

**The Influence of the Target Audience on Joe Wright's
Film Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*
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Abstract

This paper traces the influence of audience expectations on Joe Wright's 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*. It points out the differences between the film and the adapted novel that have been made in order to please a particular group of filmgoers targeted by the adapters. First, it explains how as a period adaptation of a classic novel, the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* has changed Austen's story in order to appeal to the mostly female audience usually attracted to this genre. Second, it shows how as an adaptation, the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* has kept, changed, and added some elements to Austen's story in order to appeal to both the "knowing" and the "unknowing" audience members. Thus, it stresses the role of the target audience in shaping novel-to-film adaptations.

تأثير الجمهور المستهدف على فيلم جو رايت للتكيف مع جين
أوستن كبرياء وتحامل
شيري حنين إسحاق
الملخص

يقوم هذا البحث بتتبع تأثير توقعات الجمهور على فيلم كبرياء و تحامل للمخرج جو رايت، لذا يوضح التغييرات التي تمت في الرواية المُقتبسة أثناء عملية الاقتباس من أجل إرضاء مجموعة محددة من المشاهدين الذين استهدفهم مقتبسو الرواية. فيقوم البحث أولاً بتوضيح التغييرات التي أجراها فيلم كبرياء و تحامل (٢٠٠٥) في قصة أوستن، باعتباره فيلم مُقتبس عن رواية كلاسيكية، حتى يرضي الجمهور الذي يجذب عادةً لهذا النوع من الأفلام، و الذي يكون أغلبه عادةً من النساء. و يقوم البحث ثانياً بالإشارة إلى أن فيلم كبرياء و تحامل (٢٠٠٥)، باعتباره اقتباساً، قد أبقى على بعض العناصر الموجودة في الرواية، بينما غير البعض الآخر منها، و أضاف إليها أيضاً عناصر أخرى جديدة، حتى يرضي كلا من المشاهدين "العارفين" و المشاهدين "الغير عارفين" (أي المشاهدين الذين قرأوا الرواية المُقتبسة قبلاً و الذين لم يقرأونها مسبقاً). و هكذا يؤكد البحث على الدور الهام الذي يلعبه الجمهور المستهدف في تشكيل الأفلام المُقتبسة عن روايات.

The Influence of the Target Audience on Joe Wright's Film Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Besides the adapted novel, there are many forces that take part in shaping a film adaptation of a novel. One of these forces is the audience that the adapters expect (or rather seek) to please. The 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*, like most adaptations of classic novels in the 2000s, rewrites its story with a group of audience members in mind that is mostly female, and that includes some members of the "knowing" audience as well as some other members of the "unknowing" audience (Hutcheon 120). This can be clearly seen in the way it functions to live up to the expectations of these various audience members.

First, the way in which the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* depicts the women and men in the story has clearly been affected by the fact that most of the targeted audience is female. This can be noticed when it is compared both to Jane Austen's novel and to previous adaptations of it. For example, Deborah Cartmell points out that Fay Weldon's 1980 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* "focuses on the women, almost valorizing Mrs. Bennet whose objection to the entailing of the estate in preference for the male line is seen to have considerable justification" (Cartmell 20). On the contrary, Andrew Davies's 1995 adaptation "uniquely gives voice to the men, especially, of course Mr. Darcy, who is seen where he isn't in the novel, to be undergoing an almost Herculean effort to suppress his powerful feelings for Elizabeth" (20).

Because it is written by a female screenwriter for an audience of mostly postmodern females, the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* focuses on the women more than the men, and presents its women as strong and rational characters. This is why it insists on telling the story from Lizzy's point of view. For instance, Cartmell observes that unlike the openings of previous adaptations, the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* "begins with Elizabeth, following her point of view up the garden path, gradually introducing us to her life. She is distinguished from the rest of her family, as she is seen from the outside looking in, an observer, reader and perhaps even controller of her life (since the book she is reading ... is, as only the most observant viewers will recognise, none other than *Pride and Prejudice* itself" (Cartmell 56).

Appealing to a female audience is also why several female characters are portrayed in the 2005 adaptation as strong, intelligent and witty characters. First and foremost, the intelligence and wit of Lizzy Bennet are reflected in this film several times. In the Assembly Hall ball, she is the one who asks Mr. Darcy if he dances. In the Netherfield ball, she is the one who starts the conversation with Mr. Darcy, encourages him to speak, and then asks him many questions to try to “make out” his character. In her house, she is the only one who tries to reason with her father not to let Lydia travel to Brighton. Towards the end, she is the one who takes Mr. Darcy’s hand and kisses it. Finally, she is the one who convinces her father to understand Mr. Darcy.

