Joe Wright’s Film Adaption of Jane Austen’s

Pride and Prejudice

The Romanticising of Marriage in Popular Culture

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs í ensku

Hrafnhildur Sigurðardóttir

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Abstract

Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* was first published in 1813, exactly two hundred years ago, but it still appeals to readers and filmmakers alike. The novel portrays the Bennet family, with its five unmarried daughters, and their mother’s often desperate attempts to marry them off into financial safety, as the family estate is “entailed” to a distant male cousin. The main plot of the novel is Mr. Darcy’s and Elizabeth Bennet’s initial pride and prejudice turned into love, and the sub-plots of love and marriages that do not all fare well are numerous. In the novel Austen points out, that however uncertain of its capacity to ensure happiness, marriage was the best solution for young women without a fortune to escape poverty, as they had no other means of providing for themselves. The theme of the novel is marriage and the opening statement of Austen’s novel is its thesis, although a tongue-in-cheek one, advocating the universal idea that single rich men must be in need of a wife, and not the other way around.

By addressing such gender issues, regardless of her humorous angle, Austen was certainly one of the earliest feminist writers. This idea of single men in want of marriage is true, for as contemporary studies have shown men stand to benefit much more from marrying than women. Joe Wright’s 2005 film adaptation, *Pride & Prejudice*, deliberately eliminates this opening sentence, and on the apparent grounds of reaching greater popularity Wright’s team modifies the novels story structure, setting and language to appeal to contemporary audiences. These intentional alterations, which leave out Austen’s irony and wit, flatten out the characters and their dialogues and create an overall “Cinderella” perspective of the main plot, to better fit the tale which the Hollywood film is meant to convey.
## Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 4

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 6

1. Pride and Prejudice: From Austen to Cinderella ................................................................. 7
   1.1. Story Structure ....................................................................................................................... 7
   1.2. Theme and Theory ............................................................................................................... 10
   1.3. Film Script ........................................................................................................................... 12
   1.4. On Cinderella ...................................................................................................................... 14

2. Setting: Horse Drawn Carriages and Other Belongings ....................................................... 15
   2.1. Houses, Horses and Carriages ............................................................................................ 15
   2.2. Costumes and Fashion ......................................................................................................... 16

   3.1. Characters Reinvented ......................................................................................................... 20
   3.2. Dialogues, Language and Proposals ................................................................................... 23
   3.3. Opening Sequence .............................................................................................................. 26

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 28

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................... 29
Introduction

This essay will compare and contrast Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) with Joe Wright’s 2005 film adaptation. Austen’s nephew, Mr. Austen-Leigh, recounts in his memoirs: “*Pride and Prejudice*, which some consider the most brilliant of her novels, was the first finished, if not the first begun. She began it in October 1796, before she was twenty-one years old, and completed it in about ten months, in August 1797” (44). Her novel, originally written under the title *First Impressions*, was not published until 1813, exactly two hundred years ago. It portrays the Bennet family, with its five young Miss Bennet’s, who live on their father’s estate in the English countryside. The jacket description of the 1992 edition used for this essay calls it “a captivating story with a relatively simple theme of courtship and proposals, yet with Austen’s mastery of characterization and subtle observations it […] has withstood the test of time. Austen paints an unforgettable comical portrait of sophisticated society” in a story that still appeals to the reader and filmmaker alike (Austen 1992).

The film *Pride & Prejudice* by Joe Wright, was released in 2005, starring Keira Knightly as Elizabeth and Matthew Macfadyen as Mr. Darcy. The question posed in my studies was why the film has streamlined the story into a standardized production as a romantic fairy-tale, thereby stereotyping the characters. The film adaptation of Austen’s masterpiece with its storyline, setting, characters and their conversations will be examined from a gender studies perspective, to show how it has been modified to appeal to the contemporary audience. The emphasis is on the modernization of the setting, language and clothing and modification of the characters, together with the films narrowing of Austen’s storyline. The sub-plots involving other young women and their more unfortunate marriage prospects are either pushed to the background or deleted. This flattening out of the story and its characters creates an overall “Cinderella” impression of the film’s narrative, where the life of the main heroine is made central and her eventual marriage to Mr. Right the absolute climax.

I propose to argue that in an attempt to adapt Jane Austen’s original novel to contemporary ideals, Joe Wright’s film crew has impoverished the story’s structure in the film script, stereotyped the characters and altered the setting and language, while preserving the overall feeling and mood of the Regency period, on the apparent grounds of reaching a wider audience and greater popularity.
1. Pride and Prejudice: From Austen to Cinderella

The novel *Pride and Prejudice* introduces the reader to the Bennets, who live on the Longbourn estate in the English countryside, near the town of Merryton. The story revolves around the trials and tribulations of the Bennet family, with its five unmarried daughters and their mother’s, sometimes desperate, attempts to marry them off successfully, as the family estate is to be entailed off to a distant male cousin, a Mr. Collins. On the inside jacket the novel is described as a comical portrait of courtship “that takes place through a series of letters, ballroom flirtations, and parlor discussions.” It presents us with four love stories, all of which have their own plot.

1.1. Story Structure

The story commences in the Bennets’ living room, where we hear that Netherfield, a nearby estate, has been let at last to a Mr. Bingley. This is considered great news in the Longbourn neighborhood as this will surely introduce new and important acquaintances to their society, and support Mrs. Bennet immediate plans of him marrying one of his daughters, for “[i]t is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 8). According to plan, Mr. Bingley instantly falls in love with Jane, Mrs. Bennet’s oldest and most beloved daughter. This is typical “love at first sight,” which is sure to end in marriage, or as Mrs. Bennet recounts to her husband after their first ball: “[…] he seemed quite struck with Jane” and “actually danced with her twice; and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time” (Austen 16-17). This is a sure sign of attachment, but due to the interference of Mr. Bingley’s friend, Mr. Darcy, it all comes to nothing. During the unraveling of the story this love at first sight, which is now doomed to end in misery, at last finds a happy ending.

