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Miss Jones Meets Mr Darcy: Twentieth-Century Avatars of Jane Austen's Protagonists in *Bridget Jones's Diary*

Abstract: *Jane Austen's work has inspired an impressive number of intertextual projects, few of which have generated as many controversies as Helen Fielding's* Bridget Jones's Diary *and* Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason. *The present paper will neither engage in the debates concerning Fielding's allegiance to or betrayal of feminist ideals, nor discuss her novels' questionable artistic merits, but will focus instead on the intricate layers of intertextuality at work in the creation of the two main protagonists. If as far as the two plots are concerned Fielding's borrowings from* Pride and Prejudice *and* Persuasion *are relatively straightforward, the portraits of Bridget Jones and Mark Darcy are the result of quite complex fusions that go beyond Austen's Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy to comprise various other characters belonging to a wider array of texts. The analysis of the female protagonist will refer in turn to all Austen's novels and include parallels with her numerous heroines, while the discussion of Fielding's Mark Darcy will entail an incursion across media, including the nineteenth-century original as well as its most famous film version in an attempt to reveal the numerous levels of dialogic interaction established between the various texts.*

Key words: *adaptation; convention; dialogism; imperfection; intertextuality; romance*

Attitudes to tradition and influence have constantly varied throughout the ages, yet writers have never ceased to use previous literary works as materials for their own texts with the resulting perception of the work of art as edition of what exists rather than addition to it (Macfarlane 1). After decades of debates on the anxiety of influence and the death of literature, contemporary artists no longer deplore the imminent exhaustion of creative possibilities and of literature itself but choose instead to resort to the "partially assembled combinations which have previously proved serviceable in similar contexts" (Widdowson 55-56) for their own creative purposes. In contemporary fiction story telling has become "compulsory belated, inextricably bound up with retelling" (Connor 166) in all its familiar idioms (reworking, translation, adaptation, displacement, imitation, forgery, plagiarism, parody, pastiche) and very few canonical texts have been employed in quite as many intertextual projects as Jane Austen's novels, the impressive list including titles as outrageous as Ben H. Winters' *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Beth Patillo's *Jane Austen Ruined My Life and Mr Darcy Broke My Heart*, Gwyn Cready's *Seducing Mr Darcy*, Vera Nazarian's

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Mansfield Park and Mummies: Monster Mayhem, Matrimony, Ancient Curses, True Love, and Other Dire Delights, Lynn Shepherd's *Murder at Mansfield Park*, Adam Rann's *Emma and the Werewolves: Jane Austen's Classic Novel with Blood-curdling Lycanthropy*.

Given the irreverent parody or cloying romance revealed by most of these titles, it might seem surprising that of all the texts inspired by Austen's work Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* has generated the greatest amount of controversy, negative critical responses ranging from appalled reactions to the inclusion of a "dumbed-down alternative to Jane Austen" (Barham 23) on the GCSE syllabus to condescending admissions of its contribution to "the return of what is referred to in English-lit classes as the Marriage Plot" (Merkin 70) and its role as "initiator of a somewhat amorphous subgenre known as 'chick lit', a term that carries a subtext of tolerant reproval: entertaining, clever but not on a par with 'serious' writing" (Bradford 132). While most critical debates have focused on its potentially feminist, post-feminist or anti-feminist nature, with the novel being in turn accused of "reinforcing conventional gender roles while pretending to challenge them" (Guenther 84) and praised for transcribing "the authentic voice of contemporary women in one way or another disillusioned with similar questions to do with marriage and romance that preoccupied Jane Austen's heroines two hundred years earlier" (Childs 215), perhaps the most fulfilling type of project based on Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* entails tracing Austen's legacy among the multiple intertextual levels of two arguably low brow but nonetheless challenging novels.

