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# Spooky Jane: Women, History and Horror in *Death Comes to Pemberley*

Camilla Nelson

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*Abstract:*

*This essay analyses the BBC Masterpiece production of *Death Comes to Pemberley* in the context of a proliferating field of gothic, horror and paranormal adaptations of Austen, focusing on the gothic as a means of addressing issues of history, gender and power. It argues that if historical identities are about control and order, and the ordering of time is a means of identity formation, then the writing of history should therefore be considered a means of producing disciplined historical subjects. In this case, there may well be a liminal aspect to the anarchic, playful and female-centred rewriting of history that is found in Jane Austen story worlds, which, in their popular gothic manifestations, seem increasingly bent on tearing history from its roots.*

*The status of women – oppressed, controlled, fallen*

*– is a constant theme of adaptations.*

*Jerome de Groot, Consuming History*

The climax of the BBC Masterpiece production of *Death Comes to Pemberley* features a highly determined – albeit, dishevelled-looking – Elizabeth Darcy nee Bennet, played by Anna Maxwell Martin, standing at the gallows, haranguing the crowd that has gathered to witness the execution of George Wickham, the erstwhile villain of *Pride and Prejudice*, for the murder of his friend, Captain Denny. Elizabeth has just made a perilous journey from

Pemberley to the Derby assizes, driven at speed over treacherous roads in the dead of the night. She has stormed into the judge's house, roused the good man from his slumbers, and dragged him to the gallows. 'Wait, George Wickham is innocent,' Elizabeth cries. 'I have a signed confession.'

Timidly – cowed, no doubt, by Elizabeth's tirade – the judge orders the hangman to take the noose from Wickham's neck, and then to 'Well, hurry'. But, unfortunately for the men standing beside Wickham on the gallows, nobody seems to care half as much as the parson resumes his prayer, and the three are dispatched – for poaching, no doubt, or for stealing a loaf of bread – in a blurry sort of image at the edge of the frame. Darcy, played by Matthew Rhys, winces as the men 'take the drop', but is surprisingly unoffended to see his wife address a public hanging.

The scene fades to black.

In recent years, the once staid realm of Jane Austen adaptations, so often criticised for their dedication to the manufacture of nostalgia for an idealised English past<sup>1</sup> has dramatically expanded to encompass a netherworld of fan fictions populated by a range of cultural oddities, including Jane Austen as the undead 233-year-old author and owner of an upstate New York book store (Ford), Elizabeth Bennet waking up to the worrying truth that she is married to a 'vampyre' (Grange), Elizabeth Bennet as one half of a dynamic detective duo investigating supernatural mysteries (Berbris), and – most famously, perhaps – Elizabeth Bennet as a kitana-wielding zombie slayer (Graeme-Smith).<sup>2</sup>

To readers of what might safely be called a burgeoning Jane Austen horror subgenre it would come as no surprise that the latest BBC Masterpiece sequel to *Pride and Prejudice*, based on P.D. James' *Death Comes to Pemberley*, features a plot line transformed by the conventions of the neo-gothic thriller. Here, ghosts lurk in the Pemberley woods, lightning flashes across the sky,

dark-haired ladies appear and disappear, and Fitzwilliam Darcy looks a lot more like Heathcliff than any of his filmic prototypes.

Just as remarkable as the proliferation of gothic tropes is Elizabeth's appearance, which is conspicuously free from the shackles imposed by more air brushed portrayals of fictional Georgian England, as evinced, for example, in the idealised representations of Englishness found in so-called British Heritage Film. This Elizabeth doesn't wear a bonnet outside or a cap inside, there is a conspicuous lack of petticoats or any other kind of undergarment under her dress, and her hair looks frowsier than the scullery maid's. Clad in neo-Georgian combat boots, she might well grace the cafes of any contemporary inner city suburb.

This essay is not concerned with issues of textual or historical fidelity, but – to the contrary – with the idea of textual and historical infidelity as a means of addressing issues of history, gender and power. The work of French historian Francois Hartog has drawn attention to the need to think more deeply about the kinds of cultural mechanisms through which the sense of historical time is produced and organised, and how this process of ordering involves images, representations, and media technologies, as well as hierarchies and systems of power. Hartog coined the phrase 'regimes of historicity' to draw attention to the ways in which time itself has become a field of cultural struggle. If, as Hartog has argued, historical identities are about control and order, and the ordering of time is a means of identity formation – and the writing of history might therefore be considered to be a means of controlling the present, of producing disciplined historical subjects (Nelson and de Matos 1-10) – then there may well be a liminal aspect to the anarchic, female-centred, rewriting of historical fiction that is found in Jane Austen story worlds, which, in their popular gothic manifestations, seem increasingly bent on tearing history from its roots.

Historical fiction – the genre which Austen fan fictions partly occupy – has often been denounced as ‘vulgar fiction, impure history’ (Wallace *Historical Novel* 2) and derided by both literary critics and historians for its associations with popular culture. The sheer popularity of historical fiction has seen it diffuse into a range of so-called ‘escapist’ genres including historical crime, historical fantasy, and historical romance. But, as Diana Wallace has argued, the uses of historical fiction as a means of ‘escape’ and a means of ‘intervention’ may actually be more entwined than scholars have hitherto allowed (2-3). If the narratives of History have traditionally excluded women, then it might well be argued that the genre of the woman’s historical novel – and, by extension, the narratives of Jane Austen story worlds – has provided women with the imaginative space to playfully create more inclusive versions of time.

