

BLAME IT ON THE (LACK OF) NARRATOR: MORE ROMANCE, LESS IRONY IN JANE AUSTEN'S FILM ADAPTATIONS

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A false film might be refuted in a hundred books,
without much affecting the million dupes
who had never read the books but only seen the film.
(Chesterton, 1972, p. 116)

■ **ABSTRACT:** Austenian acidity does not seem to translate well onto cinema, TV, or streaming media. Working on this hypothesis, we argue that the systematic increase in romantic emphasis accompanying the migration of Jane Austen's work to audiovisual media is closely linked to the lack of the third-person narrator. To illustrate such phenomenon, we present excerpts from various adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, the two Austen novels that have generated the largest number of audiovisual recreations. Our discussion shows how, despite her enormous contemporary popularity, Austen's works are frequently misread as more romance-driven and naïve than they actually are, thus exemplifying the broader challenges involved in adapting literature to a different medium. As a counterexample, however, we examine the adaptation of the epistolary novella *Lady Susan*, whose absence of a narratorial guide in the source text allows the film *Love & Friendship* (2016), by Whit Stillman, to re-create Austen's irony through cinematic devices such as intertitles and visual framing. In this case, the director mobilizes filmic strategies to recover the sharp wit often muted in adaptations of the major novels, demonstrating that Austenian irony can, under specific conditions, be successfully translated onto the screen.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Jane Austen. Film adaptation. Ironic narrator. Romanticism.

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Jane Austen (1775-1817) lived in Romantic times, but she was not a Romantic. Romanticism, in its incitement of spontaneous emotions and individual subjectivism, does not describe her literary genre or style. Somewhere between 18th-century's heartfelt poetry¹ and the realistic novel post-1830s, Jane Austen's ironic comedies stand on a category of their own. Literary critic Ian Watt (1963) believed she was stuck in the middle of two schools, the Romantic and the Victorian, neither favorable to her. She was too orderly for Romantics, too frivolous for Victorians. He wrote:

Jane Austen was not a Romantic; she did not visualize the course of the individual life as a process of climbing to higher and yet higher planes of aesthetic perfection and moral insight. More classical, and more pessimistic, she saw the individual life less as a series of pinnacles to be scaled than as, and in many senses, a set position to be maintained against the forces of selfishness, unreason, and emotional excess; nor, all things considered, were silence and cunning too high a price to pay for maintaining it at home (Watt, 1963, p. 50).

Her novels do not suffer from “emotional excess”; on the contrary, they mock it. One need only consider Catherine's obsession with Gothic novels in *Northanger Abbey* (1817, posthumous) and the immaturity of the comically romantic Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Her marriage stories portray rural England with its ruthless caste system “as a microcosm of a larger moral universe” (Watt, 1963, p. 2), always shrewdly observed and judged by an ironic third-person narrator.

Contrarily to the Romantic attitude of “giving to the common a higher meaning, to the usual an unusual look, to the known the dignity of the unknown” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 2007, p. 335), Jane Austen's novels focus on the common while considering it to be precisely what it is: common. In doing so, she highlights the obstacles in human relationships, understanding them as power relations in which money and influence play an important role. “She's interested in how difficult it is to be a good person. She's interested in inequality and domination, and power. She's interested in how people who don't have a lot of power nonetheless preserve their principles”, as observed by Deirdre Lynch (cited by O'Grady, 2025).

When Jane Austen is adapted onto the screen, however, more frequently than not her stories are transformed into lighthearted romance: a series of misadventures leading to an idealized happy ending for the central couple. Adaptations not only tend to express an excess of emotion and optimism, as they seek to provoke an equally emotional response on the audience. Her six comedies of manners have been systematically transformed into romantic comedies in the lines of “lovable clever

¹ Cited by idealistic characters in her novel *Persuasion* (1817, posthumous), perhaps her only work that could be considered more Romantic than not.

girl finds good man”, particularly her most celebrated work, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Audiences swoon over the audiovisual versions of Jane Austen's supposedly perfect heroes, and above all reigns Mr. Darcy, played in TV and cinema by the likes of Colin Firth, Matthew Macfayden, and Matthew Rhys. As Lisa Hopkins observes: “It is Darcy, not Lizzy, who is looked at” (Hopkins, 2012, p. 252). This is a remarkable phenomenon, since Mr. Darcy is a rather absent character in the novel, only making key appearances necessary for protagonist Elizabeth Bennet's development.

