

Pride and Prejudice Book vs. Play

Grace Zhang

College of Liberal Arts, Purdue University, United States

Received: 30 Nov 2022; Received in revised form: 28 Dec 2022; Accepted: 03 Jan 2023; Available online: 09 Jan 2023

©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Since first published in 1813, Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* has remained to be a timeless classic and has continued to inspire many adaptations in different artistic forms. The novel explores pride in Mr. Darcy's character and prejudices in Elizabeth Bennet's nature. In the beginning, excessive pride and prejudices prevent them from admiring each other's virtue and beauty. As the story progresses, though, readers see both their growth and, finally, a happy ending after pride and prejudices fade. Because it tells one of the most cherished love stories in English literature, the original novel has been adapted to plays, movies, and TV series—but unfortunately, not every production is at the same level of quality. The wonderful experiences of going to the *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) movie screening and watching BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) TV series had raised my expectation for other adaptations of the novel, so I couldn't wait to go to Aquila Theatre's play production. However, it was a disappointment and I have since been curious to find out why I felt that it did not meet my expectation: I love the book, the movie, and the TV series, so why can't I like Aquila Theatre's play adaptation as well? In this paper, I will argue that I don't think Aquila Theatre's production is a good adaptation of the original work, based on how the play differently portrays Mr. Collins's character and manners, Elizabeth Bennet, and her relationship with Mr. Darcy.

- How did Jane Austen portray each character when writing the book?
- How did Aquila Theatre differently portray each character when directing the play?
- What is the message Jane Austen tries to send through her novel *Pride and Prejudice*?
- What are some reviews of Aquila Theatre's production of *Pride and Prejudice*?

Keywords— *Pride, Prejudice, TV series.*

Books and plays are two different types of formats. Good books are likely to do a good job at describing the inner thoughts of the characters, while good plays often leave audiences with endless aftertastes about the exciting climax. The book *Pride and Prejudice* follows the character development of Elizabeth Bennet, the dynamic protagonist who gradually learns the consequence of hasty judgments and comes to appreciate virtue hidden under Mr. Darcy's cold appearance. The play *Pride and Prejudice* by Aquila Theatre is said to be a modern presentation of Jane Austen's classic, which *The New Yorker* calls "beautifully spoken, dramatically revealing and crystalline in effect" (Wild, 2022). The book version unfolds each main character with abundant and proper

descriptions of background and inner thoughts, which the play version seems to lack. Therefore, I don't think Aquila Theatre's production is a good adaptation of the original work, based on how the play differently portrays Mr. Collins's character and manners, Elizabeth Bennet, and her relationship with Mr. Darcy.

First, Aquila Theatre's production's representation of Mr. Collins is quite absurd because it emphasizes that he is a man whose mind is filled with sexual desire. This change is rather unnecessary because it does not add anything significantly new to his character. In the play, Mr. Collins often talks and behaves in an indecent way, which is sometimes uncomfortable for

audiences to watch. For example, when Mrs. Bennet first introduces Mr. Collins to her daughters Jane, Elizabeth, and Lydia at their own house, Mr. Collins behaves obscenely after seeing Elizabeth's beauty and quickly changes the subject of the conversation to marriage. However, in the book, it is plainly stated in Mr. Collins's proposal to Elizabeth that the most important reason that prompts him to marry Elizabeth is that Lady Catherine has given him this particular advice. Mr. Collins wants to marry not for love but to impress his noble patroness, as he concludes, "thus much for my general intention in favor of matrimony" (Austen, 1996, p. 104). The book even makes it clear that Mr. Collins does not marry for the beauty of Elizabeth, at least not a determining factor, because he also points out that "there are many amiable young women" in his own neighborhood as well (Austen, 1996, p. 104). If Mr. Collins were a man with a dirty mind, his character would still be disapproving even in that time period; however, a social climber like Mr. Collins as portrayed in the book is sort of commonly accepted in Jane Austen's time. Therefore, the play version misses a big point of what Jane Austen tries to satirize, which is that in that society, it's common for people to value reputation and class more than true love when considering a match. Aquila Theatre's production attributes such a universal social problem at that time to simply a single case regarding one man's lascivious nature.

