Person if ever there was one, as Lizzie, they’d feel different. The film plays Lydia as someone in constant, irritating motion, too – she can’t sit still, you can’t focus on her.

A great part of the film’s success rests with Knightley, who’s so young that she’s zoomed to superstardom before her face has stopped forming. Thus in some shots her cheeks and chin look too big for her eyes, nose and mouth. This especially so when she wrinkles it all together into what you think can only be an expression of hatred and disgust, only to find it’s come out as a huge giggle.

In 1940, Robert Z. Leonard directs it all statically, to show off the richness of the sets and décor – even the Bennetts must be seen to live well. He only closes in when absolutely necessary. When they do close-ups in 2005, we’re there with the characters; because the actors have earned the close-up, and our understanding really does benefit from the camera being in so tight on them. When Wright does a scene of indoor movement or domestic confusion, we’re confused as if we’re all Lydias – but informed, as if we’re all Lizzies.

I don’t know whether it was Wright, or Knightley, who had had the idea that Lizzie’s first reaction on seeing Pemberley, and realising what it was that she’d given up by turning Mr Darcy down, should be a huge giggle of hysteria: but it works well.
Yes, she’s mortified – but yes, she’s brought it on herself and it’s her responsibility.
Of course, she doesn’t know what exactly it is she’s brought on herself before she
visits Pemberley, so a giggle is more in order than it would be afterwards.

In the 1940 version we don’t see Pemberley at all, which given that the film is so
preoccupied elsewhere with material wealth, is odd. The budget may have been in the
way – or perhaps (for they couldn’t film in old, blitzed England), there was no
Californian house classy enough. I suspect, though, it was because the script was
made not from the novel but from a stage version. Aldous Huxley tinkered with it,
and I’m sure cried all the way to the bank.

In fact, the 2005 script (also said to have been tweaked by an experienced hand at
a late stage), withholds the news that it was Darcy who paid Wickham to marry Lydia
from us, as well as from Lizzie, so that it’s not while touring Pemberley that we all
realise what Lizzie’s missed out on, but when Lydia and Wickham come home. Lizzie
doesn’t even hear Mrs Reynolds praising Darcy’s character. Meg Wynn Owen from
Upstairs Downstairs is Mrs Reynolds, and I bet she was miffed when most of her
lines were overdubbed with the music.

The camera loves Knightley, and she loves it, so communication is total. Look at
her when she and Jane overhear Darcy and Bingley discussing them at the Meryton
ball. Watch her expression of panic as the room empties for Mr Collins’ proposal, and
Lizzie turns to her father for help. Look at her face when her father says that if she
accepts Collins she’ll never see him again. Look at her when, in the midst of his
proposal – done here while the two are sheltering from a downpour – he insults her
father, and the thunderstorm echoes her outrage. The more she expresses her dislike
of him, the closer to him she creeps. Thirty-six-year old Greer Garson doesn’t stand a
chance.

It’s the reality of it all that startles in 2005, done by attention to detail. No
National Trust prettiness here, no Disneyworld makeup of the kind that makes the
Gwyneth Paltrow Emma such a drag (see below: that film steals from the 1940 P&PP
an archery contest between the two principals). In fact, I think Wright watched every
Jane Austen video and DVD he could find (especially the 1940 version), and
determined that his movie should go in another direction. It’s set in the 1790s, closer
to Tom Jones than normal. Many of the older extras have wigs. The dancing is lustier.
The Bennett house has bare boards, with pigs and chickens roam free outside. Donald
Sutherland as Mr Bennett has a permanent four-days’-growth of stubble on his chin
(Edmund Gwenn, it must be said, brings an unaffected commonsense to his Mr
Bennett, elsewhere lacking in 1940). Brenda Blethyn as Mrs Bennett is less annoying
than usual – she’s given a viewpoint. Mr Darcy hasn’t bothered to shave for the
Meryton ball.

The choreography and camerawork in the Netherfield ball (for which he has
shaved), is virtuoso. At last a film concedes how impossible it is to hold a continuous
chat while swirling from one side of a formation to the other (they try in 1940, but the
camera has to stay back). Darcy and Lizzie have an easier time here than Collins and
Lizzie: they dance to the famous Purcell tune from Abdelazer, played on a solo violin.

When on the other hand they go big, they go big. I can’t remember the name of
the house which plays Pemberley in the famed BBC series – but here it’s Chatsworth:
perhaps a bit too grand even for Darcy, who’s after all only a Mister, not a Duke.
Matthew Macfadyen is bigger than Colin Firth – and much bigger than Tom Holland,
who’s the superb, concentrated Mr Collins here – but is also younger, more lonely-
looking, and more vulnerable. Tears never seem that far away, though you can see
he’d be much too manly ever to let them out. Olivier by contrast is shallow and uninvolved.

