

Max Seidman

Dr. Mangiavellano

English 1010-26

11 October 2011

Maintaining Austenticity

Janeites, as described in Alan A. Stone's *Happy Endings*, "are a *faithful* congregation made up mostly of intelligent, well-read women who have an abiding love for the Austen oeuvre and its author" (Stone 53) [emphasis added]. I italicize *faithful* to emphasize that this quasi-cult of Jane Austen loyalists essentially shun those who adapt Austen's work and fail to adhere to nearly all its aspects. However, one must note that Janeites do not advocate on behalf Austen, herself. They are merely a modern audience with expertise in Regency-era protocol. In Joe Wright's criticized 2005 cinematic adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, Janeites and other critics point to two troubling inadequacies highlighting its fraudulent nature: they say that Keira Knightley's beauty exceeds the role's intentions and the sappy ending evokes lustful adolescent feelings rather than those of a Jane Austen novel. However, Austen's Regency period audience was, itself, a modern audience at the time; thus, Austen wrote with their Regency etiquette tastes in mind. In adding an extra scene to the end of the adaptation, Wright maintains a similar approach to his 21st century spectators as Austen did to her 19th century readership: they both use tactics that appeal to audiences of their relative time periods. Furthermore, Wright never contradicts Elizabeth's beauty within the original work considering Austen never actually defines Elizabeth's beauty in the novel. Therefore, one must realize that contrary to what Janeites and other critics say, Wright stays in line with the purpose of Austen's original work and maintains the authenticity of *Pride and Prejudice* .

In Kathy Lette's *Engage the Enemy* she criticizes the 2005 adaptation saying, "Keira Knightley is enchanting, but far too beautiful for the part of Lizzie Bennet. Lizzie is witty not pretty" (Lette 70). In saying this, Lette is witty, but wrong. Unfortunately, Lette does not provide us with textual evidence for her unsupported claim, and therefore forces us to look towards two key scenes in the novel where she most likely founds her assertion: Mrs. Bennet's censure of Elizabeth during her persuasion of Mr. Bennet to visit Mr. Bingley; and the Meryton Ball.

In Mrs. Bennet's attempt to persuade Mr. Bennet to visit Mr. Bingley, Mr. Bennet tells her that on his visit he "must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy" (Austen 6). In a long-winded exclamation to this remark Mrs. Bennet claims, "I am sure [Elizabeth] is not half so handsome as Jane" (6). On the surface, it may seem as though Elizabeth is not very attractive. However, one must view the ill-tempered Mrs. Bennet's opinion with some skepticism, refraining from accepting her opinion as wholly true. To better understand Mrs. Bennet's motives behind making this assertion, one must recognize that Regency era protocol has sent Mrs. Bennet on a maternal mission to marry all five of her daughters in order from oldest to youngest. So, Mrs. Bennet makes sure that Elizabeth, the second oldest sister, gains no advantage over Jane, the eldest sister, in the eyes of Mr. Bingley and therefore passes judgment on Elizabeth's beauty without hesitation. Here one can see that Mrs. Bennet's objective in insulting Elizabeth did not include accurately stating the facts at hand; her priority involves favoring Jane at all costs to make sure that her oldest daughter marries first.

Similarly, one can turn to Mr. Darcy's condescension of Elizabeth at the Meryton Ball to find the second instance in which Elizabeth's beauty falls under harsh criticism as a result of alternate motives. At the Meryton ball, Mr. Darcy tells Mr. Bingley, "You know how I detest [dancing], unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner." (13) From this statement we

find out that Mr. Darcy's shy and introverted personality keeps him from dancing with Elizabeth, not her beauty. However, Mr. Bingley looks right past this excuse as if Mr. Darcy never even said it, responding with a statement about the surplus of beautiful women in the room. This miscommunication, combined with a fear of dancing with a strange partner, sends Mr. Darcy on a frantic search for an alternate excuse. What does he come up with? "[Elizabeth] is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*" (12) Commenting on this quotation, Lette unnecessarily responds by asking "What is he – gay?" (Lette 2). No, he is not gay; he is shy and uncomfortable, just as he originally implies. From this we see that the basis for Mr. Darcy's insult towards Elizabeth exists not in his true opinion of her beauty, but rather in his discomfort with the present circumstances at the ball.

Having dismissed the sources of Lette's argument, one can understand that Austen never actually provides her audience with a detailed description of Jane or Elizabeth, whereas she does describe Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy's handsome figures. Therefore, Austen ambitiously leaves the physical features of the eligible bachelorettes open to interpretation for future adaptations of the work—whether Austen consciously omitted these details we do not know. Nonetheless, without a detailed description of Elizabeth or Jane's beauty, Janeites' first major criticism of Wright's work lays unfounded, which leaves Wright in the clear to depict them however he so pleases. Although the topics of Keira Knightley's beauty and the sappy ending may not seem to have much relevance to each other at first, the connection between them lays in Wright's controversial adaptation of both aspects in his film. Just as Wright freely adapts Elizabeth's character from the novel, he possesses the same liberties when adapting the novel's final scene.