Jane Austen has been adapted for the screen dozens of times, with different degrees of freedom and commercial success, varying from close-to-the-source retellings such as Ang Lee and Emma Thompson's film *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) to updated versions as the commercially successful comedy *Clueless* (1995), an adaptation of *Emma* by Amy Heckerling. We can risk affirming that nowadays adaptations are as known as her books, and possibly the major responsible for the fame of Jane Austen among the two last generations of readers/viewers – after the 1990s' boom of film renderings. As Ariane Hudelet (2012, p. 264) states, “Jane Austen exists in the collective imagination maybe as much through her different incarnations as through her texts”. In academic terms, adaptations seem to have boosted the study of her works. More so, together with Shakespeare's, Jane Austen's adaptations contributed to the emergency of film adaptation as a domain of study (Cartmell & Whelehan, 2005).

The massive misinterpretation of her marriage stories as passion-driven romantic stories perhaps leads to a general wrong impression on her literature, especially by those who only watch her instead of reading her, but also by those who read her after watching adaptations. A migration in genre and style may be due to producers' desire to win over an audience that yearns for heartwarming stories, but also to a narratological aspect: the lack of a third-person narrator, largely responsible for Austenian irony and rationality. Already alluded by Nora Nachumi (2001), among other scholars, this is the hypothesis that guides our brief investigation.

The analytical framework adopted in this study developed gradually from the authors' long-term engagement with Jane Austen's works and their audiovisual adaptations. Through repeated readings of the novels – combined with the experience of translating Austen in Brazil and sustained exposure to film and television adaptations – we refined the questions guiding the analysis. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* were selected to illustrate the lack of the narrator in audiovisual adaptation because both feature highly interventionist and sharply ironic third-person narrators, and because they are among Austen's most culturally influential works, being the most frequently adapted and referenced in contemporary media. The counterexample provided by *Love & Friendship* emerged from our familiarity with Austen's Juvenilia and with Whit Stillman's adaptation of *Lady Susan*.

Although modest in its reception, the film stands out among Austen adaptations for its successful re-creation of Austenian irony. Methodologically, the analysis adopts a narratological approach to examine the transformation – or obliteration – of the narratorial voice in adaptation. In this respect, Wayne C. Booth's work is particularly relevant: both his reading of Austen and his triadic model for understanding the operation of irony offer useful tools for examining how Austenian irony functions in the novels and why it often proves difficult to reproduce in audiovisual media.

We do not intend to exhaust the question of literary genre versus film genre, but to emphasize this one aspect – the narrator – as crucial to the Austenian style and the lack thereof in adaptations, which we will illustrate by examining marriage proposals in various adaptations of the novels *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Emma* (1815). As a counterpoint, we show how *Love & Friendship* (2016) by Whit Stillman, adapted from *Lady Susan* (c. 1794-1799, according to Sabor, 2006), an epistolary novella belonging to Austen's Juvenilia, follows a distinct path: instead of amplifying romantic sentiment, the film preserves the sharp ironic tone of the source through overtly stylized devices, such as sardonic intertitles and a deliberately theatrical mise-en-scène. In the absence of a narratorial voice in the novella, these cinematic strategies function as a surrogate commentator, sustaining the moral ambiguity and the satirical edge that are often softened or lost in adaptations of Austen's major novels.

Lizzy & Darcy in the moors

Among Austen adaptations, *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), directed by Joe Wright, stands out as probably the best received by journalistic critics and fans. The film was nominated for four Oscars – including Best Actress for Keira Knightley in the role of Lizzy – and tends to be forgiven for some deliberate modifications, such as depicting the late 18th century, instead of the early 19th as in the novel. As for the palpable increase in romance and almost Gothic touches absent in Jane Austen's novel, that is a matter for purist academics to address:

This *Pride and Prejudice* aims to attract a very different audience – teenagers – who will gravitate toward a film that looks superficially like *Pirates of the Caribbean* crossed with *Wuthering Heights*: an edgy heroine (Keira Knightley) meets a broody hero in a long coat (Matthew Macfayden) – the music swells as emotions boil and the fog thickens (Troost, 2007, p. 79).

