

A “Light and Bright and Sparkling” Adaptation (1940)

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the 1940 film adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. The production presents a radically altered story: it curtails the plot, changes the ideologies the novel is based on, and the characters – especially the female ones, in addition to disempowering Mr Darcy and allowing Elizabeth Bennet to dominate him. The 1940 adaptation approximates the spirit of Austen’s assessment of her own novel, which she did not consider serious enough.

Key Words: Film adaptation, fidelity discourse, humor, Jane Austen

Directed by Robert Z. Leonard, the 1940 MGM adaptation features Greer Garson as Elizabeth and Sir Laurence Olivier as Mr Darcy. Twice distanced from the novel – as a filmic adaptation of a play based on the novel –, the film presents radical changes in the plot and also in the ideologies prevalent in the story. The story of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* has been radically transformed not only due to a shortening of the plot but also to the different values working in the story. The film is the adaptation of a 1940 story rather than Austen’s 1813 novel, considering the world views presented in the film. Mr and Mrs Bennet are being portrayed as caring parents amidst a strongly united family. Furthermore, with her elopement softened, Lydia’s behaviour is less scandalous since she runs away with someone with whom she seems to be in love.

Based on a stage production, the opening credits of the film resemble a playbill. Following the title captions, the third one declares: “it happened in Old England... in the village of Meryton....” The following captions establish the setting, the main players, and the atmosphere of the adaptation. Under the headings “those living at Meryton Village/ Longbourn/ Netherfield/ Rosings,” there appear the credits of actors. The music in the background changes from setting to setting, suggesting the atmosphere of each place, vivid at Longbourn or serious at Netherfield, according to the events taking place there. In the

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meantime, the background images also change, showing the sketches of the places in question.

Fidelity to the stage production is reflected mainly by the position of cameras and by the actors' movement. Cameras are always placed in front of the actors in a long shot so as to include all the participants of the scene. They seldom focus on one character; in case they do, characters are presented mostly in medium shots. Close-up shots, in which the camera focuses on the character's face, are very rare. They are used only in scenes involving the elder Bennet sisters, like the one in which the camera focuses on Elizabeth during her refusal of Darcy's invitation to dance at the Meryton ball. Also, when the prospects of Jane remaining at Netherfield are presented by Mrs Bennet, the camera shows Jane smiling happily at the idea of being forced to stay there – the camera focuses only on the face. Nevertheless, messages are usually conveyed through discourse and scenes are conceived as if performed on stage. Exaggerated gestures and theatrical mimics replace these shot sizes in order to express emotions.

Despite the profound changes in plot and character that make this rendition the most unfaithful one of the mainstream English-language adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, the 1940 rendition best embodies the "light and bright and sparkling" (Austen 94) nature of the novel. The lively background music, the actors' exaggerated gesticulation, their mimics, and discourse are a major source of humour. The extent to which gestures increase humour in the film becomes evident in scenes that do not serve the plot. In the Netherfield-ball sequence, Miss Bingley asks Darcy to taste the punch before she serves it to the guests. The distant Mr Darcy, whose high birth has been previously established, contrary to his education smacks his lips thus generating laughter.

Certain changes soften the edge of the story. For instance, Wickham is introduced at the beginning already as the officer Lydia flirts with at the puppet show and dances with at the Meryton ball. Thus, when Lydia eventually elopes with Wickham, she does so with her long-established partner. Her behaviour is not frivolous, but seems to be a romantic cliché rather than a deed which might have dramatic consequences. As far as Wickham is concerned, the ball sequence emphasizes his flirtatious character – while dancing with Lydia, he notices Elizabeth and approaches her in a direct and coy manner, which Elizabeth wittily eludes. His presence at the Meryton ball triggers a small change in the plot, namely that he

meets Darcy at this ball and serves as a tool for Elizabeth to defy Darcy for his previous rude remark she has overheard.

Characters' relating what has happened off-stage also shortens the plot. The news of Mr Collins's arrival is announced by Elizabeth and it becomes the reason for which the sisters leave Netherfield. Their going home is not related to Elizabeth's relationship with Darcy, or to her having been upset by him, which implies that he has no power over her. In addition to this, the Bennet sisters' explanation that their mother is expecting them home also sheds a different light on Mrs Bennet and suggests a caring and well-organized mother. This view is sustained by the fact that Mrs Bennet goes to fetch Jane and Elizabeth herself. Her visit and what she said is not shown, avoiding thus to have her behave embarrassingly. The fact that she only recounts, triumphantly, what she has told Mr Bingley about how many marriage proposals Jane had to decline softens Mrs Bennet and presents her as being less vulgar than her novelistic counterpart. In the 1940 version of the story, she might be as loud as in the source novel but she is assigned less embarrassing behaviour than the original Mrs Bennet.

