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# Silver Hair on the Silver Screen: Adaptations of Jane Austen's Older Women

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SILVER HAIR ON THE SILVER SCREEN: ADAPTATIONS OF JANE AUSTEN'S  
OLDER WOMEN

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Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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## ABSTRACT

Three adaptations of Jane Austen novels were produced between 1995 and 1999. These late 90s films represented a set of romantic comedies created in the style of heritage cinema. In adapting *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Mansfield Park*, filmmakers reshaped the older women supporting characters in order to better fit the generic conventions of romantic comedies. Romantic comedies of the 1990s relied on a narrow view of the marriage plot whereby the focus is wholly on the courtship process of a predominately affluent, white, heterosexual couple. By excising the roles of the older women, Mrs. Jennings, Miss Bates, and Mrs. Norris respectively, filmmakers refused to allow for alternate versions of womanhood beyond the traditions of marriage and motherhood.

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## INTRODUCTION

Film writers and directors keep returning to Jane Austen as source material for movies, but where the novels may explore a variety of themes, Hollywood is only interested in one: the marriage plot. In the late 1990s, Austen saw something of a renaissance in Hollywood, as three films (along with a BBC miniseries and a variety of stories inspired by her books) came to the screen: *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee 1995), *Emma* (Douglas McGrath 1996), and *Mansfield Park* (Patricia Rozema 1999). This set of films is often lauded for the portrayal of the protagonist, and each film had some measure of box-office success. However, it is a mistake to view these films as faithful adaptations of Jane Austen because of their formulaic subscription to the romantic comedy genre. Such erroneously assumed fidelity overlooks the fact that in creating a space for the Hollywood starlet to find her ideal husband, Austen's women-centric narratives and satiric backdrops must be diminished or outright dismissed. In fact, while Austen builds her narratives in front parlors and women's private correspondence, filmmakers forgo these relationships among women for the generic romantic comedy with its primary focus on women's relationships only to men. Thus, the secondary female characters, particularly the older women past childbearing or marriageable age, are minimized in favor of bringing the leading male characters more fully into the narrative and increasing screen time for stars like Hugh Grant and Jonny Lee Miller. In Austen's novels, marriages are merely the side effect, albeit intended and expected, while the stories are grounded in the community, a network largely composed of women's correspondence.

By marginalizing a prominent aspect of the society, that is, the elder and experienced woman, Hollywood displays a stigma against aging women and perpetuates a narrow space of acceptable roles for women. While the marriage plot is one way for a woman to live happily in an Austen narrative, it is certainly not the only way to succeed as the adaptations suggest. Austen presents a number of women characters who are either past the role of finding a husband or have forgone the marriage plot entirely. In examining this set of secondary women characters—Miss Bates, Mrs. Jennings, and Mrs. Norris—and their roles in both the novels and the corresponding films from the 1990s, it becomes clear that these women, overlooked and disregarded in their respective cinematic portrayals, are not the buffoons or comic foils that Hollywood depicts.

Paula Marantz Cohen argues that the romantic comedy “derives from the novelistic tradition associated with Jane Austen, who launched the courtship plot in all its conventionalized glory. Invariably there is a heroine of pluck and intelligence who, after a variety of fairly predictable misadventures and misunderstandings, is united with her soul mate at the end” (Cohen 79). Cohen’s description of Austen “tradition” is exactly the one dimensional aspect that Hollywood grasped; it ignores, as Cohen does, the worlds that Austen created, full of characters that range in age and station in favor of standard romantic plot points that sell movie tickets. The romantic comedy of the 1990s carried on with a film practice that began over a decade prior. Tamar Jeffers McDonald notes in *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* that romantic comedies of the 90s “do not merely ignore the advances in the genre that [previous] romantic comedies represent: they reject them” in a kind of neo-traditional way (91). It is perhaps no surprise then, that

several of Austen's novels themselves were once again adapted for the big screen in the 1990s as her association with the romantic comedy genre is inescapable by virtue of a marriage at the end. In turning to the past through Austen's narratives, filmmakers can continue "pigeonholing the perceived truths of women's experiences in a so-called lifestyle culture" (Tasker and Negra 172). In the case of the 90s adaptations of Jane Austen, women's experiences are limited to the personal evolution that makes the young protagonist worthy of the appropriate male suitor. Without exception, Austen's novels have been adapted into marriage plots that fulfill the romantic comedy formula and present themselves as "truths of women's experiences." However, this "truth" only extends as far as the main female characters who themselves are young, white, and affluent.

Linda Hutcheon notes "that, in most concepts of translation, the source text is granted an axiomatic primacy and authority, and the rhetoric of comparison has most often been that of faithfulness and equivalence" (Hutcheon 16). Yet, as Paula Marantz Cohen has used Austen as the litmus test for all romantic comedies, the success of the film adaptations has informed the reading of Austen's texts. *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Mansfield Park* do each culminate with the marriage of a young couple, but the novels' narratives are far more concerned with the community at large and how the multiple characters have built their lives. In *Mansfield Park* for example, the protagonist Fanny Price is not even named until the second chapter. Austen instead lays the foundation of *Mansfield Park* through the personal histories of the Ward sisters (Fanny's mother and aunts). Film audiences are not privy to these histories as Fanny's marriage

plot overshadows the rest of the relationships. Certainly film adapters must decide what changes will lead to the most successful film, but in adjusting Austen's narrative to better fit the conventions of a romantic comedy, audiences are likely to come to the same conclusion about Austen's focus on marriage that Cohen blithely ascribes to her novels.