Just as historical fiction has hybridised, so too has the gothic transcended its older generic limitations, breaking free from its archetypal expression in the pages of eighteenth century literature to inflect – or infect – a range of contemporary cultural phenomena, including films, comic books, advertisements and computer games, not to mention fashion and makeup. Historically, gothic literature has concerned itself with the actions of a predatory aristocracy, the rise of industrial capital, and provided a sinister counterpoint to the bourgeois dream of the home as a safe refuge from the moral and physical horrors of the world. It has provided a means to invoke the violence of social dismemberment in its preoccupation with deformed, diseased and grotesque bodies. It has provided a figurative language through which to represent the depredations of both imperialism and capitalism in its construction of individuals and peoples as monstrous. However, contemporary gothic is now so diffuse and commercialised that scholars such as Fred Botting have argued that the radical potential it once possessed is essentially dead. More recently, critics such as Anders Höglund have argued

that the gothic has ceased to interrogate social fears and anxieties but has become complicit and continuous with them.<sup>3</sup>

However, if the gothic is considered less as a discrete body of works and more as a language then, as Catherine Spooner has argued, it can be understood as neither intrinsically bound up with a politics of either repression or resistance but merely as a linguistic means through which repression and resistance has been discussed (1-9). The gothic, reconceived as a language, has provided a means through which to figure – and, indeed, reconfigure – the ordering force of the past and the impact of the past on the present. The gothic, as Diana Wallace has argued, provides a language that is at once ‘obsessed with the return of the past’ – that is, concerned with historically imposed cycles of violence – but is also (paradoxically) a-historical in the way that it occupies a realm of fantasy (*Female Gothic* 4).

Austen herself drew attention to the frictions between history and the fictive imaginings of the gothic – pulling together the diverse themes of history, the gothic aesthetic, and women’s writing and experience – when, in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Moorland announced,

History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in ... I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all. It is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. (123)

The double-edged irony inherent in Austen’s use of free indirect style leaves the reader with the clear – albeit complicated – impression that there is indeed something wrong with ‘real solemn history’ of this sort. It is not just that

history contains, as Hayden White has argued, a great degree of fiction, but also because it is a powerful means of identity formation, which can enfranchise and disenfranchise – just as it disenfranchises Catherine Moreland. Perhaps this is why, in more contemporary times, women writers and readers have demonstrated a persistent interest in engaging with Austen's fictional narratives of Georgian England in preference the 'real thing'. This tendency is particularly apparent in the field of adaptation, where, as the historian Jerome de Groot has argued, 'The status of women – oppressed, controlled, fallen – is a constant theme' (189).

It may well be true that the politics of recent romantic remakes of *Pride and Prejudice* are more often consumerist than democratic, and scholars are quite justified in being sceptical about the Harlequin-isation of Austen's work. But it is also possible to read romantic remakes of Austen less as dreams of endless love than as conjectures about women's historically determined identity and the potential for women's freedom – even when such 'glimpses of freedom' are encapsulated in essentially illusory images of unlimited money, unlimited leisure, unlimited consumption, or, in the case of *Lost in Austen's* Elizabeth, the wonders of mobile telephony and Internet access. These 'glimpses of freedom' may not measure up to the expectations of certain scholars (and quite a few of them may well be treated with a measure of scepticism), but there is also a need to recognise that a playful agency is often at work in these texts. The BBC adaptation of *Death Comes to Pemberley* is a curious case in point. Here, it is not only the title of the series that signals its status as an adaptation of an adaptation, but also the hair, the boots, not to mention the conspicuous absence of petticoats, which constantly clue the reader to the fact that the canvas being played on is not 'History' but a text (or, more precisely, series of texts). They are signs to be negotiated by a reader who can delight in the text's recognition of its own artifice, in its constant gesturing towards the memory of other texts, and the way it draws attention to the



constructed-ness of its world. Reading an adaptation involves, to use Christine Geraghty's words, a practiced 'recognition of ghostly presences' left by an 'accretion' of textual 'deposits over time', and a capacity to unravel the 'layering process' that gives rise to the sense of 'shadowing or doubling of what is on the surface by what is glimpsed behind' (195). By observing the 'ghostly' elements of textual representation that follow a script, and noting points of divergence, readers may consider which aspects of Elizabeth's construction have been changed, how they have changed, and whether these changes are politically, socially or culturally significant.<sup>4</sup>

If the drama in Austen story worlds can be said to reside in Elizabeth finding the 'right man', then the central drama of *Death Comes to Pemberley* resides in Elizabeth confirming herself in having made the right choice. In P.D. James' novel, the choice presented to Elizabeth is the limited one provided by 'History', and is semantically hemmed round by James' numerous historical asides and disquisitions. The BBC adaptation takes a very different approach. What is intriguing about the BBC version is that it allows Elizabeth to resolve the conflict not in terms of 'History' – that is, the entrapment of women within patriarchal history, or, indeed, histories of patriarchy – but in terms of the semantic excess that is 'fictional Georgian England' (to adopt the phrase used to designate the chaotic story world into which *Lost in Austen's* Amanda Price steps through the portal in her bathroom). By mobilising tropes and allusions drawn not only from woman-centred Austen story worlds, but from gothic and neo-gothic films and fictions, not to mention the neo-historical murder mystery, the BBC adaptation radically reworks not only the politics of Austen, but also the Thatcherite anxieties that are such a notable characteristic of P.D. James.