Austen’s main love story in the novel enfolds more slowly between the second oldest Miss Bennet, the main heroine Elizabeth (Lizzy), and Mr. Darcy, who is Bingley’s best friend. This is a more complex story than Jane’s, and does not come to a climax until the very end. Their acquaintance starts off on the wrong foot with pride on Mr. Darcy’s side, who will not dance with her at the first country dance, as “[s]he is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt [him]” (Austen 15-16), and misunderstandings and prejudice on Elizabeth’s; she finds him both proud and conceited. When she later finds that he has been the means of ruining her sister’s happiness as well as Mr. Wickham’s fortune, her negative opinion of him is reinforced.
This mutual dislike gradually subsides during the course of the novel to become mutual love. The first evidence of change in attitude is detected early on in Mr. Darcy’s case: But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that [Elizabeth] had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. […] Of this [Elizabeth] was perfectly unaware; - to her he was only the man who made himself agreeable nowhere, and who had not thought her handsome enough to dance with. (Austen 26)

His proposal to her in the middle of the novel therefore comes as a total surprise and shock, as her final words to him bear witness to: “[…]I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry” (Austen 178). During the course of the novel his true character reveals itself to Elizabeth, showing him as the gentleman he really is, whereby Elizabeth’s former prejudices are gradually removed. By his second proposal to her, her feelings are quite the opposite of what they were before (Austen 330). She accepts him and a happy ending is in store for our main heroine and her admirer.

“Had Elizabeth’s opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity…” (Austen 214). The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet is by no means based on mutual love. Mr. Bennet’s attraction was initially based on Mrs. Bennet’s (née Gardiner) captivating beauty and her inherited fortune (Austen 30), but since “[s]he was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper,” Mr. Bennet’s initial admiration has dwindled into mere tolerance of her “nerves” (Austen 10). The only really happy marriage that is portrayed in the novel is that of their uncle and aunt Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, whose superior nature, education and intelligence on both parts make for a very congenial match. (Austen 131). The two other love stories in the novel, although they both end in marriage, do not end as happily as the two elder Miss Bennets. The functions of these sub-plots is to show that not all marriages are examples of nuptial felicity, based on mutual love and respect, and that initial infatuation or love can eventually turn sour.

One such sour story relates to Mr. Wickham, who has just come into the country to serve in the regiment. On their first acquaintance the Miss Bennets found this “exactly as it should be; for the young man wanted only regimentals to make him completely charming” (Austen 69). Elizabeth becomes Mr. Wickham’s friend and
confidante and, for the next ball she “prepared in the highest spirits for the conquest of all that remained un-subdued of his heart” (Austen 85). His true deceiving and fortune-hunting character is revealed to Elizabeth through a confidential account from Mr. Darcy, but Jane and Elizabeth decide to keep the information to themselves instead of letting his character become generally known. This proves to be a fatal decision, as exposure of his character could later have prevented their younger sister Lydia’s scandalous elopement with him to London, where he has no intention of marrying her. Mr. Darcy blames the elopement on himself, and personally sees to it that they are wed, paying Mr. Wickham’s debts off, as well as buying him a new place in the Northern regiments. Mr. Wickham is thereby made to pay for his indiscretions for the rest of his life by being married to ignorant Lydia, who will no doubt turn out just like her ignorant mother.

A marriage based on financial comfort rather than love is that of Mr. Collins, the distant cousin who is to inherit Mr. Bennet’s estate. This “conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly” young man pays the Bennets a visit, determined to make this grievance up to them by marrying one of their daughters (Austen 128). Hence Elizabeth gets an offer of marriage from her cousin, which she declines, to the mortification of her mother, as she is certain Elizabeth will never get another offer of marriage. Her best friend Charlotte Lukas seizes the moment, by diverting his attentions from Lizzy to herself, and consequently Mr. Collins proposes to her the following day. Charlotte accepts him, much to Elizabeth’s surprise, for she “[…] believes that happiness is her right – is every woman’s right” (O’Connell 15). She “[…] had always felt that Charlotte’s opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she could not have supposed it possible that when called into action, she would have sacrificed every better feeling for worldly advantage” (Austen 118). Jane points out that Elisabeth does “[…] not make allowance enough for difference of situation and temper” and reminds her that Charlotte “[…] is one of a large family; that as to fortune, it is a most eligible match” (Austen 128).

“A spinster herself, an outsider peering in at the rituals of the married, Jane Austen exposed matrimony’s contradictions and incongruities […]” (Geller 12). She depicted life and the different facets of love in a world where not every marriage began or ended with love and mutual respect. It was more often based on financial and social standing than reciprocal affection, but nonetheless the institution of marriage was something most women had to aspire to as their only means of survival.
1.2. Theme and Theory

Austen’s work has sometimes “been criticized for portraying a closed world of trivial matters of the female sex instead of dealing with the larger and more important affairs, as the social unrest of the Napoleon era” (Valdimarsdóttir 4). But what exactly were the most pressing matters of a young girl of that time? The feminist writer Jaclyn Geller illustrates that in her book *Here Comes the Bride*:

A young woman of small fortune in England in 1813 had few options. She was barred from the professions and could exercise no voting rights to alter this state of affairs. In marriage she ceased to exist as a legal entity; outside of wedlock, she was destined to a life of grinding poverty and shameful spinsterhood. Domestic law in itself effected the legal oppression of women by making it virtually impossible to exist outside of marriage. (Geller 13)

Consequently, the theme of Austen’s novel is looking for love, but also more importantly looking for financial security. For young women of that era the wars between England and France were not the immediate reality, but only a distant thunder and fortuitously bringing about the “arrival of a militia regiment in the neighbourhood,” wearing their bright red coats (Austen 19-20).

At that time almost the only occupation that young women could take up was to become teachers for their nieces and nephews, as Lizzy suggests to her sister Jane in the BBC series: “I shall end an old maid and teach your ten children to embroider cushions and play their instruments very ill” (Langton). It mattered a great deal for women not only whether you married or not, but also whom you married, as this would decide your social standing for the rest of your life. Marriage was therefore the most important step any woman could take and not all could afford the luxury of waiting to fall in love like Elizabeth Bennet but rather had to settle for what she could procure, like her friend Charlotte. She must surely have known that by marrying Mr. Collins she would be marrying one of the stupidest men in England (Langton; Austen 128), but what are her choices? She had neither the fortune nor the beauty to guarantee her a future husband, or as Austen points out, “[…marriage] was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want” (Austen 116).

