

Adapting Jane Austen: The Surprising Fidelity of *Clueless*

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The many liberties taken by the cinematic adaptors of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*—unquestionably the most serious of the feature-length adaptations of Austen's novels to have appeared recently—cannot be dismissed as indulgences or inaccuracies. Rather they are attempts to rectify problems and to smooth out inconsistencies in the novels by way of saving Austen from her less felicitous or, the adaptors seem to feel, less-than-Austenian tendencies. The treatment of *Sense of Sensibility* (1995) written by Emma Thompson and directed by Ang Lee does something altogether counterintuitive, or so it seems, in foregoing the most "cinematic" moment in the entire novel: John Willoughby's tenth-hour visit in the midst of Marianne Dashwood's near-fatal illness. But this move was more likely the result of an either/or proposition posed by the novel's incoherence. After all, not only does Willoughby's visit in which he explains his otherwise bad behavior go a long way in retrieving him from the villainy with which he is otherwise saddled by the plot to which the film in turn is pegged but also his surprise visit, along with expectations it resuscitates, creates additional complications in endorsing sensibility as a mode or affect of resistance to things as they are. While the novel, like the film, is obviously aligned with something opposed to sensibility, specifically the good "sense" and propriety that Marianne's older sister Elinor continually displays in the face of disappointment or adversity, it remains, as the title suggests, just as faithful to the sisters as a unit (as opposed to a binarism) or to a sisterhood writ large, where the *desire* for something else or better finds a register in Marianne and an enabler in Willoughby.

All of this might not matter much if the sisters' condition—specifically the precariousness of their lives in a culture where women typically have no control over wealth or property—were secondary or ancillary to the novel. However with a material sanction that literally begins on page one, the resistance of the sisters' situation to the story, where Marianne (to quote Eve Sedgwick) is ultimately "taught a lesson" (833) never really flags. And so the liberties that the film takes with the novel are not liberties. They are efforts to keep faith with the book as a vehicle of instruction and containment that other, equally crucial, aspects of *Sense and Sensibility* forever oppose. In striving for coherence in a text where confusion and discontent are linked, the Lee/Thompson adaptation "saves" the novel in lieu of the its ability, apparently, to save itself.

Driving this (in)fidelity (where what film theorist Jean Mitry terms "inspiration" (4) is mobilized on Austen's behalf regardless of what her novels actually say), is a myth or conception of Austen as somehow flawless that has been a commonplace for over a century and a half. Some of this

flawlessness falls under the heading of nostalgia particularly for Victorian readers who were much taken with the lost world of a largely gentrified community that Austen brings so vividly to life. But most of it resides in the special place that literary history has accorded Austen as the writer who essentially invented or helped to codify the novel as a realistic instrument. As the first writer successfully to negotiate what James Thompson (echoing Ian Watt) has described as "that most fundamental contradiction of novelistic discourse . . . between subjectivity and objectivity," Austen "found the means of displaying the inside and outside of human life, how her characters think and feel, along with how they interact with others." And for this she "occupies a crucial spot in the development of the novel; not just showing more of life, but a leap to showing all of life. As F. R. Leavis puts it, Jane Austen makes possible George Eliot: 'Jane Austen, in fact, is the inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel'" (18).

Observations along these lines are manifold, including those by Raymond Williams, who also takes particular issue with the totality of Austen's vision:

The paradox of Jane Austen is the . . . achievement of a unity of tone, of a settled and remarkably confident way of seeing and judging, in the chronicle of confusion and change. She is precise and candid, but in very particular ways. . . . Her eye for a house, for timber, for the details of improvement is quick, accurate, monetary. Yet money of other kinds, from the trading houses, from the colonial plantations, has no visual equivalent; it has to be converted to these signs of order to be recognized at all. . . . Jane Austen could achieve her remarkable unity of tone—that cool and controlled observation which is the basis of her narrative method; that lightly distanced management of event and description and character which need not become either open manipulation or direct participation—because of an effective and yet unseen formula: improvement is or ought to be improvement. The working improvement, which is not seen at all, is the means to social improvement, which is then so isolated that is seen very clearly indeed. (115-16)

Striking in this Marxist analysis is not just Williams' admiration, however qualified, but the horizon of perfectibility it projects—the something almost perfect that needs perfecting or should be perfected—which proves an additional sanction, I would argue, for the kinds of liberties that cinematic adaptation takes with Austen .