Adaptation filmmakers create movies that follow Hollywood conventions to reach a wide audience for financial gain while still aiming to appeal to the established fan base of the novels: a smaller, though more emotionally invested and often more vocal group. In particular, fans of Austen's works are so prolific that they have been dubbed "Janeites." There is even a Jane Austen Society of North America which is as invested in Austen's personal life as a scholar is in her works. JASNA's contributions to Austen scholarship is undeniable, though they appear to approach any adaptation with an air of suspicion, noting that "we love to watch them all – even if we are not always so fond of the finished product as we had wished to be" (JASNA.org). Austen's books are part of the Regency era which filmmakers and viewers like the Janeites imbue with a sense of nostalgia and fetishize as a somehow better time. The Regency setting is another layer to the adaptation process, and filmmakers adapting Austen's novels end up producing a 'period' film even as they produce a romantic comedy addressing contemporary concerns. Indeed, the Janeites' complaints seem to fall under a concern with fidelity to the novels that is largely based on reconstructing the look of the Regency period, but there is perhaps less at stake in the drapery choices of the set designers than in the way the characters are continually made to function within the constraints of a romantic comedy. The adaptations of the 1990s, with the exception of the 1996 film *Clueless*, exemplify

“exhaustive attempts to create an impression of fidelity to...Jane Austen’s village life, the result of which, so far from ensuring fidelity to the text, is to produce a distracting quaintness” (McFarlane 9). Certainly, a visually ingrained sense of nostalgia can add to an audience’s enjoyment of the film because the setting “looks” correct, but without effective characters, even the most ‘period’ accurate Austen adaptation will still be generically static. In addition to the generic concerns of Austen adaptations, they are also associated with heritage cinema which, as Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant point out in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage, and Costume Film*, are “typically set in an English, southern, middle- or upper-class past...and frequently adapted from ‘classic’ literary sources” (Monk and Sargeant 178). Through this association with heritage cinema, Austen adaptations inevitably become linked to a conservative nostalgia that has little to do with the novels themselves. Further, filmmakers are also working with a wider cinematic audience in mind. Such an audience may be vaguely aware of Austen, having been forced to read at least one of her novels in high school, and will watch with a set of expectations that may be less grounded in Austen lore than that of the Janeites. And, as heritage film is intended to invoke a sense of nostalgia through “a particular aesthetic approach to the visualization of the past,” audiences can walk out of the theatre secure in feeling that the filmmaker successfully encapsulated the Regency era (Monk and Sargeant 178). However, the intersection of heritage films’ nostalgia for a better, simpler, and happier past and the romantic comedy’s focus on young love, courtship, and marriage means that adapting Austen’s novels leaves little room for showing the narrative as anything more than a prescriptive and conventional primer on how a young woman

must behave in order to succeed in Regency England. In this set of ‘period’ movies made in the 1990s, one group in particular must be reshaped to better fit the adaptive expectations: the older female supporting characters. Mrs. Jennings, Miss Bates, and Mrs. Norris do look the part, and they are treated as equivalent to the rolling countryside and interior design because exploring their characters means little to the protagonist’s marital success as set forth by both heritage film and romantic comedy conventions.

Austen film adaptations of the 1990s competed for an audience during a decade that had become increasingly inundated with views of Americana which had been whitewashed and taboo in previous decades. The 1990s saw an influx of popular television shows like *Ellen*, *My So-Called Life*, and *Party of Five*, each of which premiered in 1994 and found success particularly with a young female audience (imdb.com). While the popularity of these shows suggests a continued privileging of youth, television had begun to broach subjects like sexuality, racism, and class division that had been largely ignored in mainstream entertainment. Additionally, Alex Heigl notes in “Twelve Crucial Moments in the Evolution of MTV” that MTV, which had already altered the way America consumed media with music videos, found success with *The Real World* which had been airing since 1992. This show portrayed a group of young people living together and being filmed at all hours of the day, beginning a reality television tidal wave that fully developed into a successful television formula by the end of the 90s (Heigl). In contrast, the romantic comedy largely clung to a conservative and restrictive view of youth and courtship because the romantic comedy “keeps the appearance, inherited from the 1970s films, of being a more realistic type of romantic

comedy, it has no use for realism if this means facing up to the actual problems of forming a lasting relationship in contemporary society” (McDonald 86). The hybrid genre had certainly been around long before the 1990s, but it is during that decade that the romantic comedy clings to its generic conventions against a shift to more realistic displays of modern issues about relationships and culture.