In debating the film's controversial final scene, Janeites have criticized the adaptation's "sexed-up ending as blasphemy" (Stanley 1). If Wright were attempting to follow the exact plot

structure of *Pride and Prejudice*, then by all means, call it blasphemy. But Wright aims for a different goal; staying in line with the tactics Austen uses to please her audience. Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, a point in time when intimate physical love was seldom found in novels. Authors remained conservative when portraying intimacy in their works. As Roberta Grandi puts it in her essay “The Passion Translated: Literary and Cinematic Rhetoric in *Pride and Prejudice*”, “Austen never goes into the privacy of her characters’ bedrooms” (50). Austen does this for no other reason than the fact that Regency-era standards did not allow her to. She wrote to an audience who would not have stood for such portrayals. However, flash forward 192 years to 2005 and Wright “seems to choose [bedrooms] as appointed spaces where the most private feelings can be revealed” (50). Basically, in writing to their own modern audiences, Wright and Austen use tactics that their respective time periods allow them to use. I specify modern to establish that Austen’s 1813 audience was modern at the time of publication just as Wright’s 2005 audience is relatively modern today.

These same rules of intimacy apply to the endings of both works. When writing a novel, one can assume that any author intends to please his or her readers. When writing the ending to her novel, Austen never brings any kissing into the picture, for her Regency audience would have frowned upon such actions, scrutinizing them as foreign. In Regency-era times, public displays of affection may have shown a lack of honor and respect. In avoiding such measures, Austen sums her novel up more formally by giving a separate conclusion for nearly all of the major and minor characters present in the novel. However, in the more informal times of 2005, Wright, using tactics that appeal to his respective audience, adds the final kiss scene to bring *Pride and Prejudice* up to speed with the times, thus harmlessly doing away with the unnecessary closing statements while meeting the expectations of the more casual-minded 21st

century audience. Whereas readers of the novel walked away satisfied with Austen's summation of all the minor characters and no provocative finale, Wright's 21st century crowd might have felt short-changed without that 21st century romance they have become so accustomed to seeing on the big screen. In fact, this turned out to be the case as "Austen fans in England who got wind of the American version", that which included the summative smooch, "were incensed that they had been denied a final kiss" (Stanley 1). This outrage resulted in an additional number of viewings of the film's extended version in certain British theaters, thus proving that it is not only Americans that enjoy "more sugar in their champagne" (Stone 53)—as Wright plainly put it in an interview; it is the 21st century public as a whole. So, in his efforts to produce a profitable film, Wright in fact stays in line with Austen's tactical intentions of tailoring to the modern audience, thereby creating a successful adaptation.

Intense Jane Austen perfectionists may say that Wright failed to convey some of the key components of Austen's novel in his adaptation. To start, these Janeites disapprove of Wright's casting of Elizabeth with Keira Knightley referring to her overwhelming beauty as unfit for the role. But who says Elizabeth can't be beautiful? Certainly not Austen. Having never given a reliable description of Elizabeth in the novel, she allows Wright to freely cast Elizabeth's character with any stunning woman he likes. With Elizabeth as the main character of the story, it only seems sensible to make her glamour shine and stand out among her other 4 sisters. Furthermore, in attacking the controversially banal ending of the movie, these hardcore Austen loyalists must recognize that successful adaptations do not necessarily need to follow the plot points to a tee. Often times, this goal falls second behind the more important task of adhering to the work's original purpose, in this case, meeting the needs and wants of the audience. Wright, in adding what seems like a mushy-gushy kissing scene at the end of his adaptation incorporates the

latter. Just as Austen successfully set out to thrill her Regency era fan base, Wright strategically adds his sappy ending in order to entertain his 21st century viewers, thereby creating a successful adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

So, I hate to break it to all the Janeites out there, but this adaptation is a tale of the times, and I am hard-pressed to see where it is exactly that Wright failed to successfully adapt *Pride and Prejudice*.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Vivien Jones. London: Penguin, 2003.

Pride and Prejudice. Dir. Joe Wright. Perf. Keira Knightley. Focus Features, 2005. Film.

Lette, Kathy. "Engage the Enemy." *New Statesman* 26 Sep. 2005: 70. International Security &

Counter Terrorism Reference Center. EBSCO. Web. 28 Oct. 2011

Stanley, Alessandra . "IDEAS & TRENDS: Critic's Notebook; Oh, Mr. Darcy Yes, I

Said Yes!." *New York Times* 20 Nov. 2005: 1. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO.

Web. 30 Oct. 2011.

Stone, Alan A. "Happy Endings." *Boston Review* 31.2 (2006): 53-54. Literary Reference Center.

EBSCO. Web. 30 Oct. 2011.