Fielding's rewriting of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* confirms her awareness of the continuing market potential of romance (Aragay, López 205), especially as regards a plot that "had been very well market-researched over a number of centuries" (Fielding 1999: 20) and her strategic choice of an all-time best-seller as well as the decision to keep the famous surname of the male protagonist ensure that even the least sophisticated reader could identify the primary source of her intertextual project, even without the first-person narrator's helpful hints in both novels: "It struck me as pretty ridiculous to be called Mr Darcy and to stand on your own looking snotty at a party." (Fielding 1996: 13), "Heart lurched when located him, standing on his own, in traditional Mark Darcy party mode, looking detached and distant." (Fielding 2000: 235) These two fragments alone, together with Bridget's resentful reference to "Mark Bloody Darcy's face smouldering out from feature on London's fifty most eligible bachelors" (Fielding 1996: 194) are enough to convince most readers of his similarity to the original, even without the added details of the "huge, detached wedding cake-style mansion on the other side of Holland Park Avenue […] surrounded by greenery" (Fielding 1996: 227) and highly reminiscent of Pemberley, the housekeeper and the "fifteen members of her family who all seemed to want to worship Mark as a god" (Fielding 2000: 78), his professional and financial efforts to save first Bridget's mother then Bridget herself from legal problems and considerable embarrassment, not to mention his initially awkward interaction with the heroine and the reactions triggered by his unsatisfactory response to the neighbourhood's matchmaking schemes:

> All this was said very aggressively as if Una was taking as a personal insult the fact that Mark had chosen a girlfriend that was a) not me and b) had not been introduced to him by Una at a turkey curry buffet. (Fielding 1996: 170-171)

Similar parallels can be drawn between Daniel Cleaver and George Wickham, equally handsome, seductive and treacherous, Mrs Jones and Mrs Bennet, both imprudent, vulgar and obsessed with finding the perfect match for their female offspring, Mr Jones and Mr Bennet, each trying to find solace from domestic trouble in solitary reading or drinking, Natasha and Miss Bingley, sophisticated and ruthless in their determination to become Mrs Darcy, and in the second novel between Rebecca and Louisa Musgrove, characterised by the same level of stubbornness, or Giles Benwick and Captain Benwick, who share both a last name and a tragic love story.

The only real difficulty seems indeed to reside in identifying what features the "chain-smoking, wine-drinking, calorie-counter who obsesses over her fluctuating physical appearance, her stalled career, and, most importantly, her tumultuous love life" (Scott 107) might share with a protagonist as balanced and sensible as Elizabeth. It can be in fact argued that while the two narratives incorporate the plots of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* the heroine's imperfect and often unrepentant nature and her propensity for "resolutions that she fails to act on" (Marsh 63) r

Likewise, Bridget not only devises increasingly hilarious lists including New Year's Resolutions, "Plan For When Mark is Away" (Fielding 2000: 79), "New post-spiritual epiphany life resolutions" (Fielding 2000: 320) and "Holiday Aims" (Fielding 2000: 292) but also frequently resolves to "stay in and read books and listen to classical music" (Fielding 1996: 3) or "start studying *The Economist* and also go to evening classes and read *Money* by Martin Amis" (Fielding 2000: 248). Her self-perfection plans range from the seemingly modest decision to "read *The Famished Road*" (Fielding 1996: 290) to almost Faustian ambitions: "am going to improve social skills, confidence" (Fielding 1996: 96), "change life: become well informed re. current affairs, stop smoking entirely and form functional relationship with adult man" (Fielding 1996: 189), "be top-flight journalist and gradually build up more and more work and extra money so can give up job and merely sit on sofa with laptop on knee." (Fielding 2000: 83)

Such lofty plans notwithstanding, not only does the protagonist herself have to rack her brain frantically to remember when she last "read a proper book" (Fielding 1996: 14), but the other characters' comments also fully expose her scholarly failures: "Please attempt to acquire at least perfunctory grasp of spelling" (Fielding 1996: 25), "How can you go out with someone who doesn't know where Germany is?" (Fielding 2000: 246), "You can't live it with someone who thinks Rimbaud was played by Sylvester Stallone." (Fielding 2000: 404) However, whereas Emma continues to entertain illusions of "improving her little friend's mind, by a great deal of useful reading and conversation" which never result in "more than a few first chapters, and the intention of going on tomorrow" (*E* 48) and takes longer to admit to her lack of "stability in good thoughts" (*E* 62), Bridget anticipates the inevitable failure of her tentative relationship with high-brow literature, vowing not to waste any more money on "books by unreadable literary authors to put impressively on shelves" (Fielding 1996: 2) and resolving to discard Ben Okri's novel, acknowledging after countless aborted attempts the fact that she will "never read the bloody thing anyway" (Fielding 2000: 264).

