

LITERATURE AND CINEMA: IMAGES OF FEMININITY IN  
*PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Sandra Guardini T. Vasconcelos

**Abstract**

By comparing the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen with an American filmic version from 1940, the article draws attention to the shift in the focus of the two narratives. While the novel provides alternative possibilities for the stories of the female characters, the filmic version chooses to reinforce an idealized image of social harmony.

**Keywords:** literature and cinema – marriage – Jane Austen

**Resumo**

Ao comparar o romance *Pride and Prejudice* de Jane Austen com uma versão fílmica americana de 1940, o artigo chama atenção para a mudança de enfoque das duas narrativas. Enquanto o romance fornece possibilidades alternativas para as histórias das personagens femininas, a versão fílmica opta por reforçar uma imagem idealizada de harmonia social.

In 1712, Lady Mary, daughter of the Marquis of Dorchester, surprised her family by eloping with Edward Wortley Montagu, a Whig MP for Huntingdon. Resolved not to marry against her own inclinations, she was thus putting an end to a long family crisis throughout which

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 42	p.317-336	jan./jun. 2002
------------------	---------------	-------	-----------	----------------

she had tried to avoid an arranged marriage. In a letter to Montagu, written about 4 July 1712, she tells him about her endeavours to convince her father:

I see all the misfortune of marrying where it is impossible to love; (...) I wanted courage to resist at first the will of my relations; but, as every day added to my fears, those, at last, grew strong enough to make me venture the disobliging them. (...) I knew the folly of my own temper, and took the method of writing to the disposer of me. I said every thing in this letter I thought proper to move him, and proffered, in atonement for not marrying whom he would, never to marry at all. He did not think fit to answer this letter, but sent for me to him. He told me he was very much surprised that I did not depend on his judgment for my future happiness; that he knew nothing I had to complain of, &c.; that he did not doubt I had some other fancy in my head, which encouraged me to this disobedience; but he assured me, if I refused a settlement that he had provided for me, he gave me his word, whatever proposals were made him, he would never so much as enter into a treaty with any other; that, if I founded any hopes upon his death, I should find myself mistaken, he never intended to leave me any thing but an annuity of £400 per annum; (...)<sup>1</sup>

Lady Mary Montagu's predicament was not at all uncommon in eighteenth-century England and it clearly illustrates one of the "awkward, unresolved issues" or "faultline stories", in Alan Sinfield's words,<sup>2</sup> which were so central to the period – the incompatible demands for obedience to parental wishes and expectations of affection in marriage. Carried away by her own fantasies of romantic love, Lady Montagu chose to defy her family interests and her father's authority and make a move which did not meet with unequivocal social approval. Hers, certainly, was the plight with which many a young lady was confronted. Indeed, personal choice versus family ambitions

determined the two patterns of marriage which predominated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, it was necessary to redefine the role of the family in society, and also women's place in it, and a whole line of argument was developed to defend the principle of personal autonomy and the importance of strong affective ties in familial relationships. Not everybody agreed, though, that love should have pride of place in a woman's choice of husband. There were still those who argued hotly in favour of the family's knowing best what was an appropriate match for their children.

If marriage of convenience versus marriage for love became a subject of discussion in treatises, sermons, conduct books and the like, it was only too natural that it should also become a recurring theme in the novels of the period. Stock-in-trade of much of the popular sentimental fiction published throughout the eighteenth century, the myth of romantic love found a lot of opposition among those who believed that novel-reading could fill young women's heads with all sorts of silly ideas about love and marriage. The more "serious" novelists, however, intent on instructing their readers, set out to discuss those issues they thought were of general social interest, and to collaborate in the task of helping people with those aspects of their lives which they found difficult. With the more widespread possibility of marrying someone of one's choice, it became even more fundamental to learn how to find an appropriate partner and make an appropriate match. Marriageability depended no longer simply or exclusively on one's dowry but also on a set of personal qualities which were demanded both of men and women; but, whereas learning, decision and authority were male prerogatives, modesty, grace, deference, self-restraint, delicacy and virtue were some of the "feminine" qualities, expected of every woman both before and after marriage.

