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Possible Futures for Pip and Mr. Darcy

Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture. Jay Clayton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. viii + 270 pp.

Jane Austen on Screen. Ed. Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xii + 284 pp.

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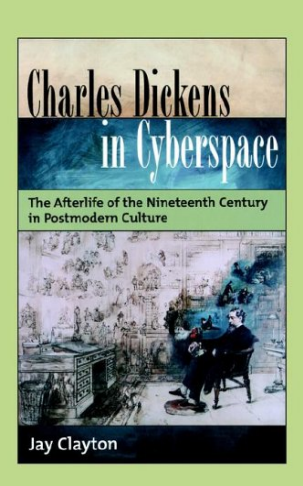
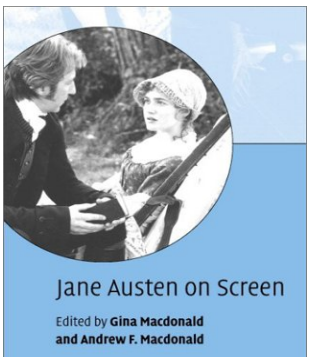


<1>Sarah Orten and Thomas Welch met, courted, and celebrated their marriage on the line. However since Thomas wasn't quite whom he had claimed to be, Sarah ended up successfully suing for an annulment. Such tales of deception and regret are all too common these days, right? Perhaps. But it is neither the uniqueness nor the ordinariness of this sequence of events that makes this story worth telling. Rather, this story is worth telling because the events leading up to *Orten v. Welch* occurred in the year 1883. Sarah Orten and Thomas Welch did not meet *online*. They met *on the line* of the electric telegraph. An extended version of this true story was recounted in an 1884 edition of a trade journal entitled *The Electrical World*, presumably to alert readers to the kinds of crimes facilitated by the anonymity of the telegraph network. Jay Clayton's retelling of this story in the second chapter of *Dickens in Cyberspace* not only reminds us that the technological vocabulary surrounding the telegraph (e.g., "relays," "code," "wired," "tech") is very much like the vocabulary surrounding the internet, but also underscores one of his book's overarching claims: postmodern American culture is more like nineteenth-century British culture than we like to think.

<2>Clayton, of course, is not the only scholar to point to what he describes as "the odd parallels between the two times" (8). Similar claims are made in the essay collection *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000). Both books are indebted to earlier investigations such as Alan Liu's "Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail" (1990), Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), and John McGowan's *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (1991). Indeed, Clayton sees *Dickens in Cyberspace* – one chapter of which originally appeared in *Victorian Afterlife* – as part of a movement to create a more historical cultural studies. *Dickens in Cyberspace* theorizes the concepts of culture, postmodernism, anachronism, amnesia, and periodization that undergird these projects. Taking the idea of "hacking" as his central trope, Clayton examines the ways in which various figures from the nineteenth century and the present have crossed the boundaries between literature, science, and technology. "Today," Clayton writes, "a convergence is underway in these domains as important as any transformation proposed by postmodern theory, but the shift is largely obscured by habits of thought that continue to interpret contemporary culture in terms of the dialectic of modernism/postmodernism" (8).



<3>To elucidate the significance of these similarities, Clayton suggests and models a non-linear approach to history – an approach that puts the past into dialectical (as opposed to causal) relationship to the present. Cultural historians are urged to examine the parallels between the nineteenth century and the present. However, they are also exhorted to remain "as sensitive to disjunction as to recurrence, as careful in delineating gaps, discontinuities, and altered meanings as in making the comparisons that urgently need to be made" (9). The complexity of the method necessitates new writing strategies for presenting the findings. Clayton rises to the challenge, and the results are intriguing. Inspired by the science fiction of the 1990s that he uses to illuminate the relationship between the past and the present, Clayton's self-reflexive method juxtaposes literary analysis, historical investigation, theoretical critique and construction with the stories of odd and untimely historical figures (figures ranging from Mary Somerville to the telegraph, from Ada Lovelace to the difference engine). Clayton's recuperation of these non-dominant

perspectives on the past amounts to more than just a simple reversal of understanding. Rather, this method enables *Dickens in Cyberspace* to consciously consider the role of the past in the future of cultural studies.