Second, some details about Elizabeth Bennet in Aquila Theatre's production don't match her character. For example, in the play version, Elizabeth always puts her feet on the table, even when Mr. Bennet and Mr. Darcy are present in the same room. Another detail that ruins her character is that she talks too loudly. It makes audiences wonder if she is yelling the whole time. In Austen's book, Elizabeth is depicted as an intelligent woman with a witty sense of humor, who often presents a playful but good-natured impertinence without being offensive. For instance, after overhearing Mr. Darcy's disagreeable comment about her looks, Elizabeth "[tells] the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she [has] a lively, playful disposition, which [delights] in anything ridiculous" (Austen, 1996, p. 14). Elizabeth's behaviors in Aquila Theatre's production, though, are oftentimes considered inappropriate. The play may have designed such acts to differentiate Elizabeth from her sisters and all the other young women in the Regency era, however, it backfires. It makes Elizabeth Bennet so unlikable as someone who is overconfident, rude and doesn't seem to be familiar with even the basic social boundaries.

Thirdly, Aquila Theatre's production doesn't show Mr. Darcy's inner thoughts well enough to indicate his character development. There is supposed to be a

significant evolution of Mr. Darcy's feelings towards Elizabeth, from finding her annoying to getting attracted to her. In the play, it feels that it's all of a sudden that Mr. Darcy proposes once and soon a second time, and it's again all of a sudden that Elizabeth changes her whole attitude towards Mr. Darcy and accepts the marriage proposal. In addition, audiences don't get to see a lot of Mr. Darcy on the stage. In other words, he is more like a background character than one of the leading actors. Therefore, he is not a very vividly-portrayed figure. It will surprise and in the meantime confuse any audience who hasn't read Austen's novel before coming to the play when Elizabeth ends up with Mr. Darcy.

Compared to Aquila Theatre's adaptation, the book version of Mr. Darcy's letter scene is superior because it hints at Mr. Darcy's well-thought intention. First of all, the book indicates that Mr. Darcy already knows Elizabeth well enough to determine that it's not wise to discuss Mr. Bingley and Jane's relationship or Mr. Wickham face-to-face with Elizabeth because she would quickly respond "with a strong prejudice against everything he might say" (Austen, 1996,

p. 198). Second, the book indicates that although Mr. Darcy is used to being a proud man, he is adjusting his character for Elizabeth. He is now careful enough to avoid any potential argument with Elizabeth because he cares about her and her opinions of him. Additionally, he wants to ensure that Elizabeth has time to process the information alone first before making a quick judgment or starting an argument. However, Aquila Theatre's production of this scene starts with Mr. Darcy writing the letter on the desk while Elizabeth is still in the same room, and then he stands up without finishing the letter and starts explaining the matter to Elizabeth verbally. It sends the message that Mr. Darcy either doesn't know Elizabeth personally well enough that he fails to assume that she judges quickly or he doesn't care at all if she argues with him, and he isn't patient enough to finish writing this very important letter. These changes make Mr. Darcy's later confession come awkwardly. The lack of character development generates an unrealistic relationship that has developed too fast to make sense.

Mr. Darcy's character development in the book as a romantic hero adds a lot of layers to his complex character. Romantic hero, by its literary definition, refers to someone thoughtful and unsociable. At first, the imperfections in Mr. Darcy's characters are easy to identify. His pride, overly awareness of class, and lack of "talent...of conversing easily with those [he has] never seen before" have earned him a reputation as a conceited and ungentlemanly man (Austen, 1996,

p. 171). He alienates almost all the attendees at parties and seems to only focus on himself as the center of existence, so readers along with the rest of the society fail to learn about his true character until the story progresses. His first proposal to Elizabeth is unexpected but fits his character as an arrogant man. He proudly thinks that if a man from such a high class as him offers a marriage proposal to a woman with such low connections as Elizabeth, she would be thrilled. To his surprise, Elizabeth rejects the offer. As an introspective individual, Mr. Darcy constantly thinks of Elizabeth's rejection and improves himself by behaving in, what Elizabeth previously suggests, "a more gentleman-like manner" (Austen, 1996, p. 188). He has grown so much since then that he now frankly admits that he has been "selfish and overbearing" and gives credit to Elizabeth for "[teaching him] a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous" (Austen, 1996, p. 349). Despite his prejudiced reputation, Mr. Darcy acts in a surprisingly heroic manner, especially concerning Lydia's elopement with Mr. Wickham. As Elizabeth puts it, he has demonstrated the "generous compassion which induced [him] to take so much trouble, and bear so many mortifications, for the sake of discovering [Lydia and Mr. Wickham]" (Austen, 1996, p. 346). Elizabeth's rejection has a profound effect on Mr. Darcy's outlook. His character has developed so much from an apathetic man to a sympathetic gentleman. It is this transformation that matters the most, as it has touched deeply not only Elizabeth Bennet's heart but also millions of readers'.

