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Senior Thesis Abstract

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Appropriating Austen: How Film Adaptations Recast Feminist Realism as Reductive Regency
Romance

In the last several decades, film adaptations of Jane Austen's novels have earned hundreds of millions of dollars worldwide. These films tend to emphasize sweeping romance, visual opulence, and drama rather than the realistic, everyday life of the gentry that is at the core of Austen's novels. This conflicting portrayal of her work in modern film more closely resembles the popular "silver fork" or fashionable novels of Austen's contemporaries. These works were romanticized and idealized portrayals of the aristocracy, typically with dramatic plot lines and characters. Letters written by or to Jane Austen reveal that she deliberately rejected these "pictures of perfection" in her own work. Despite her efforts, early periodicals and magazines in the time after her death tend to domesticate Austen into an ideal model of feminine virtue, laying the groundwork for later depoliticized interpretations. Close analysis of key scenes from both the 2005 film *Pride and Prejudice* and the 2020 adaptation of *Emma* in comparison with the original novels reveals how cinematic choices reorient focus from subtle feminist social critiques to romantic destiny. In both cases, by aestheticizing social constraints that Austen critiques and by privileging emotional spectacle over meaningful dialogue, these films convert Austen's feminism into mass marketable romance. Ultimately, this change not only dilutes the original intent of Austen's work, but sells these new ideals back to audiences as if they are the same feminist stories.