Besides being intelligent and outspoken, the Lizzy of the film is also a little more modern. For instance, we never see or hear about Lizzy sewing though in the novel she does that several times. The scene of her sewing in Netherfield, for example, is changed so that we see her reading to enjoy her time instead of sewing (vol. 1, ch. 10). Similarly, she never plays cards, as she does with Wickham in the novel (vol. 1, ch.16). Conversely, in the final proposal scene, she does not only smile, say a few words, and look down shyly as she does in the novel (vol. 3, ch. 16), but takes Mr. Darcy’s hand and kisses it. Her subsequent comment, “Your hands are cold.”, emphasizes the fact that as powerful as he is, Mr. Darcy still needs her support. In other words, the Lizzy of the 2005 film is less like a 19th-century woman and more like her 21st-century viewers.

Jane is similarly so strong and eloquent when compared to Bingley. He always seems very confused in her presence. In the Assembly Hall ball she is the one who helps him find the words to express what he wants to say about reading. While she is at his house in Netherfield, he cannot find the words to express both his sorrow that she is sick and his pleasure that she is with him. Finally, when he wants to propose to her, he goes to her house but then becomes so afraid that he leaves so abruptly, rehearses the whole proposal with his friend, Mr. Darcy, then goes back to propose to her. Bingley’s constant confusion and loss of words and Jane’s help to him are not transferred from the novel. They are rather added in the film adaptation which focuses on its powerful female characters all along.

The Influence of the Target Audience on Joe Wright's Film Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

This is also why Mrs. Bennet is portrayed in the 2005 film as less silly and less dramatic than she is in the novel. For example, early in the novel, before Mr. Bennet tells his wife about visiting Mr. Bingley, she is so angry that she shouts at Kitty for coughing, but this silly comment is removed in the film. In the conversation after the Assembly Hall in the film, Mrs. Bennet keeps going on and on about Mr. Bingley and his dances, but her words after Mr. Bennet wishes that Mr. Bingley had sprained his ankle and spared him all the long talk are changed in the film so that she gains some reason. While in the novel she speaks about the "excessively handsome" Mr. Bingley, his "charming" sisters, and the most elegant lace on their dresses (vol. 1, ch. 3), in the film she says: "Oh, Mr. Bennet, the way you carry on, anyone would think our girls look forward to a grand inheritance. When you die, Mr. Bennet, which may in fact be very soon, our girls will be left without a roof over their head, nor a penny to their name." Adding these words in the film reflects how this version of *Pride and Prejudice* allows Mrs. Bennet to explain that her enthusiastic interest in Mr. Bingley and his dances, as well as in any young man, springs from her deep concern for the welfare of her daughters. This makes the film audience gain some sympathy for her in spite of all her silly words and actions.

Towards the end, the film once more proves to be more in favor of Mrs. Bennet than the novel. This is clear when Lizzy accepts Mr. Darcy's second proposal. In the novel, we know that that Lizzy decides to tell her mother the happy news herself and is worried about the shame that her mother's reaction, be it good or bad, will bring her. (vol. 3, ch. 17) Elizabeth thinks that "whether she were violently set against the match, or violently delighted with it, it [is] certain that her manner would be equally ill adapted to do credit to her sense; and she could no more bear that Mr. Darcy should hear the first raptures of her joy, than the first vehemence of her disapprobation" (vol. 3, ch. 17). These words show that Lizzy has a more degrading view of her mother than she does in the film, where we see none of Lizzy's worries about the embarrassment of her mother's behavior or of Darcy reaction to it. Once again, the Lizzy in the film is less harsh on her mother than the Lizzy in the novel.

In fact, in the film, we see no reaction from Mrs. Bennet, the kind mother who is just happy for her daughter. Her conversation with Jane as they watch Mr. Darcy pacing nervously and waiting for Lizzy to get her father's consent shows nothing but amazement and joy:

Mrs. Bennet: But she doesn't like him! I thought she didn't like him!

Jane: So did I, so did we all ... (*laughs*) We must've been wrong.

Mrs. Bennet: Won't be the first time, will it?

Jane: (*laughs*) No, ... nor the last, I dare say.

