



An Eligible Bachelor: Austen, Love, and Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's six novels have been the starting point of many sequels, continuations, and adaptations. One of such is *Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld, a rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice* set in 21st-century U.S.A., where the search for an eligible bachelor becomes a TV reality show. This essay analyzes how Sittenfeld modifies Austen's characterization of the main characters and their matrimonial quest taking into account how marriage has changed since the 19th century, exploring what elements persist and what adjustments need to be made in order to bring the spirit of the original to our current days and if such an attempt is ultimately successful.

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Jane Austen's popularity is indisputable, having achieved the extraordinary feat of being both a cultural icon and a firmly established writer in the literary canon (Azerêdo 45), adored by readers of popular literature as well as by academic audiences. Despite this almost universal acclaim, the scarcity of her literary production, of just six finished novels, has often been bemoaned. For fervent readers, "the deficiency of her canon is, ... not one of quality, but of quantity" (Miller 435). Maybe in a double-fold effort to compensate for it and to cater for the public's seemingly insatiable demand for more works, many writers have decided to produce Austen-related works. Austen's novels have been tampered with, in the words of Wright (421), to produce sequels, prequels, continuations, revisions, choose-your-own-ending works, or time-travelling novels (without mentioning cinematographic adaptations).¹

In recent years, many well-known novels have been continued in a sequel. For instance, *Scarlett* by Alexandra Ripley continues *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and *Mrs. De Winter* by Susan Hill expands *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier. The majority of these novels continued had an unhappy ending that the sequel seeks to redress so as to give the protagonists a happy ending – Rhett Butler had abandoned Scarlett O'Hara and the De Winters were in exile since Manderley burned down, respectively.

Austen's novels end happily enough, but still they have been the source of numerous rewritings. One reason could be that, as Foucault put it, some stories are retold multiple times, as we believe that "there exists in them a secret or an asset" that needs to be revealed (quoted in Azerêdo 46). Therefore, rewritings explore the minutiae of the novels, revealing the hidden depths of largely unexplored characters (like Mary Bennet or Anne de Bourgh) or their future lives (Georgiana Darcy's future marriage is a favorite) or what happens in the background (Jo Baker's *Longbourn* focuses on the Bennets' servants). Apart from the public's thirst for more Austen, another relevant consideration is that Austen is long out of copyright, thus preventing the bitter legal battles that plagued the authors of the unauthorized sequels to *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo or *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, to name but two examples.

In the 2010s the Borough Press, an imprint of the British branch of Harper Collins, commissioned six contemporary writers to rewrite Austen's opus. Under the premise of having "Jane Austen Reimagined," the Austen Project produced *Sense & Sensibility* (2013) by Joanna Trollope, *Northanger Abbey* (2014) by Val McDermid, *Emma* (2015) by Alexander McCall Smith and *Eligible* (2016), a rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice*, by Curtis Sittenfeld. They met a mostly lukewarm critical reception and had discreet sales figures so the project was dropped before publishing the rewritings of *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park* (scheduled for 2017, their authors were never disclosed).²

This essay analyzes how American writer Curtis Sittenfeld approaches *Pride and Prejudice* and its treatment of marriage, taking into account changing social mores in the 21st century, new lifestyles and women's choices pertaining to marriage and love relationships.

REWRITING *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Most rewritings make direct reference to the Austen novel that inspired them in their very titles, such as *Death Comes to Pemberley*, *Pemberley*, *Being Elizabeth Bennet*, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Mr. Darcy's Diary*, *Seducing Mr. Darcy*, *Austenland*, *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*; *Mr. Darcy, Vampire*; or *Me and Mr. Darcy*. The indebtedness of *Eligible* to *Pride and Prejudice* is clear but the title constitutes a deliberate departure from the original. *Pride and Prejudice* is transplanted to present-day New York City and Cincinnati and the title is the name of a reality TV show in which Chip Bingley participates; it also alludes to one's eligibility in terms of marriage.