Filmmakers were thus faced with the predicament of creating successful films in light of shifting entertainment expectations and the fact that audiences, particularly young women, were beginning to see themselves on television, from the struggles of high school in *My So-Called Life* to the (albeit heavily edited) portrayal of living in *The Real World* and humorous depiction of navigating relationships and sexuality in *Ellen*. What the film industry was able to offer to these audiences came in the form of idealized romantic comedy plots in two hours or less; a kind of reaction to the weekly dramas that unfolded, seemingly never ending, on TV. Deborah Jermyn explains that “Hollywood in particular has been charged with being ‘youth-obsessed’, chasing younger audiences by putting their likeness on-screen” (Jermyn 26). By latching on to the notion that it was only youth that attracted an audience, Hollywood romantic comedies merely continued marketing to affluent, white, young females that were already used to seeing themselves reflected back from whatever screen they watched. Romantic comedies were also a product of a revival in Hollywood that began in the 1980s, according to Steve Neale in *Genre and Hollywood*. Neale points out that romantic comedies of the 80s and 90s marked a return to an “ideology of ‘old-fashioned’ heterosexual romance and hence...the rituals, signs and wishes that mark it” (63). This created a very narrow formula that

dominated the romantic comedy genre throughout the 90s. The protagonists are expected to be white, wealthy, and heterosexual. By steering romantic comedies along the generic party line, filmmakers create an investment in the love story despite the opportunity to explore the novel's other storylines that may offer alternatives to womanhood in addition to the protagonist's eventual marriage. It is perhaps no surprise then, that Amy Heckerling's 1996 *Clueless*, which updates Emma to a current setting, omits the character of Miss Bates, the novel's older spinster, entirely, only borrowing her earnest naïveté for a loosely adapted version of one of the novel's other female characters.

The *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Mansfield Park* film adaptations excise characters irrelevant to the strict romantic comedy plot to focus almost wholly on the burgeoning relationship between the main character and her soon-to-be husband. To be sure, as Sarah Morrison notes, "[r]eaders' assumptions often lead them to *expect* the relationship between the heroine and hero to dwarf all others" (340). However, despite the assertions of critics like Paula Marantz Cohen, Austen's novels do not make the romantic relationships the main crux of the narrative. Though she may tidy up her novels' endings with at least one marriage, Austen succeeds "in making women the normative center" of the worlds she depicts (Morrison 343). It is in the front parlors and private correspondence between women that her narratives are built, not at the altar. Mrs. Jennings, Miss Bates, and Mrs. Norris are each crucial to their respective narratives, and reducing them to jokes as the films do only serves to reinforce the stigma against aging women and undermines the representation of women as anything other than potential mates and mothers. They are certainly characters who contribute to the

development and maturation of the female protagonists of the stories. However, more importantly they are also characters who successfully survive in their respective societies and act as agents in their own lives. Miss Bates is the beloved center of local information around whom *Highbury* revolves; Mrs. Jennings has a sense of bold charisma that allows her to move and exert influence throughout the society of Devonshire; and Mrs. Norris is an opportunist who strives to make herself indispensable within *Mansfield Park*. Instead of recognizing the way these women illustrate a community based on the interactions of women, however, Austen film adaptations emphasize the male suitors' role in order to bolster the romantic comedy aesthetic. As Morrison explains, Austen's novels "assert the primacy of feminine experience by reducing the characterization of men in the novels" (340). The film adaptations, however, privilege the men's characters in order to encourage the audience to invest themselves in the marriage plot. In order to provide the necessary screen time to the lead couple, secondary characters like the novel's older women are minimized in favor of maximizing the masculine suitors. These women, however, are critical to the heroines' development in the novels due to their perspective as women outside of the marriage plot. In foreclosing the alternatives Mrs. Jennings, Miss Bates, and Mrs. Norris provide, the films advocate a narrow definition of a woman's acceptable role as merely young, marriageable, and fertile.

CHAPTER ONE  
SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

The audience hears Mrs. Jennings coming before they see her in Ang Lee's 1995 *Sense and Sensibility*, and her booming exuberance at the arrival of Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, stands in sharp contrast to the defeated air of the family. Screenwriter Emma Thompson, who also starred in the film as Elinor Dashwood, was praised for picking up on Austen's satirical bent in her script, but a closer look at the movie makes it clear that the filmmaker's choice to focus on the older Dashwood sisters' marriage plots leaves little room for the relationships among the women of Devonshire. Thus, Mrs. Jennings' role as the welcome wagon and facilitator to society is left looking more like an encroachment on the Dashwoods' quiet lives.

Interactions among women are paramount to the novel. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are sisters who, upon losing their family home, move with their mother to the estate of a cousin, Sir John Middleton. His mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings, is an older busybody of a woman who, having married off her own daughters makes it her mission to do the same for Elinor and Marianne. Mrs. Jennings is certainly prone to brash exclamations of her many opinions, standing in direct contrast to both Elinor and Marianne. Elinor is the manifestation of calm, collected thought and good breeding: the "sense" of the title, while the impetuous and romantic Marianne is the "sensibility." It is Mrs. Jennings however, argue Kathleen Anderson and Jordan Kidd, "whose combination of qualities the novel ultimately defines as the most healthful" (136). She is neither too

down-to-earth, like Elinor, who closes herself off to love, nor is she too accepting of others and liable to get her heart broken, like Marianne. Her happiness, as Anderson and Kidd point out, depends on nothing but herself; a comfortable widow who has no need of others' money or approval, she is in an enviable position for a woman of the time. Mrs. Jennings represents an alternate role in society beyond what Elinor or Marianne can grasp. While in the past she certainly fulfilled the expected roles of wife and mother, in the present she operates in society as her own agent. Instead of merely appearing at various functions as a moneyed widow, she is "a great wonderer, as every one must be who takes a very lively interest in all the comings and goings of all their acquaintance" and is deeply concerned with the happiness of those around her (53). Austen's language suggests that Mrs. Jennings has spent considerable time watching the people around her. While her observations are portrayed as incessant to the point of irritating Elinor and Marianne, Mrs. Jennings is no less accurate in perceiving the intentions of those around her. Eva Brann argues in her article "Whose Sense? Whose Sensibility? Jane Austen's Subtlest Novel" that Mrs. Jennings does not need romantic drama to sustain her, as Marianne does, but at the same time she displays a type of sense "superior in quickness to Elinor" as she navigates her world (133). It is Mrs. Jennings, for example, who perceives the negative qualities of Fanny Dashwood, whom she pegs immediately as being rude and proud.

