

Creating a Romantic Landscape: Costume Design and the Modern Romanticization of *Pride and Prejudice*

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Through an examination of the three major film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, this paper explores how costume design plays a role in highlighting the romance plot of the novel and creating entirely different interpretations of Austen's original text. The Robert Z. Leonard (1940), Simon Langton (1995), and Joe Wright (2005) adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* have all contributed to the contemporary notion that *Pride and Prejudice* is a great romance; the interpretations of historic costume design in each film play a significant role in changing modern perception of Austen's original novel.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has been highly regarded, and considered a prime example of Austen's innate ability to bring the everyday to life. Today, however, it is the romance aspect of the novel that is most promoted by mainstream entertainment. Society's obsession with the "timeless romance" between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy (a quick Google search brings up over 182,000 articles, blog entries, and movie reviews on the topic) has given life to an entire industry; alongside films, countless works of fiction based on *Pride and Prejudice* have been produced: modern adaptations, sequels that detail Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's married life, and books that rewrite the novel from Mr. Darcy's point of view. Each illustrates Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship in far greater depth than the original novel, which was described by Charlotte Brönte as "a highly cultivated garden...with no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy," revealing that "the Passions are unknown to [Austen]" (Brönte via Southam 128). The most pervasive adaptations today are the film versions of the novel. Many modern readers who have seen a film adaptation prior to reading the novel will go into Austen's work anticipating (and therefore only focusing on) the romantic aspect of *Pride and Prejudice*.

In every film adaptation, finding true love in marriage is the endgame for the two eldest Bennet sisters. Each film ends with a proposal or a wedding, providing audiences with a clean, "happily ever after" ending. Although marriage and romance are central to the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's novel does not equate marriage with true love, nor does romance always result in happy marriages for her couples; rather, marriage is a necessary escape from poverty for the Bennet sisters, so the pursuit of matrimony drives the plot forward. For a family of five sisters in the 19th century, when entails excluded women from inheriting property, marriage was the "pleasantest preservative from want" (Austen 122-23). Early nineteenth century reviews of *Pride and Prejudice* focus on Austen's well-rounded characters and witty dialogue that was "written with great spirit as well as vigour" (Southam 31). Even in the later nineteenth century, Austen's work was

hailed for "describing involvements, and feelings, and characters of ordinary life which is to [the reviewer] the most wonderful [he] ever met with" (Southam 135). The romance between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy is never expounded upon, but merely mentioned in passing as the primary device that moves the plot. It is not until the 20th century and the advent of film that the modern perception of *Pride and Prejudice* as an epic romance begins to take form.

Today, Elizabeth Bennet is often regarded as beautiful and witty, whereas Mr. Darcy is portrayed as handsome, brooding, and romantic. Interestingly, personal appearance and dress are rarely mentioned in *Pride and Prejudice*. Instead, Austen illustrates characters by sketching their personalities and behavior rather than describing their looks or clothing. The advent of cinema and the many film adaptations of Austen's films have drastically influenced how her novels are perceived because of liberties taken with the visual elements of each adaptation, particularly costume design. Two major adaptations (Robert Z. Leonard's 1940 film and Joe Wright's 2005 production) chose to set the action in a different time period because of a desire to create a different mood through costume design. Where Leonard's lighthearted adaptation features opulent and exaggerated leg of mutton sleeves and hoop skirts, Joe Wright favored dark colors and late 17th-century dresses for his costume design. Of the three major *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations, only Simon Langton's 1995 version of the novel is set in the same time frame as the novel. The varying interpretations of period costume design within the Robert Z. Leonard (1940), Simon Langton (BBC/A&E miniseries, 1995) and Joe Wright (2005) adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* has played a significant role in creating a composite image of *Pride and Prejudice* within modern society, and has directly influenced the popular interpretation of Jane Austen's satiric social commentary as a story of epic romance.

