
Introduction

In 1995 and 1996, three filmed versions of Jane Austen's Regency-period novel *Emma* reached movie and television screens: *Clueless* (1995), an American production written and directed by Amy Heckerling and starring Alicia Silverstone that modernizes the story by setting it in a present-day Los Angeles high school community; *Emma* (1996), an American film written and directed by Douglas McGrath and starring Gwyneth Paltrow; and *Jane Austen's "Emma"* (1996), a British television production written by Andrew Davies, directed by Diarmuid Lawrence, and starring Kate Beckinsale. Aside from a 1972 BBC production starring Doran Godwin, a live 1954 American television production, and three additional television adaptations from both sides of the Atlantic that no longer exist on film, these 1990s era films are the only cinematic retellings of the novel.¹ They emerged as a part of a 1990s popular revival of interest in Jane Austen that was spurred on by the blossoming of an independent film community interested in making more films for and by women.²

The effects of the creation of a cinematic Austen canon are still felt today in academia, since the films have garnered great critical attention from literary scholars and adaptation theorists. While recent adaptation theorists, who often write from a cultural studies or a cinema studies perspective, tend to be enthusiastic about the quality of the films, both as adaptations of revered "mother" texts and as autonomous works of art, literary scholars who write about the film adaptations tend to be more conflicted in their views. For example, many literary scholars have expressed concerns that the films ultimately rob Jane Austen's works of their integrity and independence by "cashing in" on the author's artistic currency. Also, such scholars often express fears that film studios market literary adaptations to the less-informed moviegoer as audio-visual retellings of the originals that act as narrative experiences equivalent to reading the source novel.

As a literary critic and film aficionado with an interest in adaptation theory, I hope to provide a more even-handed approach to examining the Austen adaptations than has generally been seen in the past. Aside from John Wiltshire, who assumes a very fair scholarly position on the issue of adaptation in *Recreating Jane Austen* (2001), one of the most impartial judges of Austen adaptations is Monica Lauritzen, who published a study of a 1972 BBC adaptation of *Emma* long before the 1990s popular revival of interest in the author. In her book, *Jane Austen's Emma on Television* (1980), Lauritzen offers a fair evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the *Emma* miniseries:

As a work of art the *Emma* serial is different from the original. It is weaker in some respects but also stronger in others. Because of these differences, the watching of the serial cannot replace the experience of reading the original. But it may stimulate and enrich the reading, and also attract new readers, who might otherwise never have found their way to Jane Austen's masterpiece. (154)

I would submit that what Lauritzen found to be true about the 1972 adaptation of *Emma* can also be said of the three filmed versions that followed during the 1990s, as each of these films offers an intriguing interpretation of Austen's text that can inspire fruitful meditations on the themes of the original.

Admittedly, Jane Austen narratives have sometimes proven to be more difficult to transplant from print to film than a first impression might suggest. After all, Austen gave greater attention to developing her characters' inner lives—their thoughts, feelings, and voices—than she did to describing their physical appearances and their observable actions. She also spent little time detailing setting and scenery. Therefore, one might assume that her books would translate poorly into a medium that (at least in the case of mass-marketed Hollywood films) tends to emphasize image, movement, and a style of operatic melodrama that often grants primacy to plot over characterization. And yet, all of the films based on her novels thus far have garnered more than their share of serious praise from members of the film community, and the three different adaptations of *Emma* are particularly worthy of note, especially since they are so different from one another and in their relation to the book.³ In effect, each individual film can be read as a critical assessment of the novel by the film's director, and can be used to bring to life in dramatic form the vastly divergent

readings of the novel that have long been put forward and debated by more academic textual critics.

In addition to making interpretive and critical connections between the films and the novel, I will offer examples of how the films, usually in an attempt to commercialize the story or to make it more “filmic,” deviate from the book, and will determine to what extent these deviations retain the spirit of the original novel. For example, while *Clueless* is the film that comes the closest to finding a cinematic equivalent of Austen’s “free-indirect writing style,” it is also the film that alters the book the most by changing the criteria by which Emma evaluates worthy mates for herself and her friends.⁴ Instead of judging men’s eligibility by uncovering their noble lineage, land holdings, and annual income, she is primarily concerned with men who possess the liberal values of the sexual revolution while being free from the behavioral excesses that lead to drug addictions and sexually transmitted diseases. The film *Jane Austen’s “Emma”* featuring Beckinsale rewrites Knightley as a progressive socialist. This change necessarily creates a cinematic world far different from the one in the original novel, in which the prevailing Regency-period class structure demanded that Emma’s relationship to her lower-class friend Harriet “must sink” by the closing pages. The McGrath film featuring Paltrow casts Emma as an even more liberated figure than she is in the book (for example, she would never steer her own carriage because her father would insist that James be her driver and protector), but the important consequence of that alteration is that it masks the real reason for her hostility towards Miss Bates, Miss Fairfax, and Mrs. Elton presented in the original story—her fears of social displacement. The kinds of textual divergences I have cited above, often seemingly small, have great thematic import to the films. Alterations to the original appear throughout each of the films, and it is in a close examination of these alterations that I will be able to determine where the films make interpretive assumptions about the original text.

In Chapter One, *Austen and Adaptation*, I will offer a discussion of the often skeptical outlook literary critics have presented on filmed adaptations of classics in general and Jane Austen adaptations in particular. This section will close by suggesting some preliminary ways of looking at the films, from a stylistic and cinematic perspective, as a first step in analyzing the adaptations. Chapter Two will include a

general overview of recent criticism of the novel *Emma*, and a discussion of specific readings, contemporary and traditional, that are relevant to the issues that the films raise.

Chapter Three features a detailed examination of all five of the adaptations of *Emma* that were made for British and American television between the 1940s and the 1970s. These adaptations were reviewed in Sue Parrill's book *Jane Austen on Film and Television*, but have not been discussed in detail elsewhere. In examining these earlier adaptations, I will be able to place the discussion of the 1990s adaptations of *Emma* in a broader context, since I will be discussing them as parts of a complete body of work that includes all of the versions of the novel ever put to film.

Chapter Four will turn its attention to the two films made in 1996—*Emma*, and *Jane Austen's "Emma"*—offering interpretations of them as readings of the novel. Chapter Five will examine how *Clueless* simultaneously acts as a reading of the novel and as a satire of the social values of 1990s America. The overview found in Chapter Six will examine all of these readings together to ascertain how filmmakers have presented Jane Austen and her novel *Emma* to the lay public over a period of several decades, and will determine what trends can be found. This section will also offer suggestions as to how future adaptations of *Emma* might improve upon those already produced by positing what an ideal adaptation of the novel should hope to achieve.