This conversation inspires in the film viewers a sense of happiness at Mrs. Bennet's great amazement rather than a satirical view of her too many comments on happiness and wealth.

Besides the fact that *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) sought to satisfy the expectations of a female audience, it sought to please both the knowing and unknowing audience. In order to satisfy the expectations of the knowing audience, the makers of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) kept the same storyline of the old and popular novel and of the many previous successful adaptations without much change. They clearly avoided the strong and notorious challenge both to Austen's novel and to the cultural image of Austen and Austen adaptations that was taken by the makers of the previous Jane Austen film adaptation, namely Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999). Having witnessed the fierce attacks by critics as well as audience members to *Mansfield Park* for altering the plot of the novel to focus on class, gender, and colonial conflicts in England at the time of the novel, the makers of *Pride and Prejudice* chose to include no hints to class and colonial conflicts. They dealt only with gender conflicts and they did so only in a light optimistic way. Thus, they chose to "perpetuate the myth of Austen as a safe and undemanding author, writing in an untroubled, secure and comfortable past" in order to win the knowing audience (Cartmell 40).

In this 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* no political struggles are depicted. The only time we see English officers is when they march through the streets of Meryton in a colorful and happy parade, as

The Influence of the Target Audience on Joe Wright's Film Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, and Kitty stand with many other people celebrating their arrival. What we see in this scene is a group of potential suitors to the threatened Bennet girls rather than a group of men getting ready to protect the town in case of a potential war. There are no racial conflicts in this film either. On the contrary, as Higson puts it, *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), with its English director and white English stars, offers a "more authentic version of Austen" than other adaptations of the same novel released in the same time period, such as *Pride and Prejudice – A Latter-Day Comedy* (2003) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) (Higson 170). Class struggles are similarly absent from this adaptation. Although it portrays the lives of several social classes, the film's sense of impoverishment stops at the level of the landed gentry, represented by the Bennets. It does not include the lower working classes, like the servants, for instance. Sometimes we see servants working silently, as in the scenes in Rosings, and sometimes we see them walking around and humming happily, as in Longbourn. This has some roots in Austen's writing itself, as Austen's novels in general "frequently deal with the subtleties of class and class relations at the upper end of the scale, but they overlook the role that servants, the rural poor and the working class are required to play in order to enable the upper classes to enjoy the lifestyles they do" (150). However, excluding the poor classes is still a choice made by the adapters in order to please their target audience, unlike, for instance, the choice to portray the lives of the poor classes in the film adaptations of *Emma* (1996) and *Mansfield Park* (1999).

Instead of focusing on the political or class contexts of the novel, this adaptation, like most adaptations of the same novel, is mainly preoccupied "with gender and a reiteration of what is often regarded as central to the novel's popularity: the 'timeless' desire to achieve happiness through a marriage of equal minds" (Cartmell 58). Thus, by keeping away from the political issues and class issues, and giving more focus to gender issues, the filmmakers of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) aimed at offering the filmgoers the appeal of repetition, that is, the pleasure of experiencing a familiar and loved story one more time.

However, the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* was not too traditional. It sought to offer its knowing audience something new and fresh but not too radical and shocking. Therefore, this new adaptation is less polished and more realistic than the novel or like earlier Austen adaptations. In fact, Director Joe Wright declares that he “wanted to treat [*Pride and Prejudice*] as a piece of British realism rather than going with the picturesque tradition, which tends to depict an idealized version of English heritage as some kind of Heaven on Earth. [He] wanted to make *Pride & Prejudice* real and gritty – and be as honest as possible” (Focus Features).

This is why the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* is “more dirty realist than picturesque” (Higson 170). This dirty realism can be seen clearly in the scenes in Longbourn and in the ball scenes. For example, “the Bennet household” in the 2005 film is “a carnivalesque and bawdy place, far from the sense of decorum usually associated with Austen” (170). Thus, there are scenes showing ducks and geese all around the house, clothes hanging on washing lines outside it, and a pig walking inside it. Moreover, “that sense of the carnival is even stronger in the vigorous and sweaty ball sequences” which are much more crowded and noisier than in any other Austen adaptation (170).

According to Higson, this dirty realism has resulted in an adaptation that “very much follows in the tradition of English period films of the previous few years ... offering a less safe and less pretty version of the modern English past (170-71). This dirty realism aimed at mixing the appeal of repetition with that of novelty, that is, offering its audience the pleasure of experiencing the same story but in a new way or from a fresh perspective.