1. Fitted to a modern worldview: changes in underlying ideologies

The Bennet parents have been reformed into the representatives of good parenting. Since in the end of the film all five girls are settled, Mr and Mrs Bennet prove to be able parents. The two eldest Bennet sisters are engaged, while Kitty and Mary are also shown to have marriage prospects under the close supervision of the Bennet parents.

When the family is about to move, Elizabeth's remark "What does it matter where we go as long as we go together?" indicates a united, functional family. In order to create a functional family, the parents' character was radically changed, especially as far as the father is concerned. Mr Bennet is a caring father, whose mismanagement of the family fortune is entirely dismissed. At the beginning it is emphasized that the family's misfortune of entailment is due to nature since Mr Bennet states "Mrs Bennet, for the thousandth time, this estate was entailed when I inherited it, it must by law go to a male heir... a *male* heir!" He does underline that since they do not have a male heir, the house is entailed. The fault has been removed; therefore, Mr Bennet is an ironic but loving father, who is served by his daughters. As a thoughtful father, he has given Bingley tickets to the Meryton ball even before the Bennet women found out about Bingley's existence. His calm demeanor serves as

a counterpoint to the loud Mrs Bennet and also a source of witty humour. The disdain he feels for his wife is softened in some situations since in the film she is not portrayed as a woman of “mean understanding” (Austen 6). Mr Bennet is portrayed as a man of integrity, the camera focusing on small actions such as his refusal to shake hands with Wickham. Furthermore, he is a well-informed man; when Mr Collins first mentions his patroness and her “affability and condescension” (Leonard *Pride*) Mr Bennet retorts claiming that he heard Lady de Bourgh was a proud and haughty woman.

Due to the Bennets’ suitability, Jane’s character has also suffered major changes. Instead of a composed young woman with good understanding, spectators see a silly girl who escapes from hardships into a world of dreams. In the novel, Jane’s situation depicts the poor women’s precarious condition in the eighteenth century – they are entirely at the mercy of men, a refusal to engage them might ruin their chances of marrying and, thus, avoiding poverty. In the Netherfield episode the film diffuses the social critique by humour. The close-up shot on Jane’s face before her leaving in the rain suggests that she likes the idea of being forced to stay at Netherfield because of being down with cold. In a following scene at Netherfield, her face expresses silliness when the doctor uses Latin terms in his diagnosis. However, her escape into a dream world represents the most radical change in her character. Jane’s good nature and naivety are interpreted as an inability to deal with reality. In the sequence following Lydia’s elopement, Darcy comes to Longbourn to disclose Wickham to Elizabeth in absence of the letter following the first proposal. When he leaves, Elizabeth admits to Jane that she loves Darcy, but has lost him now due to Lydia’s elopement. Jane advises Elizabeth to “learn to dream” as she does dream of Bingley and imagine him on a horse in shining armour. In addition to this, her escapism can be associated with little understanding; as her recurring question “Lizzy, what are you talking about?” suggests she does not grasp Elizabeth’s comments on the social status of their family. Hence, the bond between the two elder sisters is due to their being close in age, rather than their being different from the rest of the family.

With modern spectators in mind, the adaptors added a sequence so as to explain the gravity of the Wickham episode. In Darcy’s pool room, Miss Bingley receives a letter from Meryton. Improbable as it is – there is no indication in the film that Caroline Bingley would receive letters from anybody at Meryton –, the letter summarizes and shortens the aftermath of Lydia’s elopement and it explains to the modern audience the dire

consequences of running away while unmarried, which to the Regency-England readership was quite obvious. The camera closes upon Bingley's and Darcy's faces while Caroline is reading the letter which makes the effects of such a scandal clear:

At the Assembly ball last week the Bennet family was conspicuous by its absence [...] because the entertainment committee has dropped a gentle hint that in view of the scandal, its presence was not welcome. [...] Only yesterday I saw her sisters, Jane and Elizabeth almost running down Market Street in an attempt to escape from their disgrace. (Leonard *Pride*)

The effects of an elopement are further enlarged upon by the scene at Longbourn in which the Bennet family is planning to move away and thus escape disgrace. The fact that they want to escape from the house whose entailment caused so much anger represents another inconsistency in the plot of the film. The house stops being the symbol of a high social and financial status, and becomes a symbol "with sad associations," as Jane puts it. Her remark that the people are "so dreadfully unkind" shows how important the opinion of the community is to her.