Although *Eligible* may be read independently, reference to the original is fundamental:

works of art create their own reality and at the same time refer to the reality outside.
Outside reality can mean historical or contemporary, sometimes even future, society,

¹ For simplicity's sake, in this essay all Austen-inspired works will be referred to as rewritings.

² In the United States, *Sense & Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* only sold 5,100 copies and 2,800 copies, respectively (Alter n.p.).

characters and events, but as a special case it can also mean other works of art. Normally, references to other works of art are a minor aspect and occur only as occasional quotations, allusions and the like, but sometimes a whole work takes its point of departure from, or is modelled on, another work. (Breuer n.p.)

In rewritings, the notion of intertextuality plays a major role. Intertextuality was defined by Kristeva as “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (qtd. in Martin 148). It can be said that

intertextuality is a way of interpreting texts which focuses on the idea of texts’ borrowing words and concepts from each other. Every writer, both before writing his text and during the writing process, is a reader of the texts written before his text. S/he either borrows from the prior or concurrent texts and discourses in the network through allusions, impressions, references, citations, quotations and connections or is affected by the other texts in some ways. Therefore, an author’s work will always have echoes and traces of the other texts to which it refers either directly or indirectly and either explicitly or implicitly. It will also have layers of meanings rather than a solid and stable meaning which is supposed to be constructed through the writer’s authorial vision. Intertextuality asserts that when a text is read in the light of the text(s) to which it refers or from which it has traces, all the assumptions and implications surrounding those referred texts will shape the critic’s interpretation of the text in question. It is because a network of other texts provides the reader, critic and interpreter with the contexts of possible meanings and therefore it would not be misleading to say that his or her meditation on the meaning of the text at hand is shaped by the quotations from, absorptions and insertions in and transformation of another text or discourse. (Zengin 301)

The authors of rewritings capitalize on the notion of intertextuality to produce their own creations based on previous works so that the creative space first created by another writer is expanded.³ *Eligible* is not a rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice* in the manner of, for instance, Emma Tennant’s *Pemberley* and *An Unequal Marriage*, which imagine what happened after Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth got married. *Eligible* rather fits the definition of the counterfeit: “the re-writing and transforming of a text by taking it out of its historical and aesthetic context and transferring it into the respective present, creating, as it were, the contemporary counterpart of a famous older work” (Breuer n.p.).

Another label that could be applied to *Eligible* is that of adaptation. An adaptation must have the following characteristics – “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging, [and] an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (Hutcheon 8). Adaptations reinterpret and recreate, repeat with variations, with the reader deriving pleasure from recognition and remembrance as well as change (Hutcheon 8, 4).

Eligible is a novel in which “novelty lies not in what is said, but in the occurrence of its return” (Foucault; qtd. in Azerêdo 46) in 21st-century United States and reality TV. One may think that reality TV programs of single men and women looking for love are a far cry from Austen’s courtship scene. But the extraordinary appeal of Austen is such that even the sexually promiscuous single life of a thirty-something London woman, so diametrically different from Austen’s heroines, can still appeal to Austen fans, as the example of *Bridget Jones* by Helen Fielding illustrates, with Bridget and her friends being in love with the *Pride and Prejudice* BBC production.⁴ Similarly, Sittenfeld’s characters show that finding a suitable husband is nowadays as difficult as in Austen’s times.

3 It is interesting to note that Austen herself made use of intertextuality in *Pride and Prejudice* by using the conduct book *Sermons to Young Women* by James Fordyce (Vorachek n.p.).

4 *Bridget Jones’ Diary* is a loose rewriting of the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* whereas its continuation, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* rewrites *Persuasion*.

