

The Jane Austen Movie Club: An Analysis of Modern Jane Austen Film Adaptations

by

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Abstract

When the first epic motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*, was released in 1915, Jane Austen had been dead for almost one hundred years, and the quaint stories of her regency girls trying to find husbands seemed to be far from most filmmakers minds. Austen wouldn't make her way to the big screen for another twenty-five years, with Robert Z. Leonard's 1940 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, and her characters wouldn't make it into the modern world for much longer. Yet in the last couple of decades, Austen has gone through a resurgence in the world of film, thanks in no small part to one particular genre: the modern movie adaptation. The last twenty years have seen Jane Austen characters all over the world – from the streets of Beverly Hills to the beaches in India – reimagined and rewritten to work in the modern day. While some of these adaptations have been more successful than others, they ultimately help to illuminate her genius, and show both her great foresight and her ability to construct timeless characters and plots. Modern adaptations of Jane Austen have all helped to prove that the stories of Austen do not grow old with time, and that her universality as a writer still shines through just as brightly almost two hundred years after her death.

“Here's how adaptation works - almost everything in the movie is in the book in some form. But it's as though the deck has been completely reshuffled and some of the cards have been assigned different values, some of the fours have been made into jacks, and some of the jacks have been made into twos.” - Walter Kirn, NPR, 2009.¹

The art of adapting a piece of writing – be it prose or poetry – is very rarely simple. Taking something that was originally only intended to be read on the page and bringing it to life through actors, staging, and music, is by its very definition not an easy task, but one that takes copious amounts of time and effort. When the platform of a story is changed, it only follows that the story itself must change as well to work within that new medium. It must be forced to change and morph, yet still be recognizable and retain the energy of the work from which it originated. It needs to work as a piece of art independent of the story it is based on, but still be satisfying to fans of the original. Needless to say, it is a complicated job.

And yet, since the dawn of movies, adapting written works for the screen has been one of the most popular types of film, starting as early as 1910 with J. Searle Dawley's adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*². Despite the many challenges that come along with the act of turning a piece of prose into a living work of film, we have and continue to see a plethora of adaptations throughout the history of film, taking from the works of William Shakespeare all the way up to Gillian Flynn and putting it on the screen. From the perspective of a studio executive, this makes a lot of sense: taking a story that has already been proven successful, already has a fan-base (not to mention that

¹ "For 'Up In The Air' Writer, Book, Film Different." NPR. December 30, 2009.

² *Frankenstein*. Directed by J. Seale Dawley. Performed by Augustus Phillips and Charles Ogle. Edison Studios, 1910. Film.

it already exists at all) and turning it into a movie can seem a lot easier than completely starting from scratch.

As a result of this, adaptations of literary works are something that audiences have an abundance of. For the purposes of this paper, only adaptations of prose works will be discussed, excluding works meant to be performed, like plays, and possible interpretations of poetry. Of course, the umbrella for these film adaptations tends to be large, and many different sorts of movies can fall under it. There is the classic adaptation – one that, for all intents and purposes, takes the text and puts it up on the screen without any major changes (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1995; *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 2015). There are films that keep several elements of the original, but change things as well, whether it's the presentation and staging or a major plot point (*Anna Karenina*, 2012; *The Painted Veil*, 2006; *Mansfield Park*, 1999). There are even films that will keep the original text completely in place, but then swap the setting for something for current (*Romeo + Juliet*, 1996). And then, of course, there is the modern adaptation.

For the most part, the modern adaptation is by definition self-explanatory. It is an adaptation of a classic work that takes place in the modern world. It follows then that this world changes depending on when the adaptation is written and released (*West Side Story*³, for example, came out in 1961 and is not technically modern anymore, yet it was a modern adaptation when it originally premiered), but the concept stays the same: retooling and rearranging a story to the point where it retains its original themes and plot, but takes place within modern society. Modern adaptations are not exclusive to film, and

³ *West Side Story*. Directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins. Performed by Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer. United Artists, 1961. Film.

have been frequent in literature and stage plays as well as on the screen, including in written works that inspired some of the films analyzed in this essay. Both of the novels *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004) are loose literary adaptations of the works of Austen. *Jane* (2010) by April Lindner transfers *Jane Eyre* to the 20th century and makes Rochester a rock star. *Pygmalion* (1913) by George Bernard Shaw is a retelling of the Pygmalion story from ancient Greek mythology (which would later be adapted for the stage and screen as *My Fair Lady*). When it comes to movies, everything from the works of William Shakespeare (*10 Things I Hate About You*, 1999; *She's the Man*, 2004) to Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Cruel Intentions*, 1999) has made it up on the screen. And, of course, that it to say nothing of the works of Jane Austen.

Born in 1775 to Reverend George and Cassandra Austen, Jane Austen received fewer than two years of formal education, and yet nearly two hundred years on is still one of the most praised authors of all time⁴. Her works brought together the themes of romance, femininity, class, and culture in a way that was progressive for the time, and yet somehow can still feel relevant centuries later. She was a comedian and a satirist who knew when to keep her mouth shut, i.e. when the victims of her humor did not have the privileges she had, and she was a woman in a world run by men who did her best to speak her mind. Her novels feel distinctly classic and old, and yet, for many it is impossible to read Austen's work and not connect to at least a single facet of it. "Precisely because she never mentioned the momentous historical events of her time, her novels reveal the

⁴ Austen, Jane. *Jane Austen: Seven Novels*. New York: Barnes & Noble Inc, 2016, I.

importance of shifts in social relationships between classes and genders”.⁵ All this considered, it is no surprise that the works of Jane Austen have found themselves adapted for the screen many times over, starting in 1940 with Robert Z. Leonard’s adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*⁶. Over the years, the various ways that Austen’s novels have been adapted have changed depending on the times; the 1940 version, for instance, has the Bennet sisters dressing as though they were all Southern Belles. Seeing as this film came out a year after *Gone With the Wind*⁷, it seems unlikely that this was a coincidence. These changes have often meant different themes and tones for Austen, and with the popularity of the modern adaptation, different eras in time as well.

Of the six Austen novels that exist, not including the novella *Lady Susan*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* have found themselves turned into modern adaptations the most. This is likely mostly due to popularity – *Pride and Prejudice* has always been Austen’s most praised book, and *Emma* is not far behind. While all of Austen’s novels include themes and plots that can be transferred to the world of today, *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* seem to be the works with the fewest things keeping them in the era in which they were written. It’s a lot easier for modern readers to relate to the spoiled and at times bratty – but always well-intentioned – Emma than it is to see themselves in the boring and snotty Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*. By that same rule, no matter when someone reads it or when the novel takes place, Elizabeth Bennet is a delight and a joy, and if writers get their adaptation right, is the girl that everyone desperately wants to be

⁵ Austen, *Seven Novels*, IX.

⁶ *Pride and Prejudice*. Directed by Robert Z. Leonard. Performed by Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier. MGM, 1940. Film.

⁷ *Gone with the Wind*. Directed by Victor Fleming. Performed by Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939. Film.

best friends with. She herself is also a character who feels quite modern, specifically in her desire only to marry for love and contempt for those whom she finds disrespectful, despite their status. The romance of Elizabeth and Darcy – two people who meet under negative circumstances and cannot seem to make it work because of a series of poor encounters – stands the test of time, in ways that say, the romance between Elinor and Edward from *Sense and Sensibility*, does not. There have been attempts to turn her other novels into modern films (*From Prada to Nada*, 2011), but rarely have they been successful or had any sort of longevity. For whatever reasons, *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* fit in quite nicely with a modern setting. The other novels simply do not.

Of course, just because a book is timeless on paper does not necessarily mean that it can be so easily translated to the modern day through film. As previously established, making any story work for the film medium involves a lot of retooling and reworking, so that it can easily slip into both a new time period and a new artform. In order to succeed, it must capture the essence, intent, and tone of the original author. Without these elements, a work cannot truly be connected to its predecessor:

“It is tone which tells us what the author feels about his subject, his audience, and himself. But tone is located in no specific element of the [work]; it arises from diction, images, figures of speech, structure, even rhymes and meter-in short, from the whole. If we miss any part of this whole, we may miss the tone of the [work]. And if we miss its tone, we miss its meaning.”⁸

In theory, a work could possibly diverge drastically from the text, and still feel a closeness to the original work through the way it interprets the author’s tone. There are

⁸ Perrine, Laurence. "The Importance of Tone in the Interpretation of Literature." *College English* 24, no. 5 (1963), 395.

obviously many elements to making a good modern adaptation of a work, but capturing the essence of the original work is needed. When that tone is properly captured in a modern film, that movie can actually help viewers and readers see a work in a new light. To find out what it is that makes for a good modern film adaptation – and, of course, a good film adaptation of Austen herself – it seems necessary to compare. To look at various modern retellings of the works of a specific author, and to see not only which films succeed and fail, but what it is that has been put into those interpretations to make them work, or alternatively, not work.

This following essay will analyze the art of adapting a classic piece of literature into a modern-day film. This will be done by discussing five modern film adaptations that are either directly or indirectly based on *Emma* and/or *Pride and Prejudice*. In chronological order, they are *Clueless* (1995), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-2013). This paper will talk about the ways that each of these films succeed and/or fail in the task of adapting the work of Austen that they are based on, as well as the literary works that adapt Austen and are then turned into films, as such with *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club*. This paper will go into detail about the changes in each adaptation, how they have been retooled to work in a modern setting, and whether, given the source material and the nature of film, they work on the screen while also doing justice to Austen. This paper will analyze how each film interpreted the tone and themes of Austen's original novels, and consider how that interpretation affects the quality of the adaptation. This paper will also discuss how each adaptation fails and succeeds in its medium independent of its relation to Austen, by analyzing how critics

felt about the adaptations when they were originally released, and what box office and website views were. Ultimately, this paper will analyze whether each film fails or succeeds in adapting the spirit of Austen in a modern setting, and whether both an Austen-lover and someone who has never read her works can take enjoyment in the film.

Part One: *Clueless*

The year was 1995, and despite being deceased for some time, things were looking up for Jane Austen. At 220-years-old, the famed writer, who died at age 41, was experiencing a resurgence with a wave of films and television shows capturing her script. This included two feature films: *Persuasion*⁹, which brought to life Austen's last written novel, and the more popular *Sense and Sensibility*¹⁰, whose star Emma Thompson both adapted the book and won an Academy Award for her work. Additionally, Austen had found herself on the BBC in the wildly popular *Pride and Prejudice*¹¹ mini-series television program. This show gained popularity for a number of reasons: the lively actors who portrayed Lizzy and Darcy (Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth), its beautiful cinematography, and the way it often lifted dialogue directly from the novel. John J. O'Connor of *The New York Times* called it a, "splendid adaptation, with a remarkably faithful and sensitively nuanced script."¹² Also, the fact that Colin Firth had a scene where he emerged from a lake in a wet shirt probably didn't hurt. Either way, everything was coming up Austen.

The same could not be said for films about teenagers. Thanks to the work of director John Hughes, the 1980s had been filled with a plethora of oh-so-relatable movies about teens, which usually depicted adolescence as simultaneously terrific and horrific. While there was a level of variety amongst these films – *The Breakfast Club*, for

⁹ *Persuasion*. Directed by Roger Michell. Performed by Amanda Root and Ciarán Hinds. Sony Pictures Classics, 1995. Film.

¹⁰ *Sense and Sensibility*. Directed by Ang Lee. Performed by Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet. United States: Columbia Pictures, 1995. Film.

¹¹ Davies, Andrew, writer. *Pride and Prejudice*. BBC1. 1995.

¹² O'Connor, John J. "An England Where Heart and Purse Are Romantically United." *The New York Times*. January 12, 1996.

example, does not have that many similarities with *Valley Girl*, or *Clueless* director Amy Heckerling's hit *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* – there tended to be a bit of a common thread amongst these movies: they were hopeful, they were optimistic, and maybe most importantly, they were real. Every girl in America didn't want to be Molly Ringwald (who starred in multiple Hughes films) because she had a perfect body and was the most popular girl in school, but because her characters always had a level of authenticity to them, and still managed to end the movie with smiles on their faces. While this optimism was nice, it did not last. By the end of the 1980s, the era of the hopeful teen movie seemed to be ending. While *Heathers*, a 1988 film about two outcasts who end up accidentally killing off popular students at their high school, was a commercial failure at the box office, it won an Independent Spirit Award and went on to be a cult classic. It also seemed to mark the decline of the classic teen film.

While there were most definitely films about teenagers in the first half of the '90s (*Dazed and Confused*, which came out in 1993, being a prime example), the tone had clearly shifted. “Well, there was a moment in time where a number of movies seemed to be about, for lack of a better word, stupid young people.”¹³ Most people would likely say that while Jane Austen is many things, stupid is not one of them. As such, it's not very surprising that in 1995, moviegoers likely didn't see the newfound popularity of Jane Austen in the movies as a way to help teen films recover from their decline. As it turns out, studio heads didn't see it either. “I remember one of [the Fox executives] thought it would be better if the boys were more prominent,” says Twink Caplan, associate

¹³ Chaney, Jen. *As If!: The Oral History of Clueless as Told by Amy Heckerling, the Cast, and the Crew*. New York: Touchstone, 2015, 9.

producer of *Clueless*¹⁴ and Miss Geist in the film.¹⁵ Bubbly teen comedies about women, “in which girls are in charge of their own fates, active rather than reactive”¹⁶ did not seem particularly marketable at the time. *Clueless* was about to change that.

Interestingly enough, it was the reliability of Austen, as well as director Amy Heckerling, that helped bring this unlikely hit to life:

“The fact that Amy had mined this kind of territory before in such a seminal way with *Fast Times*, and here she was doing it again but on such a sophisticated level – and not sophisticated in a way that was going to alienate teenagers, but potentially embrace adults in a nostalgic way. It is based on *Emma*. It was more than just a teen comedy and set pieces and sex and all. It had real, deep characters and other layers.”¹⁷

In Heckerling’s eyes, the concept of these two very different worlds coming together made perfect sense. “I love [Austen], I think she’s one of the greatest writers that ever lived,” she said of Austen in an article for Time Magazine.¹⁸ “It’s wonderful that we’re able to see the way people used to function. We understand the feelings the same way we did, but the stuff we have to deal with it changes.” In many ways, Emma Woodhouse could not be more different from arguably Austen’s most popular character, the free-spirited Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. Despite Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* being quite possibly the most polarizing Austen protagonist, Emma is unique in that her flaws are so clearly acknowledged, even from the first page: “The real evils indeed of

¹⁴ *Clueless*. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Performed by Alicia Silverstone and Paul Rudd. Paramount Pictures, 1995. Film.