Each adaptation is a reflection of the time in which it was produced, as each caters to a different audience. The first major film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* was released by MGM in 1940. Starring Laurence Olivier and

Greer Garson, MGM's *Pride and Prejudice* was adapted to fit into the screwball comedy model that was popular at the time. As Parrill argues, its "warring lover, witty dialogue, class differences, opportunity for elaborate costumes, and comic minor characters...lends itself to the broadly comedic treatment of screwball comedies" (Parrill 49). Early publicity presented the film as a romantic comedy with the tagline "Bachelors Beware! Five Gorgeous Beauties are on a Madcap Manhunt" (Parrill 49). Austen's satirical examination of class, the necessity of marriage, and moral follies was reduced to lighthearted romantic fare specifically designed to appeal to a wartime audience. The romanticization of *Pride and Prejudice* also extended to the film's costume design (Lawson-Peebles 10). Historical accuracy was never a consideration for Adrian, the film's costume designer. Rather, Adrian asked Leonard to set the film in a later time period with opulent gowns that would capitalize on the recent success of the wildly popular *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Many of the films are exaggerated versions of historic silhouettes: sleeves are larger, skirts are wider, and decorative accessories are more theatrical than historically accurate. The intent was to create a sumptuous array of costumes that would appeal to audiences as an idealized, nostalgic version of old England—a time that represented a golden age in decorum and civilization. The costume design revolved around gowns with "tight bodices, tight natural waists, huge puffed sleeves, and billowing hoop skirts...in the costumes we see a mingling of 1830s and 1930s styles" (Parrill 55). By mixing historic costume with 1930s detailing, as seen in Caroline Bingley's black velvet ballgown with modern rhinestone detailing, there is an unspoken air of modernity that permeates the film (*PP*, Leonard) (Figure 1). The characters may dress and speak in a manner that sketches out an earlier time period, but historical accuracy is not the film's primary goal. Leonard's *Pride and Prejudice* is meant to be a screwball comedy, and so the film retains a older, more modern attitude toward romantic interactions than Austen's original novel.

Costumes were also used to comedic effect, as much of the physical humor in the film revolved around how the women attempted to move and maneuver in the overwhelmingly large hoop skirts. In one scene, Mrs. Bennet and her five daughters hurry home from Meryton to urge Mr. Bennet to call upon their newest neighbor, Mr. Bingley. The actresses' movements are "reminiscent of a covey of quail scurrying along" (Parrill 55). Just before this moment, Mrs. Bennet proclaims the necessity of alerting Mr. Bennet to the news of a potential suitor for her daughters before Lady Lucas has a chance to do the same for her daughter, Charlotte. The entire sequence ends the first scene in the film and sets the tone for the rest of Leonard's madcap adaptation, which features gowns and bonnets as over the top as the acting (*PP* Leonard, Parrill 55).

One particular scene where Adrian's costume design is most effective in underscoring the adaptation's emphasis



Figure 1. Caroline Bingley's black ball gown. The jeweled detailing at the neckline and large bow on the shoulder are reminiscent of 1930s evening gowns. Source: <http://felicelog.blogspot.com/2011/10/pride-and-prejudice-1940-photo-gallery.html>

on romance is the archery lesson between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy at Netherfield. Dressed in a white gown with sheer leg of mutton sleeves, an impressive hoop skirt, and a 1930s inspired art-deco belt, Greer Garson's Elizabeth appears self-assured and well aware of the effect that she has on Mr. Darcy as she impresses him with her archery skills (*PP* Leonard). These hints at modernity in Elizabeth's costume, such as the art-deco belt, highlight Garson's incredibly modern portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet. The structured dress gives her an air of sophistication and strength. She dominates the frame's space in her gown, and it becomes a physical extension of her confidence (an effect that would be lost if Garson was clothed in a softer Empire-waist gown). If she were dressed in a softer Empire gowns, the scene may not be as effective. She actively engages Mr. Darcy and is more purposely playful in her verbal sparring; Garson's Elizabeth is more