Representation of social status and wealth is emphasized to a greater degree in the adaptation than in the novel. Possession of wealth is the supreme triumph as Lydia's loud announcement, "We are rich!", at the end shows. Miss Anne de Bourgh is also shown to smile triumphantly when her mother mentions her inheritance. Usually associated with wealth, high birth becomes important at the very beginning of the film. In an added remark ladies at the Meryton ball establish that Darcy's mother was a marquise's daughter. Not only remarks without an equivalent in the novel highlight the idea of superiority, but also changed replies. Thus, Darcy's infamous refusal "to give consequence *to young ladies* who are slighted by other men" (Austen 18, emphasis added) is altered to: "I'm in no humour tonight to be of consequence *to middle classes* at play" (Leonard *Pride*, emphasis added). By moving his prejudiced remark onto a social level instead of keeping it on a personal level – as the novel does –, the production suggests that it is Darcy who needs to change and not Elizabeth.

The opening scene discloses the views held by the producers regarding the importance of fortune and of becoming rich. From the window shop, the ladies see a four-

horse carriage rushing into Meryton. Mrs Bennet's endeavour to marry her daughters is revealed instantly since she asks Mr Beck, the draper, to find out whether the young men in the carriage are eligible or not. Elizabeth's inquiry of Darcy foreshadows the fact that he is destined to be hers. The Bennet women, and the spectators, learn that the two carriages and the pack of dogs are Darcy's, while Bingley's is only the chaise. Fortune is also signaled by Elizabeth, who counts the livery servants. Lydia's entrance at the end of the film and her announcement that they are rich indicates the emphasis on wealth. A very good financial status can be obtained by birth, marriage or sudden inheritance – Wickham's Jamaican uncle dies, and leaves everything to him. The focus in the adaptation, therefore, shifts attention from personal development to attaining wealth. Lydia's greatest joy is that she is rich and not that she marries sooner than her sisters do, as it happens in the novel.

One of the major character alterations highlights the relevance of wealth and power relations. In the novel Mr Collins's reverence toward Lady Catherine is a cornerstone of his personality, but his wife does not share her husband's opinion in this respect. The feature film radically changes this aspect; upon Elizabeth's arrival, when Lady Catherine pays a visit to Mr and Mrs Collins, Charlotte eagerly rushes out to greet her husband's patroness and please Lady de Bourgh when the latter claims that only the deserving poor should receive charity. Furthermore, in the first proposal sequence, Elizabeth refuses to see Darcy because she has just found out about his role in Bingley's separation from Jane. However, when Charlotte reminds her that Darcy is Lady Catherine's nephew and that her husband is at Lady Catherine's will, she complies with Charlotte's wish.

Charlotte's request implies that Lady Catherine de Bourgh acts as a feudal lord and that anyone of lower birth is at her mercy. The image is perpetuated by her to hold obsequious people at bay. If one is deemed to possess an equally sharp intellect as hers, she would treat the person consequently. Lady de Bourgh's character suffers the greatest changes in this production. During her visit to Longbourn, Lady Catherine de Bourgh reveals Darcy's involvement with Lydia and Wickham's marriage. Lady Catherine does not only assume the role of the Gardiners, but she also becomes Darcy's advocate, who is waiting in the carriage apprehensively. Lady Catherine plays the role of the difficult to satisfy but essentially good-hearted aunt, who could be convinced that Elizabeth would be good for him. Darcy also breaks rules of decorum and kisses Lady Catherine on the cheek in an outburst of emotions. She is not the arrogant, snob character known from the novel, but an

enlightened rich woman, who only pretends to be reserved and domineering. In reality, she is good at heart.

2. Sources of humour

Most changes in the story complement the comic element. At the beginning of the film, the Lucas and the Bennet women race with their carriages to get home sooner and ask their father to visit the newly-arrived Mr Bingley. Also, at the Meryton ball, the women maliciously note that Mrs Bennet is pricing wedding garments because Jane was liked by Bingley. In order to avoid undermining humour, emotionally charged conversations are shortened and tempered. Thus, in Elizabeth and Charlotte's conversation about the latter marrying Mr Collins, Elizabeth appears appeasing, unable to exhibit an emphatic attitude. On the other hand, in trivial situations, invented discourse heightens humour in the adaptation, such as Mrs Bennet and Lady Lucas's verbal confrontation at the beginning of the film before their carriage race.