Contrarily to the novel, the film is not particularly funny, but angsty and touching, which is enhanced by the emotionally striking soundtrack; Keira Knightley's Lizzy is more impertinent than prejudiced; Matthew Macfayden's Mr. Darcy seems more melancholic than proud. Even his attire – the long coat

mentioned above – alludes to an icon of Romanticism, the painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), by Caspar David Friedrich, which is also referenced in a sequence of Lizzy marveled at the beauty of her surroundings:

Figure 1: Lizzy on a cliff



Source: screenshot captured from Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* (2025), 1h19min58sec.

The immediate predecessor of Wright's re-creation, the 1995 BBC miniseries written by Andrew Davies starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth as the main couple, had already significantly increased the romantic-erotic content of the narrative, for instance, in the famous scene in which Mr. Darcy emerges wet from a pond and encounters a surprised Lizzy standing nearby (4th episode, 47min31sec). But Wright's film goes beyond by making the main characters considerably less rational than in the novel, as well as by moving the two proposal scenes to the outdoors: the first takes place under downpouring rain next to a Neoclassical building, while the second love encounter is surrounded by moors-like scenery, in the misty early morning lights. Romanticism is known, of course, for its love of nature (Hinchman & Hinchman, 2007).

Figure 2: Proposal in the rain



Source: screenshot captured from Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* (2025), 1h08min44sec.

Figure 3: Darcy walks to the second proposal in the morning fog



Source: screenshot captured from Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* (2025), 1h53min10sec.

In the novel, the first proposal happens indoors. The second, during a long (and etiquette-conscious) walk; Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth share a detailed conversation, in which they clarify their attitudes and sentiments. It is in the aftermath, however, that the narratives mostly differ. In the novel, the resolution of love does not solve all problems, neither does it represent an abandonment of every rational thought, as perceived in the narrator's voice in the following chapter:

The evening passed quietly, unmarked by anything extraordinary. The acknowledged lovers talked and laughed; the unacknowledged were silent. **Darcy was not of a disposition in which happiness overflows in mirth; and Elizabeth, agitated and confused, rather knew that she was happy than felt herself to be so; for, besides the immediate embarrassment, there were other evils before her.** She anticipated what would be felt in the family when her situation became known: she was aware that no one liked him but Jane; and even feared that with the others it was a dislike which not all his fortune and consequence might do away (Austen, 2012, p. 396; our emphasis).

It is thus noticeable how the couple, according to the narrator, keeps their emotions under control and is still worried about the reaction of those around them. This a strong trait in the Austenian narrative, since it is the delicate balance of relationships in her microcosm that most concerns her. Darcy “was not of a disposition in which happiness overflows in mirth” can be read as funny – ironically funny, as an inside joke shared by the author, through her narrator, and the reader, as Booth (1983) suggests about dramatic irony – because not even after conquering the woman he so much desired he allows himself to be “overflowed in mirth”. It is in pointed, yet sharp, observations like this that irony is largely constructed by the narrator throughout the entire novel.

Emma & Knightley in a rom-com

In his remarks on the rhetoric of fiction, Booth (1983, p. 175) proposes that “there can be no dramatic irony, by definition, unless the author and audience can somehow share knowledge which the characters do not hold”. Irony often presupposes an alliance between at least two participants (narrator and reader, for instance) against a third, unaware, party (the character). This is very palpable in *Emma* (1815), in which we need the narrator to assess how much we can trust the novel's heroine, whose point of view occupies center stage through indirect discourse. Once warned by the insider that she is not to be trusted, we can then experience irony by simply reading her thoughts and speeches, which invariably lack in self-knowledge.

