

Movies

PRIDE & PREJUDICE ★

DIRECTED BY JOE WRIGHT

SCREENPLAY BY DEBORAH MOGGACH

WITH KEIRA KNIGHTLEY, MATTHEW MACFADYEN,

ROSAMUND PIKE, JENA MALONE, DONALD SUTHERLAND,

BRENDA BLETHYN, AND JUDI DENCH

RATINGS

★★★★ MASTERPIECE

★★★ A MUST SEE

★★ WORTH SEEING

★ HAS REDEEMING FACET

● WORTHLESS

Familiarity Breeds Another Attempt

The new Keira Knightley vehicle is an OK romance, but it's no *Pride and Prejudice*

By Elizabeth M. Tamny

The English have been clamoring for the Snog, and now they've got it. *Pride & Prejudice* was released in September in the UK, but without the gooey love scene that closes the American version. Once English filmgoers found out about the missing two minutes, which apparently had been deemed too sugary for their starchy sensibilities, they lobbied for them with surprising fervor. Last weekend brought the "American" ending to some UK theaters, along with promises that the DVD will include it as well.

I hope they're happy. The scene is beyond sappy, not to mention distractingly similar to the ending of *Sixteen Candles*: Elizabeth Bennet (Keira Knightley) and Mr. Darcy (Matthew Macfadyen), newly married, sit facing each other on a table overlooking the grounds of his ancestral home, exchanging sweet nothings, with the camera slowly moving in on them until they kiss. But those two excruciating minutes are the least of this movie's problems. By the time Lizzie and Darcy have their kiss, the story—some of the most satisfying plotting and character development in the English language—has been hopelessly mangled.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (the new film mysteriously trades the title's *and* for an ampersand) is the story of the Bennet family at the beginning of the 19th century. Mr. Bennet is loving but emotionally absent, disillusioned with his nervy wife, who's obsessed with marrying off their five children—being girls, they can't inherit the family estate. Our heroine is Mr. Bennet's favorite, the lively, clever, second-oldest daughter Lizzie, who is holding out for love. The book follows the relationship between Lizzie and the rich, aloof bachelor Fitzwilliam Darcy as she reacts to his seeming cold, snobbish pride only to discover, deliciously, how much more he is than he seems and how wrong her judgment.

There've been seven film and television remakes of the story—not to mention loose adaptations like *Bridget Jones' Diary*. The producers have gone to great pains to note that this is the first big-screen version since the 1940 Greer Garson/Laurence Olivier vehicle. But that fact speaks to the biggest problem

with it: you can't cram this story into two hours.

Carnage is inevitable when breaking down a big novel, but the new film sends Austen's tale through a terrible mauling. Characters are brutally sanded down, softened, or rounded out in the most boring ways to forgive them their foibles and resolve their conflicts. There are fewer secrets, smaller revelations, less suspense. The best example is the almost total effacement of weak, wicked Mr. Wickham, the object of Lizzie's early misguided affections. In the book Wickham is the catalyst for the ways in which Darcy is misunderstood, then redeemed, and through whom Lizzie learns to temper her brash opinions. Without him, what happens between Darcy and Lizzie has no weight. In the film he's an uninteresting twink with just a few scenes, and the tension between Lizzie and Darcy is reduced to the prosaic question of "does he like me?"

Lizzie's pragmatic older friend Charlotte Lucas meets a similar fate. Her reasons for marrying the horrid Mr. Collins (security, resignation) are ratcheted up in all sorts of awkwardly feminist ways, obscuring the enormity of her decision, Lizzie's bittersweet acceptance of it, and the sadness and nastiness that lurks beneath it all. The film tucks the whole affair away in about two minutes.

Another major change is the shift in the story's tone from Regency to romantic—its Brontëfication, to paraphrase the *New Yorker's* Anthony Lane.

Pride & Prejudice, full of mist-covered meadows and faces suddenly limned in mirrors, slides quickly from dramatic moment to dramatic moment; Darcy proposes to Lizzie not in the Collinses' cramped living room but in a stone temple on a cliff. High romance for sure, but by removing such crucial scenes from the domestic realm, the film loses intimacy, import, and a sense of place.

