

SCREENING JANE

When History, Biography and Fiction create a Cinematic Life

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Abstract – This paper analyzes the interesting technique of adaptation of the film *Becoming Jane*, a biopic on the life of Jane Austen, released in 2007. Loosely based on Jon Spence's biography *Becoming Jane Austen*, the film faces the problem of the scarcity of information on Jane Austen's life through a technique that, if not original nor always satisfying, is nevertheless worth being studied. By recurring to the character descriptions and the anecdotes narrated in the novels, the film (and Spence's book too) "fills in the blanks" in Austen's life by adding touches of romance with questionable historical accuracy and fictionalizes the writer's biography in order to adapt it to the stereotype of modern romantic film heroines.

Keywords: Austen, biography; biopic; film; adaptation.

Why make a film of Jane Austen's life that isn't true? What's the point?
(Julie — Austenblog.com)

1. Austen's biopics

Jane Austen has become a movie 'star' since spring 2007. The unfinished sketch, the silhouette and the painting portraying her from the back, sole authentic remnants of the world-famous novelist's looks have suddenly been replaced by the beautiful figure and the expressive features of Anne Hathaway. Since the publication of her first novel, Austen has unrelentingly progressed towards success, gathering momentum from century to century and finally heading to the red carpet. Not only have her novels been read and appreciated all over the world and have scholars been studying her art under every possible perspective, but also admirers and profiteers have been writing sequels and prequels, rewritings, dramatic adaptations and, more recently, films inspired by her works.

After several theatrical adaptations, musicals and dialogues,¹ Hollywood discovered Austen's works for the first time in 1940 when a *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson, was produced. From then on several cinematic adaptations and TV dramatizations have followed, until the moment of the 'Austen boom'. From 1995-1996, the Austenian phenomenon exploded: since then all her novels have been adapted for the screen, sometimes more than once (*Emma* was adapted for two different productions in the same year 1996) together with free modernizations and 'intersections'² (such as *Clueless*, *Bridget Jones Diary*, and *The Jane Austen Book Club* just to quote the

¹ In the first four decades of the nineteenth century the following were staged: Mackay (1906), Patry (1906), Macnamara (1926), Fillipi (1929), Squire (1929), Johnson (1930), Jerome, (1935), Macnamara (1936), Milne (1936). Jerome's work was at the basis of the screenplay (adapted by Huxley and Murfin) for the 1940 *Pride and Prejudice*.

² Films where the original texts are "intentionally left unassimilated" (Andrews 1984: 99).

most famous). Even if the initial boom was due to the celebration of the years when Austen started writing the first drafts of her future masterpieces (between 1995 and 1999), the Austenian ‘goldmine’ is still one of the most fruitful of costume cinema. Her works and world are nowadays at the centre of a real craze: from gadgets and Regency costume balls to blogs and fanfiction sites, Jane Austen has colonized our contemporary culture in such a way as not many other classics have been able to. Quoting Claudia Johnson and Deidre Lynch, we could say that Austen has become a ‘cultural fetish’ (Johnson 1997: 212), the object of a mania that ‘straddles the divides between high and low culture, and between the canon and the cineplex’ (Lynch 2000: 5).³ That said, it is easy to see that it was high time for Hollywood to transform this novelist into the protagonist of a film.

Opportunity was finally provided in 2003 with the publication of Jon Spence’s biography *Becoming Jane Austen*. Spence’s work is not the first (or the last) nor the most authoritative account of Austen’s life,⁴ nevertheless, it proved to be the right book at the right moment. Many are the aspects that probably concurred to make it appealing to the cinema: firstly, the particular focus on Austen’s early adulthood together with the attention devoted to romantic stories (not only Austen’s ‘crush’ on Tom Lefroy but also the affair with ensuing marriage between Henry Austen and the older cousin Eliza de Feuillide); secondly, the ‘reader-friendly’ style addressed to a public wider than the usual composed of scholars and students; and finally, the constant link between biographic elements and episodes from the novels. At the apex of ‘Austenmania’ (Lynch 2000: 5) and with a palatable biography to work on, the world of cinema took possession of the story and the film was released in 2007.

But this is not the account of an expected success. The biopic, a perplexing mix of historical facts and fictional elements, met with dubious critiques from the specialists and tepid enthusiasm from the Janeites and, even if not a failure, it didn’t get the same success at the cinema that Austenian adaptations almost regularly achieve. However, the aim of this article is not to provide a close analysis of the reasons of its success or debacle, but is, instead, to study the techniques of transformation and fictionalisation of the ‘character’ Jane Austen and her (hi)story.