¹⁵ Chaney, *As If!*, 6.

¹⁶ Orenstein, Peggy. “The Movies Discover The Teen-Age Girl.” *The New York Times*. August 10, 1996.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁸ Begley, Sarah. “Clueless 20th Anniversary: Amy Heckerling on a Musical Adaptation.” *Time*. July 19, 2015.

Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much of her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself."¹⁹

Emma is never intended to be the ideal heroine, who always thinks of the poor before herself and has dedicated her life to her intelligence. From the get-go, Austen is upfront about who Emma is – a rich girl who has faced few troubles, who at times engages in superficial and vapid activities. *Clueless* does this as well. The first scene of the film includes a series of brief clips that do, in fact, look “like a Noxzema commercial”²⁰: Cher (the Emma equivalent for this film) shopping, cruising with her friends, hanging by the pool. She is quite clearly the beautiful, popular rich girl whom everyone knows and probably wants a little bit to be. Cher's saving grace is that she is incredibly likable, and even more so, nice:

“One of the reasons why so many adaptations of *Emma* haven't lived up to the source material is that when Emma is played either as too much of a bossy know-it-all (Kate Beckinsale) or too much of a spoiled ditz (Gwyneth Paltrow) the balance of Austen's perfect narrative is thrown off. Cher Horowitz illuminates Emma Woodhouse because they both exist in that precarious realm where lovable threatens to tip over into loathsome, but doesn't.”²¹

What stops Cher and Emma from being insufferable is the fact that despite their superficial elements, they are both good people, even if at times the positive elements of their personalities can be easy to overlook.

¹⁹ Austen, *Seven Novels*, 659.

²⁰ Heckerling, *Clueless*, 1995.

²¹ Selzer, Sarah. "How 'Clueless' Illuminates the Timeless Genius of Jane Austen's 'Emma'." Flavorwire. July 15, 2015.

Clueless is, in many respects, equal parts teen flick and literary adaptation. It is, quite literally, a “shiny, girly, comedy about a shopaholic Beverly Hills teenager with a few Jane Austen DNA molecules in her genetic code.”²² What makes it succeed as a work of film is that it is rooted and steeped in such rich and complex source material, but is not afraid to make it its own. It adapts the plot of *Emma*, yes, and does so quite well, but ultimately capturing the scene-to-scene elements does not matter if the viewer doesn’t both understand and appreciate the spirit in which it was written. The essence and spirit of Jane Austen is something that often gets misconstrued, and in the 200 years since her death, has been warped into something not always representative of Austen. Films like *Becoming Jane* (2007)²³ and *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007)²⁴ portray Jane as a naïve, uppity snob. In reality, she was a woman who made both dead baby²⁵ and dick jokes²⁶. She would often make jokes at the expense of the wealthy, but never towards those who were in a lesser social situation than her own. She was, by all accounts, an unpretentious woman. Similarly, *Clueless* is an unpretentious film: its protagonist isn’t the hipster college student, but the bubbly, at times vapid Beverly Hills girl obsessed with the mall:

“*Clueless* is a cinematic sleight-of-hand: It’s an excessively smart movie about ‘dumb’ people. Or, more subversively, it’s a sly assertion that the types of people that can be easily dismissed as ‘ditzes’ or ‘airheads’—usually teenage girls—often possess an intelligence the world doesn’t give them credit for.”²⁷

²² Chaney, *As If!*, V.

²³ *Becoming Jane*. Directed by Julian Jarrold. Performed by Anne Hathaway and James McAvoy. Miramax Films, 2007. Film.

²⁴ *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Dir. Robin Swicord. Prod. John Calley, Julie Lynn, and Diana Napper. Performed by Kathy Baker, Maria Bello, and Emily Blunt. Sony Pictures Classics, 2007.

²⁵ Austen, Jane, and Deirdre Le Faye. 2011. *Jane Austen's letters*. Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, letter IX.

²⁶ Austen, *Seven Novels*, 1067-1068

²⁷ Zoladz, Lindsay. "The True Confessions of Amy Heckerling – The Ringer." The Ringer. February 16, 2017.

While Cher isn't always the smartest person in the room, she's also not dumb, and even more importantly, she is never vilified for not knowing certain things. Instead, she is celebrated for it. When Cher and Josh's girlfriend get into a disagreement regarding a scene from *Hamlet*, which Cher is, obviously, wrong about, Josh appreciates Cher's naiveté and sincerity, much to the chagrin of his girlfriend. Even though Cher doesn't know all the facts, she is shown to be earnest and genuine, much like her literary counterpart.

Not everyone sees it this way. In a 1996 interview for *New York Magazine*, while promoting her traditional adaptation of *Emma*²⁸, Gwyneth Paltrow spoke about *Clueless* with more than a little distaste: "‘I think it's sad,’ she says lighting up her first Camel, ‘that America's first cultural reference for this movie will be *Clueless*. I mean, *honestly*.’”²⁹ But the reality is that, while the Beverly Hills elite might not be what comes to mind when one thinks of Jane Austen (or, it wasn't in 1995 when *Clueless* came out), the comparison does work. As *Clueless* showcases, the arbitrariness of high society has a lot in common with the arbitrariness of high school. Like the Highbury of *Emma*, Beverly Hills teens are obsessed with who has the best clothes, social status, who is dating whom, and many other arbitrary rules that the rest of society chooses to ignore. While *Clueless* was not the first or the last film to adapt classic literature and put teens in the roles of adults, it probably did so the smoothest. It's not too on-the-nose like *Valley Girl* (1983), and the original plot isn't so ancient or steeped in outdated concepts that it doesn't

²⁸ *Emma*. Directed by Douglas McGrath. Performed by Gwyneth Paltrow and Toni Collette. Miramax Films, 1996. Film.

²⁹ Sales, Nancy Jo. "A Star Is Born." *New York Magazine*, 1996.

transfer (although *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999)³⁰, based on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, does a surprisingly good job of taking incredibly misogynistic source material and managing to turn it feminist). And while there are a couple of major changes to the plot, they feel natural: Christian being gay as opposed to secretly engaged makes him unavailable to Cher romantically in a way that both redeems his character and makes sense for the story; having Mr. Hall and Mrs. Geist not yet together romantically at the beginning of the film allows for the audience to see Cher make a positive match, and establishes on screen her desire to help people, something that comes back as a bigger part of her personality later on in the film; and making Josh Cher's ex-stepbrother as opposed to her 38-year old brother-in-law helps keep the familial element of their relationship while also making it legal and morally acceptable by modern standards.

As with any Jane Austen book, the primary romantic relationship between the heroine and whoever her lover happens to be plays a major part in both the novel and its modern counterpart. Getting the romance of Austen right is something that many feminist interpretations tend to get wrong, which is ironic, seeing as every one of Austen's published novels can be and is considered feminist. They were novels that always passed the Bechdel test, a text created by cartoonist Allison Bechdel, requiring that two women must talk about something other than a man.³¹ These stories were from the women's perspective, and frequently had characters trying to subvert the sexist society they happened to be born into. While Emma might not be as much of a feminist icon as Elizabeth Bennet, she often displays behavior that shows her dedication to her own

³⁰ *10 Things I Hate About You*. Directed by Gil Junger. US, 1999. Film.

³¹ Bechdel, Allison. "The Rule." Comic strip. In *Dykes To Watch Out For*. 1985.

dignity while not betraying her character, such as her insistence early in the novel on not marrying, since financially, she sees no reason to. Oftentimes in adaptations of Austen's work, in over-embellishing the feminist and "girl power" elements of her stories, writers fail to give enough attention to the romantic parts of her novels (which again, seems silly, since all of Austen's books end in a marriage and could be categorized as "romance"). As *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*³² will later establish, adapters often run into trouble trying to make their films and interpretations high on feminism and full of female relationships, while also dealing with the fact that, at the end of the day, these stories all center around a romance. Despite this, *Clueless* manages to be a movie both focused on women and their desires, and also be a film with a strong, believable romantic relationship that the audience roots for.

The movie is, at its heart, a story about women: their interests, their desires, the way the world works for them. It passes the Bechdel test within the first five minutes: in one of the first scenes in the movie, Cher and her best friend Dionne (a new character for a movie) ride to school together where they discuss fashion and driving, but never boys. While Cher develops male friends, many scenes showcase her determination not to be controlled by men. In an early scene where a teenage boy attempts to hit on Cher, she literally pushes him out of the frame, shouting, "Get off of me!"³³ Later when Elton comes on to her, Cher (like her literary counterpart), insists on rejecting him, despite his several attempts to coerce her physically into sex, and the fact that she is in a secluded area with only him. Although Cher might not be the type to attend political rallies and

³² *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Dir. Bernie Su and Margaret Dunlap. Performed by Ashley Clements and Daniel Vincent Gordh. Pemberley Digital. Youtube, 9 Apr. 2012. Web.

³³ Heckerling, *Clueless*, 1995.

rock out to Riot Grrrl, her actions are that of someone who cares about her autonomy and does what she likes despite society's rules. As Laura Cohen notes in an article for *Marie Claire*:

“Let's applaud Cher: She acts as a role model to all women when she makes it clear to the gross and handsy Elton that no means no as he tries to force himself on her in the car. And when she finds out her crush, Christian, is gay, she's basically like whatever, now I've got a great guy friend to shop with. No hard feelings here.”³⁴

While *Clueless* is not the most in-depth look at feminism, for a teen movie about a privileged, rich girl, it does a surprisingly good job.

In addition to its feminist and female-centered elements, this is also a movie with a well-developed and engaging romance, something that cannot be said for every teen film. Oftentimes, novels written by Jane Austen are regulated to “just romance novels,” a label that is both insulting and also blatantly untrue. In addition to their feminist elements, Austen novels focus on issues of class, societal norms and expectations, freedom, writing in general, race, and much more. Her novels are pieces of literature that take place in the real world, and frequently deal with real issues of the day. All that said, her novels do often center on romantic relationships, but the simple notion that something revolved around romantic relationships between intellectual equals, something that is a major factor in most people's lives, is inherently negative in itself steeped in sexism. More or less anything related to Jane Austen is usually labeled as a “chick-flick,” which has negative and derogatory connotations despite being given to really any piece of art

³⁴ Cohen, Laura. "Why Clueless is Important For Women." *Marie Claire*. October 22, 2015.

that happens to focus on women. So while it cannot be said that any of Austen's novels or subsequent film adaptations are "just" about romance, it also doesn't seem right to say that a piece of art centered on a romantic relationship is *just* anything. *Clueless* easily falls into that category: it deals with a wide variety of subjects, but, as in the novel, the burgeoning romance between Cher and Josh, along with Cher's emotional growth, feels like a touchstone.

While the romance between Emma and Mr. Knightley is generally liked by most Austen fans, it is not universally loved, and as such, is not always the easiest to adapt. This is mostly due to the age difference, since in the novel, Emma is twenty-one, while Knightley is in his late thirties, and the way that it affects their interactions. In addition to being a romantic interest for Emma, Knightley is also a teacher of sorts and has an intellectual influence on her, which not all Austen fans appreciate. In *The Jane Austen Book Club* novel, the character Allegra argues that Knightley has been attempting to mold Emma into his ideal woman, and that Emma's emotional growth is in fact the negative outcome of his teachings. While this idea isn't completely ridiculous (it is, after all, more or less the "love story" of *Mansfield Park*), it doesn't particularly represent the relationship portrayed in *Emma*. While Emma's free-spirit and distinct personality are obviously positive qualities to be found in a young heroine, it also seems wrong to imply that Emma is a flawless character who would not benefit from some growth. At the start of the novel, she's a young woman who, despite her affection towards her, does treat Harriet like a plaything, and talks her out of a positive match. She later goes on to make fun of Miss Bates, a woman much lower than she in class, at Box Hill. These are not positive character traits, and it seems wrong to imply that in maturing out of them, Emma

is somehow losing her spirit. Additionally, while Mr. Knightley does berate Emma for her behavior in both these situations, it is never implied in the novel that he falls for her because of her change in character; in fact, he's so distraught by his feelings for her after Box Hill, which is arguably her worst transgression, that he leaves town, thereby missing the bulk of her emotional growth. Later, he states that his main reason for schooling her in the past has been his own romantic feelings towards her. Ultimately, Knightley would have been in love with Emma no matter what, and all her maturity really does is allows Emma to see her own feelings for him, not the other way around.

For their 1995 incarnations, Amy Heckerling managed to both make the romance feel true to its source material, and also making it work for modern teenagers. While the age difference isn't quite so large in *Clueless*, the act of making Josh a college student and Cher still in high school is an effective method of allowing for a maturity difference, and also justifying some of the advice Josh tries to bestow on Cher. *Of course* the freshman in college would think he has the world figured out, and *of course* the popular high schooler would think he is stuck up. The dynamic translates perfectly. What's more, the movie does a good job of establishing their natural chemistry without overshadowing Cher's vibrant social life: they both feel tired of the party at the same time (as opposed to Christian, who is clearly content to dance the night away), but have no problem staying up late and watching cartoons together. One of the reasons why the Emma/Knightley romance works so well is that despite the bickering, it is easy to see the real affection between them, and this translates with Cher and Josh. These are characters who really do like each other, even though they are in ways complete opposites. Their interests are

different but their core values are the same, and when they kiss on the stairs at the end of the film, not only does it feel earned, but it feels right.