An entire lesson about the history of acting could be given using Holland’s performance as Collins, and that of Melville Cooper in 1940, as evidence.

Simon Woods is perhaps a bit too dumb for the 2005 Bingley, and his hair stands up too foolishly; and Rosamond Pike (much more alive here than she was in Die Another Day), perhaps a bit too intelligent for Jane: but for Wickham they’ve cast someone (Rupert Friend), who’s a dead-ringer for Orlando Bloom, which is an excellent joke.

It works by sudden contrasts, frequently between claustrophobic domestic interior and expansive rural exterior. After all, Austen heroines always look sexier after a walk – see Lizzie when she walks to Netherfield to see the sick Jane, or Anne Elliott’s sudden transformation when they all hit Lyme Regis in Persuasion (see below). One shot – held a bit too long – has Lizzie atop a Derbyshire Peak, brooding in the wind, so that for a moment we think she may have metamorphosed into Cathy from Wuthering Heights. At the end, she and Darcy reconcile in a field, with him looming out of the mists, Heathcliff-like.

But this is the nearest they get to kissing. So Emily Bronte wouldn’t like it.

The film at last makes it clear why Jane Austen, and this novel especially, stand so high in the bestseller lists – a question which would baffle anyone watching the Hollywood version. It has a plot and characters which involve you like no other.

**Persuasion**

To play Anne Elliot, the most self-suppressed and put-upon of all Austen’s heroines, you need big, dark eyes; and no-one has bigger or darker eyes than Amanda Root. As she’s surrounded by many other actresses with big dark eyes – Sophie Thompson, Susan Fleetwood, Victoria Hamilton, Fiona Shaw – we may suppose that she got the lead after her eyes showed biggest and darkest in the camera-test close-ups.

It pays off. Watch the way the camera goes in to a close-up of her face on Captain Wentworth’s first entry, and then cuts to a close-up of her hand grasping a chair-back to prevent her from fainting: Root’s acting in the first shot is so good that the second shot is superfluous: her eyes alone suggest an incipient faint. Roger Michell then even assays a Hitchcockian dolly-in-and-zoom out shot on her, as Wentworth leaves: but it
too is unnecessary: Root’s eyes have said all the tale needs about regret, loneliness, frustration, and fear of decades more to come of all three.

The odd thing is that the actress playing Louisa Musgrove – Anne Elliot’s antithesis – has ordinary eyes, not big or dark at all: is this deliberate? Is Wentworth so impercipient that he can’t judge a woman’s desirability by the size of her eyes? Or – maybe as Louisa hurtles down at him from the Cob at Lyme Regis, he will suddenly register that she has small, uninteresting eyes – and drop her deliberately?

But this is facetious. In the event, the novel’s most famous episode is botched. Louisa’s character is not well established, and from the editing it seems she throws herself down at a spot so far, not just from Wentworth’s grasp, but from anyone’s grasp, as to appear not just impetuous, but suicidal (Austen has her “too precipitate by half a second”). They put much time into a slow-motion shot of her descent, but it’s without a physical context, so the innocent viewer isn’t sure what’s going on.

Another miscalculation is that, although Anne does gain healthy colour at Lyme, she notices it herself, in the mirror, where (least vain of women) she should not be conscious of it at all: only the men, shallow Elliot and deep-revolving Wentworth, should note her femininity.

Nick Dear’s script is otherwise faithful to the book, departing from it only in such minor things as making Captain Benwick quote Byron’s Fare Thee Well, rather than The Giaour: sure enough, Anne, staring at him huge-eyed, recommends a greater allowance of prose in his reading. It is, we realise (which we don’t in the book) advice directed at herself as much as at him.

This is one of the better Jane Austen movies. The impossible cheekbones of Ciaran Hinds (Wentworth) make you, as usual, double-take on his first appearance, but you get used to them. And Corin Redgrave and John Woodvine make an excellent contrast as Sir Walter Elliot and Admiral Croft. Redgrave is allowed his best speech (about the eighty-seven women in Bond Street), but Woodvine is deprived of his, expressing distaste at the number of looking-glasses he has to cope with at Kellynch Hall. Instead he tells us near the end that Bonaparte has escaped from Elba, and that the Navy will soon be in business again. Perhaps the ship on which, in the last sequence, we see Anne and Wentworth sailing away, is the Northumberland, conveying the Captive Usurper to his last home.