Pride and Prejudice famously opens with an acknowledgment of the need of a wealthy man to get married: “it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen, ch. 1). Yet, the novel makes it abundantly clear that marriage is a more acute necessity for women. Austen, single and financially dependent on her brothers, was painfully aware of the imperious need to get married for women of her generation. In 19th-century Britain, marriage defined women’s social status and had a profound impact on their well-being and happiness, as their lives were for mostly confined to the domestic sphere. For men, who went into the public world, their domestic situation was less determining and their entering marriage did not have such a dramatic effect on their social status or their finances (Dabundo 42).

In *Pride and Prejudice* the matrimonial prospects (or lack thereof) of the five Bennet girls, living in Longbourn, an estate entailed on a distant male cousin, constitute a constant source of worry for their mother. In *Eligible*, we are first introduced to the eldest Bennet girls, yoga instructor Jane and women’s magazine writer Liz, both New York City residents for the past fifteen years. They hail from Cincinnati, where their parents and three younger sisters live in their old, rambling home “in a state of profound disrepair” (Sittenfeld 31). Some personality traits of the original protagonists are kept such as the independence of Liz, Jane’s sweetness, the younger Bennet sisters’ vulgarity, Mary’s bookishness, Bingley’s easy charm in opposition to Darcy’s emotional remoteness and aloof stance. The Wickham character is divided into Jason Wick and Ham, Liz’s and Lydia’s boyfriends, respectively.⁵

Replacing Kitty and Lydia’s obsession for soldiers, here they are obsessed with physical fitness and diets. Neither they nor Mary have jobs, making them closer to Austen’s heroines’ lack of careers or employment. But the most significant change is their age. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane is 22 years old, Elizabeth is 20 and Lydia is 15 (Austen, ch. 39, 29, 9). In *Eligible* Jane will turn 40 soon, Liz is 38, Mary is 30, Kitty is 26 and Lydia 23 (Sittenfeld 5–6, 17). This places the three eldest beyond the average age for a woman’s first marriage in the U.S.A., which, in 2018, was 27.8 (Lake n.p.). In *Eligible*, Mrs. Bennet is as much in a hurry to marry her daughters as in *Pride and Prejudice*, although not so much for the social stigma of spinsterhood or for financial reasons but because of the decline of Jane’s fertility.

Mrs. Bennet is an example of how “Austen, while giving her heroines family lives, rarely provides them with a good supportive mother” (Sturrock n.p.). For Sittenfeld and Austen, she provides comic relief (Witt 41–42) although with differences. For the original Mrs. Bennet, “the business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (Austen, ch. 1) but the new one is addicted to shopping, a sign of the pervasiveness of materialism in America.

Still, a major change is her concern for prospective suitors’ financial standing. Austen’s Bennet girls exemplified single women’s dependence on their male relatives, since in Regency England, “the only sources of income ordinarily available to a gentlewoman were marriage portions, inheritance, and the estate of her husband” (Bentley, Jr. 231). Women’s prospects of getting an education or finding employment were very restricted and “marriage was almost a necessity” (Bailey n.p.), especially since none of Austen’s heroines pursues a career (or aspires to one). Austen acknowledged in a letter that “single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor — which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony” (qtd. in Bailey n.p.). Austen and her sister Cassandra, who lost her fiancé, experienced the financial disadvantages of being single women first-hand.⁶ In *Pride and Prejudice*, lack of money or inadequate social standing makes the Bennet girls ineligible for desirable bachelors.

Austen’s Mr. Darcy is the wealthiest of her male characters (Hopkins 77) but in *Eligible* he is a medical doctor dependent on his salary, much more in par with Liz’s financial situation, who has a job and a sizable trust. Jane and Liz have “a certain awareness of the safety net below [which] had allowed the prioritizing of their personal interests over remuneration” (Sittenfeld 11).

⁵ Other changes include that Lady Catherine de Bourgh becomes Kathy de Bourgh, a famous feminist, unrelated to Darcy, whom Liz interviews once and Anne de Bourgh entirely disappears.

⁶ During her lifetime, it is estimated that Austen received a maximum of £668 from royalties, which would not have supported her financially (Butler 92).