Clueless made changes that were respectful of the source material and also managed to feel organic. Most importantly, they were savvy storytelling decisions that made *Clueless* feel whole, instead of a hodgepodge of different genres. Part of what makes *Clueless* such a great adaptation is the fact that it works within both the framework of the literature it was based on, and also managed to succeed as a piece of art on its own. “I think *Clueless*, more than any other adaptation that I’m aware of, is really an independent work of art. It is also an adaptation, but it didn’t need to sell itself as an adaptation.”³⁵ Adapters want their adaptations to be appreciated by lovers of the original, but even more so, it’s important for it to actually be a good film that people want to see, no matter what their familiarity with the source material is. It’s easy enough to take a piece of literature and try to put it in the modern day; what’s more difficult is doing so in a way that when everything is done, the finished product holds up to critics and viewers alike. That’s the mark of a great adaptation, and that is something that from its earliest reviews, *Clueless* managed to do:

“[On its premiere day] *Clueless* brought in nearly \$3 million, making it the number one movie in the country, ahead of *Apollo 13*. On Friday through Sunday, the movie played in more than 1,600 screens but business dipped a little, ultimately giving it a second-place finish at the weekend box office, behind the Tom Hanks NASA drama, even while playing on fewer screens than any other

³⁵ Chaney, *As If*, 20.

movie in the top ten. Within its first five days of release alone, *Clueless* made \$15.8 million.”³⁶

Overall, *Clueless* has grossed \$56,631,572.³⁷ Critically, the movie also did a fairly good job, with everyone from *Variety* to *The New York Times* to *The Washington Post* giving the film a positive review. While this was not necessarily universal, it does seem that, overall, the reaction was positive, and *Clueless* was a certified hit. All this initial success is to say nothing of the major impact the film has had in the 20 plus years since it was released. Currently, the film holds an 81% rating on Rotten Tomatoes.³⁸ *Clueless* has also spawned a certified platinum soundtrack³⁹, a moderately successful television spin-off, which managed to run for three seasons⁴⁰, popular merchandise which ranged from organizers to dolls⁴¹, a number of successful actors who might not have gotten their start if not for this hit (including Paul Rudd and Brittany Murphy)⁴², a fashion line⁴³, several *Clueless*-inspired films including *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Cruel Intentions* and *She's the Man*, a 2014 music video, and so much more. Today, anyone can buy a *Clueless*-related anything, from shirts to mugs to calendars and accessories. *Clueless* isn't just a popular adaptation of the work of Jane Austen; it's a popular film, period.

That is not to make little of the influence it had for Austen, a woman who, as has been established, was already having a very good year. “It's influence can be seen, too, in

³⁶ Chaney, *As If!*, 239.

³⁷ "Box Office Mojo - *Clueless*." Box Office Mojo.

³⁸ Heckerling, Amy. "*Clueless*." *Clueless* (1995) - Rotten Tomatoes. March 12, 2017. Accessed April 21, 2017.

³⁹ *Clueless*. Capitol, 1995, CD.

⁴⁰ Heckerling, Amy. *Clueless*. CBS Television Distribution. 1997. Television.

⁴¹ Semigran, Aly. "'Clueless' Merchandise & Promotions We Were Totally Buggin' Over 20 Years Ago, From Fuzzy Pens To Cher Barbies." *Bustle*. July 19, 2015.

⁴² Jang, Meena. "'Clueless' Cast: Where Are They Now? (Photos)." *The Hollywood Reporter*. July 18, 2015.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 277.

the myriad modernized Jane Austen tales that followed in its wake, including *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, *Bride and Prejudice*, the Hindi rom-com *Aisha* (which is far more *Clueless* than *Emma*), *Austenland*, and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*.⁴⁴ Thanks to its combined efforts with the BBC *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen has seen a steady increase in popularity in the decades that have followed. The year 2016 alone saw two different film adaptations of Austen (*Love and Friendship* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*), as well as a modern literary retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* (*Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld). Rarely does a year go by without anything Austen-related popping in on a screen or in a book, and this is, without a doubt, in part thanks to the work of this one film. “Amy Heckerling's inspired update, *Clueless*, brings the novel into our own era, successfully translating *Emma* into the California high school culture of the 1990s.”⁴⁵ This movie managed to take the work of a woman dead for over 200 years and make it seem fresh and new, and in the process, turned an entire generation of moviegoers onto its source material.

Clueless succeeded as an adaptation because it honored the source material, made appropriate changes when needed, and also managed to be an overall commercially successful film. It truly did adapt Austen's work, not only with plot and characters, but also with smaller nuances and tone. If someone reads *Emma* and then watches *Clueless*, they'll easily be able to spot the similarities. By contrast, it is enough of an independent work of its own that reading the Austen book is not necessary to one's enjoyment of the film: a person could be obsessed with Jane Austen and have *Clueless* be their favorite

⁴⁴ Ibid. 296.

⁴⁵ Austen, Jane, Maxfield Parrish, and Suzanne Ferriss. *Emma: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Reviews and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000, 436.

film, and they could have also never heard of Jane Austen and have *Clueless* be their favorite film. Year after its premiere, it continues to have a major influence in pop culture. In many ways, it's the ideal of a modern adaptation. It respects the source material enough to appease the fans, while also changing it so that it doesn't feel inorganic in the modern world; it was financially successful at the box office, yet also was distinct and enjoyed enough to still truly be considered a cult classic. "I think 'Clueless' updated Austen's themes, characters and tone in ways that are often more true to the novel than the film and TV adaptations that try to be historically accurate."⁴⁶ More than anything, it is a great film. And also a hard film to live up to.

⁴⁶ Greguska, Emma. "ASU's Jane Austen expert weighs in on 'Clueless,' feminist icons in pop culture." ASU Now: Access, Excellence, Impact. January 05, 2016.

Part Two: *Bridget Jones's Diary*

By the time *Bridget Jones's Diary* hit theaters in 2001, the Jane Austen resurgence was well under way, and movie-goers everywhere were still reaping the benefits. Since 1995, there had been two classical adaptations of *Emma* (one starring Gwyneth Paltrow that was released in theatres, and a television movie starring Kate Beckinsale⁴⁷), a feature length film version of *Mansfield Park*, the *Clueless* television show, and a Kollywood⁴⁸ adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* titled *Kandukondain Kandukondain*. And of course, there had been the 1996 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, based on the column written by Helen Fielding for the UK newspaper *The Independent*. It chronicled the life of Bridget, a thirtysomething woman trying to navigate the world of love, work, and family in the mid-1990s, and was written in the form of diary entries. These entries detailed everything from her current weight (always fluctuating) to her romantic troubles, and take place over the course of a year. *Bridget Jones's Diary* also happens to be based on *Pride and Prejudice*.

Unlike *Clueless*, which while very much modern, is clearly meant to be a direct adaptation, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (both the novel and the film) takes a more casual approach to the act of adaptation. Sometimes, it borrows heavily from the novel, in terms of both its plot and characters. Bridget's main love interest is, after all, named Mr. Darcy, a coincidence that, in the original novel, does not escape Bridget: "It struck me as very ridiculous to be called Mr. Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party. It's like being called Heathcliff and insisting on spending the entire evening in the garden,

⁴⁷ *Emma*. Directed by Diarmuid Lawrence. Performed by Kate Beckinsale and Mark Strong. United Film and Television, 1996. Film.

⁴⁸ "Kollywood." Dictionary.com. "The Tamil language film industry, based at Kodambakkam in S India"

shouting ‘Cathy’ and banging your head against a tree.’⁴⁹ In addition to borrowing several plot and character elements from Austen, *Bridget Jones* is also riddled with references to its source material and some of her other works, as well as pieces they have inspired. In addition to her commentary above, Bridget makes reference to the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation and the wet-shirt Mr. Darcy⁵⁰ and even brings up *Clueless* at one point⁵¹, continuing to show the influence of that particular film. Bridget is a woman who both admires the work of Austen and also happens to live within it. This is what makes the Bridget of the novel such a singular character. What then makes the Bridget of the 2001 film unique is the fact that she is living within four spheres: she is in the world of someone who enjoys Jane Austen, she is in the world of a Jane Austen novel, she is in the world of a Helen Fielding novel. And then, after all that, she is in a movie.

Another important distinction between *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones* is the fact that while *Clueless* is a direct adaptation of Austen’s work, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*⁵² is an adaptation of an adaptation. It does what many adaptations do, and then it does it over. *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, the novel, is a loose adaptation of the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, the film, is a loose adaptation of Austen, yes, but even more than that, it is an adaptation of the novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. With any classic adaptation, this would imply that along the way to the screen, some things are going to get lost in translation. With an adaptation as loose as *Bridget Jones*, one could

⁴⁹ Fielding, Helen. *Bridget Jones’s Diary: A Novel*. London: Penguin Books, 2001, 12.

⁵⁰ Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, 215.

⁵¹ Ibid. 60.

⁵² *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Dir. Sharon Maguire. Performed by Renée Zellweger and Colin Firth. Miramax Films, 2001. Film.

guess that it would mean the film would have little in common with the original work.

This is not really the case with the screen adaptation of *Bridget Jones*, but in order to understand that, the viewer has to go back to the novel by Fielding that the film is based on. A novel that, originally, wasn't a novel at all. When the column was first published in February 1995, making it older than *Clueless* by about five months, it had little resemblance to the novel and later the movie it would become. On the *Bridget Jones's Diary* archive website, writer Fielding states that the main reason she took the job was the money:

“*The Independent* asked me to write a column, as myself, about single life in London. Much as I needed the money, the idea of writing about myself in that way seemed hopelessly embarrassing and revealing. I offered to write an anonymous column instead, using an exaggerated, comic, fictional character.”⁵³

The columns don't seem to be particularly influenced by Austen, but then the novelization does not have much in common with the original columns either.

Throughout the columns, Bridget always seems far more interested in trying to make something work with Daniel Cleaver, her cute, sleazy boss who is more or less the Mr. Wickham of this interpretation, than the awkward Mr. Darcy. It is in the 1996 novelization where the true influence of Austen starts to come through.

As stated above, the novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* takes mostly plot elements and character dynamics from Austen's work, and mixes them up with original material as well. Bridget is a single woman whose often hysterical mother and family would like to see her married, although Bridget herself would probably just be happy with a nice

⁵³ Fielding, Helen. "Library." Bridget Archive. 2005. March 23, 2017.

boyfriend. Her love interests are the sleazy, cheating Daniel Cleaver and the awkward, at times rude, but ultimately genuine Mark Darcy. At one point during their romance, Daniel tells Bridget that Mark and himself used to be great friends, until Mark stole Daniel's fiancée. This is later proven to be the other way around. At the end of the novel, Mark saves Bridget's family from financial troubles after her mother, who has left Bridget's father, runs off with a violent con artist. When Bridget asks Mark why he has done this, he echoes Mr. Darcy's sentiments from *Pride and Prejudice*:

“But it was so kind of you, taking time off work and everything. Why did you bother doing all this?”

“Bridget,” he said. “Isn't it obvious?”

Oh my god.⁵⁴

“If you will thank me,” he replied, “let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you, might add force to the other inducements which led me on, I shall not attempt to deny. But your family owes me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe, I thought only of you.”⁵⁵

While the novelization of *Bridget Jones's Diary* is hardly a direct modern adaptation, it does borrow many of the key elements of Austen's original novel in order to build its plot, with the novel's ending being taken right out of Austen. Many people define *Pride and Prejudice* by the initially cool relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy, Mr. Wickham spreading lies about Mr. Darcy and their past together, and the way

⁵⁴ Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, 266.

⁵⁵ Austen, *Seven Novels*, 393.

that Darcy manages to save the day in the end. All three of these elements of present in the novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and as such, it does present itself as an adaptation.

There are two main factors that separate the work of Austen from the work of Fielding. The first is *Bridget Jones's Diary's* emphasis on the character of Daniel Cleaver and his relationship with Bridget. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Wickham have a brief flirtation, and once Elizabeth knows of his true nature, she does not want anything to do with him, while in Fielding's novel Daniel is a love interest that Bridget goes back to many times. The other main difference, is, of course, the character of Bridget herself. First and foremost, Bridget Jones is no Eliza Bennet. Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is defined by her grace of character: she is someone who both lacks pretention and also possesses a natural sort of class to herself. She mocks the rich for their rude and pompous behavior, but never turns her taunts to those who are lower in class than herself, because she understands that those people are not as fortunate as she is. She also has convictions: when she learns of Mr. Wickham's abhorrent behavior, she immediately lets go of any lingering positive feelings she might have had towards him, out of respect for both Mr. Darcy and his sister Georgiana. Elizabeth is, historically, the most popular of all Austen's heroines: she is the girl everyone wants to be friends with, the girl everyone wants to date, and, most importantly, the girl everyone wants to be.

Bridget, on the other hand, might not be exactly who most people would want to be, but she's maybe closer to who people really are. "Throughout *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the heroine is depicted as a chain-smoking, wine-drinking, calorie-counter who obsesses over her fluctuating physical appearance, her stalled career, and, most importantly, her

tumultuous love life.”⁵⁶ Where Lizzy is trekking through the mud to visit her ill sister, Bridget is falling down in the street from too much drinking. She is also nearly always trying to improve herself: “The [*Bridget Jones*] novels recall in contrast the world of Jane Austen’s, in which self-perfection is treated ironically. Bridget records with humor the many factors that influence her to change – not only her mother and her rivals, but also self-help books, diets, and other imports from American popular culture.”⁵⁷ Bridget might not always be the most graceful heroine, but she is compelling in a way that differs from that of Austen’s heroines. That is not to say that Austen’s characters are portrayed as flawless, and that it is not possible to see oneself in them. As E.M. Forster noted in *Aspects of the Novel*, Austen is famous for her well-rounded characters: “She is a miniaturist, but never two-dimensional. All her characters are round, or capable of rotundity.”⁵⁸ On the contrary, what makes Elizabeth so interesting are the things about her that readers can connect to. When someone reads or watches *Pride and Prejudice*, and sees Lizzy poke fun at the snobby or have fun playing with her sisters, that person feels a closeness with her. Lizzy is not her sister Jane, who always wants to see only the good in people, who is gorgeous without effort and easily has the rich, sweet man falling in love with her. Lizzy has a bite to her, and she makes mistakes in judgement, often letting her own prejudice get the better of her. Readers connect to that, because they see themselves in her bad parts and want to emulate her good parts.

Bridget is not a character who many readers probably want to be, despite the fact that she is ultimately a good person. She goes back to the guy who cheated on her,

⁵⁶ Scott, Robert F. *Modern Language Studies*. 2003.