Mrs. Jennings has been successful, in her way, at navigating life in the social milieu of Austen's novel, which is exactly what Elinor and Marianne find so challenging. Furthermore, while Mrs. Jennings enjoys the Dashwood sisters, her life is not exclusively

concerned with theirs. Mrs. Jennings applies her humorous scrutiny to every member of the society, as shown in her preoccupation with Colonel Brandon's sudden departure from Barton Park. She can get away with her interference because she has parlayed the station of being a wealthy widow into a position as a kind of matriarchal center of Devonshire. Mrs. Jennings, then, may be funny, but she is not a character who exists solely to be mocked. Though she is a static rather than a dynamic character, she is by no means one-dimensionally negative. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft suggests that because women are necessarily understood as "[c]onnected with man as daughters, wives, and mothers, their moral character may be estimated by their manner of fulfilling those simple duties; but the end, the grand end to their exertions should be to unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue" (Wollstonecraft 29). In a near proof of Wollstonecraft's point, Austen presents Mrs. Jennings as the grand end who has made a life for herself even after having fulfilled her own marriage plot.

Mrs. Jennings' role is not limited to meddling matchmaking as the film suggests, as she is a woman with many opinions and questions. While everyone else laughs at Mrs. Jennings' persistent nature, "Elinor tried to laugh too. But the effort was painful" (46). The sisters' intense focus on their social standings seems only to encourage Mrs. Jennings humor and matchmaking attempts. Moreover, Mrs. Jennings simply wants to know things about her new friends. On the trip to London, she laments that "she could not make them choose their own dinners at the inn, nor extort a confession of their preferring salmon to cod, or boiled fowl to veal cutlets" (114). Marianne and Elinor have

not been encouraged to form an opinion on such minutiae as it is not directly related to finding a husband. However, Mrs. Jennings has cultivated her personality, complete with actual preferences and opinions of her own making that she expresses without concern for the way they may be received. Mrs. Jennings is an example of the woman Wollstonecraft describes who, after her youth and beauty has faded, is able “to attain such habits of virtue as will render [her] independent” (Wollstonecraft 24). Such a carefree expression of self is difficult to imagine for women like Elinor and Marianne who are shortsighted in their search for husbands as if their life ends at marriage.

If one’s only experience with *Sense and Sensibility* were Ang Lee’s movie version, however, one would think of Mrs. Jennings only as a rich buffoon. Her every line is played for laughs, and the viewer is not laughing with her, or even gently at her. Instead, Mrs. Jennings seems not only silly but even ill-bred and callous. In the film, she is often loud, and is oblivious to the finer feelings of Marianne and Elinor. Her coarseness pits the audience against the older woman as the camera returns again and again to the Dashwood sisters grimacing at Mrs. Jennings. At dinner at Barton Park, for example, Mrs. Jennings dominates the meal with her questions and observations. She is instantly at ease with the Dashwoods while Elinor and Marianne are taken aback and defensive at her familiarity. When Mrs. Jennings expresses her certainty that Elinor is pining for a man, the sisters exchange exasperated looks and Sir John jokes that Mrs. Jennings is “worse than my best pointer, Flossie” (Lee). Combined with the sisters’ frustration, this announcement depicts Mrs. Jennings as a nosy and unwelcome animal. Austen’s character of a woman at peace with herself and providing a mix of sense and

sensibility is lost in favor of a clownish figure at whom the audience can laugh and who is presented as inferior to Elinor and Marianne in every respect. The novel's narrator presents Mrs. Jennings in an admiring tone, noting a "kind of discernment" in her recognition of love interests among the young people, as well as a successful socialite. She is not openly mocked as Sir John does in the film, and Mrs. Jennings' curiosity at Elinor's love interest is easily redirected into a new subject by the other dinner guests. In changing to Mrs. Jennings' character from inquisitive and caring to an insensitive foil, she better suits the tropes of romantic movies. The audience is continually situated with the Dashwoods, and while Mrs. Jennings offers a character that is beyond the anxieties of the marriage plot, her characterization in the film is oddly one dimensional, making her someone to be dismissed as quickly as the older Dashwood sisters can manage even as they take advantage of her hospitality in London.