Certainly, Darcy and his sister own a vast mansion, but, even if the mansion can be a sign of social status, it is more of an inconvenience than an asset. Vast properties in the U.S.A. nowadays are not the prized possession they were in Regency England and the Darcys' property, in need of a constant financial influx, is eventually granted to the National Trust to get rid of the costs of its upkeep. Similarly, whereas Longbourn was a desirable property, the Bennets' current home is in such a poor condition that eventually they sell it to move into a more modern residence. Houses here lose the importance of Austen's houses, which "are animated, or fail to be animated, by the life led within their walls and beneath their roofs" (Hardy 137).

For Martin Amis, in Austen's comedies "there is a Heroine, there is a Hero, and there is an obstacle. The Obstacle is always money" (qtd. in Siegel and Campbell 133). In *Eligible*, the need for a husband as a means to protect women from financial penury is non-existent. Financial stability might be a consideration for many contemporary women when choosing a life partner, but not for Sittenfeld's Bennet girls, who enjoy their trust and can afford not to work (Sittenfeld 11). This is a marked departure from Austen's novels, where there is "an understanding of the world in terms of people's connections with each other. Most if not all of those connections are regulated by determining economic factors" (Margolis, 35).

With no financial concerns, but fretting over her daughters' fertile years, Mrs. Bennet in *Eligible* holds a "view of matrimony as a race" (Sittenfeld 76). The matrimonial quest that characterized *Pride and Prejudice* is central in *Eligible* (Bailey n.p.). The social consideration of being single and women's role has greatly changed, but the search for an appropriate husband remains as desirable as ever.

The very definition of being single has undergone a drastic transformation – "while it was technically accurate that both Liz and Jane were single, this fact did not for either woman convey the full story" (Sittenfeld 18). Actually, Jane had a live-in boyfriend, Teddy, and Liz has dated a married man for two years. Additionally, social mores have changed greatly. In Regency England, pre-marital sex sullied a young woman's reputation and made her undesirable in the marriage market whereas nowadays cohabitation before marriage is not frowned upon in most Western countries. Even Mrs. Bennet's dislike for premarital cohabitation is softened by financial considerations: "Mrs. Bennet's uneasiness with Jane and Teddy living together prior to their marriage was allayed by Teddy's degree from Cornell and his lucrative job" (Sittenfeld 11).

Nineteenth-century women of limited economic means and without prestigious family connections saw their marriage chances diminished, as was the case of Charlotte Lucas. Mrs. Bennet commented about the Lucases girls that "it is a pity they are not handsome!" (Austen, ch. 9). Her lack of physical beauty and age marred Charlotte's marriage prospects in a society where "the rise of the companionate marriage also had its negative effects. It was accompanied by a rise of proportion of unmarried in the society, caused partly by a postponement of marriage to a later age, and partly by an increase in the proportion who never married at all" (Dobošiová 10). As a result, Charlotte was one of Austen's "desperate women willing to compromise" (Beer 246). Aware of her limited prospects, she took matters into her own hands to pursue Mr. Collins. Charlotte's marriage to Mr. Collins shows two different points of view – Elizabeth's and Austen's. According to Elizabeth, it is a mistake, but Austen shows that "Charlotte Lucas's views come closer to the sad truth of female necessity in her time" (McCawley n.p.). Many readers may be swayed by Elizabeth's assessment, as well as some critics, such as Ahearn, who considered the novel scandalous "in its presentation of marriage as the key to survival—survival in crude financial terms, in terms of the quality of life, in terms finally of life itself" (qtd. in Langland 50). But "Austen makes it clear that Charlotte, who is neither insensible nor crude, has accepted Mr. Collins with her eyes wide open" (Perry 213). Charlotte's views of marriage represent typical, 18th-century views that looked for practical marriages rather than romantic affairs (Haque in Kica 5, Perry 215).⁷ Different from Elizabeth, "unadmired in her family, less physically attractive, and not sensitised by the wild matchmaking of an irrepressible mother, Charlotte has less self-esteem and independence" (Todd 62). For Charlotte as well as Mr. Collins,

marriage is a market place where they must strive to make the best bargain they can in order to conserve or improve their status of life ... through her marriage she