<4>Chapter 1 offers a good example of Clayton's method and its payoffs. It puts a contextualized reading of the Crystal Palace as a cultural object in dialectical relationship to a contextualized reading of the Millennium Dome. Integrated within these multi-layered readings we find a non-linear re-telling of Joseph Paxton's story, as well as information about Victorian attitudes toward engineering and architecture. This same chapter also provides a reading of Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), a novel that refashions these concerns about engineering and architecture as narrative form. This orchestration of readings results in a history of the fear (a fear stalking the British at the turn of the last century) that Britain had become the world's historical theme park. Moreover, by recovering the Palace's role in the discourse of the aesthetic appreciation of buildings, this chapter helps us to better understand the antinomy between architecture and engineering. It challenges those prevalent ocularcentric readings of the Crystal Palace which focus on its role in producing "the dominant visual economy of consumer capitalism" (34).

<5>The remaining seven chapters provide similarly layered insights and challenges. In Chapter 2 an analysis of nineteenth-century anxieties surrounding both acoustic and ocular methods of reading telegraphic transmissions leads to a smart reading of the motif of intelligence gathering and surveillance in *Mansfield Park* (1814). Chapter 5, examines Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Helene Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1991), Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991), and Shelly Jackson's hypertext novel, *Patchwork Girl* (1995) as texts that bring together tropes of monstrosity, vision, and wisdom in order to pick up quite different lines of argument about science found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818 and 1831). Chapter 7 looks at the field of contemporary genetics to extract the concept of "Genome Time." Genes provide a future for and bear the inheritance of both the individual and the species; thus, from the perspective of the gene, time is a perpetual present, a present that does not efface the past or the future, but rather inscribes and encodes these times within itself (167-8). Clayton finds this temporal concept not only implicit in non-fiction genetic discourse, but also at work in the temporal structures of many of the science-fiction and "steampunk" novels that take evolution as central themes. Clayton concludes this discussion of Genome Time with a reading of *Gattica* (1997). Here we find the fullest articulation of a line of argument that runs faintly throughout the entire book about the sexual ambiguity surrounding many forgotten nineteenth-century figures and the recurring motif of queer sexuality found in many postmodern fictional engagements with the nineteenth century. *Gattica*, Clayton argues, must disavow the sexual undercurrent between Jude Law's character and Ethan Hawke's character in order to make heternormativity function as a cover for the film's ideological confusion around Genome Time and the power of individual agency in the face of totalitarianism.

<6>As must be apparent by now, in *Dickens in Cyberspace* Charles Dickens is not so much "a center of attention in his own right"; rather, he "stands as a representative of larger cultural patterns" (5). One pattern Dickens represents is the cultural appropriation of the nineteenth century by the present. Dispersed throughout *Dickens in Cyberspace* are meditations upon some of these appropriations. We find a sustained analysis of the logic of this afterlife in the sixth chapter, "Is Pip Postmodern?" Not a few theorists read these disparate and often grotesque appropriations as so many examples of the modern impulse to package not only the past, but also the present as graspable commodities. Frederic Jameson, for example, sees such appropriations as mere "caricature[s] of historical thinking" (qtd. in Clayton 163). Clayton acknowledges that some of these texts are more "knowing" than "historically illuminating" (164). *Pace* Jameson, however, Clayton maintains that "contemporary culture *does* know how to think historically. It has complex recourses for narrating and judging, perceiving and turning to account, both the past and the present. To deny this truth is to hobble at the outset a historical cultural studies" (165).

<7>The present tendency to commodify the nineteenth century is also a concern in *Jane Austen on Screen* (2003), a collection of essays on Jane Austen adaptations edited by Gina Macdonald and Andrew F. Macdonald. Some of the contributors bemoan the ways in which Austen was repackaged in the 1990s as an icon for simpler and more graceful times. Others argue that the film versions of her novels successfully negotiate commercial and aesthetic demands, ultimately producing through the process of adaptation rich readings of their source texts. Harriet Margolis seeks to elucidate "the values currently associated with Jane Austen's name and the reasons these associations make her name a valuable commodity" (22). "The irony of Austen's current status," Margolis ultimately argues, "is that an exchange-value culture is profiting from her expression of use-value ethics, even to the extent of converting Austen-the-author into a commercial

commodity" (39). Kate Bowles looks to the world of Jane Austen fandom (particularly as represented by Pemberley.com) to challenge the inviolability of the categories upon which most theories of commodifiction depend, categories such as "producers and consumers, artists and audiences, buyers and sellers, governments and the governed" (15).