The centrality of marriage in bourgeois England, and particularly in women's lives, determined the place and role assigned to women and dictated a whole set of rules and a code of behaviour which helped forge a new paradigm of femininity, disseminated in conduct books, educational treatises, sermons, and, of course, in novels. Excluded from

the world of labour, women had very little possibility of getting themselves a real occupation and the answer society found for them was marriage, childbearing and domesticity. Sir John Fielding, the novelist's half-brother, was simply giving voice to a widespread point of view when he saw women as an appendix of men and argued that:

The utmost of a woman's character is contained in domestic life, and she is praise- or blameworthy, according as her carriage affects her father's or her husband's house; all she has to do in this world, is contained in the duties of a daughter, sister, wife and mother... Modesty, meekness, compassion, affability, and piety, are the feminine virtues.<sup>3</sup>

The ideal of womanhood dictated that women should be contained in the realm of the home, and socializing for them was limited to visiting and letter-writing. The "public sphere", that is, the world of politics, of the coffee-houses and streets was not meant for them.

This dominant ideology, however, was challenged by some dissident voices which were raised in defense of an alternative view of women's possibilities. Charlotte Smith interrogates the common reader in the preface to her novel *Desmond*, published in 1792:

Women, it is said, have no business with politics. Why not? Have they no interest in the scenes that are acting around them, in which they have fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, or friends, engaged? Even in the commonest course of female education, they are expected to acquire some knowledge of history; and yet, if they are to have no opinion of what *is* passing, it avails little that they should be informed of what *has passed*, in a world where they are subject to such mental degradation; where they are censured as affecting masculine knowledge if they happen to have any understanding; or despised as insignificant triflers if they have none.

Charlotte Smith raised her voice to defend the woman's right to intervene in what Thomas Gisborne believed to be "departments which belong not to her jurisdiction."<sup>4</sup> In the same year, her more famous contemporary, Mary Wollstonecraft, also joined forces to vindicate woman's right to an education and to economic independence, in her "feminist manifesto", *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). These cries for emancipation, however, were not exempt from contradiction. At the same time as they criticized the social strictures and the deficient educational system which was responsible for women's weaknesses and failings, they were also contained by the bourgeois ideology of femininity, however unconventional they may have been in their private lives.

In comparison with these two of her contemporaries, Jane Austen (1775-1817) led a less public and more constricted life, which Henry James described as "front parlour existence."<sup>5</sup> Born and brought up in an age of ferment, which witnessed the American and French Revolutions, wars, and domestic social and political unrest, Austen moved in the small circle of middle-class provincial society and, as a woman of her time, was constrained by the same restrictions which governed women's lives in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Living in the same class-bound and male-dominated society, Austen presents in her work the same conflicting views on marriage and on the nature and place of women which were so characteristic of fellow novelists and women writers.

But rather than emulating the more passionate tones of Wollstonecraft or questioning her readers directly, like Charlotte Smith, Austen dramatizes women's plight and, by giving us a very comprehensive picture of female identity, maps out different forms of female conduct in her characters' struggle for the right kind of marriage. Interestingly enough, in spite of the very important differences between them, neither Wollstonecraft nor Austen subscribed to the Enlightenment discourses which argued the rationality of men against the irrational nature of women, thus attributing love madness to women and femininity. Without going so far as to defend a reformed society in

which men and women would have equal rights, as Wollstonecraft did, Austen presents her own version of the rational woman in the figure of Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*.

That marriage was still an “unresolved issue” in Jane Austen’s time becomes evident in the novel, originally called *First Impressions*, which she began in 1796 but only published in 1813, after it had been refused by a publisher and revised. A young lady in search of a proper match: this is how we could summarize the plot of this courtship novel, which explores the social appropriateness of different sorts of matches.

