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***BEYOND THE SHADES OF PEMBERLEY:
PURSUING MR. DARCY AMONG RECENT
REINCARNATIONS AND UPGRADES***

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Abstract: *Without aspiring to cover more than a fraction of the hundreds of revisitations of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in literature, cinema and related media, this paper aims to identify significant turning points in the evolution of its intertextually prolific male character, leading up to his current status as the ultimate heart-throb of British fiction. The analysis will attempt to discuss the liberties ostensibly taken by the 1995 BBC adaptation and to assess its impact on subsequent responses, as well as to examine more recent cinematic endeavours, ranging from the heavily romanticised 2007 biopic *Becoming Jane* to the 2008 time-travel fantasy *Lost in Austen*. As far as prose rewritings are concerned, while not entirely disregarding attempts made to provide Darcy with an even more sonorous voice or the novel itself with a sequel, the paper will pay more attention to his contemporary avatars as they emerge from texts such as the first two instalments of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones* series and the associated films, as well as to instances of genre-shifting and to the profusion of Darcy references to be found at the level of the wide range of Austen related merchandise and online philosophy available today, with a view to pointing out perhaps insufficiently clear links between apparently unrelated texts or products, as well as establishing how much of 19th-century Darcy has been lost in adaptation and whether the continuing fascination with Austen's most eligible male protagonist is indicative of his timeless appeal or commanded by a constantly updated and upgraded construct that bears little similarity to the original.*

In an age in which virtually no text in the canon remains untouched by intertextual endeavours, even the most cursory of glances cast over the daunting list of narrative projects stemming from Jane Austen's 1813 classic reveals not only how many fans "inspired to become producers" (Rosen 137) have made withdrawals from "a *Pride and Prejudice* archive which contains such usable artifacts as Elizabeth Bennet, Fitzwilliam Darcy, the sprawling estate of Pemberley" (Hellekson and Busse 65) and then added their own creations to this rapidly expanding corpus, but also how highly Mr Darcy ranks among those most fortunate literary characters that get the chance to migrate from one text to another "and through adaptations into different mediums" (Eco 8). This feat strikes one as all the more impressive given Darcy's considerably more recent addition to the canon compared to Ulysses, Jason, King Arthur, Parsifal and other examples on Eco's list, as well as his ubiquity far beyond the sphere of literature, with recent occurrences comprising such diverse tributes as the 12-foot fibreglass sculpture temporarily gracing a variety of British

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and Commonwealth locations, a bright pink hybrid tea rose and the decision to name a male pheromone ‘darcin’ after Jane Austen’s romantic hero “to recognise its distinct and specific role in stimulating female sexual attraction” (Hurst and Beynon 127). Moreover, at the risk of minimizing the involvement of Austen’s own text in the escalation of the “huge phenomenon” (Svensson 203) sometimes referred to as ‘Austenmania’ (Pucci and Thompson 1), one has to (however begrudgingly) acknowledge the fact that in a field marked by essentially fluid temporal landmarks this particular “shared passion” (Svensson 203) can be dated just as specifically “as the birth of ‘Byromania’ nearly two centuries before” (Wootton 86), with 24 September 1995 rather than 28 January 1813 marking the beginnings of the “Jane Austen frenzy sweeping the nation” (Leitch 45) in the wake of the BBC miniseries.

