

Translating Mr Darcy to Screen - a Byronic Darcy in Joe Wright's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)

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Abstract

Jane Austen's most famous male protagonist, Mr Darcy is known as a proud, snobbish character. However, the cinematic rhetoric used to translate his character from page to screen tends to romanticize him and downplay his pride and snobbishness. In Joe Wright's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* Darcy becomes a socially inept man struggling with his emotions. Not only the script but also the mise-en-scène place him closer to the Romantic hero than to the proud character envisaged by Austen. The paper presents how the proud Darcy known from the book has been turned into the Byronic Darcy presented in the adaptation.

Keywords: Darcy, Byronic character, Romanticism

In 2005 the American film studio Focus Features decided to adapt *Pride and Prejudice* to the big screen the first time in the sixty-five years that had passed since the 1940 version of the novel written to screen by Aldous Huxley and Jane Murfin, and featuring Greer Garson and Lawrence Olivier as Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy, respectively. Directed by British director Joe Wright, the new feature film presents Keira Knightly in the role of Elizabeth and Matthew Macfadyen as Darcy. As opposed to the 1995 miniseries, in which Darcy's character was brought forward, in this one casting an internationally more famous actress as the female lead and a less known actor in the male one allowed the female lead to become the centre of attention. This rendition of Austen's first published novel focuses on Elizabeth and everything else serves only as a background against which viewers can watch her development.

As for Mr Darcy's role, Wright wanted "a big strong, manly man, not some pretty boyband type" (DeGennaro "Wright Interview"). His choice aligns the adaptation along with the classical Harlequin romance novels in which the male protagonist should be a strong man, his physical strength suggesting his reliability. Macfadyen's stature does imply the physical, moral and emotional strength Darcy is shown to have in this adaptation. Macfadyen's interpretation of the role shed a different light on Darcy than what Austen readers were accustomed to, since "whereas the novel attributes Darcy's social reluctance [...] to his snobbery, the film presents it as a result of his dislike of social forms and practices (Ailwood "What are"). He read Darcy as a man who "is still trying to work out who he is and how to be in the world" (Foley "Macfadyen interview"). This Darcy is shown uncomfortable in society due to his dislike of social interactions. He prefers the comfort of his solitude to the nuisance of interacting with people and is shown to find most conversations tiresome, even if the partner is a familiar character like Miss Bingley. Macfadyen justifies this choice claiming that modern viewers would see Darcy "snobbish and elitist" and would not understand his dilemma because "that sense of duty is alien to us now" (Foley "Macfadyen interview"). He believes that Darcy bears a resemblance with modern male viewers because he has a huge fortune at a relatively young age similarly to many young men who have great responsibilities. In the actor's reading it is difficult for us to perceive how great the social divide between Darcy and Elizabeth was. Macfadyen likens Darcy having a huge fortune at a relatively young age to young men having great responsibilities nowadays. This interpretation of the character confirms the view according to which "Darcy, one of literature's super-patriarchs, has been rendered a victim: a victim of his own rigidly snobbish upbringing, a victim of his own good fortune, and a victim of his loneliness" (Stewart-Bear "Style"). Mr Darcy's portrayal reveals a socially inept, Byronic character, endowed with the ability to express his romantic emotions for Elizabeth.

Due to the popularity of the 1995 miniseries, the producers embarked on a daring enterprise when they decided to adapt the novel to a feature film. Exceeding the BBC miniseries would be an impossible endeavour since both the critical establishment and viewers thought highly of it despite having deplored the emphasis on landscape and the fetishizing of Darcy. Therefore, filmmakers of the 2005 rendition rightly decided to free themselves from all

predecessors and offer an entirely fresh reading of the novel devoid of any metatextual reference to any previous version. The actors also tried to liberate themselves from the constraints of previous readings. Both Macfadyen and Brenda Blethyn – the latter played Mrs Bennet – claim that actors must not have any metatextual relationships in mind, since their performances would lose any claim to originality and they would be mere copies of previous interpretations. In their view, had actors had in mind who had played various parts prior to them, viewers would not see new interpretations of Hamlet, for example.

Starting with the 1990s when literary adaptations, just like the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice*, were written for film and not studio, great emphasis has been placed on landscape and outdoor scenes. Wright followed that line and included many outdoor scenes in the film. In his view, "Jane Austen is a writer of the parlor, but in cinema, you want to step out, get some air" (DeGennaro "Wright interview"). Landscape highlights emotional states of characters, and focuses on presenting them as Romantic characters. One of the scenes to illustrate this is that of Elizabeth sitting on a swing at Longbourne in the muddy stockyard after Mr Collins's proposal. Close-up shots of her face suggest that she realizes that she has come to an age when men and relationship with them are not a topic for witty chatter with the other girls as it was at the Meryton assembly. She is shown to awaken to the fact that she is a sexual being who has entered the marriage market and that life is not a game anymore but a sometimes unpleasant matter just like the muddy stockyard behind her.