In her work Austen illustrates the many injustices and problems women faced, with lack of fortune and legal rights. This is pointed out by the feminist critics Sandra
Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

“Austen examines the female powerlessness that underlies monetary pressure to marry, the injustice of inheritance laws, the ignorance of women denied formal education, the psychological vulnerability of the heiress or widow, the exploited dependency of the spinster, the boredom of the lady provided with no vocation. (Gilbert and Gubar 136)

By addressing such issues it could be argued that she was one of the earliest feminist writers. In her book *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (1997), Margaret Kirkham states: “As a feminist moralist Jane Austen is in agreement with Wollstonecraft on so many points that it is unlikely she had not read *Vindication* and approved of much of it” (Kirkham 34). Examples from Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* of these feminist elements, besides Charlotte’s economically based decision to marry, is the inescapable poverty that Mrs. Bennet and her daughter’s face. Their estate is entailed to their cousin and Mrs. Bennet’s inheritance is not enough to support them all, should Mr. Bennet die an untimely death before the daughters are all married, and thereby safe. It is fitting that the widowed Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who herself is an example of a financially self-reliant woman, should state: “I see no occasion for entailing estates from the female line. It was not thought necessary in Sir Lewis de Bourgh’s family” (Austen 153). This of course was the reason for her economic independence. Yet another example of Austen addressing the issue of marriage is also shown through Lady Catherine de Bourgh who hears the rumor that her nephew, who was from birth intended for Lady Catherine’s daughter, is to be married to Elizabeth. The lady takes it upon herself to travel great distance to put Elizabeth in her place and to have “such a report universally contradicted” (Austen 319). The conversation between them reveals that in one generation in Austen’s time there has been a change towards women’s rights to choose their husband as opposed to being “given away” at birth (Austen 320-321).

Although women in western society today have much better means of providing for themselves and need not rely on a man for financial support, Geller points out:

For the woman who perceives herself as “single,” friendship, intellectual life, and professional success are not enough. […] A wedding ring is still the primary indispensable symbol of external validation. […] Matrimony’s continuing allure, in the twenty-first century, when women have achieved reproductive choice and the actuality of political representation, educational inclusion, and professional mobility, is something of a mystery. […] And ever-
escalating divorce statistics reveal that, even in its own terms, romance-based matrimony usually does not work. Yet despite this growing reservoir of data, women continue to mythologize marriage. (12-13)

This is indeed a mystery, especially if Jesse Bernard’s theories in her book The Future of Marriage (1981) are taken into account. She argues that “[t]here are two marriages … in every marital union, his and hers. And his is better than hers” (15). Statistically speaking marriage shows better mental health for men, lower suicide and criminal rates, higher career success and greater longevity and happiness than those of the unmarried (Bernard 18-23). The numbers are quite the reverse for women in all the above mentioned categories (Bernard 28-58), and “[…] wives make more of the adjustments called for in marriage than do husbands” (Bernard 43-44). All in all “[…] being married is about twice as advantageous to men as to women in terms of continued survival” (Bernard 27). Still “marriage has had a bad press among men, […][they] have cursed it, aimed barbed witticisms at it, bemoaned it – and never ceased to want and need it or to profit from it” (Bernard 16-17).

1.3. Film Script

The next step is to study how Austen’s novel is turned into the film script of Pride & Prejudice, and in what manner it portrays the different love stories and marriages in the final product - the film itself. Despite the unfavorable statistics regarding the institution of matrimony for women, whether to marry or not is still an important decision in the lives of women. This, and the fact that Austen’s novels lend themselves very easily to adaptations to the film screen, may be the reason for their ongoing popularity among today’s readers and film makers alike.

When comparing an original written text to the filmed version, one often finds the adaptation at a disadvantage, for how can a film portray all the details of a novel in merely two hours? The scriptwriter and director are forced to simplify by making choices of elimination when producing a film. These decisions are regrettably often made on the basis of reaching a mass audience, and must therefore adapt to the demand of a wider market than was originally intended for the book. What the film “interpretations pull out of the story says far more about the time and place the filmmaker lives in than it does about Austen’s time” (Zettel 98).

The film is often evaluated from a comparison with the fiction, how it “captures” the novel and how closely it follows it. “This emphasis […]
predetermines that the film is an imitation of [...] the novel and not an original body of work. In recent years this view towards adaptations has been criticized strongly. It has been argued that the film is not an illustration [...] or a copy. The film is always an original work and must make a demand to be judged on its own terms” (Dagsdóttir 8).

That being said, then it is not how, but why the story structure has been changed in Wright’s film. “[T]he distinctive feature of *Pride and Prejudice* is the number of its subplots, knit into one another with confident mastery,” which “is a part of its vitality” (Jenkyns 34). The film script has narrowed the plot of the novel by toning down the sub-plots and omitting or changing others. These are the love stories or marriages that have not fared well, or have even ended in disaster, such as the marriage of Charlotte Lukas to Mr. Collins, which the director in the DVD’s *Directors Commentary* portrays as “doing their best to be happy together” (Wright) and Lydia’s scandalous wedding to Mr. Wickham. As for Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, certain amelioration has taken place. He had lost all “real affections for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished forever” (Austen 214). In the film, however, their association is shown in a noticeably better light, a marriage of equals, perfectly amiable. This is evident from their conversations and body language and confirmed by the director’s comment where he claims “Mr. and Mrs. Bennet love each other and still fancy each other” (Wright). The sub-plots on marriages that are completely eliminated are those of the older Bingley sister, Mrs. Hurst whose husband is “an indolent man, who lived only to eat, drink and play cards” (Austen 36), the story of Charlotte’s parents Mr. and Mrs. Lukas, a marriage which seems much like the Bennets’ in the novel, and Mr. and Mrs. Phillips (Mrs. Bennet’s sister). In addition, the younger Bingley sister’s unrequited love for Mr. Darcy and subsequent loathing of Elizabeth is visible but kept at a minimum. Even the happy nuptial of Jane’s marriage to Mr. Bingley is somewhat pushed to the background. The film focuses with greater emphasis on a happy romantic atmosphere than the social comedy and critique one can recognize from Austen’s text. Thereby the happy ending of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s own story of pride and prejudice becomes the main focus and plot in Joe Wright’s film, which promotes the overall perception of a Cinderella story, complete with its fairy tale motifs and theme.
1.4. On Cinderella

Some writers argue that Austen’s novels do not fit the story pattern of Cinderella. In his book *A Fine Brush on Ivory: An Appreciation of Jane Austen* (2004), Richard Jenkyns remarks: “If we had a fairy-tale archetype for *Pride and Prejudice*, it might better be found in Beauty and the Beast […]” rather than Cinderella, as it lacks the element of the girl who is neglected (Jenkyns 40). By asserting this Jenkyns has apparently overlooked the two Bingley sisters in the novel, who mirror Cinderella’s two step sisters. The film takes that plot and makes it central and, even though one of the “step sisters” is made redundant, the rival for the “prince” and half the kingdom is still present.