An overview of the “new genres and thousands of offshoots . . . generated and multiplied” (Grandi 24) over the last three decades seems to suggest that the climactic scene in which Darcy’s progress towards the house in his conspicuously damp ensemble is crosscut with the gaze Elizabeth directs at his portrait has had farther-reaching consequences than earning that particular adaptation a somewhat questionable reputation as “the wet-T-shirt-Darcy” version (Troost and Greenfield 1); indeed, the self-reflexive strategies employed throughout the series and culminating in the fateful fourth episode not only allowed a “thoroughly desirable, ‘corpo-real’ ‘new man’” to break out of the “‘frames’ that constrained him in previous readings” (Aragay and López 209), but also seem to have paved the way for considerably more radical such transgressions. While narratives such as Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), P.D. James’s *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011), Heather Lynn Rigaud’s *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Rock Star* (2011), KaraLynne Mackrory’s *Haunting Mr Darcy: A Spirited Courtship* (2014), as well as variations such as the Japanese manga series *Boys over Flowers* (1992-2003), the Bollywoodian *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), not to mention the Mormon and Jewish cinematic versions – *Pride and Prejudice: The Jewess and the Gentile* (2011) and *Pride and Prejudice: A Latter-Day Comedy* (2004) – have merely done away with the historical, cultural and stylistic frames of Regency England and conventional romance, the somewhat disquieting proliferation of *Pride and Prejudice* erotica makes it “abundantly clear that Austen’s arrogant yet enigmatic bachelor has a rich and vigorous existence in many readers’ fantasy lives” (Scholes 1). Encounters with examples of intertextual homage ranging from Arielle Eckstut’s whimsical *Pride and Promiscuity. The Lost Sex Scenes of Jane Austen* (2001) to considerably more dubious attempts such as Virginia Wade’s *Pride and Penetration* (2011), Enid Wilson’s *My Darcy Vibrates* (2011), Beth Massey’s *Mr Darcy Likes it Wild: A Pride and Prejudice Diversion* (2013) or Lissa Trevor’s *Spank Me, Mr Darcy* (2014) are quite likely to leave one torn between the conflicting impulses of unbridled hilarity and righteous indignation, articulated for added effect along the lines of one of Lady Catherine’s parting rhetorical questions: “Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?” (Austen 267)

It would be interesting to know how much consolation less frivolous Austenites – or at any rate, those contingents of the novelist’s vast readership that find the idea of “juxtaposing Austen with sex, booze, and blood” nauseating rather than amusing, whether the offending elements in question take the shape of “wet

white shirts, the Austen-branded Bath Gin, vampires, zombies” (Looser 1) or BDSM – would take in greater awareness of the fact that at least some of these apparent acts of blasphemy are directed not at the 1813 original but at some of its less legitimate offspring. Thus, the true target and full significance of William Codpiece Thwackery’s *Fifty Shades of Mr Darcy: A Parody* (2012) only become apparent if one pursues the full intertextual circle inextricably connecting this otherwise merely ludicrous parody, Austen’s timeless romance and E.L. James’s massively vilified and just as massively successful best-seller via the oft-forgotten *Twilight* link. Indeed, whereas the emergence of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise from the murky backwaters of *Twilight* fandom is likely to be familiar even to those not particularly well acquainted with either masterpiece, it is quite surprising how few members of the public are aware of the indebtedness of Meyer’s first volume to the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, particularly in terms of the different status and apparent incompatibility of its two protagonists. In light of this (to many perhaps unwelcome) reminder, one can not only view texts such as Regina Jeffers’ *Vampire Darcy’s Desire: A Pride and Prejudice Adaptation* (2009), Amanda Grange’s *Mr Darcy, Vampyre* (2009) and Mary Simonsen’s *Mr. Darcy’s Bite* (2011) in a slightly altered (if not necessarily better) light, but also make added sense of a whole range of Internet memes proclaiming the superiority of Mr Darcy’s disdainful glare over the questionable charms of sparkly teenage vampires, or proudly declaring one’s preference for Mr Darcy over Mr Grey. Thus, although not necessarily emerging as particularly sophisticated jeers, such online pronouncements are at least revealed to be based on more than the mere association of random and widely divergent literary protagonists and while not all dark fantasy rewritings of *Pride and Prejudice* can be directly blamed on the producers of the BBC miniseries, the latter’s decision to cast Darcy as an “awkward hero tortured by an excess of emotions he cannot repress” by quite convincingly reimagining an apparent paragon of restraint as a “vaguely Byronic hero” (Troost and Greenfield 31) makes it easier to understand the still powerful temptation to recreate Austen’s male protagonist as a darker, moodier and altogether more mysterious individual.