7 As Austen was writing, this practical view of marriage was being replaced by more romantic views (Moe 1076), represented by Elizabeth.

achieves what she wants – financial stability, status and independence in becoming a mistress of her own house ... her marriage is not ideal but she is able to escape social pressure and humiliation as well as social isolation. (Haque; qtd. in Kica 5)

In *Eligible*, Charlotte Lucas is a successful Human Resources manager who remains single because of her extra weight (Sittenfeld 36). For her, like for Liz and her sisters, money is not crucial in marriage, but she looks for companionship when she meets Cousin Willy, the equivalent to Mr. Collins. Cousin is a courtesy title, for he is not a blood relative but the stepson of Mr. Bennet's sister.⁸ In contemporary America, with no entail, Willy does not propose marriage to Liz, but offers her “to give a relationship a try” (Sittenfeld 134). Liz, despite his protests that “growing up, we hardly spent time together,” finds that “the cousin thing” makes her uncomfortable (Sittenfeld 134–135). Instead, Charlotte and Willy embark on a whirlwind courtship by email before she moves in with him in California. However, the outcome is as not happy as for her alter ego. Austen's Charlotte believes that

happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other or ever so similar beforehand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life. (Austen, ch. 6)

In *Eligible*, in contrast, Charlotte is deeply unhappy and realizes that she has moved in with a man she hardly knows (Sittenfeld 323). She bemoans that “if I'd dated him for two years before we moved in together, like normal people do – or even for six months – I'd have gotten used to it. ... Instead, I feel like I'm a mail-order bride, and he's an annoying stranger” (Sittenfeld 324).

As already mentioned, in *Pride and Prejudice*, financial security was a good indicator of the desirability of a marriage match. Money could come from inheritances or could be acquired thanks to business success, which allowed for certain social mobility. Although the Bingleys' fortune was new money, their improved financial standing allowed them to socialize with the likes of Mr. Darcy. In present-day America, the land of the American dream and the self-made man, social success is defined not so much by wealth or social standing as by fame. Being a celebrity gives the recipient of this popularity a cache many aspire to. Thus, Chip Bingley is a participant in “*Eligible*,” a reality TV show in which a bachelor (himself) must choose from several female candidates.⁹ A neurosurgeon attracted to the limelight, now he finds himself torn between his medical career and his budding fame.

For Austen, the ideal for a gentleman's behavior was “that the active life of service to others should be most valued” (Margolis 22). This is consistent with *Eligible* – Darcy, who is a medical doctor, embodies noble virtues, whereas Chip, because he eventually gives up medical practice to embrace a TV career, is shown to be lacking. Darcy's superior standing over Chip is not a question of aristocratic connections, but career ambitions. In the process of rewriting *Pride and Prejudice*, Sittenfeld makes changes to adapt it to contemporary tastes and to our worries, likes, and dislikes. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Bingley is presented as a negligent estate manager; now, without estates to run or build, his main flaw is his overt sensibility. Lydia calls him “the *Eligible* crybaby” and he is regarded as “a sentimental fool, given to crying fits” (Sittenfeld 6). While contemporary women view marriage differently, so do men. If in the 19th century men sought to marry for stability, to keep the social order, to carry out their lineage, or to produce an heir to inherit their entailed property, now men look for “a soul connection,” as Chip says (Sittenfeld 4). Here men want to find true love and a dissimilar financial status is not a big concern.