Not always comprehensive, or as visually expansive as Williams prescribes, such "perfection" is served just as frequently by reduction or simplification. But it can also entail a

more liberal collaboration along the lines of Patricia Rozema's 1999 adaptation of *Mansfield Park*, which sets out, in many ways, to complete the project that Williams' critique leaves unfinished, asserting in effect that Austen was too perfect a writer to have produced a novel as vexed as this one. In its handling of the very materials that Williams maintains are perforce hidden or evaded in Austen, *Mansfield Park* is undoubtedly enigmatic and a problem novel. What it is not is the simplistic screed that Rozema makes of it in taking the its many shades of gray, particularly regarding the slave trade, and converting them into primary colors. Much of the alteration centers on the heroine, Fanny Price, who goes from the self-serving moralist of the novel into a full-throated abolitionist in the film, with affinities not only with the narrator but also, and more crucially, with the novelist herself of whom she is intermittently an autobiographical projection. The notion, held primarily by Austen enthusiasts, that Jane Austen is her narrator rather than a *writer* who might just be concerned with the mechanics of novelistic technique and form (including narrative voice) is only partly the amateur mistake here that it is for, say, Rudyard Kipling's *Janeites*. For despite Rozema's apparent lack of interest in Austen as a technician, which a filmmaker, above all, might very well have, Rozema's way with the novel comes mostly, or so it seems, from a dogmatic adherence to its storyline, which more than in any other Austen novel is a "cover story" or vehicle of ideology that other materials, including characters who are otherwise derogated by the plot, tend mostly to undermine.¹ In seeking to justify this story, then, rather than in coming to terms with the novel as a totality, Rozema delivers a heroine who scarcely resembles the character on whom she is based.

Mansfield Park is primarily a narrative of upward mobility, centering on the rise of the initially impoverished Fanny, who goes to live with the family of her wealthy uncle Sir Thomas Bertram, who happens also to own a plantation in the West Indies. Consequently in making Fanny's rise and projected control over the Bertram family the result of her forbearance or ability to say "no" to initiatives that are openly transgressive in opposing certain of her uncle's directives, *Mansfield Park* does more than reward her on the basis of her supposed virtue.² It situates that virtue on a larger continuum linking domestic ideology, on the one hand, with its premium on female forbearance, and the slave trade, on the other, where virtue is obviously in short supply. For as *Mansfield Park* makes equally clear, the empire currently in formation is being served less by the seemingly decadent aristocracy (figured in Sir Thomas's progeny and their friends), whose members continually resist interpellation as gendered and imperial subjects, than by the more codified likes of Fanny and her sailor brother William who are the portents, along with their uncle, of the new hegemony into which British society is evolving. As a result, the plot or storyline, where Fanny vanquishes her decadent and transgressive peers through demurral rather than direct action, is more than a vehicle of propaganda in which Fanny and her

ideology are projected to be on the winning side of history. It is an ideological apparatus that simultaneously falls flat, both in its criticism of certain characters, who are demonstrably the most interesting and proactive in the novel, and in clearing the way for what amounts to an (un)holy alliance of domestic virtue and imperial and colonial ambition.³