**Emma**

The novel opens, as we all know, with a statement of foreboding:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

If we’re alert to the Austen tone, we can tell that rich Emma will be well-vexed somehow sooner or later. Douglas McGrath opens his film with a voice-over:

In a time when one’s town was one’s world and the actions at a dance excited greater interest than the movement of armies there lived a young woman who knew how this world should be run.

Where Austen manages to sound grim, McGrath trades at once on the image of Austen as one who writes about a picture post-card world in which young ladies go to
dances, weave samplers, and never mention Bonaparte; the voice-over is indeed voiced over a shot of a twirling globe which Emma has embroidered (for the Westons’ wedding) with the faces of all the book’s characters. We can tell from the start that this Jane Austen will not be far from Barbara Cartland.

The music is sentimental / pastoral, repetitive and nauseating, the photography of candle-lit soirees pretty, the acting … professional; Gwyneth Paltrow’s accent (apart from the occasional overflattened “a” as in “Herriet!”), very good. The film is deadly dull: though not as deadly dull as the same director / scriptwriter’s Nicholas Nickleby six years later. Famous actresses are miscast throughout. Aggressive, tough Toni Collette has to demur herself as Harriet Smith. Gorgeous Greta Scacchi renders herself sexless as Mrs Weston. Dark, brooding Polly Walker looms, hopelessly out-of-period, as Jane Fairfax. Even Kathleen Byron, the crazy nun from Black Narcissus, is in there somewhere, albeit invisible. Only Sophie Thompson (daughter) and Phyllida Law (mum) appear to be enjoying themselves, as the Bateses. Compare Alan Cumming as Mr Elton with Tom Holland as Mr Collins and you see the difference between a good actor with a witty director and a good actor without.

Frank Churchill is the impossibly hirsute Ewan MacGregor: he really does need a haircut, but doesn’t go to London to get one. He and Jane Fairfax sing a Polly Peachum air, arranged for duet, from The Beggar’s Opera: “But, when once pluck’d, ’tis no longer alluring, / To Covent-Garden ’tis sent (as yet sweet)”. Knowing that such words could never be allowed into a Jane Austen book, McGrath covers them with dialogue, and so the point of the sequence – to show Jane’s professional musicianship – is lost. The idea that Jane’s life and talent are in danger of being wasted isn’t there.

Emma keeps a diary, which enables a voice-over to cover the otherwise hard-to-convey bits: she even addresses it, as Mrs Dale used to, as “Dear diary”.

We look forward to the moment when Mrs Elton turns up. She does, and is Juliet Stevenson; but at once we see what’s wrong, for her piss-elegant way of talking isn’t sufficiently contrasted with the BBC-elegant way of talking practised by everyone else. Jane Austen is clinical about Emma: this script sees most of the comings and goings, the pairings-off and failings-to-pair-off, as if the chatty fascination Emma shows in them really is all the moral interest the novel offers.

1: Hear also her vowel-sound in “I caren’t believe it!”' when told Frank Churchill is engaged to Jane Fairfax.
My attention wandered to the point where I kept asking myself, “What’s the other movie where James Cosmo plays Ewan MacGregor’s dad?” Not until I dredged up the answer (*Trainspotting*) was I able to refocus.

The thing comes to life suddenly, when Emma insults Miss Bates on Box Hill (Box Hill is not so named); Sophie Thompson’s reaction to the implication that her talk is dull is the only human moment in the evening: more moving, in fact, than it is in the novel, where Austen’s steely sensibility and control make us focus more on Emma’s ill-manners than on the feelings of their victim. As Mr Knightley lectures her, we feel something of moment is starting – but the intensity soon drops again.

McGrath has missed the whole point and balance of the novel.

*Sense and Sensibility*

Five minutes into this superb adaptation and we see where McGrath missed out: after an invented deathbed scene for Mr Dashwood, mean son John and meaner daughter-in-law Fanny argue themselves into ignoring his instructions, and determine to share no money at all with his second wife and his daughters. Emma Thompson’s screenplay, as directed by Ang Lee, is thus both extremely funny, and, because tied down, as the novel is, by considerations of property and money, extremely serious. That all the properties, from Norland to Barton Cottage, are a twitch too far upmarket (too many liveried flunkeys at the former), gives the property side of the argument a bit more visual weight than the verbal weight given it in the book: we’re aware that the conflicts are not just romantic, but material. Michael Coulter’s photography – he
also filmed *Mansfield Park*, discussed below – emphasises light and dark, where Ian Wilson’s for *Emma* just goes for the Christmas wrapper effect.