<8>Commodification isn't the only topic under consideration in *Jane Austen on Screen*. The strength of this collection is the variety of viewpoints and approaches to adaptation that it represents. The spirit of variety is apparent from the first chapter, "Short 'takes' on Austen: Summarizing the Controversy Between Literary Purists and Film Enthusiasts." The aforementioned Bowels essay appears in this chapter, along with more aesthetically-minded essays: one by a "literary purist" (Roger Gard) and another by a "film enthusiast" (Gaylene Preston). Gard dismisses film adaptations on account of the "artistic paucity of mere looking" (10). Gard's contention that film lacks nuance is taken up implicitly or explicitly by almost all of the contributors to this volume. In contrast to Gard's skepticism about the artistic possibilities of film, Preston argues that the collaborative nature of filmmaking offers "the same wealth" of effects produced by prose (14). "Painterly" films such as the Ang Lee/Emma Thompson *Sense and Sensibility* (Mirage/Columbia 1995) may make "the decor speak louder than the words"(14); nevertheless, Preston maintains, this doesn't mean that these utterances are without nuance.

<9>Unsurprisingly, the Lee/Thompson *Sense and Sensibility* gets quite a bit of attention in this collection. Opinions about the success of this adaptation vary. Margolis describes it as a "tendentious piece on women's rights"(34). Jocelyn Harris finds "the sheer materiality of the movie" distracting (46), but ultimately praises the ways in which Lee's skillful use of film grammar complements Thompson's intertextual screenplay. The film's success at the box office (it grossed over 100 million dollars) is perhaps one reason why critics are suspicious of it. Penny Gay's essay – the only one to offer a sustained reading of the film – tackles this issue head-on. Through close attention to the screenplay and Lee's film grammar, Gay argues that the film's mobilization of feminism helped it achieve what she sees as the praise-worthy double-effect of addressing the concerns of modern audiences while keeping faith with the source text.

<10>Given the general suspicion around the commercially-viable Lee/Thompson *Sense and Sensibility*, it is almost shocking to find that almost all of the contributors are delighted by Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (Paramount 1995) – even the self-styled purist Gard. However, this fact is probably the best indicator of the difference between this collection and its comparatively purist-dominated precursor *Jane Austen in Hollywood* (1998), edited by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield. The special place *Clueless* occupies in *Jane Austen on Screen* becomes quite clear after reading the final essay, John Mosier's "Clues for the Clueless." Mosier claims that the best yardstick for evaluating an adaptation is not fidelity, but the adaptor's manifest understanding of the source text (229). In the context of this collection, his claim that "with precious few exceptions, the films based on Austen's novels hardly qualify to be taken seriously even as costume dramas, much less as serious instances of the cinematic art" is audacious indeed (232). Heckerling's *Clueless* comes pretty close, Mosier argues, because Heckerling understands that *Emma* is about sexual "cluelessness" (242). Ultimately, however, even *Clueless* fails to meet his somewhat odd standards for measuring understanding.

<11>Along with *Clueless*, Mosier singles out Patricia Rozema's racy and controversial adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (Miramax 1999) for praise. This adaptation is mentioned in passing by almost all of the contributors. However, Harris and Jan Fergus make it the object of sustained analysis. Harris begins by offering three key concepts for evaluating adaptations: translation, imitation, and intertextuality. Intertextuality is the largest category of the three, a practice through which an adaptor can show her creativity and transform what might have been a mere translation into an imitation. Harris claims that just as translations of a work of prose from one language to another always "lose something"in the process, so adaptations of texts from one media to another are doomed to fail the test of fidelity (47). Drawing from John Dryden, Harris urges adaptors to create imitations of the source text. An imitation copies "the essence of a text but at a distance" (44). An imitation is proud of its differences from the source text and often uses intertextuality to comment upon such differences. Not surprisingly, Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (a film which plays pretty fast and loose with the source text, transforming the retiring Fanny Price into a spunky figure for Austen herself) rates high under this rubric. In contrast to Harris, Fergus compares the BBC *Mansfield Park* (1983) to the 1999 Miramax one with a view toward offering a "neopurist approach" (84) to the evaluation of film adaptations. Such an approach would be sensitive to the limitations of film, paying special attention to how the interplay between voice and image can be used to create nuanced utterances.

interplay between voice and image can be used to create nuanced utterances.