Irrespective of the considerable temporal distance separating the two protagonists, their responses to romantic disappointments are moreover uncannily alike, as Bridget's determination not to "sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete without boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend" (Fielding 1996: 2) is highly reminiscent of Emma's vision of her future self-improvement (Marsh 65) following her mistaken assumption that she had lost her chance to win Mr. Knightley's affection:

> The only source whence any thing like consolation or composure could be drawn, was in the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every future winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her more rational, more acquainted with herself, and leave her less to regret when it were gone. (*E* 304-305)

While her gloomy vision of her future is just as prophetic as Bridget's "fears of dying alone and being found three weeks later half-eaten by an Alsatian" (Fielding 1996: 20), it is interesting to note that these particular fragments also reveal a fundamental difference between the two protagonists, as all Bridget's ambitions represent mere strategies conducive towards her ultimate goal, finding a suitable husband, whereas Emma professes

to have no such plans: "And I am not only, not going to be married, at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all." While the social context perfectly justifies Harriet's startled reaction – "Dear me!—it is so odd to hear a woman talk so!" – Emma's privileged position as mistress of Hartfield ensures that she can safely wait until the appearance of "somebody very superior to any one […] seen yet, to be tempted" instead of falling victim to "the usual inducements of women to marry" (*E* 60) and least of all to the fear of becoming an old maid, as in her view the real danger of spinsterhood resides in a precarious economic situation rather than the lack of a husband:

> it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else. (*E* 61)

While detractors of Fielding's work might use Emma's imperviousness to marriage-related obsessions as yet another argument of Bridget Jones's failure as an independent modern woman and claim that even Austen's nineteenth-century protagonist is more of a feminist than Fielding's contemporary one, it is important to note that Emma's financial resources and unparalleled social standing in the neighbourhood, not to mention her beauty and young age, ensure that she never becomes the target of the painful comments from friends and family that constantly haunt Bridget: "'So you *still* haven't got a feller!' 'Bridget! What *are* we going to do with you!' said Una. 'You career girls! I don't know! Can't put it off for ever, you know. Tick-tock-tick-tock.'" (Fielding 1996: 11), "How are we going to get you married off at this rate?" (Fielding 1996: 169), "Well, you know, once you get past a certain age […] All the decent chaps have been snapped up" (Fielding 1996: 40), "it is difficult, single women do tend to get desperate as they grow older…" (Fielding 1996: 194), "What I don't understand […] is how a woman manages to get to Bridget's age without hooking anyone." (Fielding 2000: 148)

Perhaps one of Fielding's greatest merits resists in her awareness of the fundamental difference between our times and Austen's and her lucid exploration of the increasing "pressures on young women to conform to the expectations of their culture" (Wiltshire 2) in the portrayal of a protagonists whose confused sense of personal worth and identity clearly stems from the "contradictions of tradition and modernity, of old and new social roles for women" (Adolph 166) best exemplified by the contrasting messages sent by family, friends and the media:

> Whereas Austen's heroines bemoan their limited choices, Fielding's lament having too many. Austen's characters are given one cultural directive, to marry, while Fielding's struggle with conflicting social messages that compel them simultaneously to find a man, be independent, build a career, start a family, have sex indiscriminately and be chaste. In this light, Bridget's struggle to control her life and her narrative results not from a literary convention that emphasizes women's economic and sexual restriction, but from a cultural imperative to strive for multiple and contradictory female ideals. (Guenther 86)