Mr. Darcy's second proposal to Elizabeth also reflects this giant step in his character development, as Elizabeth feels that "he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do" (Austen, 1996, p. 346). Because "[they] have both...improved in civility," they now make an excellent match and we all enjoy the happy ending (Austen, 1996, p. 347). In her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen sends the message that without respect and understanding of both one's partner and oneself, intimacy and true love is impossible. However, without proper character development in Aquila Theatre's production, audiences can't see this significant improvement in understanding, so they miss what Austen tries to enlighten her readers.

From my perspective as a reader and an audience, Aquila Theatre's production fails to communicate with audiences the same way Jane Austen communicates with readers: Austen's work does not impose any ideas or reflection on readers but invites readers to think and feel along with the book characters. In contrast, Aquila Theatre's production does more of defining and persuading instead of effectively implying. Austen writes in an indirect way that allows readers to infer and imagine

the following plot based on the provided background information and readers' own memories and experience. For instance, in the second proposal scene, Austen merely has Mr. Darcy say "dearest, loveliest Elizabeth" and it is already clear for readers to infer that this is Mr. Darcy's second marriage proposal to Elizabeth Bennet (Austen, p. 349). There may seem to be ambiguity at first glimpse, but because Austen sets the previous plots well enough, readers know that pride and prejudices have already faded, so they can reasonably infer that Elizabeth would happily accept Mr. Darcy's proposal this time. Therefore, the story flows smoothly to the following chapter, where readers are not confused but satisfied when Elizabeth tells her sister Jane that she is now engaged with Mr. Darcy. However, this will not work well in Aquila Theatre's production: because it depicts their relationship development poorly and disjointedly, there isn't enough information for audiences to understand whether or not Elizabeth will accept his second proposal, which creates confusion.

Overall, Aquila Theatre's *Pride and Prejudice* play is far from a perfect representation of the original book. Because the play changes the main reason that prompts Mr. Collins to propose to Elizabeth, there isn't a counterexample that further implies and makes audiences appreciate how rare and precious it is for a man like Mr. Darcy to choose true love over connections. Because the play's representation of Elizabeth Bennet is far away from that intelligent and good-mannered young woman, audiences don't truly want to cheer for her when seeing her get together with her soulmate. Because there isn't a clear and smooth relationship development between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, it's confusing to watch the sudden happy ending. In Aquila Theatre's production, the change in Mr. Collins's and Elizabeth's character and manners are unnecessary, and the portrayal of Mr. Darcy is not as complex and well-developed as what we have in the book. In addition, the progression of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship happens too fast. Compared to Aquila Theatre's adaptation, the book uncovers and unfolds each character naturally with a lot of background information.

REFERENCES

- [1] Austen, J. (1996). *Pride and Prejudice*. Penguin Books.
- [2] Holdren, S. (2017). *Theater Reviews: Pride and Prejudice and Peter Pan, Reimagined*. Vulture. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/11/theater-pride-and-prejudice-and-peter-pan.html>
- [3] Oatley, K. (2016). Imagination, Inference, Intimacy: The Psychology of Pride and Prejudice. *Review of General Psychology*, 20(3), 236–244. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000076>

- [4] Szler, N. (2022). *Then and Now: the Relevance of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice*. Rock & Art. <https://www.rockandart.org/relevance-of-jane-austens-pride-and-prejudice/>
- [5] Topping, A. (2022). *15 of the Best Pride and Prejudice Adaptations and Movies, Ranked*. The Silver Petticoat Review. <https://www.silverpetticoatreview.com/pride-and-prejudice-adaptations-ranked/>
- [6] Wild, S. (2022). *Aquila Theatre presents Pride and Prejudice at Pepperdine*. Broadway World. <https://www.broadwayworld.com/los-angeles/article/Aquila-Theatre-Presents-PRIDE-AND-PREJUDICE-at-Pepperdine-20220922#:~:text=Darcy%2C%20Austen%20humorously%20skewers%20the,revealing%20and%20crystalline%20in%20effect.%22>