2. A Natural unfaithfulness

The opening quotation of this article is a comment left by a fan (Julie) on the page dedicated to the film on Austenblog.com. The spontaneous question ‘Why make a film of Jane Austen’s life that isn’t true? What’s the point?’⁵ appears like a natural perplexity. And an age-old one too. From the Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays onwards, critics have always debated on the opportunity, purpose and faithfulness of a derivative work. And, as Walsh points out, ‘the question “why” still looms over the adaptations’ (Walsh 2000: 4). Nonetheless, nowadays, particularly thanks to the success of cinema studies and postmodern theories, film adaptations are acquiring an independent status and do not need to justify themselves for daring ‘mangling’ a masterpiece anymore.

However, what is true for adaptations is still under debate for biopics. Biographical films are surrounded by an aura of historical reliability that sometimes appears to invest

³ See also Macdonald and Macdonald (2003), Pucci and Thompson (2003) and Grandi (2009).

⁴ Among recent texts dedicated to Austen, the following are noteworthy: Auerbach (2004), Butler (2007), Le Faye (2004) and (2006).

⁵ <http://austenblog.com/2006/04/21/becoming-jane-script-report-from-one-who-has-read-it/>.

them with higher responsibilities. Whether it is a biopic's duty to relate history as faithfully as possible is an interesting and fascinating question that still cannot be agreed upon. *Becoming Jane*, as the analysis here performed will show, is far from a historically reliable biopic and the question 'why' will 'loom' over this study several times. But it will not be specifically addressed. Even though it would be fascinating to investigate the market considerations and the cultural influences behind the screenplay writing, the subject of this article will not be 'why' some alterations were introduced but 'how' they were performed.

The basic assumption to start with is that the film 'isn't true': *Becoming Jane* is not an accurate and 'faithful' rendering of Spence's biography and there is nothing strange or unusual in it. Firstly, even if Jon Spence worked as a historic consultant for the film and his biography is the source for the screenplay, Kevin Hood (the screenwriter) frequently admits interpolating historical facts with imaginary elements.⁶

Secondly, even if the film had tried to faithfully 'stick to the facts', the result would not have been much dissimilar because performing an intersemiotic translation – that is the process enacted every time that a novel, a biography, a short story, etc. is adapted for a different medium – always necessarily implies a certain deal of transformation. Changes are connatural to adaptations because of the innate differences from medium to medium. Cinema has its specific language and what is effective on paper might not be effective on film, after all 'on the screen, history must be fictional in order to be true' (Rosenstone 1995: 70). The 'faithful-unfaithful' debate in adaptations – which Duncan effectively calls 'an apple and orange debate' (Duncan 2000: 2) – is, all in all, little more than a divertissement.

Moreover, a biopic, like any other historical film, is 'a work that stages and constructs a past in images and sounds' and communicates 'not just literally' or 'realistically', but 'poetically and metaphorically' (Rosenstone 2003: 65). Referring to this need for transformation, Rosenstone speaks of 'true invention' (Rosenstone 1995: 72-73), intending those kinds of imaginary additions (or cuts) that help to explain and narrate the truth of a historical moment. In *Becoming Jane* many are the changes performed for the sake of the 'medium specificity' (Rosenstone 1995: 19), and some brief examples will be provided hereafter. However, the film is also unfaithful in a different way: it is rich in 'false inventions' (Rosenstone 1995: 72-73), which are additions that alter and corrupt the very historical facts that grant the film its status of biopic. The rest of the article will be devoted to analysing these 'unfaithful techniques' and the effects of these changes.

Among the 'traditional' changes performed by screenwriters adapting (historical) novels for the cinema we can recognize in *Becoming Jane* a notable amount of 'selection and abridgment' (Leitch 2007: 185),⁷ which usually means cuts, but also 'condensation' of elements or episodes of the plot.

First of all, the screenwriters decided that they needed to simplify the composition of the Austenian family and accomplished it by 'pruning' many of its branches: of Austen's seven brothers, only Henry and George are preserved. The choice of 'casting' George, Austen's mentally disabled brother who was cared by a labourers' family in the neighbourhood, is interesting and unusual, but the rest of the selection is quite conventional. Henry's preservation is a necessity since his love story with Eliza is chosen as a romantic subplot for the film. Another relevant 'victim' is Eliza's disabled son whose

⁶ See the commentary to the film prepared for the DVD edition and Burt (2008).