Compare the leads: where Jeremy Northam as Mr Knightley is doing his professional thing, Hugh Grant as Edward Ferrars is gauche and amusing, and has every line thought out afresh. His poor reading of Cowper’s *The Castaway* (corrected by Marianne) is an excellent touch – not in the book – and his confused reaction, in the penultimate scene, to the family’s assumption that it is he, and not his brother, who has married Lucy Steele, is a masterpiece on Grant’s part of knife-edge comic seriousness. You feel this Ferrars will almost deserve his Elinor.

The script creates wittier alternatives to Austen’s dialogue than do other attempts, quoted above and below: it clarifies at once themes which the unlettered might not otherwise get:

Elinor: Good work, Marianne – you covered Shakespeare, Scott, all forms of poetry – another meeting will ascertain his [Willoughby’s] views on Nature and Romantic Attachments and you will have nothing left to talk about and the relationship will be over.

Thompson makes discreet adjustments elsewhere. Colonel Brandon – not much fun in the book – is said to play the piano (though we never see him do so), and jokes about the spicy air of the East Indies with Margaret, who is also a more amusing presence than she is in the novel. Willoughby implies Brandon’s dullness in Chapter Ten of the book by saying “his observations may have extended to the existence of nabobs, gold mohrs, and palanquins”: Thomson shows that he can, at least, gesture towards making some. Alan Rickman has the right combination of gravitas and humanity to make the Colonel’s final union with Marianne almost acceptable: he certainly reads *The Faerie Queene* very well (in the book he doesn’t read it at all). The Palmers (Hugh Laurie and Imelda Staunton) are much funnier than in the original; and Marianne’s illness is brought closer to a terminal condition, which gives Elinor’s worry at the bedside a more frightened appeal.

That there appears much more at stake in this film than in many of the others is a tribute both to Thompson and to Ang Lee: you’d never guess that only five years later he’d direct *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

*Mansfield Park*

“I know I have the appearance of inauthenticity”, sighs Henry Crawford to Fanny Price, as, having accepted his proposal the previous day, she turns him down today (thereby implicating herself in his later fall from grace). Patricia Rozema’s slick movie has plenty of apparently authentic detail: in one shot we even see Mary
Crawford’s harp being lugged across the horizon on a cart. But as for Austenian authenticity … forget it.

For this is – perhaps by way of reaction to Douglas McGrath’s *Emma* – the randy *Mansfield Park*. Watch the very well-directed scene in which Mary and Henry Crawford enter the Bertrams’ drawing-room for the first time: everyone there – Sir Henry, his wife, Maria, Julia, Edmund, yea, Fanny herself, goes instantly on heat. Later, Sir Henry has the voyeuristic hots for Fanny. Mary Crawford, helping Fanny dry off after a storm, has the hots for her. Near the end, Edmund bursts into Henry’s room to find him bonking Maria. Mr Price, down at Portsmouth, seems to be a multiple child-molester, abusing Susan and lusting at once after his newly-arrived elder daughter.

Things are worse still over in Antigua: for this is a post-colonialist *Mansfield Park* – a Saidian *Mansfield Park*! Watching over the feverish Tom, Fanny finds a sketch-book full of depictions of slave-rape and mutilation – this is what Tom and his dad have been up to on the sugar plantation. Dropping the book, Fanny turns to run, only to find the evil paterfamilias himself hovering near, drooling with simultaneous lust and guilt. Harold Pinter is excellent in this re-conceived role: though why such a free-living brute should object to poor, innocuous *Lovers’ Vows* is a mystery. Hypocrisy, presumably: though as when he returns to order the sets demolished he voices no objection, we can’t tell.

Fanny (here an embryonic novelist, and not at all self-effacing), does not refuse to play the Cottager’s wife, nor does she object to Henry and Maria climbing around the ha-ha while Mr Rushworth goes off for the keys: that episode is removed in its entirety.

By halfway through, I was shouting abuse at the screen. Rozema, affecting to use authentic Austen in the voice-overs, rewrites, with predictable lack of success. Here’s one of the most malicious paragraphs in the novel:

> It ended in Mrs. Norris’s resolving to quit Mansfield and devote herself to her unfortunate Maria, and in an establishment being formed for them in another country – remote and private, where, shut up together with little society, on one side no affection, on the other, no judgment, it may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment.

This is what Rozema does to it:

> Mrs Norris, whom Sir Thomas came to regard as an hourly evil, went to devote herself to her unfortunate niece. It may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment. It could have turned out differently, I suppose … but it didn’t.

Mercifully, the film’s quite fast. And short. Michael Coulter’s photography is very nicely contrasty, like his work on *Sense and Sensibility*. The film’s barefaced effrontery makes it much more fun than *Emma*: it’s a pity they still called it *Mansfield Park*. 