In the BBC adaptation, conflicts within the private sphere, and between the private and the public spheres, can certainly be read as conservative, but also – in their semantic excess – as anarchic, particularly in the text's greater

recognition of female agency and desire. It is this playful excess of signification that propels Elizabeth – who is, after all, the wife of a staid and class-conscious country gentleman – to the startling climax in which she not only frees the dastardly Wickham from the hangman’s noose, but breaks with all sense of social decorum by doing so in public. This textually apt, if historically preposterous scene can be read as the outcome of a playful textual experiment – one that yet again demonstrates that the woman-centred romance genre, despite the tendency to conservatism noted by its myriad detractors, is as apt as any other register for the social and political anxieties of an age.

### **Thatcherite Anxieties in P.D James’ *Death Comes to Pemberley***

Questions of class and social status are a major preoccupation for Austen’s characters, and adaptations of Austen have constantly struggled to arrange – or, rather, rearrange – Austen’s class ironies as cultural attitudes shift. Instead of the confronting words with which Austen concludes *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, setting out the ways in which Elizabeth must separate herself from the socially less acceptable members of her family, contemporary adaptations such as Joe Wright’s, for example, more often attempt to soften the acidic edge, or, at least, alleviate the necessity for separation by recasting Mr and Mrs Bennet as doting and embarrassingly heroic parents. (Wright also imposes a rags-to-riches framework on the narrative, heightening the divide between the Bennet and Darcy families, until the marriage is transformed into a class-busting Cinderella tale about upward social mobility, a tactic similarly deployed albeit to different effect in Guy Andrew’s comedic version.) It may therefore come as something of a shock to certain readers, when, in the opening passages of *Death Comes to Pemberley*, it is revealed that not only has Elizabeth separated herself from her family, but so too has her family – if not the whole of Meryton society – separated itself from her. Elizabeth, according to the Meryton gossips, has married Darcy for the worst of all possible

motives. 'One cannot have everything in life,' the gossips declare, 'and any young lady in Meryton would have endured more than a disagreeable face at the breakfast table to marry ten thousand a year and to be mistress of Pemberley' (5).

Of course, the reader is left to infer that this is not the case – Elizabeth Bennet is not a fortune hunter. Yet the discomfiting class aspects of the story are enhanced by the absence of Elizabeth's parents, who, haunted by memories of 'broken nights, screaming babies' and 'recalcitrant nursery maids' (10), are said to have been infrequent visitors of their grandchildren. Tellingly, Mrs Bennet 'had greater pleasure in regaling her neighbours with the wonders of Pemberley ... than she had in experiencing them' (10-11). Elizabeth, the reader is told, 'missed little of her previous life' (22), having been accepted into the more august society of Pemberley 'within a month' (18). The arbiters of taste in the rarefied circles in which Elizabeth now travels having swiftly – albeit patronisingly – conceded that 'Pemberley, despite the unfortunate antecedents of its new mistress, now had every promise of taking its rightful place in the social life of the county' (18). Elizabeth, in short, is represented as trapped and ensnared inside relations of class and gender against which she does not appear to strain.

Unlike Austen, who confined herself to the acute and caustic representation of the foibles of one class – giving rise to Raymond Williams famous admonition, 'where only one class is seen, no classes are seen' (117) – James dramatically reworks the wider class dimensions of Austen's novel by revealing the historic 'outside' of Austen's world of the upper middle class gentry. In this respect, one of the striking features of James' adaptation is the way in which the servants are given a new and grander role. Hill the housekeeper is mentioned only once in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but according to the Elizabeth of James' novel the servants were 'part of the family in a way the servants at Pemberley could never be' (22). Hence, it is to Hill and

'the servants at Longbourn that [Elizabeth's] thoughts most frequently turned' (22). Indeed, James' novel might well be indebted to television soap operas from *Downton Abbey* to *Upstairs Downstairs*, or read as a ghostly prototype for novels such as Jo Baker's *Longbourn*, which retells the tale of *Pride and Prejudice* from the perspective of the housemaids. But, unlike Baker's novel, which is politically scathing, the ultimate effect of James' portrayal of the Pemberley servants is to legitimate – and, therefore, entrench – class hierarchies rather than transform them. Moreover, in James' novel, the portrayal of the servants takes on a directly political dimension. Pemberley, according to Elizabeth, is a nation-like community in which the distinctly unequal relationship between the master and his servants is characterised as a bond of 'blood' (22).

Pemberley, in the hands of James, is rendered as 'Pax Pemberley'. That is, as an overtly political vision of a hierarchical communitarian society, underwritten by an ideology of sanctified Englishness, in which prosperity and security are things to be bestowed by a master on the loyal among his servants, and the master's right of privilege is legitimated and re-inscribed by recourse to the values of noblesse oblige. The reader is told, for example, that Darcy had been schooled from childhood into the notion that Pemberley could 'bestow more benefits than it could receive' (13), and, though Georgiana's suitor Henry Alveston is claimed to be 'something of a radical', the reader is anxiously reassured that he is the 'heir to an ancient barony' (217) – that his ultimate goal is to restore the family fortunes – and he is, therefore, not much of a radical at all. Indeed, despite the constant talk of women's rights and nineteenth law reform the ideology that ultimately underpins Pax Pemberley is one of rationalised inequality – oddly reminiscent of the 'trickle down effect' espoused by supply-side economists in the Thatcher era that was P.D. James' heyday.

