

ADAPTING AND APPROPRIATING JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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Abstract

Through various modes of translation and imitation, literature is created by literature. In this regard, new perspectives on canonical literary works are constantly being generated. Adaptation and appropriation have reproductive dimensions that suggest manifold ways in which texts feed off and create other texts. Adaptation and appropriation vary in the ways they explicitly state their intertextual purpose. In recent years, adaptation has become a controversial issue that provokes intense debate among authors and auteurs. Adapted and appropriated film versions of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* reflect the on-going battle between some literary and film critics. These versions also point to the different perspectives and ideas that lie inherent in this classic literary text.

Keywords: Adaptation, appropriation, Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, translation, imitation

Today, an important and controversial question in adaptation posed by literary purists and filmmakers is: Should directors faithfully translate novels into film or should they imitate in order to capture the spirit of the text through a new but familiar medium? Adaptation, which is the matching of the cinematic sign system to prior achievement in some other systems, can be considered as a distinctive feature of all representational cinemas. There are many comments and theories on the process of adaptation that have given variable meanings and applications to it. Adaptations and appropriations vary in the way they explicitly state their intertextual purpose.

Many of the film, television, or theatre adaptations of canonical works of literature declare themselves as an interpretation or re-reading of a canonical precursor. Sometimes this will involve a director's personal vision, and this may or may not involve cultural relocation or updating of some form. Sometimes this re-interpretative act also involves a movement into a new, generic mode or context. In appropriations the intertextual relationship could be less explicit and is more embedded. But what is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer, director, or performer's decision to re-interpret a source text. Therefore, the inherent intertextuality of literature encourages the ongoing, evolving production of meaning, and an ever-expanding network of textual relations. Thus adaptation and appropriation have vital roles and even, according to Julie Sanders, are fundamental to the practice and enjoyment of literature.

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The most successful cinematic versions which capture the essence and the spirit of Jane Austen's novels derive not from translation but rather from the eighteenth-century theory of imitation which inspired Jane Austen herself. Jocelyn Harris believes that these cinematic versions highlight difference rather than sameness and comment on Jane Austen's pastness, acknowledging shifts in our thinking about the world, or satirizing modern times (Macdonald 2003: 44). Although there are different challengeable views about adaptation and its value, I will examine it as a new blended form of art, a mix of verbal and perceptual signs.

Some literary critics such as Roger Gard believe that pictures only hint at the surface of things. Because critics too can be governed by their pride and prejudice as to literary content and, consequently, only accord attention to the lexical associations derived from the novel, they could ignore the possibilities inherent in translating the sense or the spirit of a novel. Gard, a literary purist, asserts that "the mess of things that pictures can't easily do – or can do only so clumsily as to be prohibitive in some way or other – seems to me dauntingly large. Pictures cannot, while contextualising, manage time or summarise. Moreover the crucial difficulty lies in the camera's inability to discriminate easily within a given appearance. That is why the adaptation of more delicate effects is very hard to achieve. The camera has no narrative voice." (Macdonald 2003:10)

As we know, all of the movie adaptations of Jane Austen's novels translate her works from the language of print culture into the sign-system of cinema. But naturally questions do arise. Could translation of this kind still be faithful to the source? Could this be impressive art? Theorists believe that when poetry is translated from one language to another, original meanings must turn to new idioms if they are not to sound bizarre. Modern translator, David Constantine says: "The translation is a metaphor of the original, a various differentiated living equivalent of the original." (1999: 15). Of course aspects of modernity such as commercialism, visuality, idealism, realism, velocity, and intertextuality affect the translation of the novel into film. On-screen versions of Jane Austen cannot then, for some reasons, be faithful translations. They have been dealt with auteurism in various forms. Sometimes we see the trace of spectatorship theory¹ in their work. Since modern film audiences include many young people who are ignorant of Jane Austen, directors often try to make their films universally attractive through visual detail and occasional modern references, as we have seen.