In this respect, were it not for its irony, the famous proposition that opens the novel – “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” – could actually be rephrased to be truer to the spirit of the time: single women were those looking for husbands. It was not that single men did not worry, in those times, about the need to find an adequate woman, preferably one who possessed all the personal qualities determined by the ideology of femininity. However, as the story is told from a feminine point of view, it is the plight of single women the novel is interested in. Mrs. Bennet’s excitement at the news of the arrival of two very eligible single men in the neighbourhood is very telling and is a clear sign of the issues the novel thematizes. It is on the circle of single young women that the narrator focuses and, in order to discuss love and marriage as it affects their lives, the small social and geographical milieu in which they circulate is made to comprise women with differing chances on the marriage market, and families with various levels of income and property.

Much as Jane Austen’s work helps narrate the “social history of the landed families at that time in England” and discusses personal conduct, as Raymond Williams has argued,<sup>6</sup> it is particularly female conduct which stands out in the novel as determinant of a woman’s destiny in life. Her cast of female characters beautifully illustrates alternative possibilities of female conduct in a society which saw women as passive objects of the male gaze. Her women are always

under scrutiny and if propriety and morals are not demanded exclusively of them, they must behave properly if they are to stand a chance of making a good match.

In this sense, there is a certain scale which is indirectly established in *Pride and Prejudice*. There are four matches in the novel, ranging from the most to the least socially appropriate and personally fulfilling: from the marriage of convenience which Charlotte Lucas accepts unquestioningly to the reckless union of Lydia and Wickham, to the more balanced and affectionate relationship between Jane and Bingley, to the perfect match between Elizabeth and Darcy. If for both Lady Catherine and Mrs. Bennet marriage is little more than a transaction, involving money and status, for the young women concerned it is a crucial move. For disenchanted Charlotte, a Mr. Collins is better than the prospect of spinsterhood; for thoughtless Lydia, being married is what counts even at the cost of her reputation and her family's shame; for amiable and passive Jane, marriage represents an expectation of affection but also a rise in status; and finally, for Elizabeth, it means a strong bond based on love and mutual respect which is also socially appropriate.

Of course, in order to be brought to this happy end, Elizabeth has to be educated (just like Darcy, we could add). She is the closest the narrator gets to the idea of the adequate type of woman with the best possibility of the right kind of marriage – one which will combine social and personal demands. But she has to conquer her shortcomings, and change. For this reason, the narrator concentrates on Elizabeth's process of self-knowledge. She has to be cured of her myopia, by learning that she can be fallible in her judgment and prone to errors of pride and prejudice. However, her failures are by far outweighed by her personal qualities: her character, charm, lively spirit and intelligence seem to be enough to abolish social barriers and win her the most eligible and wealthy man in the neighbourhood. Conflicts of interests are swiftly resolved so that Elizabeth can finally become the new member of Darcy's honourable family.

Not surprisingly, the contemporary ideology of marriage is inscribed in Jane Austen's novel, thus helping consolidate the dominant social order. The only attempt to subvert this order, represented by Lydia's elopement and inadequate choice of partner is subsequently contained and reinscribed to fit prevailing patterns. While her marrying without her parents' permission implies a slight disturbance of the system, all contradictions are resolved with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's reconciliation with Lydia's wish. As I have been trying to argue, *Pride and Prejudice* addresses the issue of marriage as a site of contest among alternative possibilities for women in a given moment in history. But while socially distressing alternatives like Lydia's or personally self-sacrificing ones like Charlotte's are subtly critiqued, everything is finally negotiated and a happy end for all concerned harmonizes conflicts and effaces social contradictions, as social comedies generally do.

In a way, for better or for worse, all the young women in the novel are shown to be entrapped in the institution of marriage, just as they are constrained by the dominant ideology of femininity. In her depiction of the female characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen creates a gallery of portraits of women which seems to cover a whole range of possibilities. There is bookish Mary, who can only utter platitudes or parrot her reading; there is silly and empty-headed Mrs. Bennet, whom Lydia and Kitty take after; there is haughty and authoritarian Lady Catherine De Bourgh with her sickly and weak-minded daughter; there is snobbish Miss Bingley. If none of the latter escape the narrator's ironical tone, the others receive a more positive treatment. Even passive Jane and insipid Charlotte are never criticized, for they possess qualities which outweigh possible shortcomings and realistically portray women as they were expected to behave in Austen's day. Jane's passivity, meekness and deference were part of the ideal of womanhood and Charlotte's quiet acceptance of a marriage of convenience was a sad reality for many young women.