reminiscent of Scarlett O'Hara than Austen's Elizabeth, who only feels "deeply-rooted dislike" for Mr. Darcy for the first half of the novel (Austen 97). When Mr. Darcy first confesses his love for her, she is shocked to learn she had "inspired unconsciously so strong an affection" in him (Austen 100). In Leonard's film however, Elizabeth's attraction to Mr. Darcy blossoms even before her visit to Pemberley, the novel's turning point in her feelings for Mr. Darcy. Instead, "the film visually suggests a mutual attraction that is almost instantaneous and that will ultimately overcome all external obstacles" (Belton 180). In her couture-worthy gowns, Garson's Elizabeth is immediately attractive and approachable, and her romance with Mr. Darcy is more light-hearted than in the novel and later film adaptations.

Simon Langton's 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* goes even farther in ratcheting up the romance by highlighting Elizabeth's sensuality. While the plot and scene order remain fairly true to the novel, the visual elements, left purposely murky by Jane Austen, are more of a modern reinterpretation of the Regency than one that is entirely historically accurate. For every authentic costume or set piece, there is one glaringly modern exception. This occurrence is especially noticeable in the film's treatment of sexuality and romance. As Ruth Perry explains "The [film] exaggerates the physical dimension of everything in the novel...the film is famous for its beefcake: Darcy without clothes climbing into Bingley's bath or plunging into the pond to cool off with a swim. All of the characters are too beautiful...and almost all elements of wit are removed from most of the conversations which are everywhere stripped down to serve the marriage plot" (Perry 216). Furthermore, the costumes chosen for Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth in pivotal moments of the plot, such as Mr. Darcy's first proposal, further heighten the sexual tension in Langton's adaptation. During the first proposal, Elizabeth is dressed in a champagne colored Empire gown with long sleeves, which boasts a false sense of modesty, as her breasts are partially uncovered. The scene takes place in the daytime, when a lady's chest and neck would be covered by a chemisette. Instead, Elizabeth is seated and filmed from a high angle, making it difficult to ignore her clichéd heaving bosom as she gets angrier during Mr. Darcy's mangled proposal. Mr. Darcy, however, is dressed in period perfect attire, including a white cravat, starched white collar, waistcoat, and a cropped topcoat. The juxtaposition of his starched and tidy appearance with Elizabeth's makes her large expanse of bare skin even more noticeable; the combination of costume design and tight camera angles charges the claustrophobic atmosphere of the scene with sexual tension (*PP*, Langton). Interestingly, Mr. Darcy's cravat has also been read by some as a symbol of sexual tension in the scene as it "[produces] a commanding set of the head on the heroic shoulders.' To our modern sensibilities, however...it represents a playful reversal of the modesty and prudishness usually associated with women. It begs to be

untied; and it is" (Voiret 232-233). Unlike Langton's adaptation, the proposal scene in the novel does not contain any sexually charged overtones. There is tension in the scene, but it is uncomfortable and stems from the aftermath of Mr. Darcy's unsuccessful proposal: it "was to Elizabeth's feelings dreadful" (Austen 97). She is not at all attracted to Mr. Darcy, and only wishes to get away from him. However, the combination of costumes and cinematography utilized by Langton and Collin completely transforms Elizabeth's indignant anger and Mr. Darcy's humiliation into a warped sense of latent sexual tension that does not exist in the original text.