⁵⁷ Marsh, Kelly A. "Contextualizing Bridget Jones." *College Literature* 31, no., 53.

⁵⁸ Forster, E. M., and Oliver Stallybrass. *Aspects of the Novel*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012, 74.

convinced that he's changed when all evidence points to the contrary. She misuses substances over and over, tells herself she's going to stop, and then starts back up again. She sets goals for herself that she knows she will never keep. She strives to have complete control over her life, and like most people, usually fails: "Bridget's voice is authentic because it reveals what we all know but rarely face, and perhaps never face with such high spirits: control is a myth, and the experience of being out of control and of being forced into mutually dependent relationships is authentic."⁵⁹ When someone reads *Bridget Jones's Diary*, they are likely not thinking about how they wish they could be Bridget. Instead, they're remembering a time when they were Bridget, and are taking comfort in the fact that they're not alone. "We have so many images bombarded at us from the media that we're all somehow infected with this idea that we're supposed to be an anorexic teenage model that gets up in the morning and runs from the gym to the board meeting and goes home to cook dinner for twelve people with the perfect husband and children. That's not what life is like."⁶⁰ Bridget is a character who represents the discord between the Lizzy who most people would love to be and the Lydia who they probably are closer to than they'd like to admit. "*Bridget Jones's Diary* [...] is a movie that gets a lot of mileage out of the disconnect Bridget herself embodies: the divide between the *is* and the *does*."⁶¹

That is not to say that Lizzy and Bridget do not have any similarities, fundamental or otherwise. They are both women who would like to marry for love, but also scoff at

⁵⁹ Marsh, "Contextualizing Bridget Jones," 53.

⁶⁰ Maguire, Sharon. DVD commentary. *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Dir. Maguire. Perf. Renée Zellweger and Colin Firth. Miramax Films, 2001. DVD.

⁶¹ Garber, Megan. "How Bridget Jones's Diary Predicted the Age of Oversharing." *The Atlantic*. April 13, 2016.

the pressures other people put on them to settle down, as evidenced by Elizabeth's refusal to marry Mr. Collins despite her mother's insistence, and Bridget's annoyance at her married friends asking her why it is that she is still single. They both, subconsciously or not, feel the need for love in a relationship because of the lack of love in their parents' marriage. But more importantly, they also share a key personality trait that is present throughout all of Austen's novels: a lack of snobbish behavior and pretention. In the same way that *Clueless* illustrates how Cher (and by extension, Emma) is not a pretentious character, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (both the novel and the film) shows that Bridget isn't either, nor is Elizabeth.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lizzy is a character who understands social decorum and what is proper, as evidenced by her embarrassment at her family's behavior at the Netherfield ball, but also understands that many rules held dearly by "polite" society are ridiculous. When Jane catches a cold at Netherfield Park, Lizzy immediately rushes to her aid, not caring about getting her clothing dirty. While the ladies of Netherfield Park find this abhorrent, Darcy is in fact attracted to her because of it – because Elizabeth is a real woman, so to speak, with gusto and a strength of character, who doesn't play by society's arbitrary rules. In the novel version of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, a similar situation occurs that highlights Bridget's lack of pretention, as well as Darcy's attraction to her as a result of it: while attending a work event, the topic of television literary adaptations comes up. Bridget's coworker, Perpetua, and Mark's friend Natasha, both express their disdain for people who learn about classic novels from television, as well as their dislike of reality television in general. Bridget expresses her fondness for the reality television

series *Blind Date*, and both Perpetua and Natasha try to berate her for this, turning her affection for a TV show into a commentary about the failings of society:

“What I mean is, if you’re taking that sort of cutesy, morally relativistic, ‘*Blind Date* is brilliant’ sort of line...,” she said with a resentful look in my direction.

“I wasn’t, I just really like *Blind Date*,” I said. “Though I do think it would be better if they made the pickees make up their own replies to the questions instead of reading out those stupid pat answers full puns and sexual innuendos.”

“Absolutely,” interjected Mark.”⁶²

In this passage, even though both Perpetua and Natasha make fun of Bridget for her television choices, she herself doesn’t seem to care, because she understands that ultimately what she chooses to watch late at night on TV doesn’t actually say anything about her character or intelligence. Perpetua and Natasha want to attach some meaning to Bridget enjoying *Blind Date*, but the reality is that it’s just a TV show. Just as importantly, throughout the passage, Darcy defends both Bridget and other viewers of reality TV, at one point almost bursting out laughing when Natasha says something pretentious about society. Ultimately, the novel rewards Bridget for her unpretentious behavior.

Ultimately, the novelization of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and the film version are nearly identical, with one major difference separating the two. The novel ends with, like in *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy rescuing Bridget’s family from financial ruin and a scam, while the film ends with the two meeting one night and kissing in the snow. Although the latter ending is more romantic from a cinematic perspective, it does take away in terms of

⁶² Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, 87-89.

adaptation, and pulls the film squarely into loose adaptation territory. The original ending of the novel allows for the entire story to be, more or less, based on the work of Austen: certain characters and plots have been altered, but it's still founded in the structure of the original novel. The film, on the other hand, is a sort of hodge-podge of the Austen novel, taking many of the thematic elements and heightening certain plot points, while changing many parts so that it fits within the cinematic world. Changing elements of a novel so that it fits in a movie is not new, and is in fact one of the main key elements in adapting. What makes *Bridget Jones* unique is that it is an adaptation of an adaptation, and as a result, it only makes sense that several of the points of Austen's novel would get lost in translation.

And yet, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is still seen as an, albeit loose, adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*: if someone googles "*Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Pride and Prejudice*," they'll get a plethora of lists and articles outlining the similarities between the two, from fan blogs highlighting the ways in which the two stories collide, to interviews with Fielding herself talking about Austen's influence.⁶³ Aside from the plot elements, what truly makes *Bridget Jones* feels like an adaptation of Austen is the tone that the film has, and the way that it depicts the ups and downs of Bridget's busy London life. "The film holds up, in part, for the same reason *Pride and Prejudice* does: the fundamental and frustrating fact that feelings, for the most part, are invisible."⁶⁴ As with Austen's novel, this is a movie where things shift often, and Bridget constantly struggles to handle her personal and family life, as well as professional, which is something Lizzy doesn't have

⁶³ "Bridget Jones vs Pride and Prejudice." BBC News. January 28, 2013.

⁶⁴ Garber, Megan. "How Bridget Jones's Diary Predicted the Age of Oversharing." The Atlantic. April 13, 2016.

to deal with. The movie has its highs (musically narrated with Whitney Houston's "I'm Every Woman") and its lows ("All By Myself" by Jamie O'Neal), and as with the novel, it is very rare that Bridget experiences something good without a bad thing coming in to counteract it. There are grand gestures of romance, and heartbreak so deep that it feels irresolvable, and the ending, like that of the book, feels earned. The viewer wants Bridget and Mark to get together because they have seen over the course of the movie how well matched they are, and even more so, how hard they have worked to find each other. They've both changed as people and made sacrifices, which is what ultimately makes their get-together so satisfying. Austen's characters are exactly the same: readers see Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy grow and mature in *Pride and Prejudice*, to the point that, by the novel's end, they are perfectly matched as a couple.

While *Bridget Jones's Diary* is not the most accurate adaptation of Austen, it succeeds because of the way it plays tribute to her themes and plots, while also creating a new story for a modern audience. It takes some of the most memorable parts of the original novel and allows them to play around in a new environment, all the while keeping the key tone elements that make Austen's work so enjoyable. The movie, like *Clueless*, was a critical and commercial success upon its release, with Roger Ebert saying in his 2001 review, "*Bridget Jones's Diary*, a beloved book about a heroine both lovable and human, has been made against all odds into a funny and charming movie that understands the charm of the original, and preserves it."⁶⁵ Over its lifetime, *Bridget Jones's Diary* has grossed \$71,543,427.⁶⁶ As of 2017, it holds an 81% rating on Rotten

⁶⁵ Ebert, Roger. "Bridget Jones's Diary Movie Review (2001) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. April 13, 2001.

⁶⁶ "Box Office Mojo - Bridget Jones's Diary." Box Office Mojo.

Tomatoes.⁶⁷ In the years since it came out, the *Bridget Jones* franchise has seen continued success, with multiple new novels and films added, including the 2013 novel *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, films *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* and *Bridget Jones's Baby*, and even a possible musical in the works. It's also had a cultural impact as well, specifically in the way that it tapped into the market of women in their thirties:

“Thirtysomethings had come out of long relationships in their 20s and realized they hadn't ended up married or with children. We were in our 30s, behaving like we were 17-year-olds and having a great time but still floundering around asking questions about relationships, careers, biological clocks.”⁶⁸

In the article “The Bridget Jones Effect,” Fielding says that she suspects that the popularity of the series was due to the way it showed the line between who people are and who they want to be, and says that, “since Bridget, thirtysomething singletons are no longer saddled with Miss Havisham as a role model.”⁶⁹ In Fielding's eyes, her books at least have helped to change the general perception of single women, which is no small task.

The success of *Bridget Jones* highlights the strength of Austen's writing, and its longevity. While this is obviously a loose adaptation, it retains the core of *Pride and Prejudice*; it still feels like a piece of Austen's work, despite the various changes that have been made. Fielding's work goes to show just how well these novels can work for a modern audience, and how popular they can still be. Jane Austen had an impact on

⁶⁷ Davies, Andrew, and Helen Fielding. “Bridget Jones's Diary.” *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) - Rotten Tomatoes. March 13, 2017.

⁶⁸ Kaufman, Amy. “The Oral history of 'Bridget Jones's Diary' from Renée Zellweger, Colin Firth and more.” *Los Angeles Times*. April 8, 2016.

⁶⁹ Fielding, Helen. “The Bridget Jones Effect: How Life Has Changed for the Single Woman..” *The Guardian*. December 20, 2013.

Bridget Jones, and *Bridget Jones* had an impact on the formula of romantic comedies as a whole. As Fielding notes in *The Guardian* article, “A lot of books in a similar vein followed Bridget, mainly with pink covers, to the point where I was dubbed by Barbara Walters the ‘grandmother’ of chick-lit.”

What both *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Clueless* also show is the importance of having a central area to the work of Austen. In both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, the characters are at times defined by the towns that they live in. *Emma* is often defined by the small area that its characters populate, and how town gossip and rules dictate their behavior. *Pride and Prejudice* deals with locations as well, albeit in a different way: the Bennet sisters are confined to their small town and whatever excitement comes across them, not the other way around, and it is only when they go out into the world that they start to find agency. While *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is very distinctly a movie about someone living in London, it doesn’t have the same change of location that so defines the novel. That would come in other adaptations.

Part Three: *Bride and Prejudice*

Clueless opens to the sound of futuristic, bubbly music about being “Kids in America,” played over bright title cards and later images of carefree teenagers prancing through LA. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* opens with Christmas music and Bridget trudging through the English snow, complaining about having to celebrate the upcoming holiday festivities with her family. *Bride and Prejudice*⁷⁰, the 2004 Bollywood modern adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, is another Austen film that establishes both the tone and the geographical importance of the movie within the first minute. As the opening credits play, the audience gets a shot of Harmandir Sahib, a popular landmark of Amritsar, which is where the film takes place. The viewer hears cheerful Indian singing, signifying the musical aspect of the movie. And then, of course, riding in on a tractor driving through fields of grass, the heroine emerges – the beautiful and down-to-earth Lalita Bakshi. Also known as Elizabeth Bennet.

Bride and Prejudice is not the first, or only, Indian-based adaptation of Jane Austen, although it is without a doubt the most remembered. In 2000 there was *Kandukondain Kandukondain*, a Tamil adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*. This same novel would later be the inspiration for Hindi soap-opera *Kumkum Bhagya*⁷¹ in 2014, and in 2010, *Emma* would get the works in the comedy-drama film *Aisha*⁷². But *Bride and Prejudice* has a distinction from these films, in that it is not simply an Indian movie, but is grounded in a very specific genre. Dating back to the 1930s, Bollywood (a combination

⁷⁰ *Bride and Prejudice*. Dir. Gurinder Chadha. Performed by Aishwarya Rai and Martin Henderson. Miramax Films, 2004. Film.

⁷¹ Nagpal, Anil, writer. *Kumkum Bhagya*. Zee TV. 2014.

⁷² *Aisha*. Directed by Rajshree Ojha. Performed by Abhay Deol and Sonam Kapoor. India: PVR Pictures, 2010. Film.

of Bombay and Hollywood) films are often characterized by lavish colors, exuberant musical numbers, and more than anything, a complete disregard for the fundamental laws of reality. As described by Roger Ebert in his review of *Bride and Prejudice*:

“Bollywood musicals are the Swiss Army Knives of the cinema, with a tool for every job: comedy, drama, song and dance, farce, pathos, adventure, great scenery, improbably handsome heroes, teeth-gnashing villains, marriage-obsessed mothers and their tragically unmarried daughters, who are invariably ethereal beauties.”⁷³

These are films that pop with color and celebrate the joys of life, all the while ignoring many of the less romantic elements the real world has to offer. The characters burst into song on a regular basis, backed up by their friends, sisters, and even at one point a gospel choir. They weave in and out of reality whenever it suits them, alternating between passionate discussions about the effects of colonialism and romantic sequences of the main characters dancing in the rain.

Technically, *Bride and Prejudice* is not strictly a Bollywood film, instead combining classic Bollywood elements with more Western aspects – not surprising, considering its director’s previous work. In 2002, Gurinder Chadha made a name for herself with the critical and commercial success *Bend It Like Beckham*⁷⁴, a film that focuses on the divide between traditional Indian expectations of women and modern sports culture. *Beckham* takes place in London, and specifically goes into the intersections of Indian and Western culture. *Bride and Prejudice* does this as well, albeit

⁷³ Ebert, Roger. "Bride and Prejudice Movie Review (2005) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. February 10, 2005.

⁷⁴ *Bend It like Beckham*. Directed by Gurinder Chadha. Performed by Parminder Nagra and Keira Knightley. Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2002. Film.

in a slightly different manner: unlike in *Beckham*, where the main character, Jess, has little interest in the rituals of her culture and would rather just play football, Lalita Bakshi feels a strong connection to her Indian roots. Even more, she resents Westerners like William Darcy coming into her country and profiting off its exotic elements in order to make money. The divide between Western and Indian culture is at the center of the film, a constant clash in Lalita's head over her loyalty to her culture and her own views on love and marriage. More than anything, this divide comes from the fact this is a film about an Indian family based on a novel by a Western writer.