Colette Dowling believes “[…] that personal, psychological dependency – the deep wish to be taken care of by others – is the chief force holding women down today.” She calls this *The Cinderella Complex* (1981) in her book of that title, because “[l]ike Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives.” Dowling really offers “[…] only one real shot at ‘liberation’ and that is to emancipate ourselves from within” (Dowling 21), to spring free from the housewife job and take the responsibility to shape our own lives outside of the home (Dowling 238). She does not however provide the reader with answers as to how their second job in their homes could be more equally distributed.

Lee Ezell, in her book *The Cinderella Syndrome*, “[…] rejected the conclusions [she] found in Colette Dowling’s book […]”, because “[w]hile [Dowling] seemed to correctly analyze a woman’s dependency problem, she failed to offer any viable … solutions, for finding contentment” (40). Ezell says that “[l]ooking for a ‘fairy godmother’ is certainly a symptom of the Cinderella Syndrome,” and the “‘[h]appily ever after’ gets muddled with the ‘sweet by-and-by.’” (Ezell 57 and 154). She points out Dowling’s views on the financial “devastation of old age [as] the most poignant outcome of the Cinderella Complex,[…]” Ezell adds that “in choosing freedom from depending on other people today, we can find satisfaction and contentment in our old age” (Ezell 125-126). Ezell does not provide the reader with a solution to how that should be accomplished other than offering phrases from the Bible which, like Austen, is not current theory regarding equality of the sexes in the home or outside of it.

In Joe Wright’s film these topics of dependency and financial devastation of old age are treated lightly. The main aim of the film is entertainment and the outcome an enhanced “Cinderella” effect of the story, where not only the plot is altered but the setting, characters and language are manipulated to fit the fairy tale image.
2. Setting: Horse Drawn Carriages and Other Belongings

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen does not openly refer to particular dates in history, nor does the novel reference historical dates. The only reference point is the arrival and presence of the militia, a fact that is actually better portrayed in the film than the novel, with a scene of the red coats marching into town (Wright). Given its presence through the whole course of the novel, we may reasonably conclude that it is set in Austen’s present time, or at the time it is written. During the period of the French Revolutionary Wars from 1793 until 1802, England and France were at constant war with each other, which would explain the military movements into the nearby town of Merryton.

2.1. Houses, Horses and Carriages

Merryton, as the name implies, is the place where the Bennet sisters seek constant source of entertainment, with shopping, balls, dinners and flirting with the officers. The film is nearly entirely shot on location; in fact the only set in the film is the Merryton assembly room (Wright). Many scenes that are set indoors in the novel, and are depicted likewise in the BBC series, are shown out of doors in the film. This gives the story a new and more open perspective, as well as an earthy tone and results in a film which, although seemingly set in the English countryside around 1800, could be from a modern romantic film of our era, which these next sections will show is intentionally done.

The casting crew went out of their way to set the film in surroundings that resembled their description as well as picking buildings that fit the architectural styles of the period (Wright). Despite this apparent adherence to Austen’s descriptions Pemberley, the grand home of Mr. Darcy, seems grander than the novel portrays, with its huge hall with its marble sculpture collection, instead of the picture-gallery of the estate mentioned in the novel (Austen 226-227). This grandeur makes both Bingley’s Netherfield and the Bennets’ Longbourne estates seem small in comparison, and makes for a “high class” versus “low class” contrast in the film, where Mr. Darcy’s Pemberley is decidedly above Elizabeth’s Longbourn. In fact the film portrays the household of Longbourn as a country farmhouse, “[w]here at first ducks and geese are as much a part of the house as the five sisters” (Hawker), and “dogs and animals are left to wander as they please” (Wright). And Mr. Bennet, rather than being portrayed as the gentleman overseeing the business side of things, is depicted like a farm worker, unshaven with
unruly hair and dress, seemingly with “a pig wandering through their house” (McFarland), and the estate as a farm with horses, chicken and cows in the courtyard. Austen’s only allusion to the fact that the Bennets actually live on an estate incorporating a farm and fields is when Jane has to go on horseback to meet the Bingley sisters, because her father cannot spare the horses as they are wanted in the farm (Austen 32). This portrayal of Elizabeth as a simple farmer’s daughter and not the gentleman’s daughter that she herself claims to be (Austen 321), further emphasizes the film’s Cinderella effect noted earlier, not to mention the all-important white and black horses Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy ride to meet the Bennet sisters (Wright).

By the same token, the Bennet’s family carriage, which by definition is a four-wheeled vehicle “designed for comfort and elegance” (“Carriage”), is turned into a simpler and less affluent type of vehicle in the film, where the family is only once seen riding a carriage, except the one owned by Bingley (Wright). This is most notable when Jane rides off to London, where she departs in a gig, a small and open “one-horse carriage” (“Gig”), and the next shot focuses on an even smaller two-wheeled cart used to transport goods (Wright). This is done in order to substantiate the film’s point of view that Elizabeth comes from poor surroundings and to make the prospect of her marrying Mr. Darcy, thereby capturing the “prince” at last, an even bigger social breach than Austen’s novel portrays.

2.2. Costumes and Fashion
Producing a film, set during this (or any other) period in time, requires a certain adherence to historical fact and style of clothing. Austen has only a few references to clothing in her novel, none of which are in detail. There is a reference to Elizabeth “employed in trimming a hat” (Austen 10), and likewise of Kitty buying a bonnet that she did not think very pretty, but hoped to buy “some prettier-coloured satin to trim it with fresh” in order to make it tolerable (Austen 199). From this we can conclude that hats were important accessories. After the first country dance Mrs. Bennet declares she “never in [her] life saw any thing more elegant that [the Bingley sisters’] dresses” with the fantastic “[…] lace upon Mrs. Hurt’s gown” (Austen 17). In one instance “Mrs. Bennet was doubly engaged, on one hand collecting an account of the present fashions from Jane […] and on the other, retailing them all to the younger Miss Lucases […]” (Austen 202) and Mrs. Gardiner bearing important news of long sleeves (Austen 132).