While costumes are historically accurate for the most part in Langton's adaptation, they are worn in ways that highlight the film's desire to add modern sensuality to the novel. While he and screenwriter Andrew Davies claim they wanted to remain true to Austen's work, in many ways Langton has deviated to create a sumptuous period piece that will appeal to a modern audience. One noticeable difference between Austen's original text and Davies' screenplay is the insertion of multiple "Mr. Darcy scenes" that attempt to portray the character in a more sympathetic light. By the late 20th century, a modern (and predominantly female) audience required a newer, softer Darcy: "cultural acceptance of the idea of a New Age Man requires a romanticizing and softening of Darcy, while the translation of his character from the page--where his physical being is barely described--to the screen...heightens his attractiveness. The 1995 audience wants Elizabeth to have it all, and the BBC production is happy to oblige" (Belton 187). Langton and Davies's idea of revealing the sensitive, sensual sides of Mr. Darcy's personality, however, consists of showing Mr. Darcy in vulnerable moments that include various states of undress. Two particular moments, Mr. Darcy's letter to Elizabeth and the infamous "wet white shirt" scene, are completely enhanced by the costume choices made by designer Dinah Collin. After his disastrous marriage proposal, Langton's adaptation shows Mr. Darcy frantically writing a letter to Elizabeth. As he writes, his costume is open and loose, and his shirt is "open at the throat, his hair disheveled..." (Parrill 65). Although he is in distress, Mr. Darcy is made to look attractively unkempt (Figure 2). It is a side of Mr. Darcy that is never revealed in Austen's novel, where he remains far more cool and detached. In the novel, while we see Elizabeth's psychological transformation as she comes to terms with her earlier misconceptions of Mr. Darcy ("Till this moment I never knew myself"), Mr. Darcy's psychological growth occurs offstage, as it were, and the final results are seen in his later actions in the novel (Austen 106). In Langton's adaptation, these additional scenes allow the audience to witness Mr. Darcy in unguarded moments; the costume design highlights the intimacy of these scenes, as in private Mr. Darcy is depicted in states of undress that show a sensitive and human side of the man who is fastidious and aloof in the public eye.



Figure 2. Mr. Darcy (Firth) in an unbuttoned waistcoat and undershirt. He shows a wide expanse of skin at the neck because of his lack of cravat. Source: <http://tumblr.com>.

Similarly, the inclusion of a scene that depicts Mr. Darcy in a wet, translucent white shirt is a clear pandering to a predominantly female audience. Not only does it reveal Mr. Darcy in another moment of internal conflict, but it also allows Langton to get away with showing Colin Firth in far less clothing than is appropriate for the era. By having Elizabeth stumble upon Mr. Darcy in a state of undress, Langton presents the audience with another moment of sexual tension that became a pop culture phenomenon. As Martine Voiret explains, “one of the most famous scenes characteristic of Austenmania is Darcy’s famous swim in the pond. It triggered in England a frenzy of Darcy parties. Female viewers would repeatedly play the scene of Darcy diving and emerging in his wet clothes, his opened white shirt sexily sticking to his dripping body” (Voiret 232-233).

This added scene allows Elizabeth to see Darcy in a state that heightens her physical attraction to him, something that Austen never mentions in the novel. By including a scene in which Elizabeth and Darcy are in a socially scandalous situation, Langton positions a moment of sexual awareness that Elizabeth and Darcy never fully realize in Austen’s novel. In the original text, Elizabeth’s reevaluation of Darcy’s character begins during her visit to Pemberley (before she even discovers Mr. Darcy is there) and continues as she reflects on his moral worth and her familiarity with his character (Austen 123-125). While these events occur in Langton’s adaptation, there is clearly an element of physical attraction that remains at the

forefront of Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship. Scenes that reveal Darcy in various states of undress are meant to reveal his inner character and garner favor from the audience, but they also heighten the sensuality of the adaptation, leaving no room for doubt that Elizabeth and Darcy are attracted to each other on a physical level (Belton 194). The fact that one scene revolves entirely around Mr. Darcy’s improper dress highlights the important role that costuming plays in modernizing and emphasizing the romance and sexuality of Langton’s adaptation.