The prevailing feminine ideal dictated that women should please men. Humour, mirth, rage and lack of self-restraint were socially condemned. *Control yourself* was an imperative urged in conduct books



again and again. This culture's feminine ideal also included restrictions on self-expression. It is easy to understand why Lady Catherine, an old-fashioned and very conservative woman, finds Elizabeth's outspokenness and assertiveness so unbearable. After all, Elizabeth is always ready to express her points of view and shows very little concern for the aunt's opposition to her marriage to Darcy. It is not only conflict of interests which dictates Lady Catherine's uncivil treatment of Elizabeth but also her own notions of what propriety and delicacy were all about. For sure, Elizabeth does not entirely fit the prescribed ideal of femininity. Nor should she, from Austen's point of view. For the novelist seems to be interested in drawing an alternative version of woman which, though not completely free from the ideology of femininity, is not unquestioningly submitted to it. In fact, Elizabeth seems to strike a delicate balance between rebelliousness against and conformity to the conduct expected of women. Irreprehensible in her moral conduct, Elizabeth is free to display all her best qualities, which include an independent spirit, intelligence and quickness of mind. Not qualities that were generally accepted as belonging to women. Elizabeth, and behind her Jane Austen, go beyond the parameters of their time and resist the generalized ideal of womanhood. Never transgressing what was considered to be proper feminine behaviour, Elizabeth challenges traditional views of woman. In a culture where men have the prerogative to address women first, ask them to dance and propose marriage, Austen creates an unconventionally assertive female identity in the person of Elizabeth. Even though she needs a little adjustment in order to learn not to trust her first impressions, it becomes clear that due to all her personal qualities she is the only character in the novel who has the tools to resist the ideology of domestic femininity and not accept a submissive role, and her establishing a relationship with Darcy on equal terms allows us to imagine a brighter future for her in married life, if compared to all the other single young women in the novel.

In any case, women are shown in all the limiting and restrictive situations which their role and position in society determined for them.

Though, as genteel women, they need not concern themselves with domestic labour, they were constrained to a domestic life, only interrupted by the social occasions on which they were allowed to make their appearances at the ballroom or dinner table. Social gatherings were a change from their routine domestic life and a precious opportunity to meet eligible men. Only at balls or visiting, which also sometimes included travelling, and always escorted by older people, could these young women find an escape from dreary domesticity. Another way of getting round the dullness of confinement was to form a female circle, a small community of women bound together by ties of friendship and common interests. Possibly, the more subversive content of the novel is its emphasis on women's culture and female bonding. Not exactly having in Mrs. Bennet a model to follow, Jane and Elizabeth have to turn to each other and to their aunt, Mrs. Gardiner, for comfort and sound advice. In Mrs. Bennet's case, lack of restraint borders on silliness and very frequently on rudeness. Considering that she is more a source of embarrassment than a mentor, it is a wonder that both elder sisters should present themselves as such fine specimens of desirable feminine behaviour, the only ones in the Bennet household. Without their mother to look up to, Jane and Elizabeth have to find guidance somewhere else and it is in female friendships, which play an important role in the novel, that they will look for support. The sense of intimacy that we witness between Jane and Elizabeth and also between Elizabeth and Charlotte (in spite of Elizabeth's disappointment in her), their frequent meeting and talking, function as an alternative means of confronting an all-male society which assigns women a subordinate role and place in it.

In this community of women, Elizabeth stands out as Jane Austen's construction of an unconventionally assertive female identity. As the novelist has no intention of drawing "pictures of perfection,"<sup>7</sup> as her predecessors had done in the eighteenth-century novel, she gives us a very good example of plausible femininity. Nevertheless, her attempt to construct an alternative female identity is circumscribed by the dominant culture and rather than giving her heroine an alternative fate, she endorses the centrality of marriage.