⁷ According to Rosenstone, the usual actions performed in "true inventions" are "alteration, compression, invention and metaphor" (1995: 72-75).

expunction allows his widowed mother to flirt with the younger cousin in complete freedom. The ‘pruning’ goes even further, eliminating every other character that had an important role in Austen’s life in those years: one for all is her dear friend and confident Mrs Lefroy,⁸ Thomas Lefroy’s aunt, who is demoted to a speaking walk-on part.

Some episodes needed to be altered in consequence of this selection: the most evident is the journey to London, an episode proposed as hypothesis in Spence’s biography. Thanks to a brief note written to Cassandra from Cork Street in August 1796,⁹ Spence conjectures that, on their way to Kent, Jane and her two brothers Edward and Frank stopped for a couple of nights in London in the house of Lefroy’s uncle Benjamin Langlois.¹⁰ The event – if true¹¹ – would demonstrate the survival of a relationship between Austen and Lefroy after January 1796 and, as a consequence, perfectly fits the development of the romance in the film. Naturally, the travel companions for Austen are, in this case, Henry and Eliza and they all join Cassandra at the coast.

Condensation of dates and events is another natural way to simplify the plot. At the beginning, Lefroy’s arrival coincides with the formal announcement of Tom Fowle’s – Cassandra’s fiancé, in the film ‘re-baptized’ Robert to distinguish him from the protagonist Tom Lefroy – imminent departure for the West Indies. Historically, Cassandra left Steventon in November to spend some months with Fowle’s family before his departure, thus missing Lefroy’s arrival for Christmas. However, in this way the film is able to show these two important events condensed in one single episode. The season has changed too: instead of winter, summer is chosen as the best setting for the love story. Summer is probably more cinematic not only thanks to its colours but also thanks to the open air activities (including walks and cricket games) that encourage movement, allow private conversations and, from a visual point of view, confer to the love story an air of freshness and vitality. The same condensation happens when the sisters receive two bad pieces of news: Fowle’s death (historically learned by the Austens in April 1797) and Lefroy’s second visit when already engaged (autumn 1798). The cinematic coincidence of the loss of the lovers is not only useful for plot condensation, but also to overlap and intensify the grief of the Austen sisters.

3. The “fill in the blanks” strategy

One of the main problems that Austenian biographers regularly face is the scarcity of testimonial material, in particular as regards Austen’s private life and emotional world. In 1925, Virginia Woolf wrote: ‘It is probable that if Miss Cassandra Austen had had her way we should have had nothing of Jane Austen’s except her novels’ (134). The systematic elimination of all the letters containing confidential information performed by Austen’s sister has forever deprived the world of the possibility of knowing with accuracy the personality of the novelist. However, what is an insurmountable obstacle for those who look for the truth, can reveal itself a priceless opportunity for those who content themselves with hypotheses. Austen’s ‘intractable silences’ (Shields, 5) are open to every speculation and conjecture and what cannot be proved cannot, as well, be refuted. The film capitalizes on this opportunity and fills the blanks of history with suggestive theories.

⁸ See Lefroy and Turner (2007).

⁹ Letter 3, 23 August 1796 (Le Faye 1995).

¹⁰ Cfr. Spence, pp. 98-100.

¹¹ In her interesting article, Walker argues against Lefroy’s presence in Cork Street in that season.

The first assumption, which is at the origin and basis of the film, is that Tom Lefroy was Austen's first, great and only love. Only three letters¹² remain which can, in some way, account for a romantic attachment of Austen to Lefroy and the importance of her feeling, its being mutual, and its duration are all matters of speculation. If Halperin lists Lefroy as the first of a long series of 'lovers', Radovici and Spence consider him the most important. Many others, from William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh to Le Faye (*Family Record*) and Ray reduce his relevance in Austen's life to a 'not very serious' attachment (Austen-Leigh, 84). The film, however, pivots entirely around this first and unique love. It shows us that *Pride and Prejudice* was fully inspired by that event, that Austen owes her style to Lefroy's influence and that, after the unfortunate conclusion of their 'affair', she chose to 'live by her pen' not to betray the love she had once felt. Moreover, in a very suggestive conclusive scene, the film implies that Lefroy never forgot Austen as well, going as far as calling his daughter 'Jane'.¹³ Furthermore, in order to provide a climax to the romance, the film hypothesises an attempted elopement that risks compromising Austen's respectability and puts an end to the 'love adventure', making the young couple realise their sad situation of money dependence. No account, not even a hint of an elopement has ever appeared in history but, as said before, what cannot be proved cannot be refuted. After all, Austen's narrative is replete of elopements, the most famous of which, as will be further explained in the following paragraph, is the episode of Lydia and Wickam in *Pride and Prejudice* which certainly constituted a source of inspiration for the screenwriters.