In film adaptation, imitation has an explicit role and implicit function. An imitation stresses its difference from the original in order to display the inventiveness of the author. In this regard, John Dryden explains: "Imitation of an author is an Endeavour of a later Poet to write like one who has written before him on the same subject that is, not to Translate his words, or to be confined to his Sense, but only to set him as a pattern, and to write, as he supposes, that author would have done, had he lived in our age, and in our Country." (Macdonald: 28). By highlighting the differences between the old text and the new, the imitator constructs a commentary that poststructuralists would call "metatextual". In fact, many auteurs approach the canonical texts by applying consumer culture theory as espoused by Miriam Hansen (1991).²

History has shown that Jane Austen's works have continued appeal. Harriet Morgolis comments that "posthumous queen of genteel cinema" that Austen is, her name alone is enough to make the connection between viewers and cultural capital (Macdonald:

39). From an economic point of view, Harriet Morgolis asserts that Austen's name seems to authorise green lighting, i.e., approval for adaptation productions. She believes that we are at a time when Austen's name functions like a license to print money. However, though Austen is so well-known, the adaptations of her works, history has also shown, must also include literary and cinematic inventiveness to ensure that these adaptations are impressive and memorable.

Since translation of conceptual signs into perceptual signs is not completely possible, conveying the sense of the text to the audience is deemed as extremely important. To achieve this purpose, the richness of the auteurs' ideas and thoughts has a vital role to play in the success of a movie. Christina Lane argues that the auteurist status can help market a film and thus get it greenlighted in the first place. Though this could work in attracting attention, most of its success depends on the literary aspect as well as the artistic and cinematic value of the movie.

In adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, different impressions of various cinematic versions attest to this statement. It is utterly understandable that the spirit and impression of the 1940 version (MGM) directed by Robert Z. Leonard, the 1958 version (BBC) directed by Barbara Burnham, the 1979 version (BBC and A&E) directed by Cyril Coke, the 1995 version (BBC) directed by Simon Langton, and the 2005 version directed by Joe Wright are vastly different from each other and also differ, in various ways and degrees, from the alluding text i.e. the Austen novel. This variety in auteurism partly derives from the auteur's response to the original text and his/her sense as a reader. There is also the factor of cultural capital and even commodification which is a constantly changing variable among literary critics. Indeed cultural capital, which is linked to cultural preferences, alters from era to era. Thus, when marketing a movie, Austen's cultural status, her cultural capital, is translated into commercial success and economic capital for producers such as the BBC, Columbia, Miramax, and A&E. In her own day, Austen's social superiority rested on cultural rather than material wealth. This was true of women who made careers out of writing. They tended to be better educated and better supplied with cultural capital than the other women of their time. Obviously culture and economics are connected, though cultural status may or may not affect social interactions as directly as money does. It is clear that auteurism and application of theories such as consumer culture theory and spectatorship theory are under the influence of commercialized culture.

Of course cultural capital can be discussed in appropriation too when it makes the original text tangible by changing the time and place (colonisation)³. In this case, appropriation is done in order to insert the political and cultural views into the canonical text. It is true that adaptation and appropriation at times serve to reinforce the canon, though in revised circumstances of understanding. Derek Attridge believes that the perpetuation of any canon is dependent in part on the references made to its earlier sources by its later sources (1996: 169). Adaptation responds or writes back to an informing original from a new or revised political and cultural position in the form of appropriation and it is this capacity which highlights troubling gaps and silences within the canonical texts to which they refer. Many appropriations have a political and literary investment in giving voice to those characters or subject positions they perceive to have been repressed in the original. In fact, many appropriations proceed by defamiliarisation, inviting readers or spectators to look anew at a canonical text. Sometimes the process of defamiliarisation serves to reveal what is repressed or suppressed in an original, or sometimes the alluding text is

used as an accepted frame for new political and cultural views. Within this approach, appropriation is applied as a medium to convey an idea or a message.

This feature of appropriation is explicit in *Bride and Prejudice*, a movie which gives *Pride and Prejudice* "an Indian slant". This is an example of cinematic appropriation. In *Bride and Prejudice*, postcolonial ideas are openly expressed within the rubric of Indian culture. In this appropriated film version, the director (Gurindar Chadha) seeks to make a very specific point about India which is entirely out of the plot of the canonical text. With artistic skill, she inserts anti-colonial ideas, cultural views and an emphatically Indian national prejudice. Appropriation could also be examined as an intercultural performance. Here, intertextuality is linked to the notion of 'hybridity' famously espoused by cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha. Bhabha's well-known account of hybridity suggests how things and ideas are repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition and also how this process of relocation can stimulate creativity (1995:207). It is, however, noticeable that for Bhabha only hybridity that respects essential difference enables innovation. Hence the consideration of differences in translation in the form of imitation from the alluding text into the target text is emphasized. In this respect, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that post-colonialism is inherently appropriative in its gestures and its political position-taking. She claims that the general mode for the postcolonial is citation, re-inscription, re-routing the historical (1990:41). Thus, it may be perceived that appropriation is a post-colonial feature before it functions as a medium.