Trapped between Sharon's motivational feminist speeches – "We women are only vulnerable because we are a pioneer generation daring to refuse to compromise in love and relying on our own economic power." (Fielding 1996: 21), "there's a whole generation of

single girls like me with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don't need to wash anyone else's socks." (Fielding 1996: 42), "We simply can't define ourselves in terms of being with another person!" (Fielding 2000: 184) – and almost everyone else's disapproval of her 'Singleton' status, Bridget oscillates between bouts of depressive self-deprecation – "V. sad and traumatized" (Fielding 1996: 28), "Emotional failure and isolation" (Fielding 1996: 212), "Cannot quite believe I am once again starting the year in single bed in my parents' house. It is too humiliating at my age." (Fielding 1996: 10), "Am going to be on own on Valentine's Day for fourth year running, spend next Christmas in single bed in parents' house." (Fielding 2000: 68), "I career rudderless and boyfriendless through dysfunctional relationships and professional stagnation." (Fielding 1996: 78) – and renewed (if rather feeble) belief in one's potential: "I had a career. Well – a job, anyway. I was a grasshopper collecting a big pile of grass, or flies, or whatever it is grasshoppers eat ready for the winter, even if I didn't have a boyfriend." (Fielding 1996: 71), "Am assured, receptive, responsive woman of substance. My sense of self comes not from other people but from… from… myself?" (Fielding 2000: 153)

It is therefore hardly surprising that after having to experience the humiliations deriving from excessive social pressure on "single women in their thirties […] accustomed to disappointing their parents and being treated as freaks by society" (Fielding 1996: 27), not to mention depressing notions of "female sell-by dates and life as game of musical chairs where girls without a chair/man when the music stops/they pass thirty are 'out'" (Fielding 1996: 213), the protagonists finds herself "constantly scanning face in mirror for wrinkles and frantically reading *Hello!*, checking out everyone's ages in desperate search for role models" (Fielding 1996: 78) and loses all faith in feminist ideals:

> This confusion, I guess, is the price I must pay for becoming a modern woman instead of following the course nature intended by marrying Abnor Rimmington off the Northampton bus when I was eighteen. (Fielding 1996: 119)

Moreover, she ironically progresses (or, from a feminist point of view, regresses) from resentfulness towards the various well-wishers' attempts to find her a husband – "Being set up with a man against your will is one level of humiliation." (Fielding 1996: 13), "I am not going to spend another evening being danced about in front of Mark Darcy like a spoonful of puréed turnip in front of a baby." (Fielding 1996: 212) – to a sense of gratitude to the "tribal elders" (Fielding 2000: 380) and their attempts at facilitating a reconciliation with Mark Darcy.

Returning to the comparison with Emma Woodhouse, it is interesting to note that not even her considerable degree of self-esteem can stop her from falling prey to the same feelings of envy and inadequacy when confronted with Jane Fairfax – the "embodiment of female perfection" (Marsh 65), elegance and musical virtuosity – that Bridget experiences in the presence of the cultivated Natasha, the rich and elegant Rebecca, or the "bronzed, long-limbed, blonde-haired stark-naked" (Fielding 1996: 177-178) woman on Daniel Cleaver's roof, all of whom she perceives as much more beautiful, successful and above all slender women than she can ever aspire to be, but who ironically turn out to feel just as threatened by her as Jane does in the presence of the voluble and charming Emma, and who moreover fail to make a lasting impression on either Mark Darcy on Daniel Cleaver. Indeed, what endears both Emma and Bridget to their male counterparts and female readers

alike has nothing to do with conventional accomplishments but lies instead in their imperfect nature, openness and free spirit, in the genuineness that can ultimately be seen as the product of their persistent failure to carry through their plans to remake themselves in another image (Case 176) and their realization that "happiness lies precisely in not striving for perfection" (Waugh 190). In addition to this, their personalities are rendered even more irresistible by the one quality they both share, their highly developed imagination, referred to in Austen's text as that "very dear part of Emma, her fancy" (*E* 152) and identifiable in Fielding's text in Bridget's often surreal but always witty, spontaneous and creative responses to all situations and Mark Darcy's subtly complimentary reactions to her ideas: "I […] gave him my opinions and advice, which he said were very interesting and very 'fresh'" (Fielding 2000: 22), "I gave him my opinions about it all, which he said were very reassuring and 'unique'!" (Fielding 2000: 94)