It is also a thoroughly masculine vision. Women are certainly there in the novel, and the 'Woman Question' is much discussed, but not by the novel's

female characters. 'We have entered the nineteenth century;' announces Henry Alveston, 'we do not need to be a disciple of Mrs Wollstonecraft to feel that women should not be denied a voice in matters that concern them. It is some centuries since we accepted that a woman has a soul. Is it not time that we accepted that she also has a mind?' (142). Darcy demurs for a few minutes before capitulating, becoming an unlikely political progressive. Alveston's comments may have been 'inappropriate and presumptuous', Darcy returns, but this did not mean 'they were not true' (143). Not only do the female characters fail to partake in these discussions on the 'Woman Question', they also lack agency and capacity to contribute to the action of the unfolding plot, and are often placed far away from the novel's centre of consciousness. Mrs Bennet, who railed so colourfully against the sexual injustice of the entail in *Pride and Prejudice*, appears much reduced in comic range. Lady Catherine remains imperious and exasperating but in a similarly reduced story role. Nor does Elizabeth – who, at the start of the story, is pictured in Lady Anne's sitting room, ensnared in a gilded domestic prison – emerge very much as the action unfolds. Even in the drawing room conversations in which Elizabeth is able to participate she fails to actively support the advancement of her sex – or even, so it seems, the advancement of justice – and is, at all times, content to respect her husband's wishes.

Nowhere is Elizabeth's lack of agency more conspicuous than in her exclusion from the mystery plot. James may have invented the intrepid female detective Cordelia Grey, but grants Elizabeth none of Grey's acumen or initiative. Elizabeth's role is circumscribed not only by the historical realities that excluded nineteenth century women from the law courts and dissecting rooms – and any other table at which the serious business of life was discussed – but seems additionally hampered by the gendered assumptions about the incompatibility of femininity and detective work that were very much a reality when the conventions of the detective story were first codified.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the

nonagenarian author flails about, searching among her male characters for a more suitable detective figure, introducing the neighbouring magistrate Hardcastle, reverting to a minor legal character named Clitheroe, making occasional use of Georgiana's legal suitor Henry Alveston, eventually deploying Darcy as the major witness to the court proceedings.

Women are not only excluded physically from the scene of the unfolding court drama, but are doubly excluded in their denial of an active role in the drawing room conversations behind the scenes. Ultimately, the mystery plot underpins the fundamentally masculine political vision of the novel, which is aptly summed up by Clitheroe, when he says to Darcy,

The peace and security of England depends on gentlemen living in their houses as good landlords and masters, considerate to their servants, charitable to the poor, and ready, as justices of the peace, to take a full part in promoting peace and order in their communities. If the aristocrats of France had lived thus, there would never have been a revolution. (217)

Interestingly enough, although these English 'gentlemen' are thus enjoined to live as 'good landlords and masters' – being 'charitable' to their wives, daughters and dependents – the titled aristocrats of the novel do not fare well. Fitzwilliam, as Viscount Hartlep, with his 'great ancestral castle' and 'miles of pitheads above the black gold of his coalfields' (125), combines the image of the predatory aristocrat with that of the industrial capitalist, and turns out to be a villain and a scoundrel. Though Darcy – who is, as always, the measure of decency in the many prequels and sequels in which he appears – muses that 'he had lost some respect in his cousin's eyes because he had placed his desire for a woman above the responsibilities of family and class' (125) he harbours

no desire to marry his sister Georgiana to Fitzwilliam – a plotline that is reversed in the BBC adaptation to striking political effect.

The threats to Pax Pemberley come from all directions. They feature most overtly in the gothic elements that are weaved intermittently through the text – in the spectral hauntings, wild woodlands, bolting carriages, and spooked horses. The horses ‘hated going into the woodland when there was a full moon’ says the coachman, ‘because of the ghost of Mrs Reilly’ (211). ‘We saw the ghost of Mrs Reilly as plain as I see you,’ say the maids. (149). But in a novel that is hedged in by material history (by endless disquisitions on the Irish Rebellion and the war with France, not to mention the constant references to ‘new-fangled’ (127) inventions such as running water and inside toilets) these gothic elements sit latently in the text. They function like an aporia in the drama, a dimly realised violence at the fringes of the novel’s consciousness. They take on a political edge in an astonishing interior monologue played out in Elizabeth’s mind on the night of the killing, as the houseguests gather in the music room, listening to Georgiana play. Incited by the ‘high wind’, which ‘raged ineffectively’ in the woods, like a ‘malignant force, seeking every chimney, every cranny, to gain entrance’ (55), Elizabeth’s ‘morbid imaginings’, which had been gathering through the morning, take on material form:

*She thought, Here we sit at the beginning of a new century, citizens of the most civilised country in Europe, surrounded by the splendour of its craftsmanship, its art and the books which enshrine its literature, while outside there is another world which wealth and education and privilege can keep from us ... Perhaps even the most fortunate of us will not be able to ignore it and keep it at bay forever. (55, original italics)*

Like the 'high wind' and 'malignant force' seeking 'to gain entrance' (55), these melodramatic threats do not emerge not from within but from outside of Pemberley. It is not just that 'England was at war with France', leaving aristocratic Englishmen fearful of being 'killed in action without leaving an heir' (26). Or that accounts of the Irish Rebellion permit an extraordinarily violent ideology of empire to emerge, with Wickham transformed into the unlikely 'hero of the hour', engaging in the 'bloody work' of empire building, as Irish 'rebels were hunted down and punished' (159). So too, the murderer is thought to be an outsider. 'It was ridiculous to consider that either Colonel the Viscount Hartlep or any member of the Pemberley household could have had any part in Denny's death,' Darcy argues to himself (147). And 'even if Denny had been murdered by a stranger ... the man would hardly present a physical threat to Pemberley House itself or anyone in it' (122). Like the 'high wind' that threatens the 'art', 'wealth' and 'privilege' of Pemberley, and cannot be kept 'at bay' (55), the spectral or material threat is – like the Irish Rebellion and Napoleonic Wars – associated with the end of Englishness.

