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Karen Gevirtz, *Seton Hall University*



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(De)Constructing Jane: Converting “Austen” in Film Responses

KAREN B. GEVIRTZ

Karen B. Gevirtz (email: Karen.Gevirtz@shu.edu) is an Assistant Professor of English at Seton Hall University. She is the author of *Life After Death: Widows and the English Novel, Defoe to Austen* (University of Delaware Press, 2005) and articles on eighteenth-century women novelists.

YOU SORT OF FEEL LIKE YOU OWN HER,” Keira Knightley says of Jane Austen in an interview, adding, “And I’m sure everybody feels the same way” (“Jane Austen”). Certainly if the last two decades are any indication, just about “everybody” does feel a claim or connection not just to the works but to Austen herself. Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson describe an explosion of Austen-related materials in an impressive array of media, from traditional print to cyberspace, during the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century (1). Phases appear within this effusion, however, particularly in film responses to her work. In the 1990s, films were occupied with the novels themselves. Gradually, however, film responses have shifted their focus so that by the end of the first decade of the new millennium, a large number of Austen films present the novels not as the result of brilliant literary endeavor, but as the inevitably limited product of a historically-bound being, Austen the woman. This conversion of Austen from author to artifact may not necessarily threaten her cultural position in terms of how much attention she and her work receive, but it does have consequences for the nature of her cultural position.

A quick comparison of film adaptations of the novels during the 1990s and during the 2000s reveals a change taking place. During the 1990s, most of the films based on Austen’s novels were adaptations: retellings of the novels that self-identified as such, a genre often called “heritage film.” In 1995, A&E produced its landmark *Pride and Prejudice*, Amanda Root and Ciaran Hinds starred in *Persuasion*, and Emma Thompson wrote the screenplay for and starred in the Oscar-winning *Sense and Sensibility*. In 1996, Gwyneth Paltrow and Kate Beckinsale both starred in adaptations of *Emma*, and in 1999 Patricia Rozema released *Mansfield Park*. After Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*, however, heritage film adaptations of the novels appeared more rarely. Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* came out in 2005, PBS showed new versions of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, and *Northanger Abbey* filmed for television as part of their series “The Complete Jane Austen” in 2008, and PBS broadcast a new production of *Emma* in 2009.

At the same time, however, two different film responses to Austen’s novels, and to Austen herself, were on the rise. The first group was the “makeovers,” as Pucci and Thompson call them. These film responses present Austen’s narrative in a contemporary setting supposedly because they aim at a “contemporary” audience. Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* (1995) is perhaps the first significant of the

makeovers that proliferated in the following decade. In 2000 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Kandukondain Kandukondain* retold *Sense and Sensibility*.¹ They were followed by *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Pride and Prejudice: A Latter Day Comedy* (2003), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), *Lost in Austen* (2008), and *Aisha*, a version of *Emma* (2010). *From Prada to Nada*, claiming a foundation in *Sense and Sensibility*, is forthcoming in 2011.

These films vary in the way they claim a relationship with Austen's origin text. In the case of *Clueless*, Heckerling famously did not cite *Emma* or Austen in the film, and it was not until critics pointed out the similarity that she acknowledged the connection. The novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* was deliberately written in response to the 1995 BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* and calls attention to its indebtedness, while the film version cast Colin Firth, then the iconic Mr. Darcy from his performance for that 1995 version, as Mark Darcy, the romantic male protagonist. *From Prada to Nada* assiduously courts the connection to Austen: Etan Vlessing for *The Hollywood Reporter* calls this film "a contemporary, Latina version of Jane Austen's classic novel *Sense and Sensibility*." The film itself suggests a more tenuous connection, however: it is the story of "two spoiled sisters left penniless after their father's sudden death and forced to move in with their estranged aunt in East Los Angeles. There they find romance and love for their culture" (Vlessing). Despite the variation in degrees of kinship and acknowledged kinship in these makeovers, they share a common origin—a text from Austen's *oeuvre*—and the common purpose of retelling the story in a new setting with the requisite new trappings.

A second group, also growing, is the biopic, a film response that represents the novels as expressions of the novelist's lived experience. Rozema's *Mansfield Park* also belongs in this category since her Fanny Price is built on Austen's letters and juvenilia, expressing opinions more characteristic of (and sometimes actually articulated by) the Austen self-constructed in the letters than the Fanny constructed by Austen in the novel.² Subsequent productions include *The Real Jane Austen* (2002), *Becoming Jane* (2007), *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008), *The Jane Austen Trilogy* (2010), and Gillian Anderson's introductions to the Austen series on PBS in 2008. For *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Anderson began with the facts of Austen's life, occasionally going on to imply but more often stating a connection between Austen's lived experience and the content of the novel being presented.