Just as marriage and looking for a spouse have drastically changed, so has courtship. In Austen's times “pre-marital sex was a risky activity for women in Regency England. The reputation of women ... was lost among respectable society if their sexual activity outside of marriage became known” (Bailey n.p.). Moreover, with the exception of *Persuasion*, physical attraction among the protagonists is not described (Perry 226). Now Chip and Jane engage in

8 In England, “first cousin marriage has been permitted in England for hundreds of years, since the rule of Henry VIII and his break from Rome” (Bailey n.p.). In the U.S.A., marriage between cousins is legal but socially controversial.

9 It is based on the actual TV show “The Bachelor.” To avoid confusion, *Eligible* refers to the novel whereas “*Eligible*” is the show.

sexual activity on their first date, marking a change from *Pride and Prejudice*, where “Jane is the most conservative and conscientious within the Bennet style. She is far more ‘modest’ than her sisters” (Souter 183). She has become much more active – instead of pining for Bingley, seeing her fertile years dwindling, she chooses to have a child as a single mother thanks to a sperm donor.

But Jane and Chip are not the only characters whose sexual lives are explored. *Pride and Prejudice* “reveals nothing of Darcy’s actual sexuality or lack of it” but *Eligible*, in common with many other Austen sequels, indulges in explicit sex scenes (Potter; qtd. in Gomez-Galisteo 2018, 63). Darcy and Liz soon engage in a no-strings-attached sexual relationship, meeting several times for sexual encounters during which they hardly speak. Liz does not only look for a romantic marriage, but also good pre-marital sex but hate sex both simultaneously stimulates and alienates them, bringing them apart until they finally verbalize their feelings at the end of *Eligible* (Nachumi and Oppenheim n.p.). Whereas Austen “is interested in dramatizing sex in everyday social life – in the drawing room rather than the bedroom,” Sittenfeld takes us into the actual bedroom as a way to characterize her protagonists and re-define their relationship (Eckhout31).

MARY BENNET AND WICKHAM

A major departing point between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Eligible* is the characterization of two characters – Mary Bennet and Wickham. In regard to the former, critics’ active dislike for her (Nelson n.p.) has often obscured the important function she plays, for “her marginality also constitutes a significant commentary on the gender politics of her society. Like Anne de Bourgh, who is ‘sickly,’ and Charlotte Lucas, who is ‘plain,’ Mary is a failed woman according to the norms of Austen’s novelistic world: she doesn’t marry, lives at home” (Nelson n.p.). Moreover, her lack of personal virtues make her unlikely to become married – “Mary is not beautiful like Jane, witty like Elizabeth, rich like Anne de Bourgh, or accomplished like Georgiana Darcy. Her marginality draws attention to the inequities of a society in which female characters who are attractive, accomplished, and wealthy may have a limited range of choices available to them, but women who possess none—or only some—of these attributes have no choices at all” (Nelson n.p.). To make matters worse, she hardly socializes in a novel characterized by social interaction (Scott; qtd. in Nelson n.p.). Even her intellectual pursuits are belittled, and she can be regarded as a “bluestocking, ... a term that, even while conceding female intelligence, minimized women’s intellectual aspirations and accomplishments” (Dabundo 44). Austen’s attitude towards Mary is conflicted – while her flaws are exposed, she also serves as a commentary on the limited prospects of women like her in their society (Bolton n.p.).

In *Eligible*, Mary is not pitiable but a figure of mild amusement for her family. Her bookishness is shown in her accumulation of a number of university degrees, enrolling in a new degree just after finishing the previous one. This follows Austen’s Mary’s intellectualism and generates much good-humored amazement, as she often goes out without giving any explanations, filling her family with curiosity. Many rewritings of *Pride and Prejudice* portray Mary undergoing a positive transformation but she does not externally change in *Eligible*. Still, her characterization is positive – she finds pleasure in her studies and while her family believes her a figure for mockery, Sittenfeld shows that, thanks to her secret passion for bowling, which nobody knows of, living a fulfilling and a happy life, busy with her studies and her bowling pals (Nelson n.p.).