According to director Chadha, the idea to adapt Jane Austen into a Bollywood film seemed to make perfect sense: "One of the reasons why I wanted to make a Bollywood version of *Pride and Prejudice* is because the themes of Jane Austen's novel are so important to contemporary India."⁷⁵ This is true in many ways, since several of the key plot elements of *Pride and Prejudice* don't translate to the Western world in the modern age, but do for Indian culture. In *Bride*, the five Bennet sisters are replaced by four Bakshi sisters and their parents, a poor family living in Amritsar, India. Their mother, Mrs. Bakshi, is obsessed with marrying her daughters off to wealthy Indian men, which is not surprising, considering around 75% of people in India prefer to have an arranged marriage.⁷⁶ Early on in the film, the charming and wealthy Balraj visits Amritsar and strikes up a romance with the eldest Bakshi daughter, Jaya. He does, however, come with a catch: he brings along his American friend, William Darcy, who is attracted to the gorgeous Lalita. She, in turn, is repulsed by his pompous behavior.

⁷⁵ Chadha, Gurinder. DVD commentary. *Bride and Prejudice*. Dir. Chadha. Perf. Aishwarya Rai and Martin Henderson. Miramax Films, 2004. DVD.

⁷⁶ "Indians Sweat by Arranged Marriages." India Today. Living Media India Limited, March 4, 2013.

In the original novel, Lizzy's main problems with Darcy are pride and prejudice: her understandable frustration with his pride, which he does not see as a flaw, and then her own prejudice regarding his status as a wealthy bachelor. Early on in the novel, Lizzy calls Darcy out for his pride and arrogance, and he refutes her: "Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride – where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will always be under good regulation."⁷⁷ It is in part the fact that they clash on both a personal and a cultural level that leads to their heated relationship and various confrontations. Culturally, their clash comes from each of their statuses financially – Darcy as rich and Lizzy as poor. Part of the appeal of this story, and several other romantic pieces in history, is the fact that these are characters that come from very different backgrounds and yet, despite their initial complications, find love together. *Bride and Prejudice* takes this concept and puts it into overdrive: not only do Lalita and Darcy differ fiscally, but they were also born on opposite sides of the world.

In the film's DVD commentary, Chadha says, "everything about [the movie] is about the combination of Bollywood and Hollywood."⁷⁸ This is true of the direction and technical parts of the film, but it also factors into many of the plot elements as well. Initially, Lalita has very little desire to leave India, and doesn't strictly seem to disapprove of her mother's efforts to marry her and her sisters to Indian men. "[Arranged marriage] is different now. It's more like a global dating service," she tells Darcy when he questions her on it. While Lalita wants to marry for love, she understands the cultural elements behind arranged marriages in India. One of the key components of Lalita's

⁷⁷ Austen, *Seven Novels*, 230.

⁷⁸ Chadha, *Bride and Prejudice*, DVD commentary.

character is her loyalty towards her homeland, even if she is at times attracted to aspects of Western culture. She doesn't specifically dislike Darcy because he is an American (although, like in the novel, her own unspoken prejudice is a part of it), but more so because he is somebody attempting to Americanize parts of her culture in order to make a profit. At one point in the movie, Darcy cites his intentions to buy an Indian hotel as proof of his admiration for the country:

“Darcy: Don't you want to see more investment and more jobs?

Lalita: Yes, but who does it really benefit? You want people to be able to come to India, without having to deal with Indians. [...] Isn't that what all tourists want? Five-star comfort with a bit of culture thrown in? Well, I don't want you turning India into a theme park. I thought we got rid of imperialists like you.”⁷⁹

Because Lalita comes from a poor family and has grown up immersed in Indian culture, she understands the disconnect between the India she lives in and the India that is marketed towards the Western world as an ethnic and exotic vacation spot. Darcy may believe he is benefiting the country, but Lalita is aware that all he really is doing is perpetrating the false idea of India to the American world.

Disqualifying Darcy's hotel efforts is not the only instance in the film when Lalita shows her distaste for Western culture, the other coming in the form of Mr. Kholi. In the original novel, Mr. Collins is a wealthy distant cousin of the family who, due to the family's lack of a son, will take ownership of the Bennet estate upon Mr. Bennet's death. He is also a single man who has decided he would like to marry one of the Bennet sisters, although he doesn't care which one it is. In *Bride and Prejudice*, Mr. Kholi more or less

⁷⁹ *Bride and Prejudice*. Directed by Gurinder Chadha

takes on the same role, with his only real difference being that he has the added factor of being an Indian who has almost completely surrendered his country in favor of Western culture. When he visits the Bakshi family midway through the film, he brags about his real-estate ventures and encourages the family to leave their country. “[America] is where the money is to be made. The UK is finished, and India is too corrupt,”⁸⁰ he tells them. While he admires the Indians of America (“They’re all doctors and computers”), he then complains about Indians who actually live in India (“Uneducated, minicab, 7-Eleven store types”), saying that the only virtue of his homeland are the women. According to him, Indian girls born in the US are “too outspoken and career-oriented,” and his goal is to find a traditional girl from India and bring her back to the states as his bride. He foolishly sets his sights on Lalita, leading to one of the most iconic songs in the film: “No Life Without Wife” is a fun pop song sung by the Bakshi sisters as they ridicule Lalita for her misfortune. While much of the number is focused on Mr. Kholi’s various bad habits, ranging from messy table manners to his opinions on women, his key fault through the song is shown to be his immersion in US culture. During a set of dream-sequences of the possible marriage between Mr. Kholi and Lalita, they are seen to be in a fictionalized version of America, with a sign displaying “Kholiwood” in the background, a reference to Mr. Kholi living in Hollywood. This nightmare involves scenes of Lalita doing chores in traditional Indian garb, while Mr. Kholi is dressed in US attire, showing both Lalita’s distaste for his Western dedication and her own fears of becoming his ethnic plaything.

Despite her strong anti-Western convictions, it should be noted that Lalita is not a character who is entirely immune to Western charms, but more the ways they conflict

⁸⁰ Chadha, *Bride and Prejudice*, 2004.

with her loyalty towards her own country. She dislikes Darcy because he wants to glorify India, and she dislikes Mr. Kholi because he has forsaken his culture, but this does not mean that she sees no appeal in the Western world. At the end of “No Life Without Wife,” there is another dream-sequence, this time completely different in tone. Lalita is running through the European countryside in a white wedding dress – the epitome of the Western bride. She is leaping into the arms of Johnny Wickham, *Bride*’s version of George Wickham, who is at this point in the film is still her ideal and has not yet lost his charm. Lalita is infatuated with him, and sings about her newfound wonder at the idea of having a Western wedding: “Now I dream of what it would be like, to be an overseas bride dressed in white.” When she imagines possible nuptials with Wickham, someone who she believes is respectful of Indian culture in the same way she is (in an earlier scene in the film, Wickham expresses similar sentiments towards Americanized Indian hotels as Lalita does), Lalita sees herself in a ballgown-like white wedding dress, getting married in a church. It is only when she reaches the altar and looks into Wickham’s eyes that Lalita’s real fears present themselves, and her Western ideal turns into her Western horror; Wickham’s face is replaced with Darcy’s, and Lalita is suddenly repulsed.

For its first half, *Bride and Prejudice* is a faithful adaptation. While the cultural divide between Lizzy and Darcy is slightly different in the novel, making it about difference in ethnic culture helps to keep the spirit of their original issues in the novel, while bringing the story into the modern age. Many of the scenes in the film mirror scenes from the book, like Darcy’s early resistance to share a dance with Lalita and their later discussion about Darcy’s hypothetical ideal woman. As previously mentioned, the character of Johnny Wickham serves the same purpose as he does in the novel, fueling

Lalita's animosity towards Darcy by telling her stories about the two growing up together, and how Darcy ultimately betrayed Wickham. They have a longstanding flirtation, and Lalita is clearly interested in more, but the romance eventually fizzles out when Wickham returns to his home country of England and doesn't respond to Lalita's emails. While Lalita is saddened by this, she is hardly heartbroken, and much of her real sorrow comes from the breakup of Jaya and Balraj (Jane and Mr. Bingley). It is at this point in the film where things start to veer slightly from the source material, though not entirely. The last third of *Bride and Prejudice* is made up almost entirely from elements of the original novel, except that it rearranges and moves things around, making for a slightly different tone and conclusion.

As in the novel, Lalita rejects the proposal of Mr. Kholi and is then shocked when her best friend Chandra (Charlotte in the novel) accepts him instead. After a cool period, the friends reconcile, and Lalita and her family go to visit Chandra in her new home in America. By coincidence, they happen to bump into Darcy on their flight over, and he shows them hospitality and kindness, earning himself respect in Lalita's eyes. The two then embark on a romance while she is staying in the US, something that does not take place in the original novel until the end. While Lizzy is very much taken with Darcy after she visits his home, Pemberley, and hears his servants gush about his kind treatment, the news of Lydia and Wickham's elopement comes before the two have time to develop a relationship. In the film, Lalita and Darcy are practically in love at this point – which makes it that much more of a shock when his mother, Catherine, (Lady Catherine de Bourgh in the novel) attempts to dissuade Lalita by showing off Anne (Anne de Bourgh), the girl she would like Darcy to marry. This, coupled with Darcy's sister unknowingly

revealing that it was Darcy who encouraged Balraj to break off his romance with Jaya, leads to the fiery altercation that normally serves as the first proposal. “You’re the last person I’d ever want to be with,” Lalita tells Darcy, in a scene that traditionally comes at the midway point in the story. Here, it is in the third act, and is quickly followed by Lydia running off with Wickham, Darcy coming to the rescue, and reconciliation. Like its Austen counterpart, the film ends with the joint happy weddings of Darcy and Lalita, and Balraj and Jaya.

Despite taking many liberties, *Bride and Prejudice* is a vivacious and delightful adaptation of Austen’s work, one that is filled with surprises and lavish color. While it may not be particularly faithful to the original novel, it is also very recognizably *Pride and Prejudice*, and the changes that the script makes – both in terms of location and plot points – do not take away from its place in history as an adaptation of Jane Austen. It is not, however, an ideal adaptation: while it falls somewhere in between *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in terms of content, as it is not as faithful as *Clueless*, but also is much more similar to the novel’s original plot than *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. As Roger Ebert says, “This is not a Bollywood movie, but a Hollywood musical comedy incorporating Bollywood elements.”⁸¹ It likely doesn’t appeal to most Indians, who would prefer actual Bollywood films, nor does it appeal to most Americans unfamiliar with the genre, who find it to be too extreme. This movie is made for Westerners who want some Bollywood cinema made for their own palette.

⁸¹ Ebert, “Bride and Prejudice Movie Review.”

Commercially, *Bride and Prejudice* flopped, though that isn't a surprise.

Considering the niche subject matter and its limited audience, the film was not expected to do tremendously well. Still, at \$6,605,592⁸², it made nowhere near the amount of *Bridget Jones's Diary* made, which doesn't say great things for it as a film, seeing as *Bridget* was a far less faithful adaptation. Critically, things were a lot more mixed: Roger Ebert gave the movie three out of four stars, and while he couldn't stop gushing about Aishwarya Rai's beauty, generally his review was positive. Manohla Dargis for *The New York Times* was not so kind:

““Bride and Prejudice” -- which transposes Austen's 1813 novel to 21st-century India, with layovers in swinging London and sunny Los Angeles -- is as high concept and rife with cliché as anything ever churned out by Hollywood, but with worse production values and a load of sanctimonious political correctness. Think “My Big Fat Sari Wedding” tricked out with putatively exotic locales and clumsy song-and-dance numbers, and delivered with much finger-wagging about cultural tolerance.”⁸³

The Guardian had similar sentiments, saying that the movie, “Could be any unremarkable Bollywood picture.”⁸⁴ Today, the film holds a 58% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, with the average rating being 3.4 stars out of 5⁸⁵. That is not to say that the film is universally disliked today – far from it. In a 2015 article from *The Huffington Post* entitled “Modern Film Adaptations Of Jane Austen, Ranked,” *Bride and Prejudice* came in third, right behind *Bridget Jones's Diary* in second and *Clueless* in first. As the article puts it,

⁸² “Box Office Mojo - Bride and Prejudice.” Box Office Mojo.

⁸³ Dargis, Manohla. “Mr. Darcy and Lalita, Singing and Dancing.” *The New York Times*. February 11, 2005.

⁸⁴ Bradshaw, Peter. “Bride and Prejudice.” *The Guardian*. October 8, 2004.

⁸⁵ Chadha, Gurinder, and Paul Mayeda Berges. “Bride and Prejudice.” *Bride and Prejudice* (2005) - Rotten Tomatoes. April 11, 2017.

“Lalita’s refusal to marry for a green card and her desire for a professional life of her own, along with her liveliness, perfectly embodies a modern Lizzie[sic].”⁸⁶ Ultimately, these varied opinions seem to suggest that there is simply no singular view-point on *Bride and Prejudice*, but instead just those who enjoy it and those who don’t.

Overall, *Bride and Prejudice* is a joyful and lively adaptation that is good, but not necessarily as good as it could be. While it made changes to the source material and did not do well commercially or critically, it has something that is missing in most mainstream films: it’s fun. It has colorful musical numbers that allow its audience to take a break from the perils of reality, and does all this while doing justice to the fundamental themes of Austen’s novel. Despite changing certain plot elements, Chadha understands the important undertones of the original novel, and stays true to the spirit of the characters. Lalita Bakshi is still Lizzy Bennet, a fun-loving young woman who cares deeply for her family and lacks any and all traces of pretention. And Darcy is still Darcy, a good guy who through his love for one woman becomes a better man. At the end of the film, while attending Jaya and Balraj’s wedding, Lalita goes searching for Darcy. Through the events of the film, she has realized the faults of her prior judgements and has come to love him, and wants to tell him so. Eventually she finds him – playing the drums at the wedding along with the traditional Indian musicians, showing that he has finally embraced the authentic Indian culture that Lalita so dearly treasures. Here, Darcy is showing himself to be someone who loves where Lalita comes from and is willing to do the work to show so. When they embrace a moment later, it feels earned, because these

⁸⁶ Fallon, Claire. "Modern Film Adaptations Of Jane Austen, Ranked." The Huffington Post. December 16, 2015.

are two characters from different worlds coming together, both accepting their differences and extending a hand to each other's culture. They have overcome their differences and found themselves in love, despite the odds, just like Lizzy and Darcy do in the original novel.