Of the male fashion we hear even less, only an occasional reference to a gentleman’s
blue coat or the red coats of the militia.

James Laver’s *Costume and Fashion* (1985) is an excellent reference guide for the male and female clothing styles of the period. The clothes of the English changed drastically during the last decade of the 19th century: The French Revolution,

Like all great social upheavals [...] had a profound effect on the clothes of both men and women. [...] In the male dress the quest for simplicity meant the abandonment of French “Court” clothes and the acceptance of English country clothes, [...] made of plain cloth [without] lace. [...] And [...] for the universal three-cornered hat they substituted a primitive form of a “topper.” (148-149)

By 1800 the English gentleman had adopted this new style of clothing: “a top hat, a not too exaggerated neckcloth, a coat with revers and a collar of medium height, … a waistcoat, … breeches with a square flap… fitting into riding boots” (Laver 153).

Women’s attire, like men’s, underwent the same fashion revolution in the 1790s.

“In fact, by the end of the eighteenth century the general lines of costume were already laid down: for women a version of what came to be known as the ‘Empire’ gown” was the order of the day (Laver 153). “[I]nspiration stemmed from the alleged ideals of classical antiquity. One of the aims was the pursuit of liberty, at least for the body” (Rothstein 31).

Women’s dress at this period was less extravagant [than men’s], but showed an even more drastic break with the past. Paniers, bustles and corsets were all abandoned, as were also the rich materials of which dresses had formerly been made. Instead women wore a *robe en chemise*, which did indeed look like an undergarment, for it consisted of a white, high-waisted muslin cambric or calico garment falling to the feet and sometimes so transparent that it was necessary to wear white, or pink, tights underneath. (Laver 152)

It was this new style of light dresses and “shawls in which the ladies wrapped themselves” (Rothstein 31).

When viewing the costumes in Joe Wright’s film, the spectator’s first impression is that it does not follow the fashions of the time as well as the BBC series did. The characters in the film seem much less refined in clothing and hair than in the BBC series, and fashion plates and portraits of the era. After having studied the clothing styles of the period depicted in the previous chapter, the opposite is actually true in certain respects. The film utilizes clothing to express and enhance certain scenes and ideas. As stated by the director Joe Wright, the film is set in 1797, at the time the book
was written (Wright), and the clothing and hairstyle of the militia, who still wear a pigtail, certify this assertion. “[W]hen the Government imposed a tax on [hair-powder] in 1795, it ceased to be worn except by some of the older men. The pig-tail was given up except by the military, who kept it for another ten years” (Laver 153). The BBC series on the other hand depicts the militia without the pigtail and is therefore set at least ten years later, which also accounts for their “true” Empire style in female dresses.

The director claims that the film is set in 1797 “so that they did not have to go with the Empire line dresses the whole time.” Thus we see the difference in dress at the Merryton assembly room ball where “Caroline Bingley, is wearing the latest fashions … the Empire line… the height of London fashion,” and all the local females wearing dresses with decidedly lower waistlines, presumable because the latest fashion has not caught on. According to the director this was decided because the lower waistline is more flattering (Wright). This thesis argues that this is done because the lower waistline resembles the modern dress and accentuates the class difference from the Netherfield party, underpinning the “rags to riches” storyline. This class distinction is further relayed through materials and colors of the costumes in the film, as color is a factor that is used to imbed an image of this transition.

The dresses of the Longbourn and Merryton females seen at the Merryton ball are simple in design, dark grey or brown in color, and course in material. Their dresses turn lighter and more refined throughout the film, with the ball at Netherfield as its height with all the women, both high and low, wearing white muslin dresses as the fashion dictates, although the design of the costumes is made to fit our time, by not rigidly following the patterns of the Regency era. The fairy tale image is added here, where the “ugly duckling” of Elisabeth Bennett is transformed into the “swan,” with her white gown, pearly white headdress, posture and walk and, and lest someone be mistaken, a symbolic white feather in her hand. This also alludes to white as the color of the virgin, and as a foreshadowing of the white wedding dress.

Part of the simplification and singling out of Elizabeth as the main heroine and Mr. Darcy as her companion also happens in regards to their hats and hair styles. Bonnets were an important accessory at this time, as seen in the many fashion plates and portraits of this period in history, and women did not move out of doors without them (Laver 146-156). In general the female characters in Joe Wright’s film are not very often seen wearing hats, “as bonnets are just too cliché for Austen” (Wright). The Bennet sisters however all wear hats when moving out of doors either by foot or carriage, except
Elizabeth, who is always bare headed. The only exception is a scene in a church where she dons a hat, but moments later when she runs into Mr. Darcy while seeking shelter from the pouring rain, neither is wearing a hat. This is part of an adjustment done in order for the viewer to relate to her character. A comparable adjustment is seen in the portrait of Jane Austen herself, painted by her sister Cassandra, which has undergone amelioration for the reprinting of the memoirs of her nephew James Austen-Leigh over the last two centuries. For the 2007 reprinting she is made more beautiful by changing her hairstyle and removing the bonnet from the original painting (Valdimarsdóttir 4-5). The character’s hair styles in the film are in general unruly, except for the Netherfield ball, where the hairdo of the major characters is according to latest fashion of their time. They are still more ruffled in hair and clothing than the BBC series and fashion plates convey, sometimes to the point of improper dress.

The best examples of ruffled hair and clothing is in the two proposal scenes, which occur out of doors, where both Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet can be said to be inappropriately attired according to the standard of their time. The first proposal scene has already been mentioned, a chance encounter between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, where seemingly both are seeking escape from the pouring rain. They are both drenched to the bone and a general disheveled look makes for a scene that looks more of the modern day than the late eighteenth century. The same applies for the second proposal scene, another chance encounter in an open field in the early morning, with the sun rising in the background. Elizabeth is wandering about, seemingly sleepless after a visit from a furious Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Mr. Darcy on the other hand is on his way to propose to her. For that occasion he is certainly improperly attired, wearing neither hat nor neck cloth, his shirt unbuttoned to the navel, badly tucked and the long coat open and flapping about his legs. Elizabeth has what seems to be a male coat over her nightdress and her hair is unruly and loose. All of the above helps to differentiate Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet as the main characters on which the audience should focus and relate to. This modernization of the clothing, omitting of hats and unraveling of hairstyles makes for a contemporary and fashionable look, bringing the story closer to the present.