Of course, any discussion of female imperfection has to include at least a passing reference to Elizabeth Bennet's firm yet justified reaction to Miss Bingley's far-fetched "idea of an accomplished woman" (*PP* 28) – "*I* never saw such a woman. *I* never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you described, united." (*PP* 29) – yet another reminder of the unrealistic ambitions of most females and of this particular protagonist's unique understanding of human nature and its limitations. While definitely less lucid in this respect than Austen's most famous female protagonist, and at times closer to Charlotte Lucas and her wish for a "comfortable home" (*PP* 96) – which takes in her particular case the shape of Magda's "big house with eight different kinds of pasta in jars" (Fielding 1996: 132) – Bridget's deep belief in romance makes her a worthy descendant of Elizabeth Bennet: "Our culture is too obsessed with outward appearance, age and status. Love is what matters." (Fielding 1996: 82) Also, in spite of her insecurities, she is quite capable of disregarding conventions and facing the assembled neighbourhood in her bunny outfit, albeit with slightly less self-possession than Elizabeth upon her arrival at Netherfield with untidy hair and a petticoat "six inches deep in mud". It is precisely this apparent "indifference to decorum" (*PP* 26) that distinguishes both Elizabeth and Bridget from their contemporaries and ensures that their respective Darcys choose them over the more conventional and implicitly more artificial Miss Bingley and Natasha, as it clearly emerges from Mark's declaration: "Bridget, all the other girls I know are so lacquered over. I don't know anyone who would fasten a bunny tail to their pants or…" (Fielding 1996: 237)

It could be of course further argued that Bridget's hyperactive imagination often generates the kind of horrific plots one would more readily associate with Catherine Morland than with either Elizabeth or Emma, some of her classic fantasies including the "post-Portuguese-holiday Shirley-Valentine-style scenario" (Fielding 1996: 53) she suspects her mother of engaging in and the terrified visions of Daniel and then Mark as homicidal maniacs: "Daniel is a mad alcoholic and will kill me then chuck me when he finds out." (Fielding 1996: 119), "Oh my God, though, maybe Mark did do it. Maybe he's going to come into the room and just, like, shoot me, and then there'll be blood all over the virgin white room." (Fielding 2000: 370) Likewise, her amateurish sleuthing in Daniel's apartment, obsessive calls to 1471 and evenings spent driving past Mark Darcy's house to spy on his movements are more than a match for Catherine's tentative explorations of the Abbey's mysterious corridors and abandoned staircases. However, while both protagonists are obviously influenced in the elaboration of their far-fetched scenarios by their interaction with contemporary texts, whether Gothic novels, or popular media, Bridget is considerably

more justified than Catherine as regards the "dreadful nature of the suspicions" (*NA* 128) she tends to entertain given the stranger than fiction occurrences she is exposed to on a daily basis, including the discoveries made in both boyfriends' houses – among which "a lithe oriental boy, stark naked, smiling weirdly, and holding out two wooden balls on a string, and a baby rabbit" (Fielding 2000: 63) – the arrival in the post of a "live bullet with her name on" (Fielding 2000: 355), the "embarrassing neo-colonialist acts committed by mother" (Fielding 2000: 94) and negative number of "incidents during parental lunch suggesting there is any sanity of reality remaining in life" (Fielding 2000: 142). What makes Bridget even more admirable (whilst also prone to hilarious incidents) is the fact that not even the growing number of "near-death experiences" (Fielding 2000: 88) and occasional bouts of paranoia can fully contaminate her essentially innocent and hopeful nature, thus ensuring that not even her most elaborate scenarios ever prepare her for the increasingly surreal episodes she goes through.