Thus far, the Austen adaptations analyzed in this essay have been, generally speaking, direct. While *Bridget Jones's Diary* may take many liberties with the plot, it is ultimately recognizable as an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, in the same way that *Bride and Prejudice* is obviously based on the Austen novel, and *Clueless* is clearly *Emma*. There have been various changes to the source material – some good, some not so good – but overall, Austen's original intent has always been clear. While at times the writers have been attempting to pay homage to Austen, the main goal throughout these films has been to tell a good story that also captures the spirit of Austen and, hopefully, is able to capture the hearts of current viewers; this has seen mixed result. This is not, however, the case for all films made about Jane Austen. There are movies where the main focus is to adapt, and to create a great work of film independent of its connection to Austen. There are movies that occasionally hint at the Austen connection, while still trying their best to be their own work. And then there are the movies that are all about Jane, that hold admiring her existence higher than trying to actually honor it. The films that take parts of her artificially created character and blindly run with it. These movies tend to be the bane of the existence of many Austen fans who don't necessarily wish to trade places with Eliza Bennet. Despite this, these films still exist, and many of them are technically adaptations. They are the miscellaneous.

Part Four: *The Jane Austen Book Club*

What is it that makes Jane Austen so appealing to Americans? Her novels are romantic explorations of the human condition that are funny and engaging to a modern audience, and also often look into the ways society as a large can put certain minority groups, specifically women and those in poverty, at a disadvantage. While this, as well as her sheer talent, is obviously the main reason why Austen has garnered so much success, it doesn't always seem to be the key factor in her admiration among many of her American fans. "There's a longing for the elegance of the time," says Myretta Robens, manager of the Austen fansite The Republic of Pemberley.⁸⁷ Many of these American fans will go to great lengths to feel like they are in the world of Austen, sometimes even dressing up in the attire of the time. "In October 2012, more than 700 Janeites – many attired in bonnets and early 19th Century-style dresses – gathered in Brooklyn, New York for a JASNA event that incorporated three days of lectures, dance workshops, antique exhibitions, a banquet and a ball." This dedication comes not just from a place of admiration of Austen herself, but of the far-gone world that her novels present:

"A myth or conception of Austen as somehow flawless [...] has been a commonplace for over a century and a half. Some of this flawlessness falls under the heading of nostalgia particularly for Victorian readers who were much taken with the lost world of a largely gentrified community that Austen brings so vividly to life."⁸⁸

This, in part, explains the opening scene of the 2007 film *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Based on the 2004 novel of the same name by Karen Joy Fowler, the film explores

⁸⁷ Kelly, Jon. "Janeites: The curious American cult of Jane Austen." BBC News. January 28, 2013.

⁸⁸ Galperin, William. "Adapting Jane Austen: The Surprising Fidelity of 'Clueless.'" Wordsworth Circle 42, no. 3, 187.

a group of five women (and one man) who decide to start a book club dedicated to their favorite writer. All Jane Austen, all the time. The movie begins with a montage of various people – some key characters in the film, others extras – going about their days, but coming across the same problem: technology. Whether it's trying to reach a parking garage ticket or a credit card not scanning, the characters all seem quite discontent with the various modern devices they are being forced to use, and the main theme of the movie seems clear: these women need Jane Austen to take them back to a simpler time. It should be noted that this is not the only flimsy adaptation of Austen that attempts to harken back to the good old days, nor is it the most overt: both *Lost in Austen* (2008)⁸⁹ and *Austenland* (2013)⁹⁰ are films about characters who desperately long for the more romantic times of yesteryear, the latter focusing on a woman so obsessed with Austen that she goes to a Jane-centered theme park. For its part, *The Jane Austen Book Club* is a lot more subtle. It is about characters who are dealing with dissatisfaction in their lives and decide to turn to Austen for a little break from the confines of their own worlds. They read one novel a month, each picking one to host at their homes, and start to see the effects of Jane.

They also all come to represent the novel that they are hosting, although this varies from character to character. There is Jocelyn (*Emma*), perpetually single and supposedly happy about it, who spends her time trying to match-make. Her best friend Sylvia (*Mansfield Park*) is currently reeling from being left by her husband of 20 years and who feels connected to Fanny's innate goodness. Sylvia's daughter, Allegra (*Sense*

⁸⁹ Andrews, Guy, writer. *Lost in Austen*. ITV. 2008.

⁹⁰ *Austenland*. Directed by Jerusha Hess. Performed by Keri Russell and JJ Feild. British-American: Sony Pictures Classics, 2013. Film.

and Sensibility), has recently moved back in with her mother in an attempt to ease her sadness. Their mutual friend Bernadette (*Pride and Prejudice*), an older woman who is the happiest and most settled of the bunch (though she says she might want to get married again), invites Prudie (*Persuasion*), a high school French teacher dealing with an unsatisfying marriage. Last but not least, there is Grigg (*Northanger Abbey*), a big science-fiction fan and the only man in the club, who is invited by Jocelyn in an attempt to set him up with the newly single Sylvia. Together, these six members make up *The Jane Austen Book Club* and also happen to make up the fabric of her six major novels.

The Jane Austen Book Club is not strictly an adaptation – in fact, many would argue that it's not an adaptation at all, though this doesn't seem fair. With each character representing the themes and ideas of an Austen novel, the film is doing some adapting, just not in the traditional sense. As such, it needn't be judged by the normal rules of an adaptation, which tend to adhere to main plot points and overall themes and, of course, how the film works independent of its connection to Austen. Here, the criteria for judging has more to do with how the film represents the themes of each book in each character, as well as how it pays homage to the general themes that Austen presented in each of her novels. Whether or not the film captures the spirit of Austen, so to speak, is what is most relevant. Is it recognizable as a piece of work related to Austen, or does it miscalculate her intentions? While these would normally be somewhat hard questions to answer, *The Jane Austen Book Club* does a service to the viewer, in that many of the scenes are in fact discussions of Austen. It's about a book club, and thankfully, the viewer gets to see not only the various dramas that happen for the characters, but also their own personal opinions of Austen. When it comes to each character individually, the movie does a

decent job of making the connections present and clear, even if this manifests in different ways, with some characters taking full plot points and others just having similar themes. For example, Jocelyn is *Emma* straight-up; she spends the entire film trying to set up Sylvia and Grigg, but cannot seem to realize that she is the one who would like to be with him. Bernadette's *Pride and Prejudice* connection is a lot subtler. She at times feels like a middle-aged Elizabeth Bennet, an older-woman with spunk and personality who also needs to get her last witty opinion out. But she also embodies the common interpretations that readers tend to have with Austen's most famous novel: an all-in attitude towards romance filled with excitement about what kinds of pleasures love could bring. If *Pride and Prejudice* were a person, it would probably be Bernadette.

However, while the characters themselves might feel like embodiments of the novels, this cannot be said for the film at large, and the tone of the movie feels like it has been borrowed from some of her more annoying fans – specifically the fans that treat her like a deity. As previously noted, one of Austen's greatest aspects is her lack of pretention – she was a woman who wrote about important issues, but she also didn't take herself too seriously. She was a writer who critiqued her society through witty novels that were accessible to the readership she had at the time, who happened to be living within a confined patriarchal society. And while many Austen fans like to romanticize the Regency Era when she lived, it seems fair to assume that if Jane could pick a historical period to live in, she'd likely go for the time when she could actually put her own name on her published works.⁹¹ She was not an apolitical writer, but instead a writer who

⁹¹ The first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* simply said that it was published "By a Lady." Her subsequent novels would say that they were published "by the lady who wrote *Sense and Sensibility*," and so on.

worked within the confines of the time when she lived, to the point that she has fooled several people throughout history about the nature of her novels:

“Austen’s most famous misreader is probably the British wartime leader Winston Churchill [...] “What calm lives they had, those people!” he remembered thinking afterward. “No worries about the French Revolution, or the crashing struggle of the Napoleonic Wars.” The fact that a regiment of militia are quartered in the heroine’s home town early on in the novel seems to have completely escaped his notice.”⁹²

Austen’s novels worked because they combined stealthy in-depth social commentary with a lack of pretention. Elizabeth Bennet judges the upper classes *in part* because of their pompous and ridiculous behavior, but also she herself lives in fear of poverty thanks to her sex and station. Their bitterness has real reason behind it. Understanding the balance that Austen achieved in her books is key to getting at the core of her works, and the film adaptations that understand this (*Clueless*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and *Bride and Prejudice*) have all been successful adaptations. *The Jane Austen Book Club* didn’t, and so it is not.

There are many scenes in the film that exemplify this, from the opening sequence of technology-gone-wrong to the various book discussions amongst the club members. In one scene in particular, Grigg compares *Mansfield Park* to *Star Wars*⁹³, to the astonishment of the women, who cannot believe he would do such a thing. Interestingly, it is a scene from the book compared with a scene from the novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

⁹² Kelly, Helena. "Why Jane Austen Is Actually So Wrong for the Alt-right." Signature Reads. March 23, 2017.

⁹³ *Star Wars*. Directed by George Lucas. Performed by Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher. 20th Century Fox, 1977. Film.

that shows this in the most clear cut way. Earlier on, a section in *Bridget Jones's Diary* was mentioned where Bridget's coworkers ridicule her for her interests in a reality TV show. While they see this as a major character flaw, Bridget and Darcy understand that television preferences do not correlate with intelligence. The scene is framed to show that Bridget, despite her various mishaps in other areas, is in the right. In the book version of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, a similar scene involving a discussion of television takes place, with Grigg making a point during one of their book meetings, but its tone is completely different:

“I was trying to think of writers who devote that same care to secondary characters, and it occurred to me that it's a common sitcom device. You can just imagine how today Austen would be writing ‘The Elinor Show,’ with Elinor as a solid moral center and the others stumbling out of her New York apartment with their wacky lives.”

Sylvia could imagine no such thing [...] “The Elinor Show”! *She did not think so.* What a waste those eyelashes were on a man who watched sitcoms. Even Bernadette was silent with disapproval.”⁹⁴

Here, Grigg makes a valid point: many of the plots of Austen novels could possibly work in the sitcom form. The women in the book club are perplexed by this suggestion and even find it offensive, that he dare compare their precious Jane to a television writer. But what is interesting in this scene is that the women are framed as in the right. It's established throughout the film that Grigg does not really understand Austen, because this is his first time reading her, whereas each of the women in the club are veterans of her work. There are five of them and one of him, and even the most open-minded of their

⁹⁴ Fowler, Karen Joy. *The Jane Austen Book Club*. London: Penguin Books, 2015, 50.

group, Bernadette, finds his ideas offensive, as if enjoying sitcoms makes someone intellectually inferior.

This scene is recreated in the film with Grigg's comparison of *Mansfield Park* and *Star Wars*, in which Grigg is portrayed as an idiot who doesn't really understand Austen, and each of the women rolls her eyes at his apparent stupidity, as if it is so ridiculous to see similarities between the work of Austen and George Lucas. These exchanges are key in the way that they tap in to a certain cliché about Austen fans – or, more specifically, women in general. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert talks about this stereotype:

“You could say that Austen created Chick Lit and therefore Chick Flicks. You could, but I would not, because I despise those terms as sexist and ignorant. As a man, I would hate to have my tastes condescended to by the opposite of Chick Lit, which, according to Gloria Steinem, is Prick Lit. I read Jane Austen for a simple reason, not gender-related: I cannot put her down and often return to her in times of trouble.”⁹⁵

Ebert rightfully understands that women don't like being put in a box for liking what they like, and yet this is a film that taps into stereotypes about Austen fans and women. As with the above mentioned scene, *The Jane Austen Book Club* is feeding into the cliché that women who read Austen feel that they are too superior to indulge in something like television or *Star Wars*, and that they look down on the heathens who do. The women in the book club are presented as all being from different walks of life – young and old, gay and straight, single and married – and yet they all apparently agree that Grigg doesn't know what he is talking about. Considering the earlier analysis of Austen's tone, this

⁹⁵ Ebert, Roger. "Jane Austen Book Club Movie Review (2007) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. September 20, 2007.

seems off: much of the mockery in Austen's novels pertains to characters who do bad things. They are ridiculed because they are bad people (or at least the person mocking them believes so) or because they represent a critique Austen is making about society at large. Nothing in her novels suggests that she would have a problem with her books being compared to a popular franchise.

In the film, Prudie is presented as the member of the club who holds Austen on the highest pedestal: "I feel when someone in the group feels superior to the author, it just sets the wrong tone,"⁹⁶ she says in one scene. But the reality is, whether they want to believe it or not, all the women in the group seem to think more of themselves because they read Austen, and the movie agrees. In their eyes, Austen is high literature – above *Stars Wars* and television and other trivial things. That's not to say they don't enjoy other sorts of books: a whole subplot in the movie involves Jocelyn blowing off Grigg's suggestions to read the sci-fi writer Ursula Le Guin, only for her to finally cave at the film's climax and realize that she loves her. But this, the overall tone of the movie seems to be clear, and it is an image and idea of Austen that simply isn't true. In portraying the club members as somewhat snotty and pretentious, the movie misses the entire crux of Austen's personality and the essence of her core set of beliefs. It simply doesn't understand the nature of who Austen was as a writer and a person, and as such, it misses the mark time and time again. Ultimately, *The Jane Austen Book Club* fails as an adaptation, not because it does not adapt well, but because it fails to grasp the essence of Austen as an entity. As far as loose adaptations of the characters go, the film actually does a good job: while they are hardly all particularly close to the source material, the

⁹⁶ Swicord, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, 2007.

parallels are for the most part all clear. The audience gets told why *this* character is meant to represent *that* novel. But the same cannot be said for the film at large, which seems more focused on paying tribute to a fictional version of who Austen was than the actual woman herself. It is possible to loosely adapt Austen and have it be successful – *Bridget Jones* is enough of an example of this. It is overall an original work that borrows themes and certain plots from Austen, and is ultimately something new that clearly has roots in something older. *The Jane Austen Book Club* tries to do this – new plots, new structure – but it fails in truly capturing Austen, and instead seems to be about annoying Austen fans. If the film and novel were to capture the essence of Austen, the casual adaptation wouldn't matter so much. But because the film fails to have a core understanding of Austen's character, it fails as a movie overall.