Despite its deterministic tone – due to the muddy stockyard, animals and their symbolism in the film – Romanticism dominates the adaptation, which is evident from the poster already. Of two horizontally laid pictures, on the top one we see Elizabeth in the foreground with her head turned towards Darcy portrayed in the background approaching in the mist. Thus the poster foreshadows the emphasis on Elizabeth's story in this film. The bottom picture shows a female figure in the background walking alone in the field; she is all alone, a small figure next to the only tree in the picture. The photo is a still from the film and represents Elizabeth on her way to Netherfield to see her ailing sister. Her relative smallness compared to the tree's height may be indicative of nature prevailing in this adaptation. The poster already indicates the overt presence of Romanticism since "the main character [...]"

seems lost, deep in the country, an image which constitutes a Romantic topos" (Martin "Joe Wright's").

Images evoking the aesthetic trends of Classicism and Romanticism are often presented alongside within the same shot to highlight the contrast between characters and setting. At Netherfield Park for instance, Elizabeth is in contrast with the house Bingley rents and which embodies Classicism. She enters with muddy hems, in her brown coat with her brown hair loose in a house in which even servants are perfectly clad and wear wigs. The breakfast room where Darcy and Miss Bingley are sitting has marble columns, light blue walls and chairs and only the necessary furniture, everything implying order. Also, the sitting room, in which they have the conversation on accomplished women, contains furniture and furnishing with straight lines and light, delicate colour. Elizabeth is quite out of place in this room with her gray dress reading a book barely sitting on the couch. As far as the colour of her dress is concerned, Elizabeth's presence disrupts the order the furnishing of the room implies, while her posture suggests her unease in the neat environment.

Though the film presents the story from Elizabeth's point of view, her having been romanticized is not as evident as that of Darcy. In this version, he resembles a Byronic figure rather than the proud, distant and aloof character readers are accustomed to. From the very beginning he is shown to stand out. When he first appears in the story, at the Meryton assembly, he stands out already due to his height and awkward behaviour. Later the film is concerned "with presenting him as a socially alienated Romantic figure. [...] like the Romantic hero, he finds the forms and practices of social interaction offered by his society unfulfilling, laying the foundation for his later characterization as a Byronic hero" (Ailwood "What are").

In the film Darcy is sometimes associated with caged birds that need to find their freedom. At Rosings, when visiting his aunt, he is shown around caged birds suggesting that he has to set himself free from his constriction. In the first proposal scene in which the tension between Darcy and Elizabeth reaches its climax, they look like two caged hawks ready to rip each other apart if not set soon free. The first proposal is the culmination of their story as socially inept or lonely individuals. Furthermore, because of the rain, "the couple's bodies, faces and hair are dripping wet with fertility" (Anderson "The Offending Pig") in a scene that ends

with an almost-kiss. The wet environment underlines on the one hand the deterministic feeling suggested by the first part of the film; on the other hand, it represents the frustration both characters shout out of themselves in the scene. Their bitter quarrel is a beautiful visual representation of the end of their loneliness. The choice of the first proposal scene supports this view since it is the Temple of Apollo in the garden of Stourhead considered an outstanding example of Classicist garden design that "Romantics sought to debunk" and which "symbolizes the social and aesthetic order that both characters clearly find so oppressive" (Ailwood "What are"). Thus, the setting alone may insinuate the failure of the proposal, the Classical building is not the environment Elizabeth and Darcy feel at ease in. As opposed to this, the second proposal takes place in a field at dawn. Unconventionally dressed - Darcy with his cravat loose and without a waistcoat while Elizabeth is wearing only a coat over her nightgown - they are the embodiment of the Romantic characters. The misty dawn in the fields seems a more appropriate setting than the man-made environment in the gardens of Stourhead.

