Pride and Prejudice and Pigs: Two Recent Film Adaptations of Austen’s Novel

It’s been exactly five years since I first saw Joe Wright’s 2005 film adaptation of Pride and Prejudice. I remember I left the cinema appalled: I felt that Wright took inexcusable liberties with Austen’s novel, and I resolved never to see his film again. And I kept that promise until I chose my paper topic for this seminar: the two recent film adaptations of Pride and Prejudice are very tempting examples of contemporary reception of eighteenth-century literature. (For those of you who do not study the eighteenth century, we like to claim the years 1660-1837 as part of the eighteenth century (from the Restoration (the return of Charles II) to Queen Victoria’s ascendance to the throne).) It goes without saying that we proudly claim Jane Austen as one of our own. Before I had re-watched both Wright’s film and the 1995 BBC adaptation, which is very faithful to the text, but is much longer – running at 300 minutes (5 hours) as opposed to Wright’s more theater-friendly 127 minutes (just over 2 hours) – I was certain that this paper would be a work of anti-Wright polemic, cataloging his inaccurate interpretations of Austen’s text. But after I re-watched both films, my opinions began to change. True, Wright’s film does take many freedoms with the content of Pride and Prejudice – some of which will be mentioned here – yet Wright often manages to capture the essence of Austen’s style in his filmic version of free-indirect discourse.

There have been quite a number of studies focusing on both of these films. The 1995 BBC adaptation has been generally praised for its fidelity to Austen’s text. Criticisms of the BBC version focus on its over-the-top characterizations (namely those of Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins), and some of Colin Firth’s scenes as Mr. Darcy have been seen as voyeuristic (for example, the shirtless bathtub scene when Elizabeth and Jane are staying at Netherfield and the
wet white shirt scene as he rises from the water near Pemberley). And Colin Firth’s smoldering glances at Jennifer Ehle’s Elizabeth are often read as indications of his unspoken desire. The BBC adaptation does preserve the polite, polished feel of the novel, while Wright’s film has gotten a lot of flack for its “realistic” interpretation. According to Joe Wright:

I wanted to treat it as a piece of British realism rather than going with the picturesque tradition, which tends to depict an idealized version of English heritage as some kind of Heaven on Earth. I wanted to make *Pride & Prejudice* real and gritty—and be as honest as possible. (Wright, *Production Notes* 4)

One of these “real and gritty” elements is the “overwhelming profusion of mud, pigs, and chickens” that has upset many Austen readers (Dole 26). (SLIDE 2) The appearance of the large-testicled pig is considered to be one of the most offensive elements of Wright’s film. The only time pigs are mentioned in *Pride and Prejudice* is in Elizabeth’s reaction to the excitement caused by Lady Catherine’s visit to the Collins’ parsonage: “I expected at least that the pigs were got into the garden, and here is nothing but Lady Catherine and her daughter!” (Austen 106). Livestock and poultry are only ever mentioned in the novel in connection with Mrs. Collins (109). They are not even peripherally linked to the Bennets. Another significant failing of Wright’s film is his overly romantic approach. (SLIDE 3) His darkly sublime landscapes, the vastness of which is contrasted with minuscule figures, have led reviews to declare: “Jane Austen has been Brontëfied” (Lane). Wright’s anachronistic approach—an approach much more suitable for *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*—de-historicizes the 1813 novel from its 1790s setting and seems to contradict Wright’s declared manifesto to be as “honest as possible.”

Wright’s film is somewhat redeemed by his convincing filmic version of free-indirect discourse. In novels, free-indirect discourse is a type of internal focalization, which takes place
when events or thoughts are mediated through the point of view of a character. Simply put, it is a blurring of the narrator’s voice with the thoughts of a character. Austen is often read as one of the great practitioners of free-indirect discourse. The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is a good example of it: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 3). The conceptual blurring that occurs in this case is whether this statement is actually a truth universally acknowledged or whether it is something one of the characters would have considered a truth (I’m thinking of Mrs. Bennet in particular here). Wright adapts this device for film by placing the camera directly behind or in the exact same place where one of the characters would be – this is called an “over-the-shoulder” shot (Monaco 334). This creates a similar effect to free-indirect discourse since it suggests the listener’s point of view “but is also physically separate from it” since “you’re looking over his [or her] shoulder” (234). The rest of my talk will focus on Wright’s use of this device and other visual metaphors within Elizabeth’s three proposals throughout the films (two of these are from Mr. Darcy, and one is from Mr. Collins). The proposal scenes are central episodes in the novel, and there is little variation in the dialogue within these scenes in the two films.