Rozema's response to this conundrum, in which we are forced to *think* in the act of reading, is to render "perfect" or uncomplicated what is necessarily imperfect and in fact a real mess: both at the level of cultural analysis or demonstration, where Fanny's individual ambition fits hand in glove with British expansionism *tout court*, and also, and just as importantly, at the level of aesthetic or narrative performance, where Austen's signature practice of free indirect discourse—a relatively recent development in novelistic technology—comes off as a powerful but potentially sinister instrument. And so Rozema's rather liberal conflation of heroine, narrator and author is not an interpretive or collaborative indulgence so much as the result, it would appear, of reading Raymond Williams and Edward Said (80-97) more closely, and with far greater sympathy, than Jane Austen. The film's conversion, for example, of Fanny's woefully neutral curiosity about Antigua ("I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies" [154]) into an angry and informed counterposition does more than whitewash what the novel subtly marks as ignorance or opportunism on her part; it converts the novel's melancholic projection of an England-about-to-be into a utopian fantasy, in which the institution of the novel as a genre, far from being part of the problem, is suddenly—in its reconstitution as film narrative—part of the solution. Unlike the adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility* or *Persuasion*, where perfection or improvement comes chiefly via simplification, Rozema's elaborate translation all but condemns the *author of Mansfield Park* as having failed or betrayed the values of posterity.

Rozema and other adaptors seem to believe, then, that Jane Austen necessarily feared change or was unequipped to deal with it in any way apart from one that was class-based and conservative. And that is why, in their quest for both perfection and fidelity, the films invariably waffle between a nearly-fetishistic delectation in the upscale and traditional environments where the narratives take place (virtually all the houses are grander in the films than in the novels) and a more progressive, if anachronistic, recasting of the novels as feminist in a more modern and recognizable way. This détente delivers more than just an Austen whose heroines can apparently jettison their impending roles as desperate housewives, as Anne Elliot does in Roger Michell's 1994 adaptation of *Persuasion*. It creates a more "perfect" Austen whose period-bound despair—or such reflexive resistance on display in *Persuasion* despite its "happy" ending—is supplanted by a full blown feminism that, in the films of both *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* especially, adds melioration and change to a comedic resolution in which marriage is simply one component.

The problem for the adaptors centers primarily, therefore, on how things end in Austen or, rather, in how they don't. For continually shadowing the change or improvement relegated to marriage in the novels, whose heroines marry either happily or up or both, is another horizon of change, registered primarily through accompanying details that I call "differentials," that the novels tend mostly to project or to embed in a story that can't be told or resolved by the usual means. And it is a story best summed up by the following statement from the work most often regarded—certainly by Patricia Rozema—as Austen's most sinister. In *Mansfield Park*, responding to an account of the changes wrought upon the chapel of an ancient estate, where further changes are being entertained, Mary Crawford has this to say about what the story—as distinct from the novel—patently endorses: "Every generation," she asserts smilingly, "has its improvements" (68).

There are a number of ways to interpret this statement, the most immediate being an endorsement of the kinds of improvements that the opportunistic, and therefore tradition-minded, Fanny disapproves of. Yet beyond this problematic configuration, which finds the aristocracy (Mary) in the critical vanguard and the rising middle class (Fanny) wedded to convention, there is the larger (and recurrent) sense in Mary's statement that for women in particular improvement has a history too long and too repetitive for there to be any hope that improvements will be "improvements." In making this statement or in being allowed to make it, Mary is indicating two distinct things: that change, especially social change, has been *at best* a repetition of the same; and second, and more important, that change *has occurred*, albeit in forms unassimilable to the usual narratives of progress or development, including progress for women, to which improvements "ought" to refer.

In the case of *Mansfield Park*, whose world is hemmed in more by the impending future than by the receding past, this latter change is invariably local in, say, the private theatrical that the Bertram children and their friends undertake during Sir Thomas's absence: an initiative that proves, foremost, as a reminder of the performance to which all social identity or selfhood is tantamount. But it is in *Emma*, more than in any other Austen novel, that the tension between change at the local or micro level and change at the macro and narratable level is most evident. And it is an aspect of the novel that Austen's earliest—and most discerning readers—were able to pick up on. They did so not by necessarily discovering change in every cranny of *Emma* but simply in noting a tension between what Walter Scott (in his review of *Emma*) described as the "narrative" of Austen's novels, the heroines who are "turned wise by precept, example and experience," and what both he and the novelist Maria Edgeworth disparaged as the "prosing."⁴ Most of Austen's contemporaries were quite taken by this prosaic detour, and by the defamiliarizing experience of seeing everyday life and social interaction in the dynamic and unprecedented relief

that Austen set it. Yet the antipathy of Scott and especially Edgeworth, who put *Emma* down after just one volume claiming (as did other contemporaries) that it had "no story in it," is equally revealing. For the anxiety for which Edgeworth's boredom is more properly a screen is an anxiety that the screen adaptations (pun intended) share equally: namely, a worry over the differentiation unleashed when there is "no story" or vehicle of ideology to anchor and direct things.