<12>Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (Miramax 1996), starring Gwyneth Paltrow, inspires two opposing evaluations. In the only essay to challenge the assumption that film can't do much that is interesting with voice, Hilary Schor makes the bold claim that McGrath successfully grapples with Austen's "most linguistically-challenging" novel (145). Schor convincingly argues that McGrath uses a play of voices to render the "problematic nature of subjectivity, particularly female subjectivity" (171). Close analysis of the use of voice-over narration, aural transitions between scenes, and the interplay between diegetic voices and image within a scene allows her to show how McGrath comes close to the novel's "hermeneutic instruction" (172), suggesting that no matter how self-sufficient we think we are, we need to listen to the voices of others. David Monaghan heaps ridicule upon McGrath's *Emma*, eventually coming to the unusual verdict that the director failed "to engage seriously with his source text" (222). He prefers Diarmuid Lawrence's *Emma* (A&E 1997), and offers an analysis of its film grammar and engagement with Burkean ideas of social change.

<13>Although most of its contributors scoff at Roger Michell's *Persuasion* (BBC/WGBH 1995), this collection's two sustained analyses of the film praise its creativity. Paulette Richards argues that although adaptors of Austen's novels often turn to the twentieth-century Regency romances popularized by Georgette Heyer and Clare Darcey to fill in the gaps in Austen's fiction (such as details about clothing and furniture) and to learn how best to lure readers of these novels to the theater by incorporating many of their tropes and motifs, such practices do not necessarily "harlequinize" Austen. Rather than simply deploring the imperialist nostalgia that informs both the Regency romance novel genre and Michell's *Persuasion*, Richards examines the visual representation of this fantasy. Like Richards, Tara Ghoshal Wallace is ultimately interested in the film's visual texture. Her essay starts from the assumption that film is incapable of rendering Austen's complex narrative voice (127), and offers an approving analysis of Michell's film grammar, attention to the bodies of his characters, and deployment of "visual intertextuality" (129).

<14>While the beloved *Pride and Prejudice* (BBC 1995) is mentioned by several contributors, surprisingly only one essay discusses it at length. (The absence of an essay on *Bridget Jones's Diary* [Miramax 2001] is even more surprising.) Ellen Belton's essay returns us to where we began – to a theoretical interest in the ways in which present concerns shape our packaging of the past. Belton argues that the 1940 *Pride and Prejudice* hoped to strengthen the US alliance with Britain during the war by suggesting that individual desires ought to be sublimated to the fate of the common good and linking the fates of the two countries by "infusing the world depicted in the film of Austen's novel with associations and values that are understood as essentially American and democratic in character" (180), namely equality among the classes and family cohesiveness. The 1995 version is often praised for its fidelity to the text. However, Belton's analysis of the film's camera work enables her to argue that this adaptation is most interested in the very '90s idea that individual self-fulfillment and self-gratification can be pursued without damage to the social order.

<15>Overall, the essays in this collection share an interest in the ways in which aesthetic, ideological, and material concerns influence the process of adaptation. Ultimately, however, most essays in this collection are more interested in the literary and cinematic implications of adaptation than the cultural motivations for certain compositional choices. This emphasis may well have something to do with the fact that most of the contributors argue against the idea that making a "classic" text speak to modern audiences through adaptation necessarily involves "dumbing it down." Thomas Leitch has argued that one of the reasons adaptation theory is so impoverished as a field is that scholars prefer to study particular literary texts and their adaptations rather than consider "what is at stake in adapting a text from one medium to another." The title of *Jane Austen On Screen* and its contributors' almost-universal interest in providing evaluative tools might lead one to suppose that this collection is little more than a set of studies. However, the variety of approaches and steady focus on the aesthetic problems involved in the process of adaptation enables the collection to function as a contribution to this growing theoretical field.

<16>The theoretical ambitions of both *Jane Austen on Screen* and *Dickens in Cyberspace* make them of interest to specialists. Still, they are written to be accessible not only to non-specialist scholars and students, but to the general reader as well. Each book features helpful aids to readers. Clayton's book offers a great index and thorough bibliography, along with a clear presentation of the debates it enters. *Jane Austen on Screen* provides an exhaustive bibliography

presentation of the debates it enters. *Jane Austen on Screen* provides an exhaustive bibliography, features stills from many of the films under consideration (nineteen in total), and even offers a list of discussion questions organized by film. The index is also very user-friendly, noting whether the topic in question is just mentioned or discussed at length. The book's filmography lists many more adaptations of Austen films than the ones discussed by the book's contributors. Overall, both of these books should be useful to anyone generally interested in analyzing the conditions under which texts are produced and consumed and specifically interested in how modern demands shape the "afterlife" of Britain's nineteenth-century.