As a matter of fact, after the first proposal scene nearly all settings are mostly Romantic ones which both characters fit in. Pemberley lacks the Classical orderliness of Netherfield and abounds with references to ancient Greek and Roman culture mostly in the form of the sculptures both in the gallery and Darcy's writing table. Though these references are usually perceived as Neoclassical, "touch" transforms them into something different, something romantic. The director has Elizabeth see a sculpture gallery at Pemberley instead of a picture gallery and allows her to touch these. Due to the replacement of portraits with sculptures, Elizabeth can feel and touch Darcy not only look at his portrait. The sequence may be perceived as a circle she completes. Upon entering the gallery Elizabeth stares at the sculpture of the Veiled Virgin in a troubled manner, as if she realized that she is looking at herself. Then she wanders in the gallery running her finger on the sculptures staring at the male nudes finally arriving at Darcy's bust standing in the middle of the room and staring at it for more than forty seconds. From the veiled girl she arrives at Darcy, she realizes that she admires Darcy and even likes him.

Not only is Pemberley the place where Elizabeth recognizes her emotions, but it is also the only place spectators are allowed to see Darcy heartily laugh when Elizabeth peeks into a

room and sees him surprise Georgiana. His warm laughter stands in contrast with his distant behaviour in Hertfordshire; he is the Romantic hero at ease in his own safe environment.

In the Pemberley sequences Darcy is brought forward and portrayed as a sensitive romantic hero. According to Sarah Ailwood, however, Romanticizing Darcy is not only possible because he is not in the eye of the reader all the time, but because Austen set Pemberley in a romantic area, which directors drew upon:

Wright's extensive use of landscape throughout this section of the film highlights an aspect of Austen's novel that is frequently overlooked by scholarship: her decision to locate Pemberley in Derbyshire [...] characterizes Darcy in terms of the symbolically Romantic landscape of the Peak district. ("What are")

The difference between the Darcy we see outside and at Pemberley is best suggested by the hand spasm sequences. The hand scenes have been added to the story - close-shots of Darcy's hand have been included in the film to show the hero's emotion. Darcy's hand is shown in two instances: first, he clenches his hand while helping Elizabeth into the carriage when she is going home after Jane's ailing at Netherfield, and the second time viewers have a glance at his hand is at Pemberley after Elizabeth leaves following their first encounter there. The second time he does not clench his fist, which implies that he has come to terms with his feelings. He is yet unable to express his feelings as the dialogue between the two reveals, but his attitude towards Elizabeth has changed. Though it may seem unusual to invest so much into such a little motion, concentrating on little actions such as the movement of the hand "allows the audience an enriched and rather unabashed view of the characters and their ability or inability to convey admiration outwardly (within the realm of appropriateness, considering the era's social codes)" (Gollay "The Most").

The hand spasm suggests that we have a simplified Darcy at hand in this version. His snobbishness is downplayed and his portrayal as a Byronic hero is emphasized by his dislike of social gatherings and preference for a familiar environment. He falls in love with Elizabeth, but in this version it is not Mrs Bennet's vulgarity, and the Bennets' wealth and social status that represent the major impediment he has to overcome, but his disability to show his emotions. In

the novel Darcy's first proposal is governed by his pride; in the 2005 version he only *seems* proud because of his taciturn behaviour in general. With pride excluded, Darcy has to accept his emotions and surrender to them. He pours his frustration out in the first proposal scene and these are washed away by the torrential rain. This Darcy does not need to reform, but only accept his emotions and convince Elizabeth of his affection.

By the second proposal scene Darcy has grown able to express his emotions. Unlike the novel, which avoided presenting the proposal, or the restrained rendition of the 1995 version, this scene abounds in emotions: "you have bewitched me body and soul, and I love... love... I love you. I don't wish to be parted from you from this day on," Darcy declares (58:48 – 59:00). His statement shows that "he is a man driven by passionate feeling, whose love is eternal and who pursues his desire for Elizabeth despite its disruption of the social and familial order" (Ailwood "What are").

The film is a strange mixture of sexuality and romance. In the first proposal scene sexual tension drives the two protagonists into the bitter quarrel and they almost kiss at the end; whereas in the second one Darcy's passionate words reflect intense romance. At the end of the scene they do not kiss – as it would be expected in a film in which "his interest in Elizabeth is very much driven by his sexual desire" (Stewart-Beer "Style") – but Elizabeth kisses Darcy's hand and they touch foreheads. Elizabeth subjects herself to Darcy's passion and what started as romantic bickering and sexual attraction becomes a meeting of minds despite the fact that the film does not emphasize the romance between Elizabeth and Darcy to be "a meeting of minds, a chance for Elizabeth to find her intellectual equal" (Stewart-Beer "Style"). Maturing emotionally, Elizabeth subdues herself to a strong, seemingly Byronic Darcy who has learned to accept and express his romantic feelings towards her.

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