Unlike *Mansfield Park*'s heroine, whose development is entirely material rather than existential or pedagogical, Emma Woodhouse undergoes a transformation exactly as Scott outlines. In learning the error of her ways, Emma is not simply turned wise, or so one is given to believe; she is also turned marriageable in either learning or discovering that she has always loved Mr. Knightley, who has been her chief disciplinarian throughout. The 1996 adaptations of *Emma* by Douglas McGrath and Andrew Davies (both titled *Emma*) follow this trajectory closely, differing only in the weight they assign to pedagogy and to romance respectively. In doing so, however, both adaptations miss a great deal of what the novel is about, which, as Edgeworth unhappily surmised, has surprisingly little to do with the story. For *Emma* was written not to be read just once for story (as it were); it was written, as I've argued elsewhere, to be *reread*, particularly for what was missed or overlooked the first time around (*The Historical Austen*, 180-213). Austen's novels are obviously unique in the capacity to reward rereading. However in *Emma*, as opposed to, say, *Pride and Prejudice*, rereading is a protocol imposed by the novel directly—through the suppression, in this instance, of the courtship narrative involving Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, which not even the narrator, who knows or should know everything, is apparently aware of until it is disclosed by one of the characters. As an invitation to research the novel for details regarding the courtship that were overlooked and of which every other character, with the possible exception of Knightley, remains ignorant, Austen's "choice of mystery at the expense of irony" (as Wayne Booth terms it [255]) effectively endows *Emma* with an afterlife that it might not have had otherwise. But there is more to this aspect of the novel than the insider status that rereading it confers. In addition to the discovery of information on Frank and Jane that has been hiding all along in plain sight, reading *Emma* as it asks to be read now is an uncontainable process, where there is always something new and different to be discovered and to reflect upon.

Among the many things brought to light by this process is the extraordinary dimensionality of routinized existence in a small village, where change or difference, far from absent or impossible, are in fact a daily occurrence. Thus, as Reginald Farrer noted admiringly in 1917, *Emma* "is not an easy book to read," or indeed to reread. For the "manifold complexity of the book's web" by which twelve readings of the novel provide "twelve periods of pleasure . . . squared and squared again with each perusal, till at every fresh reading you feel anew that you never understood anything like the

widening sum of its delights" is even on this description a sublime of sorts that "pleasure" doesn't fully describe (266). If anything, the ongoing tension in the novel between plot and the ever "widening sum" of information, especially evident whenever Miss Bates opens her mouth, has the concomitant effect of distinguishing the heroine's improvement, on the one hand, which mimics cultural hegemony through a narrative that is tutelary and hierarchical, and change, on the other hand, which is seemingly and potentially everywhere and figured, in among other places, the heroine's attempts to unite disadvantaged women to more advantaged or entitled men. As actions pitched toward social transformation or even leveling, Emma's initiatives are relatively modest and, as she discovers to her embarrassment, not always successful. But that is in many ways the point, or the point to which readers are consistently referred by the novel: not just that politics may be local in this way but that the more motivated and less contingent these politics the more vulnerable they will be to discovery and control. This is another reason why the Frank-Jane union is kept under the radar as a "shadow" narrative or parallel reality in the novel (Harvey, 52) and why Emma's comparatively overt attempts at orchestrating similar change are destined to fail. For the success Frank enjoys in achieving with Jane what Emma, for her part, fails to achieve in the case of Harriet Smith, is a reminder that change or improvement may very well be abroad, but only when it literally doesn't matter.