In terms of box office, the film was not successful. It had a budget of \$6 million and has had a lifetime gross of \$3,575,227⁹⁷ at the box office. It did, however, receive some positive reviews, with Stephen Holden from *The New York Times* saying, “it is an entertaining, carefully assembled piece of clockwork that imposes order on an ever more complicated gender warfare.”⁹⁸ Similarly, Roger Ebert had kind words as well:

“I settled down with this movie as with a comfortable book. I expected no earth-shaking revelations and got none, and everything turned out about right, in a clockwork ending that reminded me of the precision the Victorians always used to tidy up their loose ends.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ "Box Office Mojo - The Jane Austen Book Club." Box Office Mojo.

⁹⁸ Holden, Stephen. "Bibliophiles With Pride and Prejudice, Some in Need of Gentle Persuasion." *The New York Times*. September 21, 2007.

⁹⁹ Ebert, "The Jane Austen Book Club Movie Review."

Whether this movie is enjoyable at all is a matter of opinion, but what these reviewers seem to miss is the way this movie works to pay homage to a version of Austen that did not actually exist. This movie is a tribute to the cartoon interpretation of Austen that has been created in recent years to sell memorabilia. Currently opinions seem to reflect that: today, the movie has a rating of 65% on Rotten Tomatoes.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, it doesn't seem like the women of this film would actually enjoy *The Jane Austen Book Club* – they'd probably find it too cliché and mainstream. Prudie would definitely be offended that Jane's name would be put on something so tacky. At the end of the day, it's simple: this movie doesn't feel like Jane Austen. The characters are pretentious and stuck-up, and while there is a correlation between each character and their book, the film ultimately misses the essence of Austen as a whole, and thus misses the point entirely. It doesn't fail because it's not a good adaptation. It fails because it doesn't feel anything like Jane Austen.

Interestingly, the book isn't any better than the movie, even though the novel is not being restricted by the two-hour movie format. While the novel has more of an in-depth look at each of the characters, the main problems present in the book (specifically in regard to the pretentious characters) are still present. This is not to say, of course, that classic films are the only adaptations of Austen that have ever made it to a screen. Mini-series have been a particularly popular medium for adaptations in the last couple decades. Sometimes these series are only slightly longer than a normal movie would be: the 2008 BBC adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*¹⁰¹, for instance, is only three hour-long episodes.

¹⁰⁰ Swicord, Robin. "The Jane Austen Book Club." *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007) - Rotten Tomatoes. March 12, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Davies, Andrew, writer. *Sense and Sensibility*. BBC. 2008.

Other times, these films can exceed two hours by several hours, as with the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* BBC mini-series, which is composed of six episodes and runs a little less than six hours long. These types of shows can be interesting, in that they allow for more exploration than a two-hour film, but also need to be written and constructed differently than a movie in order to work within the different format. Interestingly, within the last couple of years, a new medium for content has emerged, leading to a plethora of classic novel adaptations that almost always exceed the usual two hours of a movie. This medium is the webseries.

Part Five: *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

As of 2017, many people get at least some of their entertainment from the internet, whether they see it this way or not. From network streaming to content providers like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, there are now more ways than ever to watch film and television online. Since its creation in 2005, YouTube has been a major player on this new frontier. While it has at times tried to monetize its content (it currently produces shows that a person must pay to watch), it has never truly been able to compete with the various creative minds who have come to make content of their own. Some of this has been in the form of talk shows (*My Drunk Kitchen*, *Daily Grace*), scripted sketch comedy (*Broad City*), and, of course, fictional scripted shows. After the success of shows like *lonelygirl15*, a scripted series that did not reveal its fictitious nature until well into the series run, another popular sort of series began to emerge: fictional video blog (vlog) shows. In these series, the episodes tend to be brief (between three and five minutes), with the main characters looking directly at the screen and interacting with the camera. These characters might talk about their friends, relationships, or whatever else is going on in their fictional lives. Eventually, drama will unfold.

This series format has inspired a variety of shows, in part because of its easy-to-film nature. The comedy duo Gaby Dunn and Allison Raskin of *Just Between Us* do scripted comedy which is often presented in a faux-vlog style, and the creators cite this as a reason for their ability to continue creating content. “It’s very easy to shoot, which is a reason why it has been able to continue,” said Raskin on the *The Josh Macuga Show*.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Allison & Gaby from “*Just Between Us*”, *The Casual Mafia*. YouTube. March 09, 2015.

For many up-and-coming content creators, vlog-style shows are a relatively cost-efficient way to get their content out to the public. Most vlogs are filmed in a few central locations, meaning that only a limited number of sets are required. Vlogs are typically only filmed from a single angle, which also means that directors don't necessarily need various pieces of camera equipment. More often than not, these shows are put up on YouTube, or other similar video-sharing sites, so distribution isn't an issue. While these shows can involve a complicated amount of production, for young creators with a lack of resources, this can be a relatively easy way to get practice and experience making something.

As of 2017, one of the biggest teams on YouTube is the VlogBrothers. Hank and John Green are siblings who in 2007 decided they would cease all text communication with each other for a year, and instead would communicate solely through vlogs. The pair cemented themselves as stars of the vlogging world, and in 2012, Hank Green had an idea: why not adapt a classic novel for the web?

"I wanted to do something no one had done before: an adaptation in online video. Taking a previous work and transferring it into this new media. I wanted to take something that was a great story that I loved. And I wanted something that was very dialogue based and character based, so that we could do something that's not a big production with sets and scenery, but just a person talking to a camera."¹⁰³

The result? *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a modern retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* presented through fictional video-blogs, premiered on YouTube on April 9, 2012. Like its

¹⁰³ *Introducing Lizzie Bennet*. Dir. Hank Green. Vlogbrothers. April 12, 2012.

inspiration, the series starts with the iconic first line of the novel: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Sitting up-front-and-center, quoting her mother with a heavy dose of sarcasm, is, of course, Lizzie[sic]¹⁰⁴ Bennet herself. Lizzie is, in her own words, “a 24-year-old grad student with a mountain of student loans, living at home and preparing for a career.”¹⁰⁵ She is talkative and opinioned, and within the first minute of the first episode, has already established her profound annoyance with her mother’s focus on seeing each of her young daughters married. “I’m sure there are a great number of rich, young, single men who aren’t looking for wives.” Thanks to the nature of vlogging – which involves talking at a camera and not much more – exposition in the series is not a problem. The audience quickly learns that Lizzie is the middle child in her family (in this version there are three Bennet sisters instead of five – Kitty and Mary make appearances in other forms), that her best friend is Charlotte Lu, that her mother is obsessed with marriage and her father not so much (the series is strictly cast with people in their 20s, so reenactments of previous events are often performed within the show by Lizzie and her friends), and most importantly, that a rich young med-student named Bing Lee has moved into their neighborhood.

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries consists of 100 episodes, each being between 3 and 5 minutes long. Additionally, extra plot content is viewable on other channels, including *The Lydia Bennet* (29 episodes detailing Lydia’s adventures) and *Pemberley Digital* (6 episodes hosted by Darcy’s younger sister, Gigi). The series also has an active Twitter

¹⁰⁴ In Austen’s novel, Elizabeth Bennet’s nickname is spelled “Lizzy,” but in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* her name is spelled “Lizzie.”

¹⁰⁵ *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, 2013-2012.

accounts for each of the main characters who contribute to the plot, as well as non-plot related content, like question and answer videos and other video channels (*Collins & Collins* and *The Maria Lu*). This spreading of content makes for a viewing experience that is both immersive and confusing, as there are many different areas where someone can go for plot and information regarding the series. “Some viewers may not have experienced this arc in full if their focus is on the “main” episodes,” says the AV Club in a review.¹⁰⁶ While the bulk of the heavier plot elements do take place on the main *Lizzie Bennet* YouTube channel, this is not always the case: when Lydia decides to run away with Wickham (which this time around, includes making a sex tape with him), the main channel reveals this information in episode 83, *Ugh*, but the episode makes it unclear what has occurred. At that point, other channels and Twitter accounts had been showcasing the relationship between Lydia and Wickham for weeks, and the official episode reflects that. If the viewer had been keeping up with the various platforms, the episode would feel cohesive. If not, then the episode appears to be disjointed and confusing.

While the at times fragmented storytelling is one of the biggest flaws of the series, another major problem is the way it chooses to adapt the story. *Pride and Prejudice* is often heralded as one of the greatest love stories of all time (for example, it was voted as the Greatest Love Story ever told on goodreads.com), and yet in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Darcy only appears in 10 episodes out of 100. He does make appearances through reenactments – where he is frequently portrayed in a negative light, keeping in

¹⁰⁶ McNutt, Myles, "Webseries Phenom The Lizzie Bennet Diaries Made It to 100 Entries (and Beyond)." AV Club. February 3, 2014.

tune with the original novel – but the audience ultimately only gets ten chances to meet him. This gets to the root of one of the biggest issues with the show: its neglect of the romantic elements of *Pride and Prejudice*, in order to favor friendship:

“What stands out about The Lizzie Bennet Diaries is that it isn’t a love story. Yes, Lizzie Bennet eventually looks past her first impression of the socially inept William Darcy to discover a kindhearted man she loves and who loves her as well, and the characters spend much of their time reflecting on the courtship of Lizzie’s sister Jane and Darcy’s close friend Bing Lee. However, while Lizzie’s story undoubtedly concerns love, it is not about romantic love, at least not in the way other adaptations of the story have been memorialized through their depictions of Elizabeth and Darcy.”¹⁰⁷

When the series begins, the viewer is only introduced to the four leads – Lizzie, Jane, Lydia, and Charlotte – although many other characters make appearances through the reenactments. There are then another 25 episodes before a new character appears and 60 before Darcy is introduced, illustrating the series’ focus on the relationships between its four main female characters. The dynamics between these women are established quickly, and while there is obviously some tension within the group, particularly between Lizzie and Lydia, ultimately they are portrayed as a group of close-knit women.

This is, of course, until George Wickham comes into town in episode 45, disrupting the eco-system between the girls. Fulfilling the same role as he does in the original novel, Wickham has a brief flirtation with Lizzie, during which he “reveals” a fictitious account of his past relationship with Darcy. Lizzie and Wickham quickly fizzle out, and after some time, he reenters the narrative as a love interest for Lydia. In the

¹⁰⁷ McNutt, “Webseries Phenom.”

novel, the fact that Wickham has chosen Lydia as his latest conquest has little impact on the relationship between the sisters, as they are not close to begin with. Since the source material has five sisters instead of three, there is less of a bond between all of the sisters as a whole, and Lizzy and Lydia's relationship is barely existent. Additionally, because Lydia is not a main character in the novel (as opposed to being one of four leads in the series), she is portrayed in a much less sympathetic light. Lizzy is obviously worried by the reveal that Lydia and Wickham have eloped, but this is more based on the negative impact this action could hold for Lydia's reputation in society, as well as that of their family as a whole. In *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Lydia gets her own channel to show her point of view, and thus is portrayed as a much more sympathetic and loveable character. There is still some antagonism between Lizzie and Lydia, but because the viewer is given more personal time with Lydia as well as Lizzie, the audience is not meant to necessarily agree with Lizzie's frequent jabs at her sister, or Lydia's constant insults towards Lizzie. Instead, their relationship, as well as their relationships with both Charlotte and Jane, are given more of a focus and nuance, and turn out to be the core of the series.

Unfortunately, this comes at the expense of Darcy, who in this series is relegated to a supporting character. Because of the show's frequent focus on the relationships between the Bennet sisters, Lizzie and Darcy's romance is put on the back-burner, and it is ultimately a secondary plot in an adaptation where it should be the focus. This is not to say that portraying positive relationships between women is a bad thing: women are often pitted against each other in life and in fiction, and portrayals of loving friendships between girls is typically something the media does not provide enough of. The problem is that this is not *Sense and Sensibility*, but *Pride and Prejudice*. Published in 1811,

Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is all about female relationships. It focuses on a pair of sisters who are two sides of the same coin, and while both women have romantic interests that help determine their happiness, the key component of the novel is the relationship between the sisters. If the creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* wanted to adapt an Austen story about the complex friendships between women, they had the material right in front of them. Instead, they picked a novel that is famous for being one of the greatest love stories of all time, and tried to dim down the love. It makes for an unsatisfying and underwhelming romance.

Another major problem in this adaptation is *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' handling of Lydia overall. In the novel, Lydia is, "untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless."¹⁰⁸ She is frivolous and superficial, oftentimes more concerned with finding soldiers to kiss than she is with her family. While she isn't necessarily portrayed as a cruel character, she's also not deep and is, for all intents and purposes, an annoying teenager. For the first half of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the series stays close to Austen's description. This time around, Lydia is a rowdy party girl, who studies at the community college during the week and sleeps around during the weekend. She is the bane of Lizzie's existence, who at the beginning of the series casually refers to her sister as a "stupid whorey slut." While Jane and Lizzie do obviously love her, Lydia is obnoxious, and insults her family for everything from their old clothes to reading books. For the first third of the series, this take on the character aligns with the original novel: while Lydia has more of a focus than she does in the book, since she is one of four leads, the portrayal of her as a somewhat thoughtless party girl translates nicely. However, this does not last.

¹⁰⁸ Austen, *Seven Novels*, 365.

Fed up with Lizzie's frequent commentary on her promiscuity and lack of intellect, Lydia jumps into a romance with Wickham. He tells her the same lies he told Lizzie, who at this point has been enlightened by Darcy as to the nature of their previous acquaintance, and the two embark on an abusive relationship that Lydia documents on her channel (which, for convenience reasons, Lizzie is not watching; the suspension of disbelief does not hold up).