There is no wedding scene at the end of the film to pacify the viewer. Instead the film crew has opted for an alternate US ending for that market, where the rest of the world is left with an ending a bit less corny. This shows them on their wedding night, in their night gown out of doors, seated on some kind of platform or pedestal, a scene that is another example of inappropriate dress as well as being ridiculously out of character.

Jane Austen is a master of characterization and subtle observations and in the novel she introduces us to memorable characters with a spectrum of personalities. Her characters reveal themselves through love affairs and marriage, as well as the want of it. Joe Wright’s film *Pride & Prejudice*, rather than relying directly on Jane Austen’s character construction, written text and dialogues, uses the full screen effects of cinematography to convey moods and expressions, and “fills the screen with bold colour, striking images and interesting camerawork” (Page M.). Where the novel is mostly set indoors, the film turns to the outdoors to convey important scenes, moods and expressions. This is done at the inevitable expense of the character construction and dialogues, for example is Mr. Darcy’s two proposals to Elizabeth.


Austen carved out her stories with sharp and exacting strokes. She is unsparing of her criticism of her characters, and her works are as much social satire and commentary as they are romances. [...] She points out the absurdity, not of the system always, but of the people within that system [...]. Which may be the most difficult point about trying to translate *Pride and Prejudice* into modern times, and why neither the comparatively modern sensibility of the [2005] production or the modern setting of Bollywood can quite match the tone of the book. (Zettel 102)

It is through the spirited, witty and charming Elizabeth’s eyes and actions that we perceive and form an opinion of the characters in Austen’s novel. In the film she is portrayed by Keira Knightly as the lively and sometimes cynical character we know from *Pride and Prejudice*; however in certain respects she seems entirely out of character. This happens primarily in the two proposal scenes as well as the alternate US ending already mentioned. In the novel, Elizabeth’s negative first impression of Mr. Darcy, coupled with knowing that he deliberately tried to destroy the happiness of her beloved sister, accounts for her prejudice and rude behavior towards him when he first proposes to her. In the film Mr. Darcy’s proposal scene is made into a chance encounter, and thereby becomes a spontaneous act rather than the rehearsed and deliberate speech he gives in the novel. In the middle of their quarrel that follows, Lizzy leans toward him as if she genuinely attracted to him and secretly longs to kiss him. The subtle changes in Elizabeth’s regard for Mr. Darcy is thereby lost in the film, so much so that one might
think that she actually did decide to marry him because of his wealth rather than of genuine love grown out of respect. In the second proposal scene and the alternate US ending Elizabeth has become a different character, a quiet submissive girl desperately wanting to get married and to please her husband-to-be.

Then there are the two gentlemen at Netherfield, both of whom are in need of a wife. Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth’s counterpart, did not make a favorable first impression, despite “[...]his fine, tall person, handsome feature, noble mein [sic]; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year” (Austen 14). After having slighted Lizzy he was deemed by Mrs. Bennet, and the rest of the party, to be a proud and “a most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing. So high and so conceited that there was no enduring him!” (Austen 17). This judgment of his character was formed mainly due to his refusal to dance, although gentlemen were scarce in the room (Austen 15). In the film Mr. Darcy somehow never recovers the viewer’s sympathy.

Matthew MacFadyen, by his own admission, plays Darcy as “a young man who’s lost, who’s grieving for his parents […].” Sadly though, this makes his character rather impenetrable, and ultimately rather dull. It’s difficult to feel for him the way we do for Lizzie, and harder still to see what attracts her to him. […] [T]here’s not even a hint of chemistry between them. (Page)

Then why does Elizabeth decide to marry him? Chrys Ingraham explains this phenomenon in her chapter on films in her book White Weddings. She claims that “[w]eddings in popular film and television contribute to the creation of many taken-for-granted beliefs, values, and assumptions about weddings,” one of them being “that all eligible women must marry” no matter how unattractive their options are (174-175).

The other Netherfield gentleman made a considerably better first impression than his best friend. After the Merryton ball Jane “expresses to her sister how very much she admired [Mr. Bingley]. ‘He is just what a young man ought to be,’ said she, ‘sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners! - so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!’”(Austen 17-18). As Matt Page, a guest reviewer for the online film review Looking Closer, points out the Mr. Bingley we see in the film is no match with Jane Austen’s original: “Sadly here he is reduced to being a rich fool. He is nonetheless likeable, but certainly not someone who Darcy would choose as a close friend or that Jane would choose as a husband.” Jane’s love of Mr. Bingley is one of the driving forces of the plot of the novel, as the eventual restoration of her
felicity is entwined with Elizabeth’s future happiness. The sweet and excellent disposition of Jane comes across well in the film, but as mentioned earlier her story is somewhat pushed to the background, in favor of her sister’s.

The one character in the novel which utterly deceives the reader is the fortune hunting and wicked Mr. Wickham (his name is no co-incidence). “His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address” (Austen 69-70). “His countenance, voice, and manner, had established him at once in the possession of every virtue” (Austen 189), but his “character was by no means […] so amiable” (Austen 234). The “vicious propensities – the want of principle” coupled with “a life of idleness and dissipation” (Austen 184), and a lifestyle of imprudence and extravagance had left him greatly in debt (Austen 263). Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy thus prove to be polar opposites where “[o]ne has got all the goodness and the other all the appearance of it” (Austen 205). In Joe Wright’s film “Mr. Wickham lacks the screen time needed to really demonstrate his more insidious nature” (Page), but also character interpretation. He is portrayed more like an amiable flirt, than the wicked character that the novel and the BBC series reveal him to be. This is a character which the intelligent Elizabeth would see right through and could never have fallen for in real life.

Another prominent male character is the head of the household of Longbourne, Mr. Bennet himself. He “was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character” (Austen 10). “In the 1995 miniseries, … Mr. Bennet is … a charming, slightly absent old man, who is really fond of his daughters and is content with their rescue, but not really to blame for them being in need of rescue” (Zettel 99). The film copies this interpretation but takes it one step further with Donald Sutherland’s interpretation of Mr. Bennet, who has completely lost his sarcastic humor and caprice and has become perfectly amiable towards his wife (Wright).