The endeavour to entertain justifies the changes made in certain famous episodes in the story. In the novel Mrs Bennet sends her Jane to Netherfield by carriage directly, but in the adaptation she is first seen off to a carriage by the entire family. Only when Mrs Bennet notices the clouds announcing rain does she change her mind and send Jane by horse. In addition to revealing the Bennets as a strong family the scene also shows Mrs Bennet as a boisterous, funny woman. Her response to Elizabeth's protest about the upcoming rain renders the scene even more humorous: "Fiddlesticks! People don't catch cold from a few buckets of water!" Mrs Bennet's discourse is full of comical remarks in general. She reminds Mr Collins in a subtle, but curt manner that he will deprive her daughters of their house: "Unfortunately, looks are not the only things that count, Mr Collins! Even a beautiful girl must have money and eer... things are settled so oddly in this family!"

Mrs Bennet represents the greatest source of humour for which her personality suffers the greatest and most visible changes. She has a highly developed sense of decorum, revealed in her instructions to the draper at the beginning of the film to ask "slyly" about the newly-arrived gentlemen. Also when she notices Aunt Philips running through the town, she exclaims "Looks a daisy! My sister has lost all sense of decorum!" Not showing any preference for Lydia at the Meryton ball she instructs all her daughters without any sign of

partiality how to sit, stand and behave properly. Furthermore, Mrs Bennet's mean understanding disappears in this adaptation and instead spectators see a loud mother who is able to open her daughters' letters if necessary: "I thought it was a declaration [of love] so I opened it." Even Mrs Bennet's confrontation with her husband is a source of merriment - she accuses Mr Bennet of escaping in his unintelligible books instead of being more implicated in having his daughters married off in a highly theatrical manner. Humour in Mrs Bennet's case rests mostly on theatricality. After accusing her husband of hiding behind books, she opens the door and spectators are shown five young women in big dresses.

Mrs Bennet: Look at them! Five of them without dowries! What's to become of them?

Mr Bennet: Yes, what is to become of the wretched creatures? Perhaps we should have drowned some of them at birth. (Leonard *Pride*)

Mr Bennet's calm and ironic demeanour is a counterpoint to Mrs Bennet's loud behaviour. The discrepancy between the two characters' personality further heightens the humour in the film. Although he is not a constant presence on the screen, Mr Bennet is also a memorable character due to his discourse, as shown by the long but funny answer he gives to Lydia's question as to how long Jane is going to stay at Netherfield:

Well, we're hoping Elizabeth can manage to catch a cold of her own and stay long enough to get engaged to Mr Darcy. Then, if a good snowstorm can be arranged, we'll send Kitty over and if a young man should happen to be in the house - a young man who likes singing of course, and can discuss philosophy, Mary could go. Then if a dashing young soldier in uniform should appear for Lydia, everything would be perfect, my dear. (Leonard *Pride*)

Not only Mrs Bennet's behaviour renders the film comic, but also Mr Collins's, who is another major source of humour. The pretentious nature of his demeanour is implied by his theatrical small actions. When he first appears on the screen in a long shot, he looks into a mirror he accidentally notices and repeats what he is to say to Mrs Bennet. Suddenly, when noticing a valuable bowl, he stops. Exaggerated or ample facial expressions and movements emphasize humour in the portrayal of Mr Collins's. In the scene in which he presents his

intention of marrying one of the Bennet daughters, he looks around, using his monocle in an obvious manner and settles on Elizabeth. During the proposal scene to Elizabeth, he kneels, grabs her hand, and is dragged when Elizabeth tries to escape. It is Mrs Bennet's words "foolish and headstrong," repeated in a parrot-like manner, which change his mind about Elizabeth and close the otherwise embarrassing scene in a light and funny manner.

Conclusions

Advancing family values, the production empowers some women while it presents others as being weak and at the mercy of circumstances. The wealthy and powerful are seen as autocratic leaders. In order to be awarded merely a change of circumstances is needed instead of personal development. Women have great influence and power over men, yet this power is futile since they cannot use it to their own advantage. The greatest changes, however, regard the perception on social status and wealth. In line with ideals resembling meritocracy, the rich in the film appreciate others on the basis of personal traits such as honesty and outspokenness. Birth and rank are of no relevance, thus the production eliminates Austen's social criticism in the novel and retains only the love story. The producers' approach to the story, however, allowed characters, behaviour and gestures to be portrayed in such a way so as to be faithful to the author's assessment of the novel as being "too light, and bright, and sparkling." The dichotomy at hand, faithfulness to the spirit of the novel, and total disregard of the letter of the novel, gave this adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* an identity of its own, not a slavish reproduction of the novel.

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