Nevertheless, the killer turns out to be a Pemberley insider, not an outsider. It is none other than William Bidwell, the ailing son of the head coachman, whose crime has its origins in mistaken identity (Bidwell mistakes Denning for his dastardly friend, Wickham) and is motivated by a desire to defend his defenceless sister Louisa against the sexual depredations of Wickham, who had lied to her about his identity, means and martial status, then seduced her, and left her pregnant. Though the novel refuses any radicality to Bidwell's action, characterising his rebellion as a miscalculation, a mistaken manslaughter which 'English justice' can apparently be called upon to rectify, he is, nevertheless – in an unrealised sense – a figure of an incipient, if not overtly insurgent working class in Pemberley. Indeed, compared to Bidwell, who confesses to the manslaughter of Denning on his deathbed, the upper class villains of the piece do comparatively well. Fitzwilliam goes off to



fight Napoleon, before, no doubt, retiring to his coal reserves and ancient castle. And a clergyman arranges for the exonerated Wickham to depart for the 'New World', where – as in so many of novels of Britain's imperial age in which money from the East India Company or a Caribbean sugar plantation supplies the means for a plot resolution – he will, no doubt, make his fortune.

But it is in the novel's condemnation of its so-called fallen women that the regressive nature of its politics is most conspicuous. It is here that class and gender relations – in all their violence – are ruthlessly enforced. Louisa Bidwell – the seduced and betrayed mother of Wickham's illegitimate child – is hemmed in by patriarchy on every side. 'Poor Louisa!' writes James, who had perhaps in her affair with Wickham been 'given a glimpse of a different and more exciting life' must be punished for her transgressions. 'She knew, poor girl, that the prospect of bringing disgrace on Pemberley would be worse for [her father] than anything that could happen to her' (296). And so Louisa's baby is taken from her, and Louisa too is sent away. This, according to James, is 'the best' that could be 'done', and Louisa's 'future would lie as a parlourmaid at Highmarten' (296).

A worse fate lay in store for the novel's other fallen woman, Wickham's sister Mrs Younge, a would-be adoptive mother to Wickham's unwanted child. 'Thrown upon her own resources early in life' and forced to run a 'boarding house' (a polite euphemism for a world close to prostitution), her crime, it appears, was to love her brother too much. On hearing the death sentence erroneously passed on Wickham, his sister flees the courtroom and hurls herself beneath a passing carriage. The act leaves her 'squashed under the heavy wheels', 'as if she were a stray animal, her blood flowing in a red stream to pool under the horses feet'. The horses 'neighed and reared' at the 'stench', and the 'coachmen had difficulty in controlling them'. Though Darcy had earlier conceded in his argument with Alveston that women possessed both a soul and a mind, this does not, or so it appears, apply to Mrs Younge. 'Darcy

took one look and, turning away, vomited violently in the gutter' (261). Darcy's revulsion is apparently shared, as right-thinking citizens 'shrank back', although the rest of the London crowd, including children and wailing babies, swells as the stench 'poisons the air'. Ultimately, it is this image of female abjection – of the reviled or fallen woman – that generates the novel's larger national picture, providing the ground on which its vision of Pax Pemberley is generated and empowered.

### **Female Agency in BBC Masterpiece's *Death Comes to Pemberley***

The BBC production of *Death Comes to Pemberley*, adapted for the small screen by Juliette Towhidi, strikes a very different tone, opening in the romantic and mysterious Pemberley woods, re-envisioned as a gothic landscape shot through with blackening shadows and piercing greens. Two housemaids appear, wandering the leaf-strewn paths in search of boys. One runs on ahead and returns, shrieking. The camera travels forwards, creeping down a wild escarpment before coming to rest on a moss-covered gravestone featuring the word 'Darcy', with the last words of the inscription – 'Here Lies the Mortal Remains' – partially concealed by the undergrowth. An ominous soundtrack, combined with the gloomy and frightening scenery, sets the tone for what the audience might expect. Like the ruined castle or crumbling pile of the gothic imaginary, Pemberley has been recreated as a place that hides secrets. Here, time is no longer linear but cyclical, driving characters backwards as well as forwards, imposing an eddying motion on the narrative, so that the present comes to be understood as being governed by events that are concealed in the past.

The house – towards which the maids now scurry in their terror – is framed as a dramatic counterpoint to the gravestone, which proclaims the death and disappearance of the Darcys. Inside, the house is taken up with preparations for Lady Anne's ball, inaugurated by Darcy's aristocratic mother,

which is now the central event on the county calendar. The house itself is presented as a vision of conspicuous – and, perhaps, unsustainable – consumption. Servants are seen hurrying about – setting fires, polishing silver, taking out the six-hour candles – as a young Fitzwilliam Darcy, having escaped from his governess, hurtles through the halls. Elizabeth circles around, gazing at the flowers in their out-sized vases, at the mirrors and the crystal, before descending the stairs to inspect the culinary confections prepared under the stern gaze of the cook. In the kitchens, the table is spread with an extraordinary array of Regency concoctions, including white soup, wild goose and orange sauce, almond faggots, millefruit, Prince of Wales biscuits, Duke of Clarence biscuits, Duchess of York biscuits, not to mention a series of extravagant pies with feathered birds on top. Into the midst of this spectacle, the housemaids return from the woodlands, screaming.