Yet the challenge of pleasing the knowing audience lies not only in the relationship between this adaptation and the adapted novel, nor in the relationship between this adaptation and the cultural image of the writer and the novel. Equally important in this challenge is the relationship between this adaptation and earlier adaptations of the same novel, especially if those adaptations have been so successful that they have attained a cultural status in the minds of viewers and critics equal to the status of the novel itself. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, the 1995 mini-series is generally

The Influence of the Target Audience on Joe Wright's Film Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

considered the most successful and most powerful adaptation of the novel, which means that any new adaptation of this novel is instantly compared to it by critics and viewers alike. Therefore, to please the knowing audience, *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) had to distinguish itself not only from the novel, but also from the mini-series. This is another reason why *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) insisted on presenting Lizzy's story.

By comparing the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* film adaptation to the earlier 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* mini-series adaptation it becomes very obvious that the 1995 version of the story is Darcy's version while the 2005 version is Lizzy's. "In general," Lisa Hopkins explains, "Andrew Davies's adaptation is extremely faithful to the novel", however, "It is really only with Mr. Darcy that changes have been made, and as a general rule, they all tend in the same direction: to focus on his feelings, his desires, and his emotional and social development" (Hopkins 115). Some of the added sequences in this adaptation, for instance, show him bathing and fencing and trying hard to overcome his sadness and anger after Lizzy's refusal of his first marriage proposal (116).

On the contrary, in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*, all the focus is on Lizzy and Mr. Darcy is only seen by the audience and known to them insofar as he is related to her. This is why the 2005 adaptation clearly opposes the 1995 adaptation in two very clear instances. First, in the 2005 film we never see Darcy's sadness after Lizzy rejects him as in the 1995 mini-series. Instead, we see Lizzy's sadness in a scene where she tries to read, gazes sadly out of the window, and receives and reads Darcy's explanation letter. Second, in the 2005 film we never see Darcy's journey to find Lydia and Wickham and save the Bennet family name, we only see Lizzy's reaction upon knowing he has been on that journey. Therefore, the empowerment of Lizzy in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* aimed at adding the appeal of intertextuality to the appeals of repetition and novelty, since it invited the viewers to carry out a comparison between adaptations of the same novel which "self-consciously address each other, reviewing and revising what's gone before" (Cartmell 49-50).

Besides the knowing audience, the makers of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) had the unknowing audience in mind. This group of audience members has not read Austen's novel before, nor seen its earlier adaptations. To attract this group to his new adaptation, Wright accentuated the element of romance originally found in the adapted novel. "Austen's characters are young people – Lizzie is 20, Darcy 28, Lydia 15. The emotions they experience are those of young people falling in love for the first time. I was moved by that and sought to convey it" (Focus Features). A clear example of this adaptation's focus on romance is the scene of Darcy's second proposal to Lizzy. This scene in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) is very different from both that of the novel and that of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995). In the novel, the proposal can be considered "in some respects, anticlimactic: when he asks if her feelings are still what they were last April, Elizabeth says simply, 'Just the opposite,' a declaration rather lacking in the language of passionate feeling. There is no kiss, no touch, and Mr. Darcy does not even smile; they merely walk down the lane side by side" (119). In the 1995 adaptation, Andrew Davies presents this scene without changes in order to "keep back full resolution for as long as possible" until the final wedding scene (119).

However, in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* the proposal scene is the exact opposite. First, it takes place at a more romantic setting: outdoors at dawn as neither Darcy nor Lizzy can sleep because they are thinking about each other. Second, more passionate words than the ones in the novel are added here as Darcy says: "I love, and love, and love you, and never wish to be parted from you from this day on". Third, Lizzy takes his hand and kisses it, then their heads touch in perfect serenity and satisfaction is clear on their faces, with the rising sun and the soft music accentuating the happy resolution. By focusing on Darcy and Lizzy's love story, the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* sought to live up to the expectations of young filmgoers who are more interested in a story about love and happy endings than in a story written by a great author. To sum up, the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* secured the attention of its modern, female, knowing and unknowing viewers alike by offering them the same popular story which takes place in a contained conservative society while adding to it a new realistic element, telling it from the new perspective of a strong woman, and highlighting its happy closure.

The Influence of the Target Audience on Joe Wright's Film
Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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