The more conventional cinematic adaptations of *Emma* treat the novel very differently, of course, sticking to a sense of it based on a single reading. Adhering strenuously to the main plot, in which Emma's matchmaking comes off as meddling that only threatens the happiness of the young woman she is trying to help, the adaptations by McGrath (featuring Gwyneth Paltrow) and Davies (with Kate Beckinsdale) not only follow a story-line that repeats itself but also, they use the episode of Emma's failed matchmaking as a fulcrum for a narrative that, far from one of real change, is simply a developmental account annexed to a love story. Even as it is eventually tried by many other details and characters in the novel, beginning with the arrival of Frank, Jane and Mrs. Elton and the delayed appearance of Miss Bates, all of this in the aftermath of Emma's initial failure to match Harriet and Mr. Elton, the developmental narrative remains the sum and substance of the movies, which are interested less in the many details of the novel and what they might yield or signify than in getting Emma to the altar in an eminently presentable way. The adaptations seem scarcely to recall, in other words, what the novel, for its part, can hardly forget and what we are forced to remember in (re)reading it: that Emma is far more interesting and attractive as the troublemaker first encountered than she is as Mrs. Knightley at the close; that Knightley is a more suitable and age-appropriate mate for the unmarried (and now pathetic) Miss Bates than for the wife he will have essentially grown from seed; that Frank's flirtations with Emma are distinctly de-eroticized and pitched, if anything, toward a dialogue with the heroine regarding the

uses and abuses of her agency that Knightley's top-down pedagogy ultimately nullifies; that Emma's interest in marrying Harriet is an initiative driven partly by same-sex desire; and finally, and regrettably, that in light of her exceptional independence and financial capability, same-sex solidarity—be it with Jane or Miss Bates or even Harriet—is an increasingly abject experience for Emma that she is compelled finally to suspend. And these are just a few of the differentials that the novel—or rereading it—delivers.⁵

The cinematic adaptations can also be reviewed and reconsidered. Yet all that is discoverable the second or third or fourth time around are further details and hints about Frank and Jane. Any other information of the kind I've just enumerated is nonexistent in the films, and not because it is unavailable for inclusion. It is nonexistent because to include this information by, say, casting Miss Bates as the thirty-something character she is, complicates the basic story line in making Knightley's continual kindness to her a chivalry with a back story. Another term for these complications, then, or for what they provoke as differentials when more than the story is being put into images, is thinking or reflection—something difficult to do when the impulse is either to read or to adapt for plot but eminently achievable when the adaptation rises to the interpretive model of rereading or reading for detail.

This brings me, then, to *Clueless*, which keeps faith with Austen's novel not by following "the procedure of the novelist step-by-step so that the chains of circumstance are exactly the same" (Mitry, 4) but by effectively exchanging the novel's nominal "story" for one lodged in the "widening sum" of details, most of which involve change in some form. Thus while Amy Heckerling's 1995 adaptation is also a romantic comedy ending in the union—or at least the temporary union—of the Emma-character (Cher) and the Knightley counterpart (Josh), it follows the novel, or what I've been arguing is the novel, in being irreducible to this one narrative. In the novel, as I've suggested, the "widening" separation of story and information necessarily leaves the story of Emma's development intact, but as an object of interpretation from which the novel overall is increasingly disarticulated. And so it goes in *Clueless*, where the developmental narrative is, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent or, when existent, doggedly plot-driven and even a little pathetic, particularly at the end when Cher, like Emma, becomes a patronizing do-gooder. This is not to say that Cher does not make mistakes or even the same mistakes that Emma makes. It is simply that Cher's mistakes—including her insult to the El Salvadoran housemaid (whom she misidentifies as Mexican)—carry almost no force regarding her need for improvement or discipline. More like Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, in fact, who arrives on the scene having learned everything she apparently needs to, Cher has learned everything that she needs or, better still, *should have learned* by the time we first encounter her in late 20th century Los Angeles. This is immediately derivable from her intelligence, charm, and self-irony even when they