In Joe Wright’s 2005 adaptation, the role of costume design is more symbolic than in the other two adaptations. Color symbolism is important in the film’s costume design, as Elizabeth is often dressed in earth tones that reflect her natural beauty. Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, simultaneously undergoes a transformation in fashion at the same time that he reforms his proud ways: his clothes become less structured as his relationship with Elizabeth progresses, and the audience sees him in softer, looser silhouettes (“Costume Notes,” Durran). These interpretations of costume design parallel the structural changes each adaptation makes to the plot and tone of the original novel, and they all become a part of the modern narrative of *Pride and Prejudice*, implying “that the value of the prior text is in part generated by and therefore dependent upon the meanings revealed by the adaptation” (Belton 177). In this manner, each adaptation’s interpretation of the novel is equally important in shaping a modern perception of the novel. Because of the visual nature of film, costume design becomes a primary resource in the creation of a romantic *Pride and Prejudice*.

In Joe Wright’s adaptation, the costume design focuses more on late 18th-century fashion than traditional Regency silhouettes. Wright commented, “I think the empire line dresses are very ugly, so I did some research. Although the novel was published in 1811, Jane Austen wrote the first draft of *Pride and Prejudice*, then called *First Impressions*, in 1797. So we were able to use the fashions of the earlier period, where the waist line was much lower, and more flattering” (Wright, “Costume Notes”). Although *First Impressions* was initially finished in 1797, it went through substantial re-writes and the finished product was published in 1813. In Wright’s adaptation, characters such as Mrs. Bennet and her daughters are seen in gowns with dropped, natural waists, long sleeves, and tightly corseted bodices. This silhouette is reminiscent of an early 18th-century mantua and the *robe à l’Anglaise*, which was popular throughout the latter half of the 18th century (Figure 3, Figure 4).



Figure 3. Fashion plate: 1797 walking dress. The waistline already appears to be under the bust, and the silhouette is similar to the Empire style of the early 1800s. Source: <http://locutus.ucr.edu/~cathy/jd2.html>



Figure 4. Brenda Blethyn as Mrs. Bennet in a robe à l'Anglaise. Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3646215/Ambition-Id-rather-retire.html>

However, fashion in 1797 had already begun to revolve around the Empire silhouette associated with the Regency period. With the advent of the round gown in the 1790s, waistlines rose to just beneath the bust, although skirts were still full and round; by 1797 the first signs of the column silhouette began to appear in fashion plates (Figure 5). Although it was common for older women to continue to wear outdated fashions, the younger Bennet sisters would most certainly wear gowns that were, at the very least, only a year or two behind contemporary London fashion. Wright's decision to play with historical accuracy allows him to achieve a specific costume aesthetic for his adaptation: a *Pride and Prejudice* that is less "light and bright and sparkling" and more attuned to the gritty realism that often accompany Wright's films (Austen, "February 4, 1813"; Wright, "Costume Notes").



Figure 5. Fashion plate: 1797 walking dress. The waistline already appears to be under the bust, and the silhouette is similar to the Empire style of the early 1800s. Source: <http://locutus.ucr.edu/~cathy/jd2.html>

Much like Simon Langton, Wright desired to highlight a tomboyish aspect of Lizzy's charm. According to costume designer Jacqueline Durran, "Joe wanted Lizzie's character to be tomboyish, to be clever, to be bright, to not be very interested in current fashions, to be interested and involved in nature and the things around her" (Durran, "Costume Notes"). This effect is achieved through simple silhouettes, an earthy color palette, and rather loose fabrics that appear

almost coarse on film. There are also a number of scenes in which Keira Knightley wears overcoats that appear more suited to a masculine frame; she never appears in a spencer or other fitted overcoat worn by women in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Where Langton highlights Elizabeth's tomboyish nature through action and numerous scenes of Jennifer Ehle walking through the countryside, Joe Wright and Jacqueline Durran do so almost entirely through hair and costume design. Keira Knightley appears windswept and unkempt throughout most of the movie. Even when she is dressed in her finest at Netherfield Ball, her white dress is less ornate and decorated than those of her sisters' (*PP*, Wright).