Trailers for biopics reinforce this premise, as well. The PBS trailer for *Miss Austen Regrets* claims that the film presents the "story behind the stories." In the trailer for *Becoming Jane*, the voiceover explains, "When everyone else was trying to fit in, Jane was the only one who stood out. She was a young woman no one understood. Until she met the one man who would change her life." This statement is quickly followed by a rapid montage of scenes of building sexual tension culminating in Tom Lefroy's suggestive claim that if Jane Austen wishes to be a great author, her "horizons must be"—scene of a couple hastily removing their last undergarments in the woods—" . . . widened." The implication that it is not just love but some kind of sexual initiation or awakening that makes possible Austen's understanding of romance is summarized in the key line, "Discover Jane Austen's untold romance, that would become the inspiration for her greatest love stories." As the tagline in the print publicity puts it, "Jane Austen's Most Extraordinary Romance Was Her Own."



What is interesting to me here is not the "fidelity" of these film responses to an original, whether that original is a novel by Austen or the historical moment in which she wrote it. Rather, I am interested in what the trend indicates about approaches to Austen and her work, and what the consequences of those approaches might be. In considering the relationship between original text and film response, for example, critics such as Deborah Cartmell, Imelda Whelehan, Thomas M. Leitch, Gina Macdonald and Andrew F. Macdonald, and Brian McFarlane argue that such a relationship is "intertextual," that is, not a hierarchical relationship where the original text is superior to the film response, but a relationship of equals. According to this approach, intertextuality is value-free: a "source novel and film can echo back

and forth in a satisfying way, their intertextual relationship reminding us of virtues in each medium that might remain unnoticed otherwise” (Macdonald and Macdonald 7). In other terms, intertextuality involves an enhancement of cultural status for both texts, particularly an opportunity to celebrate “the multitudinous ways in which adaptations can increase the cultural capital of a text” (Cartmell and Whelehan 6). Although such critics also recognize that ideology does play a role in the creation of a film response (Whelehan 12), they generally overlook the point that ideology itself confers value and is not guaranteed to benefit those subject to it.³

In fact, successive texts inevitably change not just the status but also the nature of the status of the origin text. T. S. Eliot, whose “Tradition and the Individual Talent” provides some of the foundation for intertextuality, makes this point himself: “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. . . . [T]he *whole* existing order must be, ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted” (38, original italics). The films themselves comment on each other in this way. Douglas McGrath’s *Emma* (1996) capitalizes on the success of Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* by casting Jeremy Northam as Mr. Knightley and then costuming and grooming him to increase the resemblance. In this regard, *Emma*’s status is affected by the critical and popular status conferred on its predecessor. In reinforcing the idea of a glamorous male lead, however, McGrath’s *Emma* helps normalize the much-debated value of male beauty in the BBC’s *Pride and Prejudice*. As Sarah Maza, Walter C. Metz, and Jessica Durgan have shown, adaptations as a genre reflect the values and concerns of the particular period in which they are made, thereby affecting the understanding and cultural position of the original text. This point has been made about Austen-inspired films by the essays of Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield’s ground-breaking collection, *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, and more recently by critics such as Ruth Perry and Joyce Goggin. Martine Voiret and Madeleine Dobie also describe the “postfeminist” agendas inhering in many film responses.

These ideological elements transfer directly into audiences. Describing her undergraduate students, M. Casey Diana contends that viewers who begin with the films and then read the novels have a significantly different experience than those who follow the opposite route. They are what David Roche might call “critical and sensitive readers,” readers who use both intellect and emotion to engage with a text. This difference of experience applies to non-college students, as well, but their engagement with the novels they read after viewing the films may be less critical, in the academic sense, than that of Diana’s students: as Whelehan notes, film viewers often buy but do not finish the original novel (18). Laurie Kaplan points out that “Generation-Y” viewers, a generation later than Diana’s undergraduates, are “more likely to see an adaptation first and to read the novel after having been impressed with someone else’s vision of the characters and the settings,” what Roche calls reading “that merely takes in a dominant discourse” (Kaplan, “Lost in Austen”; Roche). For many people, evidently, the interpretation of a text provided not just by the inevitable choices involved in filming but also by the premise of the film becomes a mode of understanding the original text.