MAID ONE: Mrs Reilly's ghost ... in the woods!

COOK: What on earth?

MAID: I saw her ma'am.

MAID TWO: Vicious-looking, she was.

MAID ONE: Real as you, standing there!

COOK: What utter nonsense! (Whispering) What will Mrs Darcy think of you pair. Edith, can you take these two into the pantry and give them a thimble full of brandy each. I'll deal with you in a minute. (To Elizabeth) I must apologise, madam. They're very silly girls.

ELIZABETH: Who's Mrs Reilly?

COOK: It's an old wives tale, madam.

In the BBC adaptation, the 'old wives tale' of the ghost takes centre stage. Far more than the mystery of Denning's murder, it is the mystery of Mrs Reilly's ghost that lends depth to the series, embodying both the cultural anxiety of the

gothic, and its potential for social critique. By pursuing the 'old wives tale' of the ghost Elizabeth is eventually forced to confront the judicial murder of a child, a tenant of the Darcy's, who was executed by a local magistrate for the crime of poaching, and the subsequent death of the child's mother, who was driven to hang herself in the Pemberley woodlands in a state of grief. The figure of Mrs Reilly's ghost, which 'appears in the woods every time that misfortune is about to strike', dramatically frames the extremes of class violence that haunt more traditional or idealized visions of Pemberley, placing the historic violence associated with class privilege firmly in the foreground. It is not just the fact of the ghost, but also the symbolic haunting that provokes terror in the maids. In this sense, the maids – whose story bookends the opening series of scenes – have journeyed away from the house into the wild woodlands which encircle it, only to meet with the violent secret that lurks at its dark heart.

But if the gothic is an aesthetic that is obsessed with history – and historic cycles of violence – it is also about the possibility of change. The gothic heroine, who, as Ellen Moers famously argued, is forced to 'climb pasteboard Alps', 'scurry along miles of darkened corridors, inspect secret chambers, or descend into dungeons unchaperoned' (144), not only navigates the details of a mystery, but also interrogates the social processes that created it. In the BBC's *Death Comes to Pemberley*, the idea of change is embodied in the agency of Elizabeth herself. Unlike the Elizabeth of P.D. James' novel, who is quite content to allow her husband to decide everything, the Elizabeth of the BBC adaptation is shown to be in control of the household, and of Darcy. In the scenes that follow on from the opening sequence, Elizabeth parries Darcy's ire, and Darcy readily capitulates before Elizabeth's good-humoured banter:

DARCY: How can a man think with such a racket going on? Can you please ask them to stop?

ELIZABETH: That wouldn't be helpful, Fitzwilliam dearest.

DARCY: It is a fine family tradition for the master of the house to be irritable on the eve of the ball.

ELIZABETH: And for the lady to do everything in her power to assuage him.

DARCY: Quite.

ELIZABETH: Perhaps some traditions need updating.

DARCY: It worked perfectly well so far.

ELIZABETH: How dreary! All good things must come to an end.

In this conversation, Darcy stands for 'tradition' and 'family' – in other words, 'patriarchy' – and Elizabeth stands for progress and change. Their argument is therefore less a straight-forward one over matters of household management, so much as it is one over matters of gender, politics and class – and, more specifically, or so it emerges, between the clashing values of an established gentry and an aspiring, individualistic middle class. As the narrative progresses, so too the class aspects of the couple's argument are compounded by the marital aspirations of Darcy for Georgiana, the dramatic entry of the 'vulgar' Mrs Bennet, not to mention the acquisitive and attention-seeking Lydia, the death of Captain Denning, the discovery of a blood-soaked Wickham, and the probing questions of the magistrate. As the problems complicate, so too the couple's differences are less easily settled and it is essentially the clash of class values that threatens to tear Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage apart. 'This family was not built or sustained by people doing what they want,' Georgiana informs Elizabeth, by the side of the moss-covered grave in the woodlands. 'It's bigger than you or I.' Indeed, for many viewers, the thrill of the BBC series lies less in the murder plot, or the story of the haunting, and more in the way that the mystery throws the Darcy's marriage into turmoil. The suspense of the series has less to do with the actual murder

and more to do with the spectacle of the great romantic couple of English literature drifting apart then coming back together.

By framing the couple's argument as a matter of class conflict – thereby adding a social and political dimension to the romantic relationship – the television series expresses an apparent desire for a reordering of class relations, including the relations between men and women. But by the end of the drama, as the couple reunites, these subversive desires are deflected. The drama is resolved almost entirely in terms of the romantic plot, and arguably in ways that show such desire for social protest to have been misguided at the outset.

Indeed, as Janice Radway once argued, the difficulty of the modern gothic romance is that despite the subversive strain of the gothic tropes – the metaphor of the ghostly haunting, of the woman captive in a gilded domestic space – the narrative force of the happy ending tends to suggest that the only way out of the gothic cycle of violence is to 'find the right man' (159). In the BBC adaptation, Elizabeth eventually scuttles Darcy's angry expectation that Georgiana will marry Colonel Fitzwilliam, but ultimately this expectation is merely replaced by Elizabeth's insistence that Georgiana will find a better means of escape through a marriage to the politically progressive Henry Alveston, who is 'no supporter of tyranny, in any form'. In short, Georgiana must repeat the success of Elizabeth's own marriage, which was for love rather than status or money. Hence, although the viewer may well feel a sense of discontent and a desire to protest the historic violence of class and gender relations, the viewer is also reassured that such acts of protest are perhaps unnecessary. The real threat to Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship – seen in a rational light, once the strange gothic miasma has lifted – was not actually from within the marriage, or even from within Pemberley society, but from outside. In terms of the wider plot, it was not Darcy's father but Hardcastle's father who ordered the execution of Mrs Reilly's child ('The Hardcastles aren't

much liked at Pemberley,' says the Cook). It was not the ghost of Mrs Reilly, but the reality of Mrs Younge and her relationship with the treacherous (and, indeed, lecherous) Wickham that gave rise to the circumstances that led to Denning's murder.