If, as Alan Sinfield argues, “all stories comprise within themselves the ghosts of the alternative stories”<sup>8</sup> of their culture, *Pride and Prejudice* is no different. But again, as in the case of social conflicts, Austen’s allegiance to the prevailing values of her time leads to a conciliation of contradictions at the end. Subversion of the dominant order is contained by the effacement of social contradictions as well as of alternative versions of womanhood.

With all these issues in mind, I would now like to move on to the discussion of the film version of *Pride and Prejudice*, which Robert Z. Leonard<sup>9</sup> directed in 1940 and about which a critic has said:

A delightful example of Hollywood’s ‘Englishness’. Though Aldous Huxley’s script was a simplification of Jane Austen and advanced the period 40 years to take advantage of the fuller fashion, this remains a splendid romantic comedy of a more polite age, full of richly satisfying performances.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the film does reproduce current stereotypes of “Englishness” – the stiff upper lip, accent as a mark of class difference, restraint, politeness, etc. –, thereby reaffirming some of the characteristics which have popularly been associated with being English. However, this very positive opinion about the film fails to pay due attention to its most relevant features. Evaluating the film from a more informed point of view, George Bluestone points out its faithful embodiment of “the dialectics of Jane Austen’s central ironies”<sup>11</sup> and goes on to show how, from the point of view of its adaptational process, the filmic version has skillfully translated onto the screen the “ballet movement” (the phrase is David Daiches’) which seems to characterise the structural pattern of the novel. With Elizabeth and Darcy in mind, whose interaction is marked by a movement of attraction and hostility, Bluestone sees the ballroom scene in the film as paradigmatic of the whole novel and emblematic of all of its personal and social relationships:

There is hardly a dramatic and psychological relationship in either the film or novel's opening events which is not realized here in terms of a dance relationship. Jane and Bingley's meeting and coming together; Kitty and Lydia's preference for handsome soldiers; Mrs. Bennet's nervous grooming of the girls for the marriage block; Charlotte's feeling of inadequacy in the social game; maternal competition for the eligible males; Elizabeth's hostility to Darcy's snobbishness; her consequent willingness to become blinded by Wickham's prevarication; her retaliatory snub in declining Darcy's first offer – all these are carried out in terms of dance ritual – the taking, refusing, and searching out of partners, the ceremonial rhythms which join couples and cast them assunder. (...) choreography becomes an exact analogue of the social game.<sup>12</sup>

But I would argue that this is not all there is to the film. It is at least intriguing why Leonard picked up such a novel for adaptation and why, being a Hollywood commercial director, he chose to film it right after the outbreak of the war which would devastate Europe.

It is true that *Pride and Prejudice* contains "the essential ingredients of a movie script"<sup>13</sup> and that in the late thirties Hollywood producers had started encouraging projects which adapted novels, preferably best-sellers, to the big screen. Coincidentally, the 1940 Academy Award for best film went to Hitchcock's version of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, and the best director Award went to John Ford for his version of *Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck. *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *How Green was my Valley* were also made in this period.<sup>14</sup> Knowing Hollywood's talent for investing in what is profitable, it would be all too easy to argue that this policy simply gave the public what the public wanted. For one *Grapes of Wrath*, or *The Great Dictator*, or *Citizen Kane*, there were countless productions whose sole objective seemed to be to gratify the audience. The cinema's power of manipulation over the cinemagoer and its wish-fulfilling function will not be discussed here, but I would like to suggest that, very possibly, the adaptation of novels

might be part of a strategy that some studios had adopted to take people out of the depressing social and political realities of their time. However, just as it facilitates symbolic satisfaction, mass culture, as Fredric Jameson argues, also “entertain[s] relations of repression with the fundamental social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster, which are [its] raw material.”<sup>15</sup> And, Jameson goes on to say, it “represses [compensatory structures] by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony.”<sup>16</sup>

What I would like to argue, in relation to the film version of *Pride and Prejudice*, is that the film director deepens this “optical illusion of social harmony” not only by emptying Austen’s work of any suggestion of conflict of interests within the same class but also by presenting an image of femininity which does not do justice to the novel.