The same contemporary fascination with Darcy, combined with a desire to compensate for the personal fulfilment missing from Jane Austen’s own narrative, can be identified as a significant factor behind the attempts made to locate his historical equivalent in the heavily romanticised 2007 biopic *Becoming Jane*. Whereas the lack of biographical evidence supporting the level of attachment at the core of the plot and the similarities between the flirtatious repartee deployed between the cinematic versions of Jane Austen and Thomas Lefroy and the verbal duelling Elizabeth and Darcy engage in have been duly commented upon, virtually no attention has been paid to the extent to which the film appears to accidentally or deliberately divide the various attributes making up the latter’s persona between two extremely different male protagonists, the wealthy but essentially dull Mr Wisely and the dashing but tragically impecunious Mr Lefroy. Indeed, whereas Thomas Lefroy’s manifold physical attractions, fashionable London attire, worldly sophistication and clear sense of his own superiority over the society of Austen’s native Hampshire single him out as Darcy’s obvious equivalent, the elegant mansion and extensive grounds Mr Wisely stands to inherit bear a striking resemblance to the

fictional Pemberley, an impression further reinforced by the clear parallels between Mr Wisely's devoted and overbearing aunt, Lady Gresham, and the equally opinionated and dictatorial Lady Catherine.

Thomas Lefroy's trenchant assessment of Austen's youthful literary attempts – “accomplished enough, perhaps, but a metropolitan mind may be less susceptible to extended, juvenile self-regard.” (Jarrold) – clearly echoes Darcy's harsh dismissal of Elizabeth's physical charms, yet Mr Wisely's emphasis on his unwillingness to marry in the absence of shared affection – “I am vain enough to want to be loved for myself rather than my money.” (Jarrold) – is equally evocative of Darcy's blatant disregard for those whose only incentive in seeking his company is awareness of his wealth. Moreover, the fact that Mr Wisely's hesitant first proposal, with its stronger stress on affluence than romance – “I have a respectable property of 2000 a year, in addition to even greater expectations as Lady Gresham's heir . . . It's yours. If we marry, all of it, yours.” (Jarrold) – might be perceived by viewers unmoved by the emotion pervading his every word as more reminiscent of Mr Collins's pragmatic offer than Mr Darcy's impassionate first declaration does not detract from the fact that Mr Wisely's tacit disapproval of his aunt's hostile attitude towards Jane's independent thought and literary inclinations appears to be built on the foundations of Darcy's insistence on the importance of improving one's mind “by extensive reading” (Austen 29). Both male characters engage in discussions of Jane's ambitions and narrative choices, yet whereas Thomas Lefroy's invariably condescending recommendations provide further evidence of the extent to which this particular cinematic version takes Darcy's haughtiness to new heights, the more reserved but equally helpful suggestions leading up to Mr Wisely's momentous parting prompt – “The good do not always come to good ends. It is a truth universally acknowledged.” (Jarrold) – reveal his apparently clumsy infatuation to entail the same complex fusion of physical attraction and respect for an intellectual equal characterising the later stages of Darcy's love for Elizabeth. It would be quite interesting to establish whether the fact that this dual distribution of accomplishments has gone unnoticed is due to a general state of denial regarding the unlikelihood of Mr Darcy's enviable fusion of wealth, intelligence and decency occurring in real-life situations or merely to the film's greater emphasis on the Darcy-Lefroy connection, yet the latter is clearly more indicative of the increasingly common tendency to reduce Darcy's desirability to his physical appeal so frequently ascribed to the BBC's “Firth treatment” (Leith 1).

A diachronic overview of responses to Austen-inspired creative endeavours and the strategies and impact of various adaptations reveals both the apparent substitution of Mr Darcy for “Prince Charming in the Janeites' imagination” (Grandi 36) and the widespread belief that the BBC version turned a previously “dour” and “mildly unpleasant, if misunderstood character” (Leith 1) into the undisputed champion of literary “heroes that remain so inconspicuous in the original texts, but become tangibly attractive on screen” (Wagner 221). Likewise, the full extent to which the 1995 adaptation fulfilled “the promise of fleshing out a shadowy character” (Rosen 135) emerges with equal clarity from academic analyses and the often too readily dismissed corpus of popular fiction tributes, as is the case with Jane Hayes' unscholarly yet insightful account of the reader response mechanisms