This deflection is particularly apparent in the story of the ghost. In the gothic tradition of the 'explained supernatural', in which every seemingly supernatural intrusion is traced back to natural causes, it turns out that the 'ghost' glimpsed by the maids in the opening scene is not the spectral force that they first imagined – the grieving mother of a murdered child – but the villainess of the piece, the very fleshly Mrs Younge. It is Georgiana's former governess, reincarnated as Wickham's sister, who is roaming the Pemberley Woods, meeting up with Colonel Fitzwilliam, scheming to steal the illegitimate child of Wickham and Louisa Bidwell. It is the same flesh and blood woman who Elizabeth encounters during her stroll through the woods (returning from the Bidwell's house, where she has played the part of the charitable mistress, visiting the ailing son of the Pemberley head coachman).

Though not a ghost, Mrs Younge is still thoroughly gothicised, in her costume, in her makeup and in her deranged appearance, not to mention Darcy's characterisation of her as a 'madwoman' who 'could have attacked' Elizabeth. ('No, I'm sure she was frightened,' Elizabeth replies.) Hence, there remains something ghostly – or, at least, profoundly disturbing – about Mrs Younge, who, although she turns out to be neither a 'ghost' or a 'madwoman' is nonetheless spectral in that she is, as Diana Wallace once argued with respect to gothic women, "'dead' or 'buried (alive)' within male power structures that render her ghostly' (*Female Gothic* 26). No longer the one-dimensional villainess of James' adaptation, Mrs Younge gains dimension through her association with the various figures and tropes that make up the vast nineteenth century literary underworld of marginalised, oppressed and subordinated women. She is even given the opportunity to respond. 'Your

sister's no victim, Mr Darcy,' Mrs Younge retaliates in answer to Darcy's accusation about her involvement in Wickham's seduction of Georgiana. 'Not with men such as you to guard her.' The real victims, argues Mrs Younge, are the oppressed, despised and disenfranchised 'women such as me who sacrifice their lives to protect the sanctity of high rank'. It is also noticeable that rather than reviling Mrs Younge, the Darcy of the BBC series appears perturbed by her words, and is visibly shaken by her subsequent death. But this extension of a superficial kind of empathy does nothing to evade the awful inevitability of the gothic plotline that insists that Mrs Younge – rather like Bertha Rochester, or, indeed, Mrs Danvers – must die to bring about the desired happy ending. It appears that all the 'oppressed' and 'fallen' women must be 'controlled' – to play with de Groot's terms – or else be ejected from the action before the drama can conclude.

Yet, there is a twist. In the BBC adaptation, the 'fallen' Lydia Wickham and Louisa Bidwell are dealt a kinder hand. Lydia – so often castigated in Austen adaptations for her sexuality, which is invariably linked to her hyper-consumerism – is allowed a final moment of redemption. 'It was the best day of my life when I met you, Wickham,' Lydia informs him in the darkness of the condemned cell. 'Look at all the fun we've had. No one can say we didn't live it to the full.' For all her foibles, Lydia – delightfully, if somewhat melodramatically, played by Jenna Coleman – is allowed to demonstrate a measure of steadfastness. 'Choose the brightest, best memory of me, will you?' Wickham replies in a similar vein. 'Hold on to that.' Once the hanging is circumvented, the couple recover with admirable pluck, living to stare down outmoded English moralities and conventions. As in the novel, they go to the colonies to make their fortunes – banished from the garden of Pemberley – but are at least packed off with a greater sense of irony. 'I do wonder what America will make of them,' says Elizabeth. The ending of the BBC adaptation also signals a more liberal and enlightened version of Pax Pemberley in its



treatment of Louisa Bidwell, who not only gets to keep her baby, but is allowed to remain within the Edenic garden of the Pemberley estate, rather than being exiled into domestic service far away. 'It's time,' says a surprisingly progressive Darcy, 'Pemberley began to look after its own.'

Indeed, each of the scenes that make up the denouement of the series is laced with a generous sense of irony. It is not Darcy but Henry Alveston who features in the obligatory 'wet, white shirt scene' as he fervently declares to Georgiana, 'I can wait no longer'. Though not quite soaked through, Alveston's shirt is certainly damp enough to signal an allusion to Joe Wright's adaptation, which featured Matthew Macfadyen in an open-neck shirt walking through a misty morning glade – which, like the drenched Elliot Cowan in Guy Andrews' *Lost Austen*, references the iconic BBC production featuring Colin Firth diving into the Pemberley ponds. The closing scene of *Death Comes to Pemberley* features the ponds once again, though this time Darcy, older and wiser, accompanied by the newly pregnant Elizabeth, is content to stroll idly by. 'Ah, those early moments of love,' he says, in a line that not only alludes to the impending marriage of Henry and Georgiana, but ironically invokes all the other 'wet, white shirt scenes', as one of the greatest – or, at least, most popular – romantic couples in literature get back together, once again.