The complexity of the heroine portrayed by Fielding as well as the wide range of female characters depicted in Austen's fiction provides the reader with the possibility of drawing even more parallels, identifying in Bridget's insecurity and occasional naivety traces of Fanny Price, and seeing her melodramatic outbursts as evidence of a personality highly reminiscent of Marianne Dashwood's: "She was […] eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent." (*SS* 5) As far as the protagonist of *Persuasion* is concerned, while considerably closer to Bridget as regards actual age, Anne Elliot happens to be characterised by "an elegance of mind and sweetness of character" (*P* 5) which might seem impossible to associate with Fielding's rather uncouth and abrupt heroine, were it not for the fact that in spite of her keen awareness of others' shortcomings Bridget rarely voices her negative opinions and that notwithstanding her inner rebellion she is usually prevailed upon to conform to other people's wishes. Fielding's decision to borrow elements from *Persuasion* in the plot of *The Edge of Reason* moreover results in considerable attention being paid to Bridget's new-found role as selfless daughter and devoted friend, babysitter, "caring angel or saint" (Fielding 1996: 42), "wise counsellor" (Fielding 1996: 49) and even "therapist" (Fielding 2000: 188), successfully calming down Mark's friend and pointing him "in direction of one or two useful volumes" (Fielding 2000: 24) and, given the dysfunctional nature of her family situation, "advising one's own father on the suspected gigolo-hiring habits of one's own mother" (Fielding 2000: 37). It is however equally important to note that although the emphasis in both novel and critical studies is on the role played by her friends and impressive collection of self-help books with their "mythical rules of conduct" (Fielding 2000: 253) in the temporary disintegration of her relationship with Mark Darcy, Bridget herself is just as guilty of acting like Lady Russell when it comes to advising Jude on the best course of action regarding Vile Richard.

While the intertextual relationship between *The Edge of Reason* and *Persuasion* is relatively straightforward and unproblematic, it has been observed that *Bridget Jones's Diary* simply "makes of with the plot outline and a few references to *Pride and Prejudice*" and is considerably more indebted to the 1995 BBC serialisation of the novel in which Colin Firth played a memorable Mr Darcy than to "Jane Austen's original fusion of social criticism and romance" (Wiltshire 2). In its turn, the BBC mini-series established a unique intertextual dialogue with a particular dimension of the novel, the subversive fantasy of female autonomy, to the extent of transforming the gaze into a major structuring principle

and promoting the female spectators' sympathy towards a hero "allowed to express weaknesses, doubts and emotions which the late twentieth century constructed as desirable in a man" (Aragay, López 206) and therefore embodying an updated masculinity which differs greatly from that of Austen's mostly distant and impenetrable Darcy. Not only is Colin Firth's "'new-man' Darcy" endowed with qualities which would have been unthinkable in Austen's milieu but he is also turned by means of skilful camerawork into "an object of desire, almost an *objet d'art*, for the female spectator" to such an extent that it could be argued that the "narcissistic gaze by which women fantasised themselves in Elizabeth's place" (Aragay, López 206-207) constitutes the best explanation of the intense involvement of British female viewers with the TV version that turned the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy into a sexually charged affair (McFarlane 206) and Colin Firth into a star.

The veritable 'Darcymania' (Aragay, López 207) generated by the series and above all the episode likely to have triggered it – the climactic scene in which Darcy, having plunged fully clothed into a pond, regales Elizabeth and the female spectator with a view of his still dripping loose white shirt – receives considerable attention in the novel, with Bridget and her friends religiously watching the episodes on television and frequently resorting to the videotapes in moments of crisis:

> Just nipped out for fags prior to getting changed ready for BBC *Pride and Prejudice*. Hard to believe there are so many cars out on the roads. Shouldn't they be at home getting ready? Love the nation being so addicted. The basis of my own addiction, I know, is my simple human need for Darcy to get off with Elizabeth […] That is precisely my feeling about Darcy and Elizabeth. They are my chosen representatives in the field of shagging, or, rather, courtship. (Fielding 1996: 246)