involved in her evolving relationship with Austen's plot in *Austenland*: "it wasn't until the BBC put a face on the story that those gentlemen in tight breeches had stepped out of her reader's imagination and into her nonfiction hopes." (Hale 2) Before deciding whether to commend or condemn the apparent focus on "barely controlled testosterone" (Sutherland 1) characterising such dramatisations, it might be worth taking a moment to rejoice in the freedom of interpretative choice afforded by the wide range of perspectives available today – "In modern parlance we can choose to see Darcy as a hunk, a fop, Darcy Lite, Heathcliffian, a dandy, a toff." (Sutherland 1) – and to consider the fact that, for all the critical diatribes it triggered, the 1995 version ultimately provided a more convincing visual embodiment of Darcy's inner turmoil than the "foppish" and "uptight" (Wootton 89) incarnations of 1940 and 1980 respectively. Although the lake interlude, the bath episode and a series of other less memorable yet equally significant added scenes have mainly been discussed in terms of the extent to which the setting and camerawork frame Darcy as "an object of desire, almost an object d'art, for the female spectator," not merely turning him from the mere subject of the gaze into the "object of the female spectator's desiring gaze" (Aragay and López 207) but actually fetishising his body (Aragay and López 209), it has been also pointed out that the ultimate success of the 1995 BBC endeavour to "eroticise Darcy, increase his presence" and construct a compelling "model of masculinity far removed from Austen's" was the result of an irresistible fusion of "physicality and emotional expression" (Aragay and López 211).

Although the general impression permeating the vast corpus of responses would indicate that the impact of the BBC construction of Darcy, particularly the "craze over Colin Firth as the ultimate Mr Darcy" and the associated "Darcymania following Colin Firth's performance" (Terentowicz-Fotyga 270), was the exclusive outcome of skilful use of camerawork to highlight the abundant physical charms of his screen persona, commentators capable of watching the 1995 miniseries without succumbing to either "tears or to delirious laughter" (Hitchings 25) have also endeavoured to point out that "Colin Firth's beefcake version of Darcy has less to do with the attractions of his body and more to do with a series of sultry and meaningful 'looks'" (Blum 166) and, even more importantly, that the main merit of the added scenes resides in the insights they provide into Darcy's feelings, thus promoting a masculinity which differs greatly from that of Austen's largely "distant and impenetrable" Darcy in the sense of allowing Colin Firth's 'new-man' Darcy to "express weaknesses, doubts and emotions which the late twentieth century constructed as desirable in a man" (Aragay and López 207).

Moreover, whereas some might be baffled by the coexistence of interpretations rating Firth's character as a "far more Romantic Darcy than Austen's generally restrained hero" (Aragay and López 210) with readings that cast him as an antidote to the "New Man' of the 1990s" (Wootton 89), it could also be argued that an "updated concept of masculinity" (Aragay and López 211) does not necessarily entail the transformation of a "taciturn, withdrawn, aloof . . . grave and sober" (Carroll et al. 110) character into a "feminized wimp" (Wootton 89) and that it is this very ambiguity that brings the 1995 version closer to Austen's equally contradictory character, a man "poised between the 'traditional' and the 'modern', a composite of

radical and conservative impulses” (Wootton 89). The associated notion that, notwithstanding its obvious absence from the original text, the much-ridiculed lake episode actually “maintains the thematic thrust of Austen’s plot” and functions as a dramatic visual symbol of the protagonist’s “emotional rebirth” (Nixon 22) as a more sensitive and tolerant individual appears to have had limited impact on subsequent views, with considerably more critical attention directed towards its post-1995 evolution, a hardly surprising state of affairs given the scene’s current status as not only “most viewers’ abiding memory” (Hitchings 25-26) of the BBC adaptation but also “one of the most intertextually fertile references to *Pride and Prejudice*” (Terentowicz-Fotyga 270).