In regards to Wickham, in *Eligible* there are two characters that have his traits — John Wick, who is married with a son but has been Liz’s boyfriend for the past two years and Ham, Lydia’s CrossFit trainer. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Wickham, posted in a new location, where nobody knew him and Darcy, could redefine who he was in a more favorable way, almost to the point of adopting a new identity – that of the noble and wronged gentleman. This was a rather frequent situation at the time: “a soldier posted away from his home district was free from those who knew him and reputation. His very identity was changed: he was now an officer by title, and his previous self and his social status were covered by his gaudy regimental dress” (Fulford; qtd. in Chalupová 34). Both Wick and Ham hide secrets; in the case of the former, it is the real reason why he was expelled from university – he tells Liz that Darcy, sitting in a committee, maneuvered to have him expelled because of a controversial story he wrote for a class and which he refused to re-write. Eventually Darcy reveals that Wick disagreed with the mark he

was given by an African-American professor and broke into and vandalized her apartment, which earned his expulsion on the grounds of intentional property damage (Sittenfeld 224, 303).

Ham's secret makes him probably the most interesting and original character in the novel. Rewritings must make adjustments to meet their audience's "ideological expectations" (Dole and DuChene n.p.), given that social changes have brought dramatic changes to our understanding of Austen. Lydia's pre-marital co-habitation with a man hardly constitutes the moral affront of the 19th century. Also, now Lydia's personality is generally more appealing than Jane's restraint and moderation (Dole and DuChene n.p.). This complicates the characterization of Lydia in rewritings, as her behavior must be outrageous enough to cause a cataclysm that requires Darcy's intervention (Dole and DuChene n.p.).

Writers have dealt with Lydia in a number of ways:

the earliest of these updated adaptations tried to skirt the challenges of modernizing her sexuality by placing her in modern cultures that restrict female sexuality or even by folding Lydia into another character; a second wave turned to fantasy; and adaptations of the last decade have portrayed premarital sexuality as normative but recast Lydia as testing the limits of less widely accepted sexual behaviors. (Dole and DuChene n.p.)

In *Eligible*, for all her outspokenness and bad manners that embarrass her older sisters, her "drama" is not caused by her behavior itself, but for the fact that Ham is a transgender person, which is revealed when they elope to Chicago. Mr. Bennet and Kitty unsuccessfully pursue the couple, a sign that nowadays women have more agency, as Mr. Bennet does not turn to his brother-in-law for help to find them. Once the newlyweds return on their own accord, Mrs. Bennet still does not accept Ham as a new member to her family, despite Liz's efforts in finding a support group for families with transgender members. It is only thanks to Darcy, who has a helpful conversation with Mrs. Bingley about Ham's "condition", that Mrs. Bennet can come to terms with their marriage (Sittenfeld 475, 477). Once more, Darcy restores harmony in the Bennet family.

A major point in the loss of Lydia's reputation was the far-reaching effect it would have on her other sisters (Dabundo 46). Even before this, the Bennets were considered unequal to Darcy, as Elizabeth was discarded as a prospective wife on accounts of her family – "Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger" (Austen, ch. 10). Even more harmful for a young woman's marriage prospects than her family's lack of fortune was a damaged social reputation could, even if the fault was not hers, but her sister's.

In *Eligible*, the Bennets are upper-class, but the younger Bennet sisters' manners reflect badly on Liz and Jane – "her sisters were people who never passed up an opportunity to talk about sex, shit, or combinations thereof; if her family horrified Darcy and Caroline, so be it. It was mostly for Jane that she felt regret, should the evening compromise Chip's impression of her" (Sittenfeld 85–86). Yet, Lydia's marriage to Ham would not have any dramatic or long-standing effect on her sisters' lives. More importantly, this marriage is more likely to be a happy one than Wickham and Lydia's, with which she "has condemned herself to a life of misery as there will never be enough money to cover the cost of the lifestyle they both desire" (Smith; qtd. in Kica 6).