The first significant move the director makes has to do with his treatment of the historical context in (and of) the film. Although the US were not yet taking part in the conflict, there was a war in Europe and the Americans would not be able to keep their neutrality much longer. Interestingly enough, both novel and film version, though produced in a period of domestic and international unrest, chose to ignore the great historical events of their time. But, whereas the novel writes the social history of the English landed gentry, the film does not seem particularly interested in the social context. Some of Austen’s concern about property and income is voiced in the film but only in relation to the eligibility of certain young men as prospective husbands. We can see none of her interest in what Raymond Williams describes as “the changes of fortune – the facts of general change and of a certain mobility – which were affecting the landed families at this time.”<sup>17</sup> As for the broader historical context, not one reference, even indirect or disguised, do we find in the film to any of what is going on in Europe. Except for the very brief comment Mrs. Bennet makes at the news of the arrival of Bingley and Darcy in the neighbourhood, at the beginning of the film – “This is the most heartening piece of news since the Battle of Waterloo!” –, nothing else is heard which might help the audience associate the 1815 war

between France and England with the war in Europe. Quite the contrary: by situating the events in the aftermath of Waterloo and by glossing over the changes Williams talks about, the film presents itself as a much more conservative version of the novel.

In fact, Leonard's reading of *Pride and Prejudice* sides with the more conventional critical interpretations which see it as nothing more than a study in manners. Not surprisingly, the conflicts arise more from stereotyped opinions as to what polite, or good manners are than from insurmountable obstacles determined by conflicts of interest. Miss Bingley is especially patronizing in the way she puts up with what she calls "the lack of refinement of these rustics". More than money and property, the film suggests that it is Elizabeth's family's manners which are an impediment to her union with Darcy. It is true that Elizabeth's family are a constant source of embarrassment to her; there are several embarrassing, and comic, situations which involve the Bennets and the *pride and prejudice* motto often comes to mind even if it is not frequently verbalised. But as all comes down to a question of romantic love, even the haughty Lady Catherine is ready to recognise that Elizabeth is the right woman for Darcy and willingly assumes the role of ambassador to impart the news of Darcy's help to Lydia and Wickham, and to pave the way for Darcy's second and now successful marriage proposal. The socially resonant conflict between these two female characters in the novel is transformed into a personal question of pride and prejudice which can be harmoniously resolved.

Rather than a social comedy, this is by right a romantic comedy, as it has accurately been described, where the conflicts of interest which surface so clearly in Jane Austen's work are skillfully glossed over in order to give place to a light and pleasant love story. Far from a serious study in love and marriage, it is much more a delightful rendering of the age-old Hollywood formula "boy meets girl". Elizabeth is still the focus here and it is her relationship with Darcy that structures the film narrative. All the other relationships, which function as a counterpoint to Elizabeth and Darcy's in the novel, are left in the shade and are not fully developed. The film does not seem to be seriously interested in

discussing all the personal and social implications of marriage and treats the whole issue very superficially. The obstacles to Jane's marriage to Bingley, Charlotte's disillusioned choice of partner and the social consequences of Lydia's elopement are not given due prominence and the more dramatic moments in the novel are either attenuated or flippantly dismissed. The comedy, on the other hand, is reinforced by the deepening of the comic traits of characters like Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet or Lady Catherine De Bourgh, made even more foolish or ridiculous than in the novel.

Austen's cool irony is obviously lost in the film and a third-person, omniscient camera, though almost exclusively focused on Elizabeth, sometimes distances itself from its main focus to explore other spaces and viewpoints. Because of the formal difficulties involved in probing the territory of the heroine's consciousness, the feminine point of view is only barely maintained. In this sense, even though Elizabeth is the most consistently sustained female character, much of her complexity is lost in her rendering in the film. Conventional Hollywood codes of representation seem to get the better of it and if male characters, with the exception of Mr. Collins, present a dignified and serene behaviour, female characters are shown to be foolish creatures, all too ready to flutter and fidget. Gossipy, garrulous, lacking in seriousness, women are represented as having husband-hunting as their sole business. Even Jane and Elizabeth, who get the better treatment, do not escape a certain stereotype of femininity which sees women as silly, empty-headed creatures. No relevance is given to Elizabeth's process of self-discovery or to her recognition of her own failings and the result is a much shallower heroine, though still as adorable as her creator thought her to be. Elizabeth's most striking qualities – her liveliness, quick intelligence, her independence of mind and outspokenness – are accounted for as simply a question of personality rather than a challenge to the ideal of passive womanhood. The film does not make much of the fact that she is empowered with the possibility of saying yes or no to Darcy on her own terms and all the tensions which were part and parcel of the dominant ideology of marriage are dismissed as