What then does the growing tendency to produce makeover and biopic responses to Austen and her novels indicate? For critics like William Leung, Laura Carroll, and Hugh Davis, makeovers of Austen’s novels render more visible the text’s relevance to contemporary audiences. According to the publicity for *The Jane Austen Book Club*, “When five women and one man get together to discuss the English writer’s beloved novels, they realize the heartaches of Emma, Mr. Darcy and the Bennet sisters are not so different from their own.”

Certainly audiences in the 1990s had no difficulty recognizing the shared humanity of Austen’s characters. Miramax publicity described *Mansfield Park* as a “fun and sexy comedy [which] tells a timelessly entertaining story where wealth, secret passions, and mischievous women put love to the test” and a “smart, playful, and funny hit”; Fanny Price became a “spirited young woman,” who “enlightens”

her cousins “with a wit and sparkle all her own.” Readers of the novel might take issue with these characterizations, but evidently such descriptions did not then seem incompatible with empire-waist dresses and a coach-and-four. The trailer for *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) attempted seduction, pausing enticingly between each infinitive: “Columbia Pictures invites you to fall deeply . . . , to feel intensely . . . , to surrender completely . . . , to risk everything. . . . From Jane Austen’s timeless classic comes a motion picture beyond all expectations.” Although this suggestive voice-over is interspersed with scenes from the film, leaving no doubt that viewers were to “surrender completely” to and “risk everything” for a film about women in hats and men in high collars, the film was a tremendous critical and popular success. Still more recently, *Lost In Austen* (2008) seems to have offered a highly relevant critique of contemporary life for Generation Y, as Kaplan calls them, as well as a highly relevant alternative to contemporary manners and mores (Kaplan, “Lost in Austen”).

Increasingly, however, film responses and critics voice an opposite assumption, that the novels’ temporal distance from contemporary audiences makes them irrelevant. As McFarlane contends, “Modern-set versions of *Emma* (Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless*, 1995) and *Henry IV Parts I and II* (Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho*, 1991) suggest that the directors had more on their minds than careful adaptation of Jane Austen and Shakespeare: their interest seemed to lie primarily in how far works of earlier centuries might be *made to seem relevant to later generations* in settings and times far removed from those in which they had their origins” (17, italics added). Similarly, Pucci and Thompson suggest that films can link “the present of [viewers’] own cultural perception and experience with a distant historical and cultural location of the written text” (4). Deirdre Lynch considers this alienation by temporal distance a condition of contemporary society when she asks, “Do these remakes of classic texts from the past present us with opportunities to think historically—to perceive an organic and necessary relation between the bygone worlds they depict and our lived experience? Can we learn history—can we regain that capacity for retrospection ostensibly lost in a postmodern age . . . ?” (71). Seen this way, makeovers like *Clueless* function less as a fresh expression of old truths and more as an effort to infuse something old with any truth at all.

This doubt about relevance also could explain the impulse to account for the novels in terms of biography. The growing number of biographically-based films are expressions of the “pronounced recent phenomenon of ‘screening the author’” or an “emphasis on the author” in films interested in portraying the past. Supposedly arising from the need to establish an authentic past, this approach is really an aspect of the recent fascination with biography as a way of understanding literature (Cartmell and Whelehan 8). In the special feature, “Jane Austen, Ahead of Her Time” on the DVD of *Pride & Prejudice*, Paul Webster, a producer, and Joe Wright, the director, contend that Austen’s work depends upon lived experience:

This recognition of Austen's keen insights into her own society modifies into the premise of *Becoming Jane*, the insistence that specific experience itself must be the explanation for her representation of romantic relationships. Advertising around the adaptations of the 1990s acknowledging the "irony of a maiden lady as the expert on women's feelings for men" (Brownstein 19) has evolved into a shallower, un-ironic insistence that a "maiden lady" could only know about "women's feelings for men" because she was a woman who had those feelings. In other words, instead of the irony that the person without the experience has the insight into human nature, the biographical approach manifested in *Becoming Jane* insists that insight can only be derived from experience.