are seemingly belied by her use of language, neologism or analogy. And it receives confirmation from none other than Josh himself. Summoned to retrieve Cher after a series of mishaps in which Cher is hit on by Elton and subsequently mugged after refusing Elton's offer of a ride home, Josh finds himself in the rather awkward position of escorting not one but two girls: Cher whom he is obliged (as a step-brother) to assist and his rather opinionated date. During the car ride to the girls' respective homes the conversation migrates to the famous quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("To thine own self be true") that Josh's date attributes to the Hamlet character, and which Cher (already offended by the former's pompous attitude) promptly and happily observes is a misattribution. Josh's date replies sardonically that she thinks (i.e., knows) that she remembers *Hamlet* accurately. But it is Cher's seemingly philistine rejoinder that she remembers Mel Gibson accurately and that it was the "Polonius-guy" who uttered the famous lines (in the movie adaptation, of course) that brings a broad and approving smile to Josh's face. The novel hints at a similar attraction on Knightley's part, mostly through his constant presence at Emma's house and continued efforts to engage her. But Knightley's attraction, however palpable, is alloyed with a disposition to admonish and correct, especially when Emma is associated with the forces of change or disruption (in for example her sponsorship of Harriet) that the film—beginning by making Josh an age-appropriate companion—consistently rejects.

So at stake in *Clueless* (as in *Emma*) is a very different story than the one driving the other adaptations. More than in the novel, where the courtship narrative is at least free-standing throughout, the story in the details of *Clueless*, centering on both language and fashion, particularly in the early scenes where they literally overwhelm, aggregates to a series of ruminations—on women, on sexuality and finally on women's agency—into which the courtship plot is simply folded. Language and style are key here, both because they are at the heart of the principal conceit of *Clueless*—the "modernization" of a literary masterpiece—and, because they proceed in the perplexed recognition that "every generation has its improvements." No one, least of all Heckerling, is claiming that Cher's cartoonish fashion sense or use of slang is truly an improvement. But it is impossible to deny that these *are improvements*—especially in certain quarters—and more crucially that they register, as language and fashion do, the change and difference occurring daily. A particularly striking example takes place in slow motion as the film lingers over a group of walkman-wearing, skateboard-toting, suburban "gangsta" wannabes, whose vanguardist fashion sense, shaped mostly by the imperative to sport underwear as outerwear, elicits a dissenting opinion from Cher, who notes apologetically that she is otherwise "no traitor to [her] generation." Whether this generational change is shocking, disruptive or just simply unappealing is beside the point; the point, in *Clueless* as in *Emma*, is the disenchanting disconnect between change, which is ongoing (and a register of possibil-

ity or even hope), and any narrative of real progress to which change or difference or Cher's "generation" for that matter can be assimilated.

To be sure, Cher's exasperated deployment of "as if" to refer to an order or identity to which she has been erroneously assigned—or is assumed by others to belong—hints at just such a narrative, "as if" what is happening in fashion, music, language, and manners are already the coordinates of some utopian space. And beginning indeed with the opening credits, a world elsewhere is seemingly close at hand in *Clueless* mostly in the frothy entertainment, with intertextual nods to both "chick-flicks" and screwball comedy, to which the film is at one level tantamount.⁶ But this is also of course movie magic, and like all movie magic, and for that matter Cher's magical thinking here, magic with an expiration date.⁷ For the real intertext that *is Clueless* includes not just *Emma* obviously, where change or difference is everywhere and nowhere, but also in *Persuasion*, the novel that follows *Emma*, the very title echoing *Clueless* by also describing a pathology or disposition that comes to define the heroine despite her efforts to be otherwise. In *Persuasion* this disposition refers initially to the coercion or family pressure to which the heroine Anne Elliot submits in first rejecting her suitor, Captain Wentworth. But it comes to apply equally, the novel shows, to the romantic imperative that Anne "learn[s]," or introjects subsequently, making any distinction between capitulation and desire, or between submission and will, or between "over-persuasion" and "internal persuasion" quite negligible (25, 48, 173). *Clueless* proceeds in a different direction, with cluelessness as an imprecation reserved initially for other people—and a measure of the state of exception to which Cher imagines herself as belonging—and only later becoming an apparatus of self-criticism following a number of discoveries where Cher's magical thinking, or what she has imagined to be true, turns out to be otherwise. Chief among these discoveries is the realization that Cher has loved Josh all along, which echoes the famous moment in *Emma* when the heroine's conviction that "Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself" darts through her "with the speed of an arrow" (320). The difference is that where the *eclaircissement* of the novel is primarily class-based and prompted by Harriet's presumptuous fixation on Knightley as a potential mate, Cher's recognition—though nominally provoked by a similar disclosure by the Harriet-character Tai regarding Josh—is more immediately the result of a losing battle with sexuality or impending sexualization that Cher has been waging from the very beginning. Thus even as Cher has presumably learned something by the close of the film, she is at least as clueless in this putatively "enlightened state," driven by biology, as she was previously, where any efforts to contain her or to coordinate her to a scenario akin to what prevails at the close were met with "as if."