irrelevant in the face of love. The film reinforces established positions, demarcated sex differences and loses much of the subtleties of the novel in its representation of femininity.

"I am a rational creature, speaking the truth of her heart", Elizabeth says, but her construction as a rational woman is full of gaps and blind spots. The suppression of such a central episode as Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley, in which she is confronted with an alternative version of Darcy and therefore with her own partiality and myopia, flattens her characterization, reducing her complexity to a more conventional, and Hollywoodian, construction of woman. Her gradual process of self-knowledge and of recognition of her own pride and prejudice is explained away and substituted by a sudden admission of her true feelings for Darcy, which lays an emphasis on romantic love and thus distorts the meaning of the novel.

The precipitation and rearrangement of events, the toning down of conflict of interests, the glossing over – with the icing of love – of the allegory of alliance between different social ranks are all of them moves made in order to adapt Austen's work to conventional Hollywood codes of representation. The result is a film narrative that loses much in tension, complexity, subtlety and dilutes the dramatic possibilities of the novel. Similarly, while the reinforcement of the "marriage for love" narrative suggests that there are no real obstacles to its fulfillment, the idealized screen heroine gives back to the female spectator a more subdued, passive image of herself. Little room is opened up for dissidence and alternative ways of living and even the community of women, which plays a central role in the novel, is written off as a collection of silly and garrulous creatures. Aldous Huxley's script advancing the action in 40 years, on the other hand, simply points to a period in England (1840s) in which women's mothering role was being emphasised, as Françoise Basch notes:

Any activity deriving from woman's specific role of mother, exercising an ennobling and purifying influence in the



natural framework of her family, alleviating suffering and sacrificing herself to others, was recognized as legitimate.<sup>18</sup>

If we agree with Jameson's argument that social reality is the raw material of commercial films, we have to return to those two questions I posed above. I would like to offer two working hypotheses rather than definitive answers to them.

At this point, it might be helpful to bring in some of the comments and arguments that David R. Shumway<sup>19</sup> offers about Hollywood's "screwball comedies" as a film genre whose major cultural work "is not the stimulation of thought about marriage, but the affirmation of marriage in the face of the threat of a growing divorce rate and liberalized divorce laws."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the United States seemed to be experiencing a major crisis of marriage, clearly visible in the figures presented by Elaine Tyler May:

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American marriages began to collapse at an unprecedented rate. Between 1867 and 1929, the population of the United States grew 300 percent, the number of marriages increased 400 percent, and the divorce rate rose 2000 percent. By the end of the 1920s, more than one in six marriages terminated in court.<sup>21</sup>

Divorce rates are reckoned to have doubled between 1910 and 1940, and there was general concern, among scholars and moralists, as to the causes of this crisis. It does not seem surprising, therefore, that Hollywood should reinforce a romantic view of marriage and "take up this cultural work not only out of patriarchal interest and ideology, but for the coincident reason that films that participated in this ideology were popular."<sup>22</sup>

A romance that ends in marriage, like many other films made in this decade and the following, *Pride and Prejudice* contains some of the ingredients that Shumway suggests are inherent to the genre. The first

is *casting*: from the moment they meet for the first time, it becomes obvious to the viewer that Greer Garson must fall in love with Lawrence Olivier. In addition to the attraction they exert on each other and on us, there is also the element of the *verbal relationship* established between the two. The exchanges between Elizabeth and Darcy are meant, from the beginning, to suggest a certain “electricity”, a mutual teasing frequently involving double entendre and repartee. Dialogues full of innuendoes become almost a verbal equivalent of or substitute for the game of seduction consciously or unconsciously played by both parties. The third component is *class difference*, which, Shumway argues, screwball comedies depend on “to create, on the one hand, comedy in the form of jokes at inappropriate behavior and, on the other hand, romance by enhancing the appeal of the hero and heroine.”<sup>23</sup> One has only to remember how Mrs. Bennet or Mr. Collins, just to mention two examples, are characterised to realise how much Leonard’s film shares, in content and in form, with other productions of the same period.