In addition to hounding Firth for a number of years in the form of rather tedious Darcy-related interview questions of the kind immortalised in Fielding’s *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, the scene’s popularity ensured that the scripts of at least three subsequent films – *Love Actually* (2003), *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004) and *St Trinian’s* (2007) – required the actor to engage in quite demeaning acts of self-parody invariably featuring the iconic wet garment but none of the aura of irresistible masculinity surrounding its first on-screen occurrence. Of course, given the vast “network of dialogic cross-references” (Aragay and López 204) connecting Fielding’s tribute and Austen’s original and the extent to which the casting of the “living vestige of Austen’s novel” (Collins 192) to play Bridget’s real-life romantic interest further augmented the already complex “intertextual whirl” (Aragay and López 204), the second of the three instances amounts to more than an inside joke meant to trigger an amused reaction on the part of observant viewers. For obvious reasons, the film versions of the first two Bridget Jones books feature neither Bridget’s enthusiastic first encounter with the BBC miniseries and the exact number of “minutes spent thinking about Mr Darcy” (Fielding, *Diary* 246), nor the first narrative intimations of the “frenzy of Darcy parties” (Voiret 232) apparently triggered in England by that particular adaptation – “‘OK, come on, he’s going to dive in.’ We all fell silent then, watching Colin Firth emerging from the lake dripping wet, in the see-through, white shirt.” (Fielding, *Edge* 45) – nor indeed the scene’s cathartic as well as aesthetic potential: “‘Quick, get her a drink . . . Put *Pride and Prejudice* on . . . Find the wet shirt.’” (Fielding, *Edge* 113) The film versions do however compensate by means of their own equally entertaining if considerably subtler contributions to the “heteroglossic stew” (Leitch 46) and thus provide further confirmation that adaptation often functions as a “dynamic (if not vengeful) display of intertextuality” (Cobb 281-282); to give but one example, the script ensures for instance that Mark Darcy’s cinematic incarnation displays the bluntness that his textual avatar seems to lack, presumably in response to the conclusion Bridget and Jude reach at the end of their “long discussion about the comparative merits of Mr Darcy and Mark Darcy, both agreeing that Mr Darcy was more attractive because he was ruder” (Fielding, *Diary* 247).

Far from being confined to the Bridget Jones franchise, the resulting Darcy palimpsest gained additional layers with every subsequent revisitation, with the 2008 time-travel fantasy *Lost in Austen* providing a particularly clear insight into the increasingly intricate web woven whenever a new intertextual product is added to an already rich corpus, as every such rewriting inevitably comes “into dialogue not only

with the original text but also with the intertextual field that has grown around it” (Terentowicz-Fotyga 270). Far from merely paying homage to a memorable former avatar by means of “due amount of frowning and condescending reminiscent of Colin Firth’s performance” (Terentowicz-Fotyga 266), this new incarnation of Darcy hesitantly immerses himself in a “multimedial, intertextual, diachronic, transhistorical as well as transcultural process of identity formation and maturation” (Tóth 294) that not only turns the 21st-century Amanda into an extremely convincing Jane Austen heroine but also appears to upgrade an already irresistible archetype. His willingness to replicate the lake scene not only occasions “a bit of a strange post-modern moment” (Zeff) for female protagonist and female audience alike in terms of the intertextual paradox generated when the ‘original’ Darcy unquestioningly imitates his most famous cinematic version, but also triggers another playful dialogue with the past by presenting conservative critics and viewers already perturbed by a previous Mr Darcy’s brawniness and informal attire with a considerably more muscular physique and a correspondingly more diaphanous and waterlogged garment.