Although Bridget never openly identifies with Austen's protagonist, her admission of her purely vicarious interest in Elizabeth's relationship with Darcy, together with the long discussion with Jude about the "comparative merits of Mr Darcy and Mark Darcy, both agreeing that Mr Darcy was more attractive because he was ruder but that being imaginary was a disadvantage that could not be overlooked" (Fielding 1996: 194) is quite revealing, especially in the context of her deep involvement in fictional narratives in the manner of Madame Bovary. Her growing sense of perplexity as to "what is and is not reality" (Fielding 1996: 299) is suggested even before her admission – "Feel disoriented and worried, for surely Mr Darcy would never do anything so vain and frivolous as to be an actor and yet Mr Darcy *is* an actor. Hmmm. All v. confusing." (Fielding 1996: 248) – by her apparent inability to acknowledge the difference between Colin Firth the actor and Mr Darcy the fictional protagonist. Notwithstanding her attempts to "concentrate on fact that there are other things about Colin Firth apart from playing Mr Darcy" (Fielding 2000: 156) her obsession with the BBC series ensures that her research prior to interviewing Colin Firth on his forthcoming film consists of watching the "*Pride and Prejudice* video where Colin Firth dives into lake" (Fielding 2000: 158) fifteen times and determines her awed reaction to both his actual persona – "He looked exactly like Mr Darcy: all smouldery and lean." (Fielding 2000: 167) – and his answering machine message: "'Hello, Bridget, this is Colin Firth.' […] It was Mr Darcy. The same posh, deep, can't-be-bothered voice that he proposed to Elizabeth Bennet in on the BBC. Bridget. Me. Mr Darcy said Bridget."

(Fielding 2000: 159) Apart from adding new levels of ridiculousness to the increasingly hilarious chapter culminating in the actual interview, the heroine's confusion is indicative not merely of her inability to have an objective view of her own life and romantic relationships and tendency to engage in constant acts of self-delusion – "Mr Darcy has made me forget obsession with Mark Darcy… Telephone! Maybe Mr or Mark Darcy." (Fielding 2000: 157) – but also of the extent to which Fielding's two novels succeed in blurring the borders between reality and fiction by "working at a more self-consciously intertextual level: art imitating art imitating art" (Salber) and merging Austen's nineteenth-century prototype and his BBC version in the portrayal of the equally eligible if somewhat less imposing Mark Darcy.

Naturally enough, what the utterly mesmerised female protagonist understandably fails to notice is the fact that the added scenes in the BBC adaptation not only repeatedly eroticise Darcy but also "provide insights into his feelings" (Aragay, López 211), a typical example being once again the notorious lake scene in which the protagonist's visibly flustered reaction to Elizabeth's unexpected appearance, while clearly lost on Bridget and her friends, further contributes to a model of masculinity far removed from Austen's in its emphasis on emotional expression as well as physicality. Bridget's compulsive-obsessive relationship with the *Pride and Prejudice* videos as well as Colin Firth the character (and consequently the infamous interview in Rome) are obviously absent from the script of *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* – in which, in the most "peculiar case of intergeneric intertextuality" (Bradford 132) imaginable, the very same Colin Firth plays Mark Darcy – yet the shirt that had functioned as such a significant symbol in the novels and such a crucial element in the intertextual game makes a brief appearance. If the reference to Mark's "very white, semi-undone shirt" (Fielding 2000: 131) is as likely to be a deliberate if very subtle act of homage as an instance of unplanned intertextuality, the only glimpse of a wet white shirt in the film version occurs in the context of a fight between Darcy and Cleaver. Including several ridiculous chase sequences and culminating in attempted drowning in several inches of water in a public fountain, this episode reveals the extent to which both narrative and film continue the intricate intertextual dialogue and the challenge to conventional male identity initiated by the BBC series and can be regarded as "searing vision[s] of the wounds our century has inflicted on traditional masculinities" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*), to adopt Bridget's impressive if rather uninformed assessment of the fictional *Kafka's Motorbike*.

Aside from the deliberate casting of Colin Firth as Mark Darcy and addition of yet another "self-referential layer" (Salber) to the complex "tapestry of conscious quotations and allusions, involving themselves and the reader/viewer in a game of seemingly endless permutations" (Aragay, López 203), perhaps the most interesting aspect of the deeply intertextual dialogic interactions between the various texts and their cinematic renditions concerns the way in which the *Bridget Jones* films create a sense of circularity by paradoxically engaging more with the original (for any given definition of the word) nineteenth-century source than Fielding's actual novels. Thus, not only does the script of the first film include the familiar "It's a truth universally acknowledged..." (*PP* 1) in a classic Bridget-ism reminiscent of Murphy's Laws – "… that the moment one area of your life starts going OK another part of it falls spectacularly to pieces" – but Daniel Cleaver assumes Wickham's role more fully by misrepresenting his past history with Darcy in order to denigrate a former friend and monopolise the heroine's affections. Even more