Mrs. Bennet’s “mind was less difficult to develop” than her husband’s. “She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous” (Austen 10). This is completely lost in the film where Blenda Blethlyn is cast as Mrs. Bennet and portrays her as goodhearted, perfectly charming and cheerful, albeit sometimes a little slow to catch on to Mr. Bennet’s jokes. She is generally concerned for all her daughter’s happiness and perfectly irons out all the faults of Austen’s Mrs. Bennet.
As previously concluded, the two Bingley sisters in the novel remind us of the two step sisters in Cinderella. In the film the older Mrs. Hurst who is the unhappily married sister is conveniently made redundant. This leaves us with only one (step)sister, which makes her less intimidating, and less of a rival to the “throne,” in spite of her fine clothes, grooming and general appearance, but nevertheless acts as the evil stepsister.

Lastly there is their cousin the insufferable clergyman Mr. Collins. It is clear from the very beginning that “Mr. Collins was not a sensible man” (Austen 67). On the question of whether he could indeed be a sensible man, Mr. Bennet, who delighted in foolishness, answers his daughter Elizabeth that he had “great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well” (Austen 62). In the novel Mr. Collins is described as “a tall heavy looking man” (Austen 63), whereas Joe Wright’s Mr. Collins is short and wimpy looking. There is always a fine line between comedy and farce, but here he is not portrayed silly or stupid enough. He seems only very timid, awkward in his countenance and uncertain of himself, which of course makes for a more equal match with Miss Lukas than the novel portrays, and thereby a better marriage.

Austen’s characters in Joe Wright’s film are flattened out to the point that Mr. Bingley, who is by far the most eligible young man in the beginning of the novel, is seen in the film as an equal to Mr. Collins in wits, awkwardness, speech and countenance. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham, who Jane depicts as binary opposites, become very similar in demeanor and attitude. The nuances in characterization and the gap in their intelligence and conduct is lessened, thus stereotyping Austen’s characters so that they all seem equally feasible for marriage, if their financial situation is overlooked.

3.2. Dialogues, Language and Proposals.

In the two hundred years that have passed since the novel Pride and Prejudice was written, oral language as well as formal address has obviously changed, but not so much as to render the novel hard to read. Its content still relates to today’s society, and the formality of the language sets a certain tone which immediately takes us historically back in time. While the Pride and Prejudice BBC series is known for its almost verbatim conversations of Austen’s text, in contrast the screenwriter of the film, Deborah Moggach, takes liberties and modernizes the language considerably. She “[...]creates Austen-esque sounding quotes whilst leaving out many of the original’s best, and most celebrated [passages], whereby [...]some beloved lines do fall by the
wayside” (Page). Or, as Ann F. Mcfarland points out in her editorial review on the film: “It has none of Austen’s charm and wit. In fact, it completely loses [her] satirical edge […]. When they attempt Regency-era speech it is laughable at best, painful at worst.” This simplification and modernization of the language is done so that its language will be widely understood (especially in the US), thereby reaching a wider audience, and temporarily moving the setting to the present time for the viewer to identify with it.

Austen’s dialogues are masterfully crafted – some witty, some bordering on hilarious, but the conversation that will be studied here for comparison is of a different and more serious nature, or Mr. Darcy’s first proposal to Elizabeth Bennett. It is a proposal that comes as a surprise to the heroine as well as the reader, as up until that moment neither Elizabeth nor the reader had realized the strength of his attachment. In the novel the scene enfolds in the living room parlor of the Collinses, where he seeks her out when he knows she is alone:

“In vain have I stuggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

Elizabeth’s astonishment was beyond expression […]. This he considered sufficient encouragement […]. He spoke well, but […] he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority – of its being a degradation – of the family obstacles […], were dwelt on with at warmth […] very unlikely to recommend his suit. He concluded with […] expressing his hope that [he] would now be rewarded by her accepting his hand. (Austen 174-175)

Elizabeth’s answer is one of the best monologues in the novel:

“In such cases as this, it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they may be returned. It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could feel gratitude, I would now thank you. But I cannot – I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly, I am sorry to have occasioned pain to any one. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and I hope will be of short duration. The feelings which you tell me, have long prevented the acknowledgment of your regard, can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation.” (Austen 175-176)

After Elizabeth’s initial rejection, they start arguing. It may be hard to get a good overview of Mr. Darcy and his proposal and its consequent refusal in this short excerpt,
but it is obvious that there is great pride on Mr. Darcy’s side coupled with lack of propriety of what is to be said under such circumstances. On the other hand Elizabeth is furious because of his mode of proposing, but after an initial remorse “for the pain he was to receive…she lost all compassion in anger” (Austen 175). She therefore has no scruples in denying him and abusing him at the same time. In the above marriage offer and the ensuing argument it is obvious that she is in fact not at all attracted to, but rather repulsed by, him. This fact does not come across well in the film:

Mr. Darcy: “Miss Elizabeth. I have struggled in vain and I can bear it no longer. These past months have been a torment. I came to Rosings with the single object of seeing you. I had to see you. I have fought against my better judgment, my family’s expectations, all these things. I am willing to put them aside and ask you to end my misery.”

Elizabeth: “I don’t understand.”

Mr. Darcy: “I love you. Most ardently. Please do me the honor of accepting my hand.”

Elizabeth: “Sir, I appreciate the struggle you have been through and I am very sorry to have caused you pain. Believe me it was unconsciously done.”

Mr. Darcy: “Is this your reply?”

Elizabeth: “Yes sir.”

Mr. Darcy: “Are you laughing at me? Are you rejecting me?

Elizabeth: “I am sure that the feeling, which hindered your regard will help you overcoming it. (Wright)

The proposal scene in Joe Wright’s film leaves much to be desired. If we compare the two proposals some words have been copied, and their sentences intermixed but the overall effect is lost, as is Elizabeth’s direct denial of his hand in marriage.