Elizabeth’s first proposal in the novel comes from her silly cousin Mr. Collins. The BBC version emphasizes the ridiculous and long-winded nature of this character (SLIDE 4). Let’s compare this scene with Wright’s version (SLIDE 5). In Wright’s version, Mr. Collins is somber and small, even though Austen describes him as “a tall, heavy looking young man of five and twenty” in her novel (Austen 44). And while, in the BBC version, Elizabeth can barely keep from laughing, in Wright’s version, the entire scene is much darker: the characters are more serious and the lighting is gloomier. Besides this change in mood, the camera angles that occur just as Elizabeth is rejecting Mr. Collins are fascinating (SLIDE 6). While Mr. Collins begins
the scene and the proposal appearing slightly taller than Elizabeth, he kneels slightly (SLIDE 7), and from the camera’s perspective Elizabeth the rejecter looks like a giant (SLIDE 8) and Mr. Collins the unworthy suitor appears very small. (In real life, Keira Knightley is 5’7” and Tom Hollander (the actor who plays Mr. Collins) is 5’5”). Here this discrepancy is exploited to its fullest potential. Notice also in this image, that part of Elizabeth’s neck and face is showing. This shows that we are experiencing the scene from Elizabeth’s perspective, and the focus on Mr. Collins’ smallness in this sequence serves as a metaphor for his unworthiness as Elizabeth’s suitor.

Let’s move on to the first of two Mr. Darcy proposals. The BBC locates his first proposal, as in the book, inside a sitting room in the Collins’ parsonage (SLIDE 9). Wright moves this scene outdoors and adds a “Brontean” landscape and a melodramatic soundtrack (SLIDE 10). Initially, the most apparent difference is the indoor-outdoor contrast – the proposal in the BBC version is clean, bright, and dry, while the proposal in Wright’s version is rain-soaked and dark. There are again differences in the point of view in Wright’s version. While the BBC version does alternate character points of view, these alternations still do not have the same feel as Wright’s over-the-shoulder shots, which punctuate his version (SLIDE 11). We are given both Elizabeth’s (we see her face and neck again) (SLIDE 12) and Mr. Darcy’s (we see the collar of his coat) perspectives. Also the way in which Wright’s Mr. Darcy delivers his proposal is much more rushed and emotional – Wright’s Darcy, in general, is much more awkward – while Colin Firth preserves his dignity and poise throughout the whole. However, the biggest difference between these two proposal scenes occurs at the end. In Wright’s adaptation, the characters move closer together and almost kiss, even though their language is antagonistic (SLIDE 13). Compare this with the much more spiteful deliveries of the characters in the BBC
version (SLIDE 14). The BBC adaptation, as usual, is closer to Austen’s novel. Perhaps Wright’s directorial decision can be explained by his interpretation of Elizabeth and Darcy’s unconscious attraction within the novel, but coupled with the rain-soaked setting, this reeks of schlock.

The final proposal scene is Mr. Darcy’s successful proposal that occurs at the end of the novel. As in the novel, the BBC adaptation locates this scene during a walk to Meryton after Elizabeth and Darcy have separated themselves from the larger Bennet party (SLIDE 15). Elizabeth’s outpouring – “Mr. Darcy, I can go no longer without thanking you for your kindness to my poor sister” – which precipitates Darcy’s second proposal nicely mirrors Mr. Darcy’s words at the beginning of his first proposal: “In vain I have struggled, it will not do. My feelings will not be repressed.” Both proposals are linked to an uncontrolled outpouring of emotion. Wright’s version of this scene, again, is quite different (SLIDE 16). The setting is much more in focus in this scene, as Mr. Darcy emerges from the mist like a knight in shining armor. Even Joe Wright admits that this scene is “a bit over the top and a bit over-romantic and a bit slushy” in the DVD commentary. Although the language is muddled, the scene makes skillful use of dark and light imagery to reflect the characters’ internal states (SLIDE 17). Elizabeth begins this scene in suspense, literally “in the dark” regarding Mr. Darcy’s feelings for her (SLIDE 18). These are soon dispelled with his proposal, and everything is framed by the blinding light of knowledge, happiness, and love.

Through these comparisons, I have tried to account for some of the irregularities of Wright’s adaptation. Some of these stem from questions of marketability – from the DVD commentary, it is clear that Wright was pressured into making the cheesy final proposal scene. But Wright’s focus on marketability translates into a much larger budget. Even though his film
is less than half the length of the BBC version, it was produced on a 28 million dollar budget, while the BBC version had a budget of 6 million pounds (about 9.6 million dollars). And while some aspects of Wright’s version really cannot be defended – namely, the overly saccharine ending of the “American version,” in which Mr. Darcy kisses Elizabeth and calls her “Mrs. Darcy” over and over again – I hope at least to have convinced you that though Wright’s adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* frequently strays from Austen’s text, it still, at times, conveys the spirit of her prose.

**Bibliography**