In flattening the character of Mrs. Jennings, Thompson in her capacity as screenwriter and Lee, as director, made Austen's story better fit the mold of a Hollywood romantic comedy, where anxiety about marriage is key. By avoiding the nuances of the female relationships that are largely directed by Mrs. Jennings in the novel, time can be spent on the heroines and their heroes. Devoney Looser argues that the shift from a women-centric narrative to the romantic comedy creates sympathy for the male characters that is not present in Austen's novels. She notes that:

“[t]he changes that Emma Thompson's screenplay makes to the male characters, if anything, allow them to be less culpable, more likeable, and certainly less sexist or patriarchal. *Sense and Sensibility* as it is rewritten (and as it now compels us to

reread) is revealed as a text that allows men to reconcile the contradictory demands of manhood—that allows them models for creating more just relationships with women and more complete understandings of themselves and their own emotions.” (166)

These revisions must make room for the men in some way, to the detriment of the supporting women characters. For example, during Marianne’s breakdown over Willoughby’s marriage to another woman, Mrs. Jennings is portrayed as oblivious and shallow. The audience has been invited to share in the heartbreak over the handsome Willoughby but Mrs. Jennings seeks to end Marianne’s emotional suffering by offering solution through physical comforts, asking Elinor, “Does she like olives?” Thus, Lee and Thompson further lose the function of Mrs. Jennings’ character by showing her as insensitive to Marianne’s heartbreak. In the book, Mrs. Jennings represents a matriarch who has evolved beyond her relationships only to men and is undaunted by the anxieties that plague the other characters. Her reaction to Marianne’s heartbreak does have some measure of tending to her physical comfort, but her first reaction is outrage on Marianne’s behalf, vowing that “if I ever meet [Willoughby] again, I will give him such a dressing as he not had this many day” (Austen 136). Mrs. Jennings is willing to use her societal clout to champion the Dashwoods while “possess[ing] sufficient confidence to ask the questions” that everyone else is too anxious or polite to ask (Anderson and Kidd 143). In the movie, she is no more than a buffoon making coarse jokes.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EMMA

Perhaps Austen's most well-known old maid is *Emma's* Miss Bates, who never married and lives with her decrepit mother, relying on the spoils of their neighbors to make ends meet on their meager pension. Certainly Miss Bates is a stereotypical spinster and, as Devoney Looser argues in *Women Writers and Old Age in Britain*, "it seems that Austen did not seek to challenge representational trends where old maids were concerned" (95). However, Miss Bates is not limited in her function as an old maid as Looser suggests. She is a daughter, a caretaker, an aunt, and a friend. While the narrative of the novel is of course, centered around Emma, the informational center of Highbury is largely in the Bateses' front sitting room.

Miss Bates' major characteristic is her volubility, and this bothers Emma, who in turn is quite negative toward her. However, it is that precise trait that has allowed Miss Bates to remain in high society despite her financial woes. Mr. Knightly, whom Emma ends up marrying, even rebukes Emma, pointing out that Miss Bates is "poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to and, if she lives to old age, must probably sink more." (Austen 267). Despite her low position in a society defined by money and marriage, most of the information in and around Highbury flows from Miss Bates' effusive desire to talk with her neighbors. Even Emma, who convinces herself that visiting with the Bates women is "very disagreeable,—a waste of time," uses the gossip she gleans from Miss Bates to further her own suspicions about Jane Fairfax (107).

Moreover, Miss Bates brokers her role of town gossip and informational hub to secure a favorable position in Highbury's society. Even without wealth, Miss Bates is invited to every social gathering and is "very much to the taste of everybody" save Emma, and thus manages to supplement her meager wealth through the charity of respected Highbury residents like Mr. Knightley.

As such a large portion of *Emma's* narrative focuses on the societal roles within Highbury, Miss Bates offers an example of being an older woman who finds fulfillment in her life beyond the marriage plot. Although Emma is in a different social and financial position, if she does not marry, she will still be called an old maid like Miss Bates. This threat causes Emma stress as she cannot see anything positive about Miss Bates' life, nor how she could ever relate to the older woman. A large part of Emma's journey is her movement toward self-understanding and specifically toward noticing her own shortcomings in order for her to fulfill the marriage plot. Emma, as Austen points out in the novel's opening pages has "a disposition to think a little too well of herself" and perhaps to think too little of others like Miss Bates (2). Although Austen notes Emma's arrogance as a danger, this issue "[does] not by any means rank as [a] misfortune" to Emma (2). The journey that Emma takes which eventually allows her to be worthy of the more thoughtful Mr. Knightley is the one in which she recognizes that she does have shortcomings, and her recognition of the way she treats Miss Bates is part of that journey. Although Miss Bates' circumstances are reduced because she has failed to marry, she is not a "ridiculous, disagreeable" type of old maid as even Emma must admit Miss Bates' popularity (Austen 62). Miss Bates "loved every body, was interested in every body's

happiness, quick-sighted to every body's merits; thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother and so many good neighbors and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing" (Austen 17). Miss Bates has cultivated a fulfilling life in spite of the flaws that Emma sees.