As critic Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir has already pointed out, a film must always be judged on its own terms, and not by how closely it follows the novel. The film also has to economize and “[i]t is not easy to maintain Austen’s ambiguous irony in a film script, as her language is so loaded with nuances and direct statements are scarce. The scriptwriters usually take the approach of adding phrases which are nowhere to be found in books of Austen, but are still faithful to the spirit of the novels” (Dagsdóttir 9). This we see in the BBC series, where scriptwriter Andrew Davies mirrors her dialogue and language so closely that this scene, where Mr. Darcy’s full proposal has to be invented, is so true to form that they are as if Jane herself had written them. As already
established, Wright takes an entirely different angle where Mr. Darcy happens upon Elizabeth by chance, which makes the proposal spontaneous on his behalf. The modification of their dialogue is deliberate; not only has it been modernized but it has also been cut into shorter sentences in place of the longer monologues of the novel. This creates certain urgency and in some respects a convincing scenario, but at the cost of their wonderful, eloquent and brilliant battle of words, causing their argument to fall flat. These two different approaches of Langton’s BBC series and Wright’s film are due to their different agendas and the story they want to portray. The BBC versions agenda is educational, as Andrew Davies scriptwriter “is known for his truthfulness to the story he is working with” (Indriðason), whereas Wright’s crew wants first and foremost to convey the story of the enamored heroine and the happily ever after.

3.3. Opening Sequence.
Central to the theme of Pride and Prejudice, besides the moral on too much of either, are the satirical opening lines 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.” Julia Prewitt Brown comments on this statement in her critical essay Authorial Voice and the Total Perspective in Pride and Prejudice:

Certain moments in literature always surprise us, no matter how many times we encounter them […]. Austen’s claim is surprising because we do not know how to interpret it. […] the opening claim of Pride and Prejudice is either an instance of unalloyed irony or comic hyperbole. […] No matter how we read it, its finality is its irony (or comedy); it holds its “truth” and the resistance to its truth in one – the quintessential stance of the ironic comedies. The discourse of the rest of Pride and Prejudice issues from this initial stance […], [and the tongue-in-cheek irony, sets the mood for the whole novel]. The opening hyperbole […] contains an element of eccentric delight in human exaggeration. The narrative voice […], which the action strives ceaselessly (and successfully) to overcome. (Austen 360-363)

This opening sentence of the narrative voice is befittingly expressed with irony in the BBC by Elizabeth to her sisters after her mother’s prelude on Mr. Bingley marrying one of them: “For a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” In Gurinder Chadha’s Bride and Prejudice it is Lalita (Lizzy) who after a similar speech from her mother declares to her sister Jaya (Jane) that “[a]ll mothers think that any single
guy with big bucks must be shopping for a wife.” Even the novel The Jane Austen Book Club sees fit to include the statement of one of the club members at an annual fund-raiser where “[r]ich men were all around them,” that “[e]veryone knows […] that a rich man is eventually going to want a new wife” (Fowler 158). If we compare how this rare instance of Austen’s “direct address from the author to the reader” (Brown 360) was handled by screenwriters of Joe Wright’s film, we find a surprising result. These famous opening lines have been entirely excluded and the film instead opens with a long close-up sequence of Elizabeth. By breaking with tradition and omitting the sentence, not only does the film miss out on the satirical and ironic effect, but it also lacks the depth and complexity of the scenes and characters that we see in the novel, giving the film a more serious undertone. In light of the above it is a very surprising and bold move on behalf of the screenwriter and the film director, as this sentence forms the thesis statement of the novel. It could be argued that the sentence was left out because it has become a cliché, but it is more likely that its thesis has not conformed and accommodated the underlying theory and philosophy, that the film was supposed to portray and promote. Cliché or not, arguably this sentence would have strengthened the film’s strong emphasis on marriage. A review of “how the marriage mystique is expressed in popular culture” (Geller 13), may provide an answer to why this hyperbole of rich men and marriage has been left out.

The idea that romance-based marriage is the highest human aspiration and the ultimate female good pervades American culture. It is bolstered by the notion that individuals – especially women – find ultimate fulfillment in a sanctioned, monogamous, sexual partnership and that those without spouses are fragmentary “single” beings whose lives are in error. (Geller 382) “[T]he notion of matrimony as destiny for women is as deeply entrenched in our own culture as it has been in any past era” (Geller 382), in fact “40% still believe that working mothers weaken the family as an institution” (Steil 679). Recent studies on “His” and “her” marriage show that nothing much has changed, although more women now work outside of the home than in Bernard’s study in 1981:

Thus women, whether they are full-time homemakers or employed outside the home, continue to do more of the work of the home and relationships and seem to provide better emotional support for husbands than husbands provide for them. As a result, marriage continues to benefit men more than women across a number of dimensions including the quality of their lives, their mental health and their professional opportunities. (Steil 680)
Conclusion

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* was published exactly 200 years ago, but with its theme of courtship and proposals, mastery of characterization and delicate observations of character it still captivates readers and film makers alike. Viewing Joe Wright’s film, the spectator finds it evident that, unlike the BBC series, it does not follow Austen’s novel closely. His film modernizes and simplifies the storyline and changes the physical setting of the characters in the novel, including their houses and costumes and fashion, while at the same time maintaining an overall feeling of the Regency era.

The structure of the novel rests on the conversations of Austen’s colorful characters, but regrettably their language and conversations has undergone the same modification in Wright’s film. This is done to such a degree that it flattens out their personalities and dialogue, resulting in stereotyped characters that are stripped of Austen’s wittiest lines, humor and mischievous comments. Wright’s adaptation and simplification of the novel is done in an attempt to bring the story closer to the present, on the apparent ground of reaching a wider audience, resulting in a film that focuses entirely on Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, making their love story central and her eventual marriage to Mr. Right the absolute climax.

Some of the changes of Joe Wright’s film are made under the auspices that it was too cliché for Austen, hats and bonnets being one of those clichés, but he has no scruples exploiting other clichés like the myths of Cinderella, The Ugly Duckling, the Knight in Shining Armor and marriage as the happy institution for women. The film weeds out the unhappy or ill-suited marriages by omission or character alteration, and at the same time enhances the Cinderella perspective to better fit the tale that the Hollywood film wants to convey, in order to promote the institution of marriage.

The opening sentence of Austen’s novel is its thesis, advocating the idea that it is men who are “in want of a wife,” which is true, for as studies have shown men stand to benefit much more from marrying than women. Eliminating this line from the film is a deliberate decision and not a coincidence. The American film industry produces the romantic comedy as a means to perpetuate the myth of marital bliss, and to promote the institution of marriage by glorification, as the final destination of young women in the “happily ever after,” thereby hiding the fact that this institution has been grossly biased against women, and the West’s central vehicle for enforcing that inequity, a fact that Austen pointed out in her time but the film industry conveniently decides to ignore.
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