It is here that the comparison with *Persuasion*, or with a composite Austen that includes *Persuasion*, proves instructive. For unlike Anne Elliot's struggle, which is waged primarily in

the understanding that the imperatives of the body will direct her to a place—the domestic sphere—from which there is no escape and where her ability to make a difference on any scale, however subtly or quietly, will be diminished, Cher's struggle is alternately backdated and postdated. It is backdated in that, like one of Carol Gilligan's young female subjects, Cher must control her sexuality lest she be controlled by it (hence, the use of fashion to attract so as to repel boys and the hilarious micromanagement of her "seduction" by Christian). And it is postdated insofar as the world of *Clueless* is no longer Jane Austen's world but a "modern" or even "postmodern" world where women can do other things apart from marrying—as the film cleverly implies in ending with a marriage that is *not* Cher's at which she is merely in attendance. That these "other things" devolve on premarital sex in the film or being able to drive rather than on something more serious or substantial, is not a joke so much as a melancholy insight. In contrast to the claustrophobic and frightened state to which the heroine is eventually consigned in *Persuasion* (but typically liberated from by the film), or to the subdued propriety that the chastened Emma eventually displays as the future Mrs. Knightley in the novel, the sixteen-year-old Cher's normative—if not quite realized—fate at the end of *Clueless* is a holding pattern that, in the spirit of *Emma* reread (or *Clueless* re-viewed) effectively honors where Cher *has been*, along with the change all around of which she is a placeholder as a member, again, of her "generation." Very near the end of the film, then, amid discoveries that she has been clueless and is "majorly, totally but crazy-in-love with Josh" (that the two discoveries are linked is again no accident), Cher ambles by a fashion display and is momentarily distracted and diverted in her thinking to wonder "if they have that in my size." This is obviously a joke. But there is more to Cher's recidivism than a fetishism that the film can take easy aim at. For the calculus linking shoes to change or music to change or language to change in the movie, is, like change itself, part of the endless and dialectical work that viewing *Clueless*, like reading *Emma*, entails. Consumption of the sort Cher practices may not be the most honorable or progressive form of agency or production. However, in light of where she is literally headed at the moment she is temporarily distracted, thinking about it with her, particularly as a kind of detour or "if," is serious business indeed.

NOTES

¹Gilbert and Gubar, "Jane Austen's Cover Story (and Its Secret Agents)," in *Madwoman in the Attic*.

²Eventually Fanny also says to "no" to her uncle when he insists that she marry Henry Crawford. But his directive in this instance is a mistake that he later acknowledges.

³I discuss *Mansfield Park* along these lines in both *The Historical Austen* (154-79), and in "The Missed Opportunities of *Mansfield Park* (123-33).

⁴For a full discussion of the responses of Austen's contemporaries to her writing, see *The Historical Austen* (44-81).

⁵Again, for a fuller discussion of *Emma* along these lines, see *The Historical Austen* (180-213).

⁶For further discussion of these cinematic intertexts, see Turim and Stern. Other relevant discussions of *Clueless* include Lynch, who sees continuities between the novel and the film in their respective engagements with historical situatedness, and Ferriss, who argues for the surprising or relative conservatism of Heckerling's remake.

⁷For a more general discussion of movie magic as a "polymorphous web" of fantasy and interpellation, see Murray.