A great deal is lost as a result of this suspicion of literature as a vehicle for meaning. Certainly, the assumption that film as a genre necessarily offers an entirely different way of telling a story cannot hold, however films are valued for this difference. Despite the claims by "purists" like Roger Gard that elements of literariness cannot carry into film, for example, the record suggests otherwise. Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* has been extensively discussed in terms of the plethora of film techniques Wright used to present narrative elements such as point of view or thematic concerns. A large number of essays in the special issue of *Persuasions On-Line* devoted to the film, for example, addressed that topic.⁴ Wright himself acknowledged his effort to represent the narratorial voice, that elusive creature, with the camera (Pacquet-Deyris; Fetters).

In fact, film critics have often suggested that film responses benefit thematically, narratively, and structurally from a close, but not necessarily mimetic, relationship to the original. Reviewing Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, David Elley savors the moments when the film offers "the viewer pure Austen, with well-turned dialogue, acute social irony and held-back emotions" and notes that "when [Rozema] lets Austen's dialogue have a chance—as during a late-in-the-proceedings carriage scene between Fanny and Edmund that's tumescent with repressed feelings—the movie briefly has an emotional power" (Elley 10). Robert Bianco, writing about PBS's *Persuasion* in *USA Today*, opens with, "If you're launching a Jane Austen festival, shouldn't you show a little more faith in her? Not absolute fidelity, mind you: Print and screen are different mediums. But *Persuasion*, the first production from PBS' *Complete Jane Austen*, badly overadjusts, adding so many fussy modern flourishes and out-of-place romantic gestures it almost undermines the inherent beauty of Austen's work."

Explaining text primarily in terms of biography reduces the opportunity for audience engagement and investment, despite claims to the contrary, by providing the explanation for the text's form and content. Introducing *Mansfield Park* for PBS, Gillian Anderson uncompromisingly asserts, "Jane Austen is obviously making up for what's missing in her own life and putting it in her fiction." The inclusion of *Miss Austen Regrets* in the series reinforces the notion that Austen's life explains the novels. In fact, the biopics in particular disregard the point that writers, Austen included, make the things they write, and that the act of making is not the same thing as translating or transferring. In the introduction to *Sense and Sensibility*, Anderson asks, "Who taught Jane Austen to recognize and understand these feelings? Was it a young man called Tom Lefroy?" But as Claudia Johnson points out, such assumptions overlook Austen's career as a writer, a practitioner of a craft. Although often characterized as the self-conscious elegy of a dying, unmarried woman, *Persuasion*, Johnson points out, was rather a particular text drawing on her knowledge of the world and her critical and imaginative faculties, as "Sanditon," the narrative she was constructing while she was dying, was quite different (144-45).

Significantly, explanatory material included on the DVD of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, a film based on the assumption that Austen's work is already relevant because it is grounded in an understanding of human nature, provides a different emphasis. In the biographical featurette "The Life of Jane Austen," Austen scholar Joan Klingel Ray introduces Tom Lefroy only to dismiss him as the cause of any

revelation:

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Here, biography begins with documentary evidence rather than the literary text, and the film that this biography accompanies reaches a considerably different conclusion not just about the influence of the encounters with Tom Lefroy but also about Austen's skills as a writer. Reading the novels as expressions of the author's lived experience to the exclusion of her insight or imagination thus disparages the process of writing—which Austen recognized and honored—and, even at best, runs the risk of misreading the work.



Admittedly, other authors, even male authors, have had their work reduced to biography. Many fans of Sherlock Holmes insist on finding the exact place or person in “real life” that appeared in the story. Similarly, the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1999) suggests that *Romeo and Juliet* originated in the Bard's experiences rather than in his acumen and creativity. *Shakespeare in Love*, however, has not become the model for understanding Shakespeare's work; nor do the fans of Holmes who argue about the “real” location of 221B Baker Street represent the dominant cultural discourse about Holmes or, more analogously, Conan Doyle. In contrast, the growing number of biopics shifts the perception of Austen's work from great literature to archaeological artifact (at best) or encoded diary (at worst). Voiret and Dobie both describe how Austen adaptations and makeovers articulate elements of a backlash against women and feminism, and the increasing reliance on an “author-centered” approach continues this trend. The reiterated claim that Austen wrote her life when she wrote her novels obscures the texts' significant concerns—about gender, class, power, education, imperialism, love, and families, for example—as well as the notion that Austen, a woman writer, engaged with these issues.