There is a salient question when translating and conveying the sense and spirit of the source text: when we speak of fidelity to Jane Austen, which Jane Austen are we talking about? Jane Austen's Jane Austen, or the individual reader's Austen? Different readers respond according to their own material conditions, locations, histories, and genders. In this respect Donna Haraway's observation is insightful: "All readings are also mis-readings, re-readings, partial readings, imposed readings, and imagined reading of a text that is originally and finally never simply there" (1991:124). In film adaptations of classic texts, it is eminently apparent that these adaptations constitute a multi-dimensional process of translation and transformation of an art from one historical period to another as well as from one medium to another and one nation to another. Adaptation is affected by and responsive to social and cultural shifts. Readers of the same text construct different meanings. In view of this, what are the criteria for determining if a work of literature has been faithfully adapted? This is a matter of great controversy among scholars.

Many literary and film critics claim that the 1995 version of *Pride and Prejudice* is more faithful to the novel than other versions. This degree of fidelity is an important factor in the success of the BBC production. Because the Regency era was a time of powerful navies and naval heroes, this was highlighted in the 1995 adaptive version as it was in the 1940 version. Another example of this kind can also be traced in the different characterization in various film versions of *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy, a proud and strict character, has been visualized differently in the various film adaptations. In the 1940 MGM version, Darcy emerges as a more romantic figure than in the 1995 BBC version. On the other hand, Elizabeth in the 1940 version is more charming and flirtatious than in the 1995 version.

The creative imagination of the reader is as important as the conception of the author. In an imitation of a text, this has an explicit manifestation. William Kinsley calls it the "anxiety of imitation", echoing Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" theory (MacDonald:

52). This trend in literary criticism came to be known as 'reception theory' in Germany and later 'reader response criticism' in the American cultural milieu. It was a reaction against the formalists who saw the reader as a perceiving subject whose main task was to distinguish or discover the literary form and procedure. In recent years, the reader found a virtual personality hitherto neglected by the critics and the reality of the text was felt to depend on this new personality who gave the text the chance to breathe and survive. The orphaned text cut off from the authority of the originating voice, finds in the reader its source of resonance. In other words, the text is nurtured and fathered by the reader (Caputo 1996: 91). Moreover, the reception of a literary work becomes varied from reader to reader rather than from period to period. However, Dudley Andrew emphasized the existence of variety in adaptation in different periods.

This variety is a consequence of different interpretations and expectations of generations of readers. In connection to this, in translating a Jane Austen text into another medium, the female character has always been central. In Austen adaptations, there are various portraits of women. Some critics have attacked some of them for their "harlequinization" of Austen's heroes. This appropriation in women characterization is not acceptable for some feminists and cine-feminists. Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen, for instance, assert that film reflects social reality and the depictions of women in film mirror the way society treats women and makes clear how women really are and what they really want (Hill 2002: 118).

My belief is that literariness is an indispensable part of cinematic adaptation and appropriation and there should be a fusion of literature and cinema instead of privileging one over the other. This would certainly open the way to the creation of a new genre in artistic work rather than a sheer copy of the original text. Now is the time to do away with pride and prejudice. We should and must grasp literary complexity and subtlety and to do more than read for mere narrative. As such, we should look at film for meaning and understanding as we do in literature. Adaptation and appropriation allows for new dimensions of reality and knowledge.

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Endnotes

- ¹ **Spectatorship film theory:** in general, this theory revolves around the expectations of spectators. In this context, however, I refer to Mary Ann Doane who develops a theory of female spectatorship through intricate textual analyses of films produced for a female audience in wartime Hollywood. Doane argues that the visual economy and affective intensity of films on women encourage the female spectator to over-identify with the image (*The Desire to Desire*, 1987).
- ² **Consumer culture theory:** according to this theory, historically, cinema emerges within cultural consumption. It is not unreasonable to suggest that women are not marginalized as spectators, with no access except through disempowering identification with femininity-as-commodity in the figure of the star, but instead energetically addressed as consumers (Miriam Hansen and Valentino, 1991). In following this theory, work on consumerism can restore the question of gender to the now dominant concept of postmodernism. Many of the characteristics of postmodern society--fragmentation over coherence, style over history, surface over depth, and consumption over production-- have traditionally been associated with women's condition. (Hill, J and Church Gibson, P 2002)
- ³ **Colonisation :** deliberately altering the time and place of a literary text.