importantly, the film's Darcy starts by being considerably more reminiscent of Austen's protagonist than Fielding's initial portrayal of him as a man who owes more to the tactful courteousness of "the perfect gentleman Mr Knightley" than to "the upper-class snobbishness (though essentially good-heartedness) of Mr. Darcy" (Berberich 34) and whose psychological profile effortlessly combines "the benefits of both older and newer forms of masculinity" (Bentley 15).

Mark's relatively polite rejection of Una's intrusive matchmaking attempts – "I'm sure Bridget's life in London is quite full enough already, Mrs Alconbury" – is enough to bruise Bridget's already frail ego –"Humph. It's not that I wanted him to take my phone number or anything, but I didn't want him to make it perfectly obvious to everyone that he didn't want to." (Fielding 1996: 16) – yet the film line is at least as offensive as Mr Darcy's iconic "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*" (*PP* 7) assessment of Elizabeth's attractions: "Mother, I do not need a blind date. Particularly not with some verbally incontinent spinster who smokes like a chimney, drinks like a fish and dresses like her mother." Likewise, the film's version of the proposal scene, albeit ending on a much flattering note than the infamous "In vain I have struggled" (*PP* 142) speech in *Pride and Prejudice*, is not confined to the exclusively positive terms of the declaration in Fielding's novel:

> I don't think you're an idiot at all. I mean, there are elements of the ridiculous about you. Your mother's pretty interesting. And you really are an appallingly bad public speaker. And you tend to let whatever's in your head come out of your mouth without much consideration of the consequences. I realize that when I met you at the turkey curry buffet that I was unforgivably rude and wearing a reindeer jumper that my mother had given me the day before. But the thing is, um what I'm trying to say very inarticulately is that, um, in fact perhaps despite appearances, I like you very much.

However interesting the similarities between the *Bridget Jones* films and the nineteenth-century novels, the crucial difference between their central male protagonists clearly resides in the absence on the part of twentieth-century Darcy's of any "sense of her inferiority" (*PP* 142) and in his surprising declaration of his affection *for* rather than *in spite of* the female protagonist's imperfection: "'Ah. Apart from the smoking and the drinking and the vulgar mother and the verbal diarrhoea.' 'No. I like you very much – just as you are.'"

These intricate interactions between the various fictional narratives and film scripts reveal the extent to which, far from being interesting merely in terms of literary intertextuality, Fielding's novels are emblematic of a much wider phenomenon "typical of cultural production in this era of greatly diversified means of mechanical reproduction" (Wiltshire 2). The "remaking, rewriting, 'adaptation', reworking, 'appropriation', conversion, mimicking of earlier works into other media" has been repeatedly identified as one of the most important features of the current landscape, with some critics paying particular attention to the "'cross-fertilisation' that so often takes place between classics and more popular films and novels with a broad appeal" and other preferring to resort to film theory and describe the phenomenon in terms of 'transcoding' (Wiltshire 2). Irrespective of the terminology employed and of the intricate network of similarities and differences, appropriations of and departures from a certain tradition, not to mention the confusing array of Mr Darcys, the two *Bridget Jones* novels and their screen adaptations are

"essentially palimpsests upon which both Fielding's texts and Austen's co-exist" and whose ultimate value is very likely to lie "in the insights they provide into Austen's work" (Salber). Jane Austen's novels, and *Pride and Prejudice* above all others, have been and continue to be "irrevocably inf(l)ected" following their "immersion in dialogic heteroglossia in the mid- to late 1990s" (Aragay, López 203), yet deploring this phenomenon as a sign of cultural degradation is perhaps less constructive a reaction than acknowledging the merit of texts such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* in providing an updated version of the relation between romance and notions of masculinity and femininity, as well as in mediating the relationship between canonical nineteenth-century texts and late twentieth-century (female) readers and ultimately honouring Jane Austen whilst engaging the audience in a challenging intertextual game and journey across various genres and media.

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