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The Duchess, Mary Robinson, and Georgiana's Social Network

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All the main characters in Saul Dibb's film *The Duchess* (2008) are based on figures who appeared in the list of subscribers to Mary Robinson's *Poems by Mrs. M. Robinson* (1791). These names include Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire; her husband, the Duke of Devonshire; his lover and Georgiana's friend, Lady Elizabeth Foster; Georgiana's lover, the politician and future Prime Minister, Charles Grey; and such prominent Whig politicians as the statesman, Charles James Fox, and the playwright, Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Robinson's subscription list included among other notables all the sons of King George III, many of the most Whiggish peers, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Robinson's lover and MP for Liverpool, Col. Banastre Tarleton, and Della Crusca himself, Robert Merry. Robinson's 1791 volume reintroduced her to a fashionable social network from which she had been absent for the previous several years following the scandal of her affair with the Prince of Wales. Robinson's theatrical career, her apprenticeship under David Garrick, her status as a sex symbol and the dissolution of that status into gossip, pornography, debt, disability, and Robinson's subsequent reinvention of herself as a professional writer make her, like Georgiana, a case study in the vicissitudes of Romantic period celebrity—which is one of the main subjects of Dibb's film about Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire. Robinson's professional network, with John Bell, publisher, at the center, intersected and overlapped with the political network of Whigs that included Fox, Sheridan, the Prince, and the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire.¹

Although Robinson does not appear among these illustrious Whigs in *The Duchess*, Dibb's film, nonetheless, is the closest cinematic representation to date of the fashionable world that promoted, persecuted, and professionalized her. And this network also sustained many of the other writers who propelled the market for commercial literature during the late 1770s, '80s, and '90s. So, Dibb's film, despite misrepresentation of history, Whig politics, and even Georgiana herself, shows a more accurate picture of this significant demographic of early Romantic period readership than, say, Ken Russell's or Julien Temple's depictions of Wordsworth and Coleridge.² The professional (albeit not the imaginative) lives of the first generation Romantics had more to do with the world of West End elegance than with ruined cottages, old beggars, and enclosure laws. This particular net-

work of readers and writers, then, helps to fill in the cultural and social space between the early readers of, say, Fanny Burney of Wordsworth and helps to visualize them in context. Curiously, the Prince of Wales does not appear in the film although Georgiana thought of him as a brother and, like others in her network, considered him the great hope for Whig supremacy. The film, instead, portrays the Prince's closest political allies, Sheridan and Fox, as the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Georgiana's Hamlet.

For the sake of the domestic and social drama, *The Duchess* only briefly depicts Georgiana's cultural interests and influence. Dibb shows her, for instance, hosting a private performance of Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, the scene being short-hand for Georgiana's patronage of the arts, which included the works of Mary Robinson. For all of Robinson's adult life and literary career, Georgiana's encouragement, however distant, served her own poetic identity. Robinson herself describes Georgiana as "my admired patroness, my liberal and affectionate friend" (*Memoirs* 238). At the start of her literary career, Robinson was still tangentially connected to the social network depicted in the film—the frequently treacherous *bon ton* and the power centers connected with the Prince of Wales and Charles James Fox, both her former lovers.

Robinson first proclaimed her admiration for Georgiana in her 1776 poem "Written on Richmond Hill," published in *Town and Country Magazine*, calling her "beauty's queen." According to her *Memoirs*, Robinson sent her little brother to deliver her 1775 *Poems* to Georgiana, who responded with an invitation to Devonshire House (238). During her husband's imprisonment for debt, Robinson reports many visits with Georgiana that included intimate conversations about their mutual sorrows. They were approximately the same age and both newly and unhappily married. Robinson dedicated *Captivity* (1777) to the Duchess, describing her as "the friendly Patroness of the Unhappy" (*Poems* 1: 380). Shortly thereafter, once Robinson took to the stage at Drury Lane as Garrick's new discovery and inflamed the passions of the young Prince of Wales, she became herself a fashionable celebrity and, despite her unhappy circumstances, enjoyed many of the luxurious advantages of those in Georgiana's social network.

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