Here, the capacity to think about representation across a crowded field of adaptations (as opposed to a single text measured against a perceived original) yields different insights, not only into the many layered ironies of the ending, but the meaning of all those 'oppressed', 'controlled' and 'fallen' women who are, as de Groot argues, a constant theme of adaptations. None of the dizzying array of Elizabeths that make up the field of *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations can claim to be entirely free from the discursive constraints of 'fictional Georgian England' let alone the constraints of the contemporary world, yet it is possible to read the Elizabeth played by Anna Maxwell Martin as yet another

intervention in a field of adaptations, as yet another attempt to produce a version of Austen's heroine that is adequate to the needs of an egalitarian age.

Maxwell Martin's Elizabeth appears to be both defiant and in control not only because Elizabeth's feisty determination was somewhat attenuated in P.D. James' adaptation, but also because, in considering the range of adaptations since the 'Austen-mania' of the 1990s, there is a sense in which the male characters have gradually assumed increased importance. No longer shadowy presences hovering at the margins of a female-centred narrative (whose intentions are, if not obscure, then, at least, less obvious), the Darcys and Wickhams and Bingleys of recent television dramas have more often burst across the screen, brimming with physical self-assurance, galloping on horseback, striding through glades in the rain. (Indeed, in fan-works such as Amanda Grange's *Mr Darcy's Diary* or *Wickham's Diary* the reader can even re-experience the story through the prism of the hero's innermost thoughts.)

By bringing Elizabeth back to the centre of dramatic consciousness, as actor and agent, the recent series represents a return to a more female-centred drama. Moreover, Elizabeth's agency – the historical oddity of her address from the gallows – is all the more pronounced for the way it runs contrary to the usual constraints that are placed upon a heroine in a gothic narrative. In gothic romance, as Janice Radway argues, it may be the feistiness of the heroine that establishes her deviation from the feminine ideal. Yet, as the plot unravels and the dramatic action draws to a climax, this feistiness usually fails to secure the thing that the heroine most desires. In short, the reader may delight in the heroine's strength and intelligence, but events invariably develop in such a way that her ability to take effective action is circumscribed (149). In contrast to P.D. James' novel – in which Elizabeth not only fails to act, but is in fact marginalised by the action – the BBC adaptation not only draws Elizabeth back to the centre of dramatic consciousness, but also endows her with the agency to precipitate the climax. Elizabeth not only unravels the

mystery but also gallops in a coach-and-four to the Derby assizes, snatching an innocent Wickham from the clutches of both the rabble and the hangman. Elizabeth's actions are, of course, historically anachronistic. Added to this is a strange filmic discontinuity, visible to the attentive viewer, whereby, at some point between raging at the magistrate and the hangman, Elizabeth manages – against the odds – to both acquire and arrange a bonnet, donning the surface sign of social conformity at the very moment when she is least conforming.

There is no doubt that the female characters in this adaptation are more independent, more able to move about than their counterparts in earlier Heritage versions – freer, in fact, than is suggested by any historical reality. Indeed, the pleasure to be gained from such a text may be less one of agreement or belief, so much as the capacity to identify the improbable, the absurd or the politically suspect. It is not altogether clear that this historical romance drama has opened a space within which gendered characters can escape the disciplining effects of history, but at least another danger has been circumvented – that is, the possibility that in constantly playing out the fact of gender subordination in history, by incessantly presenting and representing it, women may well find themselves trapped within the prison house that Jane Austen evocatively labelled 'real solemn history'.

'Let's look to the past only as it gives us pleasure,' says Elizabeth in the closing lines of the television series, rendering these thematic concerns overt. Looking to history in this way undoubtedly carries the risk of resurrecting a sanitised, if not ultimately commodified version of the past. Then again, perhaps the recent surge of gothic Austen adaptations signal that – when it comes to both patriarchal history and histories of patriarchy – the stronger imperative is not to reproduce the past so much as to escape from it.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Higson's *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* famously argues that costume dramas 'articulate a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged classes' and 'reinvent an England that no longer existed ... as something fondly remembered and desirable' (12). See also Higson's *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking Since the 1990s*, which dedicates two chapters to the discussion of Austen adaptations.

<sup>2</sup> There is a growing body of scholarship examining the cultural practices of Austen fans. Recent scholarly works include Kylie Mirmohamadi's *Digital Afterlives of Jane Austen*, Deborah Yaffe's delightful *Among the Janeites*, and Gabrielle Malcolm's Jane Austen collection in Intellect's Fan Phenomenon series, not to mention Claudia Johnson's *Jane Austen Cults and Cultures*, Gillian Dow and Clare Hanson's *The Uses of Austen*, Deidre Lynch's *Jane Austen's Disciples and Devotees* and Juliette Wells' *Everybody's Jane*. These studies have collectively begun the work of examining the complicated textual transactions, including literary, social and industrial practices, through which this increasingly crowded field is produced and organised.

<sup>3</sup> Also relevant here is David McNally's *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*, which takes issue with Franco Moretti's influential essay 'Dialectic of Fear' in order to reposition gothic figures as expressions of social protest.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, it is also useful to consider the ways in which Anna Maxwell Martin's appearance in other well-known historical dramas adds a further layer of complexity, especially as she tends to be cast as a feisty female character. For example, in *Bleak House* Maxwell Martin appeared as the courageous albeit outwardly docile Esther; in *North and South* she appeared on the other side of the class divide, as the factory worker Bessie Higgins; and in *South Riding* she appeared as a fiery young teacher bringing progressive ideas to a girl's school in 1930s Yorkshire.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, 'Yesterday's Women', a recent discussion of female characters in neo-Victorian crime dramas, in which Claire Meldrum argues that the exclusion of women from representation actively produces women as 'Other'.