These changes lead to a major shift in the nature of the series, as well as Lydia's character as a whole. For one thing, there are Lydia's reasons for entering into her relationship with Wickham. In the novel, because they are not as close, Lydia is never made aware of the substance of Lizzie's brief flirtation with Wickham. She doesn't run away with Wickham to hurt her sister; she likely isn't thinking of her sisters at all when she and Wickham elope, except maybe with anticipation of the jealousy they will have at her landing a man. Even more crucial, though, is the series' efforts to give Lydia redemption, and how these efforts backfired on the show overall. From the start, Lydia is portrayed in a more sympathetic light than she is in the novel – not surprising, considering her more substantial role. As opposed to being just another of Lizzie's annoying sisters, Lydia is a lead character, with a point of view that the series takes time to cultivate. Early on in the series, Lydia establishes her discontent with Lizzie's often dismissive attitude towards her, despite the fact that she herself often mocks Lizzie as well. Additionally, thanks to her channel, Lydia gets to express her views and feelings throughout the series on her own terms. In theory, giving Lydia a redemption story is not necessarily bad. *Bride and Prejudice* does this in a subtle way, having its version of Lydia (Lakhi) realize her mistake in running away with Wickham quietly and without

fanfare. But *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* goes overboard, and the way the series handles Lydia's plot creates chaos toward the end of the show, when the momentum should be at its highest. Even more so, it takes valuable attention away from Lizzie and Darcy's relationship, which should be the focus.

Ultimately, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' biggest problem is that it doesn't seem to understand the core of its source material. While the series is never groundbreaking or even particularly excellent, it does start out somewhat strong. The first half of the show is fun and enjoyable, even if it is at times pointless. The stakes are not very high, but as a series that aired 3 minute videos twice a week, they didn't need to be. It was a small show, and that was acceptable. The real issues of the series did not emerge until it started to tackle serious plot elements, storylines that did not feel sincere in the format of the show. The creators made attempts to retell Austen's novel in new and interesting ways, but the reality is that the series did not have the depth to handle these plots, and oftentimes their attempts at striking storylines ended in underwhelming ways that were unsatisfying. While the show fancied itself to be a feminist retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*, with a major focus on female relationships (as if the original novel was not clearly a feminist work), it also involved a plot in which one of its most outspoken characters (Lydia), who is proudly promiscuous but frequently mocked for it, is manipulated into an abusive relationship and punished for it. Lydia starts the series as a crazy, fun, and outspoken (if not also annoying) character, and she ends it deep in depression, trying to regain her happiness after being abused by George. Her character is broken down by the end, and she is ultimately punished by the narrative for her party-girl ways. Even more importantly, the series attempts to provide the audience with a grand

romance between Lizzie and Darcy, but then doesn't follow through. The show does not spend very much time with Lizzie and Darcy, or even just Darcy in general, and as a result, their ultimate coupling does not feel earned, as it has with many of the other romances in Austen adaptations. Instead, it feels like a forced foregone conclusion.

Some might argue that these problems are a result of the nature of the text and the issues that are presented in transferring it to the modern age, but considering all the different adaptations this paper has looked at, this does not seem right. While there are certain plot elements that are hard to make believable in the modern day, it is hardly impossible. Aside from the loose interpretations that have adapted certain elements and left out others (*Bridget Jones's Diaries*), there have obviously been film adaptations that were far stricter with the source material and still managed not to make as many mistakes as *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. *Clueless*, for example, is a complete modern retelling of *Emma*, a story that fully integrates itself into the present day, but still manages to accurately depict the most important elements of the novel on which it was based. While it is not a classic interpretation of Austen, it is also probably one of the best adaptations of the source material in terms of tone. And while it could be argued that these issues with *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are a product of its medium, taking into account shows that have been created since it was released, this does not hold up. There are other webseries adaptations of classic literature, including *Nothing Much To Do* (based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*) and *Green Gables Fables* (based on L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*). Both these shows managed to take a classic piece of literature and make it work both in the modern day and in the webseries format. They have stakes that are important, but don't feel overly dramatic in their medium. The key

problem with *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is that it is a low stakes series that refuses to acknowledge itself as such. As a result, it flounders, and ultimately ends with little impact.

Because of the nature of the series, it did not receive much recognition from major critics, aside from winning the 2013 Emmy for Outstanding Creative Achievement In Interactive Media - Original Interactive Program. It didn't get the Roger Ebert treatment, or that of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, and so on. The biggest publications to review the series were *The Guardian* and *The AV Club*, and while both only have positive things to say, neither of them acknowledge the deep structural problems the show has. *The Guardian* even notes the flaws in the show's DNA, but seems to think it prevails in spite of them: "In theory, it should be terrible. In practice, it's pure genius."¹⁰⁹ The review also notes that it believes, "if Austen was writing now, she might have created something very like this." Considering the various changes and problems the show faced, this does not seem likely. Austen's style was clear: she was unpretentious and not snooty, but she was also incredibly savvy about the world, and that shined through her work. *Clueless* is, again, a great example of this: while the film itself is focused on mostly airheaded characters, the movie as a whole is very savvy, and it assumes the audience will be able to understand this. It allows its characters, who are often surrounded by superficiality, to have real depth, and it does this while also not mocking its female lead for her at times pointless obsessions. This is why *Clueless* succeeds, and incidentally, it's why *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* fails.

¹⁰⁹ Welsh, Kaite. "Pride and Prejudice at 200: the best Jane Austen small-screen adaptations." *The Guardian*. January 28, 2013.

The most interesting thing about *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is not the series itself, but its influence on the webshows that would come after it. The literary webseries has manifested in a variety of shows, including both *Nothing Much To Do* and *Green Gables Fables*, but also *Emma Approved (Emma)*, *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre (Jane Eyre)*, *Carmilla* (based on the novella by Sheridan Le Fanu), *The New Adventures of Peter and Wendy (Peter Pan)*, *Jules and Monty (Romeo and Juliet)*, *The Misselthwaite Archives (The Secret Garden)*, and many more. While the quality and professionalism of these shows vary, they have become a niche on the internet that has garnered enough popularity as to have inspired so much diversity of product. It is a genre that has continued to grow, and it more or less owes its entire existence to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Nearly all literary webseries creators cite the show as their primary inspiration. “We were talking a lot about *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, and how we really liked it, and if we could do something similar,” says *Nothing Much To Do* co-creator Claris Jacob in an online information video.¹¹⁰ On the website for *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre*, the creators don’t even feel the need to mention the influence of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* – rather, they clarify that they are not connected with the show, as if it is a foregone conclusion that the series was an influence. While *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is not a great series on its own, it does deserve credit for the minds it has inspired, and the influence on the future of media it could possibly have had.

There is a place for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, but it shouldn’t be looked at as anything grand. It’s watchable and fun, and as long as the viewer doesn’t look too deeply into it, the show can be enjoyable. It would be a lot easier to handle if one weren’t

¹¹⁰ Chat 1: *How This Started*. The Candle Wasters. September 24, 2014.

familiar with the source material, and thus the various narrative problems the show has. It's a stupid adaptation, but it is an adaptation nonetheless. The majority of its merit lies in its influence on other shows, and it does deserve credit for being the first of its kind. But the amount of praise it received – from the Emmy, to the 2,626,269¹¹¹ views on its first video, to the various love from a plethora of fans – was not warranted, and was more so due to the fact that it caught the zeitgeist. While it might not misinterpret the tone of *Austen* as much as *The Jane Austen Book Club* does, it also reworks too many plot elements, to the point where the core of Austen's work is unrecognizable. While many of the changes initially seem small, they have major ramifications for the show as a whole, and not for the better. If the viewer's knowledge of Austen is not great, and if they are satisfied with a show that is entertaining but not deep, then it can be a very enjoyable thing to watch. But if the viewer is looking for a real adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, they should look elsewhere.

¹¹¹ *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. YouTube. April 09, 2012.

Conclusion:

Adaptation is not easy. This is perhaps the understatement of the century, but it bears being repeated. Adapting any narrative for the screen is hard, but taking a written work and adapting it for the modern day – changing a piece of work immensely while also trying to make it true to its origins – is even harder. It cannot effectively be done on a whim, and it cannot be accomplished by people who do not completely and utterly understand the nature of the text. It is also something that, a lot of the time, seems easier than it is. It's not very hard to look at a piece of classic text and think *what would that be today?* It's easy to imagine what a character would be doing in modern times. Taking certain elements of a piece of literature and reworking them for today can be fun, and sometimes it can work, as with *Bridget Jones's Diary*. But a story is more than a single character, or a romantic relationship. Most pieces of classic literature are made up of several moving parts, that work together to make a final piece of text that breathes life. This is certainly the case for Jane Austen, who is a writer known for several elements: her feminist themes, her characters, her twists, her commentary on society. She is also known for being timeless, of course, but it is not necessarily because her entire novels can be transported to the modern world without any effort. Rather, she is timeless because certain elements of her works still feel that they have relevance today.

Adapting Austen requires also a vast knowledge of the core elements of her original works. Through the various adaptations this paper has analyzed, tone seems to be one of the most important factors in any Austen book, and striking that perfect balance between in-depth and unpretentious is key. This is evidenced through *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Jane Austen Book Club*, both incredibly loose adaptations that take

different approaches to tone. An adaptation does not need to stick strictly to the plot in order to be successful, but it does need to understand the core values that Austen applied to each of her novels. While *Bridget Jones's Diary* is not particularly close to *Pride and Prejudice* in regards to plot, it completely understands what Austen's key tone was.

Bridget knows that watching certain television shows or dressing like a bunny at a costume party does not make her dumb, and rather than repelled, Mark Darcy and the intended watcher is more attracted to her because of these qualities. By contrast, the women of *The Jane Austen Book Club* cannot fathom why Grigg would compare Austen to something as mainstream as *Star Wars* (or, in the novel, a sitcom), and are actually quite offended by it. The movie frames the women as in the right, and Grigg in the wrong. As a result, the film showcases its clear misunderstanding of the tone behind Austen's original work.

With films that are attempting more of a strict adaptation (*Clueless*, *Bride and Prejudice*, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*), tone is still incredibly important, but a key understanding of the plot is also needed. Changes can and should be made, but they need to be regarded with how they will affect the plot, and ultimately the adaptation, as a whole. Making Christian gay in *Clueless* as opposed to secretly engaged to Miss Fairfax works because it does not affect the overall plot for Cher and Josh, and still allows that character to have an important role in the story. Changing the climax of *Bride and Prejudice* from the novel works, because it still serves the same purpose for the characters, and does not negatively impact the story as a whole. Alternatively, the various changes made in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* do not work. While they each originally seem small (Lydia's character, the romantic arc), these changes slowly build up over the course

of the series, to the point where, by the climax, the writers had essentially written themselves into a corner. This made for an unsatisfying ending, that was both unenjoyable and not anything like what Austen had originally written. While changes can and should happen in any modern adaptation, it is also wise not to believe that one understands a work more than its original writer. There is a reason why people still devour Jane Austen's novels 200 years after they were written. Adapters should not seek to improve upon her work – not only because it isn't needed, but also because it is nearly impossible to do so.

Of the five adaptations that have been analyzed in this paper, *Clueless* is by far the best. It seamlessly transports Emma Woodhouse to mid-1990s Beverly Hills, creating a world that feels fully realized and also very much grounded in the background of Austen. It is an independent work that, after over 20 years, is still a cultural touchstone that adults and teenagers alike love. Its influence on the popularity of Austen, as well as the overall tones of teen films, has been immense. Strictly in terms of adapting, *Clueless* is a movie that manages to capture all the most important elements of *Emma*, while also feeling natural. It is distinctly and recognizably *Emma*, but it also doesn't tell the audience this: either the viewers gets that it's an adaptation, or they don't. In reimagining the rich and spoiled heiress as a rich and spoiled Beverly Hills teenager, Amy Heckerling perfectly understands the core of Austen's world. The transferring of the various characters works so well that it almost seems as though they were all meant to be vapid Beverly Hills High students. Very importantly, Cher has just the right amount of brat and soul to work. She is not a typical nice girl (and neither is *Emma*), but she is also not mean. She has depth and nuance, even if she might not always know what those words

mean. At the end of the day, *Clueless* works as an adaptation most of all because it is, quite simply, a well put together movie. An adaptation can try as hard as it wants to adapt correctly, but if it's not a good piece of film, that's all for nothing. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is a good example of this. In addition to being a very good piece of adaptation, through its pacing, characters, and plot, *Clueless* is a good movie, and that is what matters the most.

Over the course of this paper, it has become clear that the best adaptations – the films that manage to embody the work of Austen while also being good pieces of cinema overall – are the movies that not only completely capture the essence of her original tone, but also fully immerse themselves in an entirely new world, and allow the text to fit into that world. The adaptations that do the best job – *Clueless*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *Bride and Prejudice* – are the movies that truly latch on to the cultural aspects of their geographical areas. Beverly Hills, London, Amritsar. These films all work independently of Austen, and as a result, they feel full and real even without their connection to her. *The Jane Austen Book Club* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* take different approaches to adapting, the former going very loose and the latter making seemingly small changes that ultimately negatively impact the whole. These adaptations, while neither of them stick very strictly to the text, are both stuck to Austen, to a fault. They do not exist without the clear connection to Austen, and even more importantly, they cannot exist without it. They need the recognition of Austen in order to be appreciated. The other mentioned films do not, and that is why they succeed.

Through the various films that have been looked at over the course of this paper, it has become clear that Jane Austen is a timeless writer whose themes, plots, and ideas

can be made identifiable in modern times. Her famously well-rounded characters are both understandable and at times insufferable, and her novels contain common themes that readers and watchers can easily identify with over two hundred years later. She is not, however, a particularly easy writer to adapt, and in order to do her work justice, adapters need to have a core understanding of her original work. Modern adaptations should try to ground themselves in a distinct geographical location or theme, as opposed to just having the theme of their work be, “an adaptation of Jane Austen.” Most importantly, a stellar adaptation requires the correct tone – witty, in-depth, but also unpretentious: without this key tone, the writers display a lack of a proper understanding of Austen, and ultimately cannot capture the spirit of her original work. Through savvy filmmaking and directing, and a core handle on Austen’s tone and ideas, the works of Jane Austen are made timeless.

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