SITTENFELD'S ACHIEVEMENTS

Sittenfeld had no easy task when rewriting such a well-known novel. She had to walk a very tight rope concerning the faithfulness of her works to the original novel. If the rewriting is too close to the original, it runs the risk of being accused of lack of originality and repetitiveness. If it goes too far, the author may be blamed for departing too much from the original for recognition. In the case of *Eligible*, the novel presents a credible version of the life of the Bennet sisters, transported to a different setting and country.

Sittenfeld succeeded in updating Elizabeth's revolutionary traits (which at the time Austen wrote would have been considered rather masculine) in a credible manner. Elizabeth's

outspokenness and independence of mind are not shocking to contemporary readers but when *Pride and Prejudice* was first published, she certainly was a revolutionary character. She was far more articulated and opinionated than what was the norm for young women and in her social situation. It should be noted that “Austen was probably indulging a fantasy in allowing Eliza Bennet to get away with as much frank expression as she uses; young women of her time would in all likelihood not have survived socially with that degree of outspokenness” (McCawley n.p.) as her Eliza’s choice of happiness in marriage over a secure home was atypical (Taavonot; qtd. in Kica 9) and a possibility that many women, including Austen herself, did not have (Melz 1). Actually, some of her defining characteristics are no longer regarded as exclusively (or predominantly) male, thus blurring her singularity and Austen’s emphasis on Darcy’s appreciation of Eliza, despite her masculinity (Leeds 29). To redefine Liz’s masculinity at a time when outspokenness is not a bold or masculine trait, Sittenfeld gives Liz a casual approach to sex that might be regarded by some as masculine, as she engages in no-strings-attached sex with Darcy. Moreover, it is Darcy the one who first speaks of love (Sittenfeld 295).

For Sittenfeld, gender is a personality aspect that can be modified, the equivalent to 19th-century upward social mobility. This is expressed in Liz’s opinion, who “concluded that if a Cincinnati could reinvent herself as a New Yorker, ... then why was gender not also mutable and elective?” (Sittenfeld 376).¹⁰ The social scandal in the nineteenth century of Lydia living with a man, now is transformed into phobia against transgender individuals. While there is more acceptance towards gay people, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s attitude towards the news of Lydia’s marriage to Ham, shows that transphobia is still widespread. Thanks to her conversation with Darcy, “when Mrs. Bennet comes around to accepting Ham in the end, the novel implicitly endorses freedom of sexual choice—but also endorses understanding that older generations have been raised with different cultural assumptions” (Dole and DuChene n.p.).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite its proliferation, rewritings are usually critically snubbed, especially if conveyed in an art form considered second-rate or low-brow (Hutcheon 2–3). *Eligible* is an example of this, as it conforms to the conventions of chick lit, a genre generally regarded as low brow, despite some academic attention. Yet, *Eligible*, in transplanting *Pride and Prejudice* to new locations and to an entirely different milieu, is more appealing than the original to contemporary readers since characters engage in activities we do ourselves, such as watching reality TV or going on diets or online shopping. Compared to the plight of the Bennet sisters, forced to get married if they want to have a reasonable social and financial standing, the new Bennet sisters, with their financial security and the multiple possibilities offered to single women (such as becoming single mothers by means of IVF), have a range of prospects much wider than getting married. Marriage may still be a goal for many women, but Sittenfeld shows that the criteria to be eligible have very much changed. Many rewritings focus almost exclusively on the love plot, without taking into account social concerns present in Austen, and have been caused of shallowness and superficiality. Instead, *Eligible* deals with deeper issues, such as the discrimination transgender people may suffer.

Despite the changes, one can safely turn to Austen or an Austen rewriting with the certainty of knowing that it will end happily. *Eligible* certainly delivers a happy ending, but, acknowledging difference, it is Liz the one who proposes. All in all, it can be said that Sittenfeld creates a completely different text from *Pride and Prejudice*, “probably the most reread novel in English” (Todd 60), but that will be satisfying to modern audiences.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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