Though Miss Bates is a crucial part of Emma's journey in Austen's novel, in the movie she, like Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility*, is nothing more than a figure of ridicule. Maaja Stewart characterizes Miss Bates, explaining that she "derives from the innumerable portraits of the comic old maids whose pretensions are measured against their limitations in their varied misuses of language in worlds where a precise and complex idiom often gauges a character's potential to survive and succeed." (73). However, Miss Bates does not need to rely on her own language in order to succeed in the novel. She brokers the words of others, like Jane Fairfax's letters and gossip from various visitors to gain the cultural capital within Highbury. In the movie however, Miss Bates is left without the social support that she receives in the novel because her role as town gossip is reduced to unnecessary chatter and she becomes nothing more than a fool who is only marshaled onto the screen to provide Emma with an opportunity for joking. In "The Cassandra of Highbury: Miss Bates on Film," Sue Parill takes a closer look at the role of Miss Bates in several film adaptations, particularly Douglas McGrath's 1999 version of *Emma*. Parill argues that "filmmakers have recognized the thematic importance of the role of Miss Bates, have cast this character appropriately, and have used her effectively." However, with regard to Sophie Thompson's role as Miss Bates, Parill pins the success of the character on being "endearingly funny." This is hardly a

resounding endorsement for the best use of Miss Bates' character as it demotes her to a comedic prop. Parill seems to overlook this reduction of character in favor of the romantic comedy trope Miss Bates fulfills in briefly alienating Emma from her eventual husband, Mr. Knightley during the Box Hill scene. Indeed, Parill notes that in the novel "Miss Bates sees and hears a great deal and is very quick to report what she sees, whether or not she understands its significance," yet Parill must admit that the McGrath *Emma* does not include a scene denoting Miss Bates' social commentary, however accidental, and relies upon other means to convey the locals' opinions. Thus, Miss Bates' role as a woman living a successful alternative to the marriage plot is removed so as not to detract from Emma's certain fate.

Moreover, Parill lauds Sophie Thompson's acting despite the fact that Thompson must rely solely on her physical presence since her words are reduced to nonsense. Miss Bates enters the film's narrative full of gratitude so excessive that it only underlines her low station in society. She walks hunched over her mother, making herself appear smaller and older than she really is. Her effusive nature, coupled with a myopic gaze and rapid speech further sets her apart from the other residents of Highbury. The bemused look that Emma maintains during any interaction with Miss Bates is intended to be mirrored by the audience. The scene where Emma and Harriet first visit the Bateses cements Miss Bates' uselessness beyond her relation to Jane Fairfax. Instead, Miss Bates provides a source of exasperation through which the audience can sympathize with Emma. The audience hears Emma's thoughts as a voice-over that drowns out Miss Bates and sets her up as an unwitting punch line to Emma's inner monologue. Miss Bates then addresses the camera

directly, further aligning the audience with Emma's perspective, and leaving Miss Bates no escape from Emma's derision.

This scene echoes Devoney Looser's assertion that "for Emma in particular—Miss Bates functions throughout the novel as little more than an object—whether of pity, charity, or derision" (91). Looser however, in focusing only on her role as an old maid, does not allow Miss Bates the cultural agency that she clearly has. The novel's Miss Bates functions as more than an object at least for the other residents of Highbury, and it is Miss Bates' "good-will and contented temper which worked such wonders" as to allow for her success despite never marrying. There is not space to develop Miss Bates' popularity and background in the movie given the narrative privilege of Emma's perspective, and she becomes the "object" for everyone in the film as well as the audience. Despite having varied and full relationships with the many residents of Highbury who come to visit her, Miss Bates' cinematic role is as a verbal punching bag for Emma, and the audience is invited to laugh along. Even Mr. Knightley's reproach does little to encourage sympathy for Miss Bates and instead simply makes the audience feel that he is an honorable leading man who will save Emma from herself. After the Box Hill picnic, Emma goes to the Bateses' to apologize for mocking her. In the novel, Miss Bates is initially reserved before warming to Emma's earnestness and the narrative suggests that it is Miss Bates' good nature that allows the reconciliation. In the film however, the camera enters the Bateses' from Emma's point of view, suggesting that the apology is entirely about Emma's goodwill towards "poor Miss Bates." In fact, Sophie Thompson's Miss Bates gets no chance to reconcile with Emma at all as the audience

sees, as if from Emma's eyes, Miss Bates disappear off-screen with a rushed excuse about feeling unwell. In this instance, Miss Bates is not only silenced, but visibly removed from the film narrative.

In flattening the character of Miss Bates, McGrath and the screenwriters created a more one-dimensional story overall. In the book, Emma is not a purely sympathetic heroine for whom the audience can have unalloyed sympathy. Rather, she is a girl who still has growing up to do, as Austen makes clear in the book's very first sentences. Her treatment of Miss Bates and subsequent realization of wrongdoing in that treatment are necessary to overcome the roadblocks that prevent Emma and Mr. Knightley from marrying. However, because Miss Bates is simply comic relief in the film, McGrath gives the audience—and by extension, Emma herself—permission to mock her. Moreover, Miss Bates has found a kind of success and fulfillment on her own merit in the novel that is lost in the film. In simplifying Miss Bates into nothing but a laughingstock, the movie version of *Emma* is left as a generic love story and fails to show the complexities of being a woman navigating through a society like Highbury, whether rich and young or poor and an old maid.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MANSFIELD PARK