Whether to ease off actual anxieties about divorce, whether to reaffirm patriarchal ideology, the filmic version of *Pride and Prejudice* reinforces romance and its generic conventions and offers the American public a reassuring view of love and marriage in the face of a disturbing state of affairs both at home and abroad.

After all, if in the private sphere there was the unavoidable reality of growing divorce rates, on the public arena, at international level, there was the inescapable reality of World War II and all the anxieties produced by it. The choice of a very competent Anglo-American cast, led by Greer Garson starring as Elizabeth and Laurence Olivier<sup>24</sup> as Darcy, may have served the purpose of pleasing both English and American audiences, giving them a pleasant picture of English life and simultaneously suggesting an alliance between the two countries which would come to exist in politics as well. Anxieties about the political order were thus dealt with and subdued by suggesting that the integration of British and Americans could work both on the screen and in reality.

This delicate historical moment, which threatened to plunge the US into the war, was also pregnant with social anxieties about the possible destiny of the population and, within it, the role women might come to play in, and after, wartime. With men going to fight in the war, American women would have to face new situations, new challenges and possibly would have to be integrated in the labour market as substitutes for the workers needed in the industries to sustain warfare. Divorce and the world of labour were two new possibilities open to women and, most certainly, it would not be excessive or out of place to remind them that marriage was the foundation of society and they should content themselves with being wives and mothers.

Notes

- 1 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. *Letters*. London, Everyman's Library, 1992, p. 29.
- 2 Alan Sinfield. "Shakespeare and Dissident Reading". In: *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*. London, Routledge, 1994, p.4.
- 3 Alan Sinfield. "Shakespeare and Dissident Reading". In: *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*. London, Routledge, 1994, p.4.
- 4 Thomas Gisborne. *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, 1797, p. 11.
- 5 Henry James in a letter to George Pellew, 1883.
- 6 Henry James in a letter to George Pellew, 1883.
- 7 The expression is Jane Austen's, in a letter to her niece Fanny Knight, dated 23 March 1817.
- 8 Alan Sinfield. *Cultural Materialism, Othello, and the Politics of Plausibility*. In: *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 47.
- 9 American director (1889-1968) who became well-known for his light films and musical comedies. A prolific and commercial director, he was one of the most prestigious at MGM in the years immediately before the war.

- 10 Leslie Halliwell. *The Filmgoer's Companion*. 3.ed. New York, Hill and Wang, 1970.
- 11 George Bluestone. *Pride and Prejudice*. In: *Novels into Film*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961, p. 117.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 131-2.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 14 It is interesting to note that Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, in which he makes a clear reference to Hitler and Nazism, also reached the screen in 1940.
- 15 Fredric Jameson. *Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture*. In: *Signatures of the Visible*. New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 25.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
- 17 Raymond Williams. *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 18 Raymond Williams. *op. cit.*, p. 19
- 19 David R. Shumway. *Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage*. In: Grant, Barry Keith (ed.). *Film Genre Reader II*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1995, p. 381-401. Referring to the difficulty scholars have had defining screwball comedy, Shumway points out that he tends to agree with James Harvey, who "identifies screwball comedy as romantic comedy during Hollywood's classic period" (cf. endnote 1, p. 399).
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- 21 *Apud* Shumway, p. 382.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 390.
- 24 Greer Garson was born in Northern Ireland in 1906. Her success in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* in 1938 won her an invitation to work in Hollywood. She won Academy Award for best actress in 1942. Laurence Olivier, the famous English stage actor, became known internationally with the film version of *Wuthering Heights*, of 1939.