In light of such examples there seems to be no denying the fact that without the catalyst provided by the “Firth adaptation” (Wootton 89) the intertextual corpus available today would amount to a mere fraction of its current scope, much in the same way in which the protagonist emerging from Austen’s text would never have gained his current “erotic charge” in the absence of “dialogic crosspollination” (Aragay and López 217) with the BBC version and Fielding’s Mark Darcy. Nevertheless, holding the series “responsible for the repackaging of Austen as chick-lit, supermarket shelf romance” (Wootton 89) strikes one as an excessively harsh and difficult to verify verdict. One could in fact argue that the very brief interval between its release and the publication of Fielding’s first volume together with the latter’s powerful impact on its readers render the causal chain particularly ambiguous and leave some room for the possibility that the process of identification at the centre of the “Bridget Jones effect” (Ramón-Torrijos 100) might have induced a fair percentage of the female public to establish a closer bond with the BBC DVD than would have otherwise been the case. Irrespective of the precise causality involved, it is interesting to note that in the case of many protagonists of subsequent narratives Bridget’s unabashed fascination gives way to embarrassment and anxiety, equally conspicuous in Amanda Price’s unconvincing denial in the opening scenes of *Lost in Austen* – “I am not hung up about Darcy. I do not sit at home with the pause button on Colin Firth in clingy pants.” (Zeff) – and Jane Hayes’ panicked haste to hide the *Pride and Prejudice* DVD among the leaves of a houseplant as soon as visitors announce their imminent arrival. Notwithstanding these feeble attempts to conceal Darcy’s virtual presence in their life, the true extent of their emotional investment in the BBC adaptation is quite clearly revealed by their invariable choice of pastimes and decor and results in rather disquieting thoughts about the unlikelihood of finding his equal in their own century and social milieu, not to mention occasional intimations of a bitter and solitary future: “that dream she’d had a few weeks ago – she’d been dressed in a ragged wedding gown (à la Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations* fame), dancing alone in a dark house, waiting for Mr. Darcy to come for her.” (Hale 7)

The fact that the lonely existence of Bridget, Jane and Amanda and a number of other similar females comes to an end with the arrival of a suitable embodiment of the fictional man of their dreams (whether it is a modern equivalent, as is the case with Mark Darcy and Henry Nobley, or the implausibly corporeal original) does not exactly help dispel the impression that the Jane Austen fandom is more likely to amount to an assortment of “happy-ending junkies, cheesy narrative geeks, and anti-feminist desperate housewives” (Grandi 23) than “a taste community that is both aware of the status of Austen’s novels but delighted to see them undergo a radical makeover” (Collins 192). It is however equally obvious that most members of this particular “tribe of kindred spirits” (Grandi 23) continue to regard “waiting for Mr Darcy” as a valid civil status option and to proudly display their allegiance by means of a wide variety of Internet memes and consumer items (ranging from sportswear inscribed with the highly motivational slogan “Run like Mr Darcy is waiting for you at the finish line” to “Reserved for Mr Darcy” pillowcases) quite unperturbed by the disparaging labels assigned by literary scholars and film critics. In the case of less intertextually adventurous ‘Austenalia’ (Rosen 136), the peaceful coexistence of products embossed with excerpts from Austen’s actual narrative and items sporting the slightly rephrased or entirely new lines popularised by the various film scripts simultaneously reinforces and subverts the idea of fidelity and provides further evidence of how subtly yet inexorably “adaptation undermines the traditional conception of the ‘original’ text or ‘source’” (Aragay and López 202), up to the point of actually replacing the memory of the novel (Ellis 3), whether the latter derives from actual reading, or a generally circulated set of cultural landmarks.

It is quite clear that notwithstanding the largely compelling arguments highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the “endurance and survival of the source text” and the “ongoing process of juxtaposed readings” (Sanders 25), not all scholars are likely to validate the notion that derivative works “strengthen the already close relationship among the audience, Austen, and her stories” (Svensson 209), maintain the global circulation of her texts “in original as well as retold forms” (Svensson 217) and ultimately “funnel readers back to the originals, increasing their cultural visibility” (Rosen 136). On the other hand, the apparently more modest proposition that rather than “dethroning the source text” and swapping high literature for popular culture (Terentowicz-Fotyga 273) most kinds of intertextual dialogue potentially rejuvenate “the presumed source . . . while synergetically throwing light on the con-text in which that source is adapted/rewritten” (Aragay and López 204) might prove to be more resilient in the face of elitist counterarguments. By agreeing to entertain the possibility that adaptations and rewritings are more likely “to tell us about our own moment in time than about Austen’s writing” (Troost and Greenfield 11) one might become aware of the extent to which the ostensibly naive contemplation of new incarnations of a familiar yet endlessly elusive figure can be accompanied by a less conspicuous yet more perceptive inward gaze and of the fact that pursuing the various avatars of a character such as Darcy can yield insights into issues that more often than not transcend the study of literature.

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