It's hard to bear the similar loss of the humor, edge, and complexity of most of the characters. Mr. Collins goes from hilarious snob to twitchy lil' perv; Jane, Lizzie's beloved older sister, is bland, rather than sweet; Bingley, her suitor and Darcy's best friend, dopey instead of sincere; Miss Bingley, his sister, all *Dynasty* bitchy instead of pathetically



Pride & Prejudice

mean. Flighty, semitragic Lydia (Jena Malone), the second-youngest Bennet daughter, is reduced to a giggly, screeching mess. Mr. Bennet (Donald Sutherland, all mellifluous Volvo-selling voice) morphs from distant yet sweet to a bemused, engaged father. When he finds out it was Darcy who paid his daughter Lydia's dowry, he cries earnestly, "I must pay him back!"; in the book Darcy's gesture elicits a dry "It will save me a world of trouble and economy." The deus ex machina of haughty Lady Catherine DeBourgh, played by the ever fabulous Judi Dench, seems positively wedged into the film. Darcy himself is softer, his defenses much more visible, a vision of inscrutable, heavy-lidded emotion that's a little more 420 than Byronic. The book gives Lizzie reasons to admire as well as love him; there's little of that here.

And what of Lizzie, perhaps the most beloved female character in fiction? Lizzie is intelligent and feeling, perspicacious in ways that make it seem like she's reaching a hand from the past to pull you in. But it's this very quality in which filmmakers find license to have their way with her. Instead of a specific character, a creation of the early 19th century, she's everywoman, cast with a nod to current fashion.

In this case Knightley is the same age as Elizabeth Bennet, but she seems far too young, with the expressive range of a chipmunk. Her Lizzie is Hollywood skinny, she mugs for her family and the camera, and

she displays a wholly contemporary, entitled sense of her place in the world. Lizzie's thoughtfulness, even temper, and sense of propriety, as well as her juice and liveliness are all muted. All that's left is Knightley's face, and that itself isn't always "too pretty," to address one issue critics have raised about her performance. In fact, she's almost a stick figure, with very strangely placed lips—like the singing orange with the rubber-band mouth on *Sesame Street*. In the scene where she first rejects Darcy's proposal, her body grows still as her lips keep moving and I couldn't help think of the hypnotic way Jack Nicholson becomes just a mouth ranting in a frozen face in the climactic you-can't-handle-the-truth scene of *A Few Good Men*.

But there's another problem with this film. It's been less than ten years since the last remake, a five-hour BBC miniseries that was A&E's highest-rated series ever in the U.S. and made a huge star out of Colin Firth. But even if you're not savoring the memory of Firth all dripping wet from his dip in the lake, this version severely tests an unwritten law about the speed at which films should be remade. In the trailer, over the image of whirling dancing Regency feet, a stentorian voice proclaims, "From the beloved author of *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility* comes [blah, blah] . . . *Pride & Prejudice*." But it wouldn't be at all weird to hear him say, "From the beloved author of *Pride and Prejudice* comes . . . *Pride & Prejudice*." We're still riding out the Austen cycle that began ten

years ago, and here comes still another version. There's no sense of necessity to it—which may have contributed to the filmmakers' apparent conclusion that fidelity to the story was also unnecessary, that they could make a generic period piece instead. It's a fitfully engaging romance, it's just not *Pride and Prejudice*.

The film does have occasional moments despite agonies like the line in the final scene in which Lizzie tells Darcy he can call her a "goddess divine," making the installation of *Pride and Prejudice* as the chick-lit urtext complete. A lot of critics are cheering it, especially for its "energy" (often code for "This film didn't bore me with period details"). The more-than-half hilarious sight of Darcy striding over the dew-covered meadow at the denouement is yummy, and Knightley can be genuinely charming. Mrs. Bennet (Brenda Blethyn), who is sometimes interpreted as relentlessly shrill, is better than usual. And the technical sophistication of current period films is impressive, down to the last beautifully lit shot of 19th-century textiles and surging bit of pseudoclassical score. But small domestic stories like *Pride and Prejudice*, through which you can see the whole world, are too vulnerable as targets for unworthy remakes: No huge fiscal demands other than kicking aristos out of their country homes for a summer of filming. No expensive costuming issues except covering up all those Pilates arms. No creatures to CGI. And no living author to scream about the violation of her art. **D**