Such a maneuver shrinks the novels and Austen. The recent crop of biopics presents the novels as so limited by the unchangeable and sometimes unknowable circumstances of Austen's life that the books can have no relevance or interest to contemporary audiences except as trivia or gossip. Anderson's questions in the introduction to *Sense and Sensibility*—“Who taught Jane Austen to recognize and understand these feelings? Was it a young man called Tom Lefroy?”—arguably encourage viewers to prioritize knowledge of Austen's life over knowledge of her work. As Ros Ballaster argues about Aphra

Behn, “The reduction of the study of Behn’s texts to biographical history serves on as a further example of taking her ‘in an ill sense,’ closing down the ‘Thousand Things’ she has ‘a great mind to say.’ Behn’s fictions, in this critical ‘recovering,’ become mere vehicles for the discovery of the ‘facts’ of her biography, where they might be employed to undo the very opposition between fact and fiction, body and text, self and other” (71).

Ballaster’s point that in reading Behn through biography we lose all the insight and critical perspective offered by her work precisely because it is literature, not biography, applies to Austen, or indeed to any writer. Explaining text as biographical eruption has a dangerous tendency to reductionism and to speculation, a tendency pointed out as early as W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s essay “The Intentional Fallacy” and more recently addressed by the New Formalists, who are increasingly turning their attention to prose, as a forthcoming issue on “Form and Formalism in the British Eighteenth-Century Novel” from *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (edited by John Richetti) attests.

That is not to suggest that biography has no role in a critical engagement with literature. Questions about an author’s motivation, experience, milieu, have generated productive, insightful avenues of discovery and understanding. As Thomas diPiero explains in his review of New Formalism, for this approach, a “text’s formal features encode the social circumstances surrounding the systematization of those features into convention or genre,” and “any formal investigation of a work or genre necessarily invokes a set of social circumstances implicitly associated with form,” a point particularly relevant for the novel (206). Furthermore, some of the sources of the heavily biographically-based approach occasionally admit the problem of biography as a primary or only tool for understanding Austen’s work. Unlike the declarative form of the verb *to be* in its trailer (“Jane was the only one who stood out. She was a young woman no one understood”), the PBS homepage for *Miss Austen Regrets* uses speculative, critical verbs more consistent with nuanced reading, as when it claims that the film “examin[es] why, despite setting the standard for romantic fiction, she died having never married or met her own Mr. Darcy.”

Similarly, PBS’s biography of Austen, designed for the 2008 series, admits at the very end that “[t]he biographical facts may never adequately explain the quick wit, the sharp insight, and the deep emotional intelligence she brought to her novels. Perhaps that is impossible; it is likely that the novels will continue to transcend our understanding of where they came from.” Nevertheless, admissions such as these, when they do come, are neither the primary marketing tool nor the primary message of the film. Such complicating acknowledgments are not likely to be significant checks on the trend in the construction of a dominant discourse about Austen or the construction of Austen within it.

Furthermore, when we view the novels solely as code, we also reduce Austen’s status as a great novelist, and there are few enough women with the cultural standing of a Shakespeare or, to be more fair, a Charles Dickens or E. M. Forster, whose work also has been adapted for popular viewing audiences without reducing it to biographical facts. As Dobie suggests, “The problem of the recent Austen adaptations in this regard may perhaps be seen as a reflection of the continuing problem of women writers’ place in the literary canon. Austen has long been accepted as a key figure in the history of English literature, yet like many other women writers, she occupies within this circle of prestige a circumscribed, distinctly feminine position, which at worst amounts to qualified acceptance, or to recognition as a woman writer” (257).

The casual film title *Becoming Jane* or a press release like PBS’s, entitled “Sundays with Jane,” converts Austen from a great writer—Austen, Shakespeare, Dickens—into an intimate acquaintance. *Shakespeare in Love* was not *Will in Love*, after all; the BBC’s series on Lord Byron was entitled *Byron*, not *George* (2003). Renaming Austen in this more intimate and personalized manner removes from her at least some of the cultural authority accorded to a “Shakespeare” or “Byron” or “Dickens,” a suspicious move when it comes to the cultural status of a woman. Even if we cede the argument that “old” literature cannot speak to us any longer—an argument that Shakespeare’s plays alone refute—we cannot afford to lose Jane Austen.

NOTES

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1. For a more extensive discussion of the relationship between *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Sense and Sensibility*, see, for example, Leung.

2. See, for example, Ealy; Elley; or Ansen.

3. For a thorough treatment of the relationship between cultural capital and ideology, see Guillory.

4. See also Kaplan, "Inside-Out/Outside-In"; Chan; Ailwood; Stewart-Beer; and Martin.

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