In *Mansfield Park*, Mrs. Norris is an older woman who operates in the narrative as a foil to the protagonist, Fanny, while also functioning in society beyond the confines of the marriage plot. Unlike Mrs. Jennings and Miss Bates, Mrs. Norris is not a character with many redeeming qualities. Although Mrs. Jennings is cumbersome and brash, she simply wants the Dashwood sisters to find happiness in fulfilling their marriage plots while Miss Bates operates as the cheerful informational center of Highbury and wishes only to have good news to pass along. Mrs. Norris, by contrast, exhibits what David Murray, for example, calls her “pointed cruelty” toward the main character, Fanny. Fanny has been taken in by her rich relations, the Bertrams. Mansfield Park is also home to Mrs. Norris, who is one of Fanny’s aunts along with Lady Bertram. *Mansfield Park* begins with the story of Mrs. Norris and the way she and her sisters arrived at their current positions. It is Mrs. Norris who creates the tension with Mrs. Price, Fanny’s mother, by “point[ing] out the folly of her conduct” in marrying a man of such meager means (Austen 6). However, after her sister showed apparently sufficient contrition, it was Mrs. Norris’ idea to relieve the Prices of their eldest daughter. While this plan served as an olive branch that repaired the sisters’ relationship it is irrespective of the daughter, Fanny. Indeed, “Mrs. Norris had not the least intention of being at any expense whatever in [Fanny’s] maintenance” (Austen 8). The act had never been about creating a new home for a child, but a way for Mrs. Norris to control her relationship with her sisters and by

extension, Sir Thomas Bertram and his money. Mrs. Norris' ability to take advantage of a situation is spelled out when she explains why Fanny must live in Mansfield Park instead of at the parish with Mrs. Norris and her reverend husband. While Mrs. Norris' sister, Lady Bertram, has the wealth and leisure to spend most of her days in contentment, Mrs. Norris does not have such opportunity. Not only is she a poor widow, but she has no children of her own. She has grown to prefer this situation as "what was begun as a matter of prudence, soon grew into a matter of choice" and she even goes so far as scheming to prevent Fanny from coming to live with her so that she may maintain control and provide for herself on her limited income.

Mrs. Norris represents yet another way in which an older woman functions in a society beyond fulfilling the narrow roles of wife and mother through her attempts at positioning herself in the favor of those she deems most likely to provide financial support. Mrs. Norris has the opportunity to take Fanny in and be loving toward her, but "[i]t required a longer time, however, than Mrs. Norris was inclined to allow, to reconcile Fanny to the novelty of Mansfield Park...Nobody meant to be unkind, but nobody put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort" (12). While Mrs. Norris fails to direct Fanny in any substantive way beyond bringing her to Mansfield Park, she presents a cunning level of resourcefulness that offers an option for survival after the loss of her husband. Mrs. Norris "consoled herself...by considering that she could do very well without [Mr. Norris]" and set about making herself a fixture at Mansfield Park. She desires order and propriety and cannot indulge Fanny's emotions as they detract from being useful in the running of a large estate. Although Fanny is ultimately given the

opportunity to join the social class of the Bertram family through a marriage proposal from Henry Crawford, she rejects him and, by extension, everything that he stands for. The marriage proposal is taken as a personal affront to Mrs. Norris as she believes that Fanny did nothing to deserve such an honor, much less possess the social positioning in which to refuse it. While certainly Mrs. Norris does not care for her niece, she does care very much about maintaining appearances of propriety.

This strength of character is lost in Patricia Rozema's 1999 adaptation of Austen's novel. Rozema's *Mansfield Park* is a notably different work from the novel and while it is still a romantic comedy in theme, Rozema inserts commentary about those who benefit, even peripherally, from societal power structures. However, despite the discussions of Sir Thomas Bertram's plantations and their corruption, the marriage plot between Fanny and Edmund undermines Rozema's attempts to explore those storylines. In her article, "Modernizing *Mansfield Park*," Kathi Groenendyk asserts that Bertram however, "receives the harshest critique in the film. While other characters—such as Tom, Mrs. Norris, Lady Bertram, Maria, Henry Crawford, and Mary Crawford—are not always viewed favorably, they do not earn the same judgment the novel requires...[and] Sir Thomas stands out as the villain" (Groenendyk). Certainly, the film gives focus to Sir Thomas' transgressions as it allows Rozema to highlight Fanny's morality, and further removes the women from the narrative center by creating more space for the male perspective.

Where Sir Bertram is painted as the ultimate villain due to his actions in Antigua, Mrs. Norris is shown on film as the domestic threat to Fanny's everyday existence. In the

film, the audience meets Mrs. Norris at the same time as Fanny. The script notes that Mrs. Norris is “a busy woman and she likes people to know it” (Rozema 17). Once Fanny arrives, Mrs. Norris makes sure that she forgets neither her humble origins nor her inferiority in the eyes of those around her: Fanny grows up quiet and mousy, overlooked by almost everyone. Mrs. Norris shows no affection towards her niece, and admonishes Fanny to “speak when you are spoken to” when Fanny interrupts Sir Bertram. During this initial scene, the camera is angled in such a way as to put the audience at the same height as young Fanny, forced to look up at the grownups around her. This subtle but effective technique situates the audience as empathetic to Fanny and does not allow for any explanation of Mrs. Norris’ background. Later in the film, Mrs. Norris chaperones in the billiards room while the Bertrams and Crawfords discuss putting on the play “*Lover’s Vows*” at Mansfield Park. When Henry Crawford asks Fanny for her opinion, she is quickly interrupted by Mrs. Norris. The older woman clearly does not approve of Fanny’s inclusion of the conversation and reminds her that “sewing wasn’t cleared away,” illustrating Fanny’s role as little more than a servant (*Mansfield Park* 1999). While this action is certainly cruel, the film has already established Fanny as the point of sympathy and this scene is intended to further pit Mrs. Norris as the villain of everyday life at Mansfield Park. Once Fanny responds and moves to leave the room, Mrs. Norris continues to speak. Her words are drowned out however, by the film score and the camera follows Fanny as everyone in the room ignores Mrs. Norris to watch Fanny. The novel sets a similar scene, whereby Mrs. Norris calls Fanny “a very obstinate, ungrateful girl...considering who and what she is” when the younger woman refuses to act in the