Another interesting costume choice made by Durran and Wright was to dress Elizabeth almost entirely in dark, earthy tones. While it is possible that this color scheme may have been worn by women in provincial areas such as Meryton, it is unlikely that a gentlemen's daughter would dress in such simple clothing. Pastels and light-colored gowns were popular for morning gowns and day-time fashion during the Regency period. Aside from mourning attire, darker clothing was associated with the lower classes, who worked all day and were bound to sully their clothes. Taking into consideration Joe Wright's decision to set his adaptation in an earlier time period, it is even less likely that Elizabeth Bennet would be seen only in shades of brown, navy, and green. Dresses in the 1790s were rounder, fuller, and more ornate than those worn a few years later in the early part of the 19th century. While Durran and Wright's choices do present Elizabeth as a more earthy, unique character (and, ultimately, more puzzling and intriguing to Mr. Darcy), they eschew historical accuracy in favor of romanticizing the untamed elements of Elizabeth's character. She is often impertinent and witty in the novel, but never is there any mention of her dress. As such, Wright was able to use costume design in his desire to heighten the raw physicality of Elizabeth and, indirectly, her relationship with Mr. Darcy.

Similarly, Mr. Darcy is dressed in a fashion that is reminiscent of the time period, but highlights his transformation from a stoic figure to a more romantic one. As Durran notes, "If you look closely, Darcy's costumes in the course of the film change quite radically. In the early scenes he's wearing a very buttoned up, very rigid, very stiff style of costume. In the middle stage he's wearing the same style but in a softer fabric and a softer cut, and by the end of the film, he's wearing a much looser cut, an open jacket, a more country style, less uptight, less rigid...His costumes reflect the other changes in his character"

(Durran, "Costume Notes"). While they play a role in character development, the costumes also serve the purpose of driving forward the romance storyline between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. More so than in the other two film adaptations, the costumes become a physical manifestation of the transforming relationship between the two central characters in Wright's version.

Although romance serves as an important plot device, romantic love is not the overarching motif in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Rather, it deals with the everyday struggles and compromises faced by gentlewomen in early 19th-century England, where women without fortune were powerless in a hierarchical society. The novel also highlights moral lessons that can be learned from both the accomplishments and follies of the Bennet family. Film adaptations, however, are primarily concerned with the central love story between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, and their various interpretations of the romance range from lighthearted and comedic (as seen in Robert Z. Leonard's adaptation) to slightly saccharine and tinged with angst (Matthew Macfadyen's Mr. Darcy in Joe Wright's adaptation is particularly moody). In particular, the ending of each adaptation highlights the importance all three place on *Pride and Prejudice*'s courtship plot. The films' conclusions are neatly buttoned with one last romantic scene between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, signaling that all will be well now that the two have found each other. In the original text, however, Austen concludes her tale with an epilogue that details how the Bennet sisters fare in the years to come. She places much more emphasis on the cause and effect of each sister's actions than on Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth's romance: "Austen's novel ends with a careful discrimination among relationships and a weighing of personal inclinations against moral and social obligations. The MGM adaptation ends with a serio-comic vision of the fulfillment of a collective family goal. The BBC/A&E adaptation ends with the long-awaited kiss between Elizabeth and Darcy. This ending confirms the primacy of the romantic relationship over other claims..." (Belton 186). In each adaptation, costume design plays an integral part in the visual and ideological aesthetic of the film; historical accuracy is considered in the design of the three major film adaptations, but it is not the primary goal of each designer. Rather, it serves as a starting point that is then crafted to fit the artistic intent of the film. As we see in Leonard's Scarlett O'Hara gowns, Langton's underdressed Darcy, and Wright's becoming earth-tones, the manipulation of historic costume design is intrinsically tied with the romantic preoccupations of each film.

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