The 'fill in the blanks' strategy is brought to a new level of artifice in the treatment of the problem of the burned letters (and manuscripts). Thanks to a curious short-circuit between history and fiction, the film presents a letter from Jane to Cassandra where she announces her visit to Cork Street with the purpose of obtaining Langlois's blessing for the marriage. Naturally, no letter of such kind survives, so the conclusion of the letter – 'Please destroy this disgraceful letter the moment you have recovered from your astonishment' – sounds particularly opportune. The boldest undertaking, however, is the one proposed at the beginning of the film. The opening sequence shows us Austen painstakingly trying to compose a piece of prose (historically, she wrote a poem)¹⁴ in occasion of her sister's engagement. It goes without saying that there is no trace of this composition in Austen's *Juvenilia* or *Minor Works*¹⁵ and the film, cleverly enough, shows us that Austen burned it because of Lefroy's harsh critique. Fortunately, the surmised manuscript burning is limited to one piece of writing, so we are spared the grief of mourning the loss of many invaluable (and imaginary) juvenilia. The screenwriters made a curious choice when they decided to make up almost all Austenian 'quotations', leaving thus the audience with the disappointing sensation that Austen's own voice is completely absent in this film.

One last 'blank' in Jane's short love life remained to be filled: what she did in London while residing in Cork Street. According to the film, she met Ann Radcliffe. The imaginary event is probably proposed to contextualize Austen in a world of women writers

¹² Letter 1, 9-10 January 1796, Letter 2, 14-15 January 1796 and Letter 11, 17-18 November 1798 (Le Faye 1995).

¹³ Historically Lefroy's son was called Anthony after Lefroy's father and, quite evidently, the daughter was called Jane after Lefroy's wife's mother, Mrs Jane Paul (Lefroy, 15). Unfortunately, the film screenwriters, producer and director completely disregard this fact and boldly define this scene "the complete justification of the entire film". See the film commentary in the DVD edition.

¹⁴ 'Ode to Pity', Sabor, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 96-98.

¹⁵ Kevin Hood claims to have "nicked bits from the *Juvenilia*" but no clear source is recognizable.

but also to allow a conversation between the two novelists about the impossibility of being an author and a good wife at the same time. The mature gothic writer prefigures for the young novelist future matrimonial dissatisfactions and difficulties. In the following scenes we will learn that Jane will not have to find a balance between her writing ambitions and her duties as a wife, but in this part of the film she is still full of hopes and expectations. The episode is clumsy and gratuitous and the best explanation for it is probably provided by Cano Lopez and Garcia-Periago who identify a resonance (perhaps an imitation) between the screenplays of *Shakespeare in Love* (where the Bard could exchange opinions and verses with Christopher Marlowe) and *Becoming Jane*.

4. Fictionalizing (and Stereotyping) Jane

The final part of this article is dedicated to studying one of the most peculiar aspects of *Becoming Jane*: the fictionalisation of Austen and of the other protagonists of this little part of history. In biopics, the re-construction of history through the use of fiction is a common device used to transform ‘an actual person’ into a ‘character’ (10) – as Bingham points out, ‘biopics partake of fiction in making their subjects’ lives real to us’ (8). Nevertheless, the conscious and blatant contradiction, distortion or erasure of those that we can consider ‘given facts’ of the Austenian biography in *Becoming Jane* is a cinematic attitude that needs further analysis.

First and foremost the characterizations of Jane Austen and Thomas Lefroy undergo a drastic metamorphosis. The impression we receive is that the ‘historical’ representation of the two protagonists was considered little appealing for a modern public and an operation of radical transformation was reputed necessary to increase their marketability and their ‘modernity’ (the screenwriters openly admit having looked for inspiration in Hollywood screwball comedies). And here come the stereotypes: Thomas Lefroy becomes a (reformed) rake and Jane Austen a proto-feminist.