play (Austen 103). There is no denying the harshness of the scene, but at least in the novel Mrs. Norris is granted the opportunity to speak without being cut off by the score. Further, Mrs. Norris has already established that she cannot abide Fanny's tendency to shy away from what she sees as the younger woman's responsibility to the Bertrams. In refusing to comply with the request of her cousins, Mrs. Norris views Fanny as thumbing her nose at the people who have sheltered and clothed Fanny for most of her life. Instead, the film uses Mrs. Norris only to incite compassion for Fanny then immediately ignores the older woman and gives no indication of Mrs. Norris' motivations. Rozema has however, furthered the marriage plot convention whereby the protagonist needs something to overcome, in this case her aunt's cruelty, in order to marry well.

Although Mrs. Norris refuses to function as a mother-substitute for Fanny, she is useful in her uselessness—that is, her engineering and directing of others while refusing to take on any real financial or social responsibility is the catalyst for the entirety of *Mansfield Park*. Moreover, this represents Mrs. Norris' choice and agency as a woman in Austen's novel. While she did marry, Mrs. Norris opted out of fulfilling her duty to motherhood, and chose to operate in *Mansfield Park* through observation and cunning. There is no explanation of why exactly Fanny is sent to Mansfield Park, a scheme that the novel makes clear was wholly hatched by Mrs. Norris as an ostensible kindness to her destitute sister. Mrs. Norris cast her lot with the Bertram sisters, assuming that their marital wealth would trickle down to her. Of course, this did not end favorably for her as she was forced to take in a shamed Maria. However, there was no way for Mrs. Norris to predict the scandal that befell Mansfield Park and she made her choices based on the

most likely outcome: that Maria and Julia would marry well and take financial care of their dotting aunt. Rozema's choice however, is to leave Mrs. Norris as a character that by now, in Austen adaptations, is quite familiar: the useless elderly busybody who offers little more than a point of comparison to remind the audience that they are watching a marriage plot. While the film audience does not laugh at her, as he or she does at Miss Bates in *Emma*, and she does not try to give advice or guidance, like *Sense and Sensibility*'s Mrs. Jennings, Mrs. Norris is caricatured on film just as surely as these other two characters. Her movie caricature is ill-tempered and thoughtless, whereas the novel presents her character as that of a shrewd survivor.

## CONCLUSION

Mary Wollstonecraft notes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that “[w]omen are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man, and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives” (22). Wollstonecraft’s concern here is that women are restricted to this narrow set of standards, and the shortsightedness of women living only to obtain a husband leaves them ill-equipped to live once that goal has passed. Austen’s heroines do end their stories having obtained their men without further concern, but Austen did not neglect exploring the lives that women have beyond the set of guidelines that dictate the marriage plot.

Austen’s older women offer views of life after fulfilling the marriage plot and as alternatives to having achieved it at all. By contrast, as Kathi Groenendyk argues in “Modernizing *Mansfield Park*” film adaptations, “emphasize the romantic story lines, glamorize the appearance of the main characters, alter the male hero, and offer a sentimental view of the English estate and landscape. Unlike Austen’s novels, the adaptations tend to dwell on the romance of the central couple and an idyllic view of the English past” (Groenendyk). By fixating on the marriage plot and exaggerating nostalgia for the past, the filmmakers reduce the impact of Austen’s stories as evidenced through

the reduction of the older women's roles in the narrative, leaving behind a superficial story that privileges youth, convention, and money.

The older women are interruptions to the typical plot of a romantic comedy and thus become expendable plot devices through which the audience finds sympathy with the protagonist. In Hollywood terms, Austen's novels are romantic comedies, a characterization that belies their sly social commentary and complex characterization. When directors set out to make big-budget adaptations of these novels, however, the constraints of Hollywood's idea of these stories required that some aspects be left behind, and the older female characters landed on the proverbial cutting-room floor, diminishing Austen's world. Examining these women, the contemporary reader notes that although they do not have roles in the happily-ever-after stories that romantic comedies perpetuate, they are still strong women characters with purposeful roles to play in their stories. By denying them these roles, Hollywood has made an oddly un-feminist Austen: the only women at the center of these stories are the young and pretty ones who conform to society's every expectation. Identifying Mrs. Jennings, Miss Bates, and Mrs. Norris' roles in Austen's novels is important work with repercussions for any judgment of the movie adaptations and ultimately of the generic conventions that govern Hollywood film production. Austen's world was a female-centric one in which women operated beyond the confines of marriage and motherhood. By reducing women to no more than the sum of their romantic parts, Hollywood has fundamentally changed how many people will see Austen's stories and, indeed, the heroines for which she is so rightfully celebrated.

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