As Sadoff convincingly argues, the choice of casting a young and beautiful Anne Hathaway, just like Keira Knightley in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*, demonstrates the will of contemporary cinema to modernize Austenian heroines by bringing ‘millennial girlhood to the megaplex’ (87).¹⁶ Not only do these actresses ‘update the Austen body for the millennial teenage set’ (ibid.) but they also add ‘sex appeal and postfeminist agency’ (ibid.) thanks to their previous roles. Outspoken and independent, young Jane is a ‘tomboy’ unresponsive to male attention (except when she falls in love). This portrayal doesn’t sound much accurate if compared to the tone of her letters; however, the result is a modern heroine, so up-to-date and cinematic that she seems almost indistinguishable from hundreds of similar heroines in contemporary films.

Lefroy, on the other hand, is a young and reckless libertine who likes wasting time on boxing, alcohol and prostitutes and who neglects his studies to the point of being punished (sent to ‘the country’) by his terrible uncle, Judge Langlois. Historically, young Tom was a responsible and serious student and his ‘terrible’ Parliamentary uncle Langlois doted on him as we can perceive from his letters to Lefroy’s father: ‘Thomas has everything in his temper and character that can conciliate affection. A good heart, a good mind, good sense, and as little to correct in him as ever I saw in one of his age’ (Lefroy, 8). And of his behaviour in the capital during that year his tutor wrote ‘He is, in his religious principles, in his desire of knowledge, and in his just ambition, fortified in every

¹⁶ See also Koh (2008), Mohr (2008), Grandi (2008).

place' (ibid. 13). The screenwriters must have decided that this serious and devoted law student was too unappealing for a modern, teenage public. The ensuing transformation thus resorts to all stereotypes of romance heroes: the rebel, the scoundrel and then, the reformed rake.

Along with stereotypes, other sources that inspired the fictionalization in *Becoming Jane* were, naturally, the novels (in particular, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*). In his biography, Spence ascribes the composition of *Pride and Prejudice* to Austen's feelings in that period and even suggests the assimilation of Lefroy with Elizabeth Bennet and the consequent identification Austen-Darcy.¹⁷ The screenwriters must have found the idea particularly appealing: they increased the superimposition between Austen's life and the novel by adding episodes and characters 'directly inspired' by it and transforming, this time, Austen into "a replica of Elizabeth Bennet (with a touch of impetuous Lydia thrown in)" (Cartmell, 11). So, not only has young Jane a 'pert tongue' but she also has a fictitious Lady Gresham (Lizzy's Lady Catherine de Bourgh) to antagonize with. The Lady's fictitious nephew, Mr Wisley, is a perfect representative of Mr Collins, including his clumsiness in dancing and his unappealing marriage proposal. And Mr Darcy? The film, quite predictably, could not do without love skirmishes, so the first meeting between Austen and Lefroy is a 'remake' of *Pride and Prejudice* where Darcy-Lefroy offends Lizzy-Austen and only after few days and many hostile conversations, the two protagonists learn to appreciate and love each other. But the character of the cinematic Jane Austen is not only based on Elizabeth Bennet. Another, less predictable, source is the youngest sister, Lydia: the elopement episode adds action to the romance plot and constitutes the climax of the film. By showing us the two lovers ready to elope, the public understands the depth and mutuality of their love and by showing, few minutes later, Austen's change of mind in order to protect Lefroy's future, the story is ready to flow towards its conclusion: Jane Austen chooses to become a professional (unmarried) writer not to betray her love and Lefroy is unable to forget her.

Finally, the influence of *Northanger Abbey* on the reconstruction of the Cork Street episode (probably inspired by Radovici's biography together with Spence's work) is noteworthy. First of all, the 'evil' uncle Langlois strongly recalls General Tilney for his austerity and his ceremonious deference for high nobility. More importantly, the fictitious episode of the expulsion of the guests (Jane, Henry and Eliza) after the arrival of an anonymous letter follows the novel with striking precision.

To sum up, *Becoming Jane* shows traditional adaptation techniques together with more original ones. The 'filling in' the blanks of Austenian history with fictional elements is a provocative and stimulating technique which is encouraged and boosted by the lack of historical information in Austen's biography. The fictionalisation of Austen's life according to episodes narrated in her novels could be based on the possibility that she might have included personal experiences in her narrative; however, the systematic alteration of historical facts in order to adapt history to fiction is a technique that risks trespassing the boundaries of the biopic. Nevertheless, the stereotyping of the characters together with the 'fictionalisation' of history are two elements of remarkable interest and (even better?) re-propose the hoary problem of the responsibility of historical films and biopics towards historical facts.

¹⁷ See Spence, 101-104.

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