Emma's self-centered nature is generally well translated into film. It is social commentary that tends to suffer more, as Lisa Hopkins (2012, p. 250) comments about the 2009's miniseries by BBC: “Most notably, there are no servants, entirely erasing Austen's carefully nuanced exploration of the nature of work in this society: Mr. Weston goes to see after the dinner, Mr. Elton leads his wife's donkey to Donwell, everyone seems to walk to Box Hill, and Emma does her own gardening”.

Even if *Emma* on screen is in general as comic as the book, the rational side of Emma and Mr. Knightley's union is frequently suppressed and substituted by adorable interactions in bucolic settings. In the novel their marriage is a happy one, but not in a romantic sense; it is happy because it is convenient for both sides, as it does not disturb the expectations of their social environment. There is a rightness to it: “All of the cheap marriage plots in the world should not lead us to be embarrassed about our pleasure in Emma and Knightley's marriage. It is more than just the marriage: it is the **rightness** of **this** marriage, as a conclusion to all of the comic wrongness that has gone before” (Booth, 1983, p. 259; his emphasis).

The happy ending comes when, on his return from London, Mr. Knightley finds Emma in the garden of her house. Their interaction involves clarifying Emma's true feelings regarding Frank Churchill, whom Mr. Knightley mistakenly believed to be Emma's love interest. Harriet, the friend whom Emma manipulates throughout the narrative and ends up falling in love with Mr. Knightley, is also in Emma's mind, as described by the narrator. They both realize their feelings for each other due to jealousy, which has a romantic touch. The dialogue itself is emotionally engaging, ending up with Mr. Knightley's heartfelt declaration, which starts with the famous question “Tell me, then, have I no chance of ever succeeding?” and follows with:

“I cannot make speeches, Emma:” he soon resumed; and in a tone of such sincere, decided, intelligible tenderness as was tolerably convincing.—“If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am.—You hear nothing but truth from me.—I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it.—Bear with the truths I would tell you now, dearest Emma, as well as you have borne with them. The manner, perhaps, may have as little to recommend them. God knows, I have been a very indifferent lover.—But you understand me.—Yes, you see, you understand my feelings—and will return them if you can. At present, I ask only to hear, once to hear your voice” (Austen, 2012, p. 634).

Emma does not respond to this in direct speech. A few paragraphs later the narrator informs us: “She was his own Emma, by hand and word, when they returned into the house” (Austen, 2012, p. 636).

In adaptations the whole interaction in the garden is generally re-enacted, with cuts in the dialogue and an overall more dramatic approach. For example, the film with Gwyneth Paltrow as Emma (directed by Douglas McGrath, 1996b) changes Mr. Knightley’s (played by Jeremy Northam) love declaration significantly:

I do not wish to call you my friend because I hope to call you something infinitely more dear. Have you not wondered why I ever befriended Frank Churchill? It was because I knew he was intended for you. Indeed, when you insulted Miss Bates at the picnic, I thought that evidence of his influence over you. And I could not bear to see it. So I went away. But I went to the wrong place. My brother’s house is usually a place of comfort to me, but seeing your sister there kept you fresh in my mind. **And the torture, I assure you, was acute.** I only felt hope again when I heard of Mr. Churchill’s engagement. **And I rushed back, anxious for your feelings. Came to be near you. I rode through the rain. I... I’d ride though worse than that if I could just hear your voice telling me that I might at least have some chance to win you** (*Emma* 1996b, 1h49min; our emphasis).

To this undoubtedly romantic speech, citing emotional torture and riding through the rain, Emma responds: “Mr. Knightley, if I have not spoken it is because I am afraid I will awaken myself from this dream. It cannot be true” (1h50min). Her correspondence is soon followed by a proposal: “Marry me, my wonderful, darling friend!”, which is sealed with a kiss. The interaction is not only very different from the one in the book, as it is particularly saccharine.

Emma’s response to Mr. Knightley’s declaration, absent in the novel, is created differently in each adaptation. Adaptors possibly consider it strange and unromantic for her to say nothing after such a declaration, which is perhaps true, since cinema

requires some degree of realism. In the adaptation with Kate Beckinsale and Mark Strong as the leading couple (1996a), Emma says: "I can. I do return them [his feelings]. I do love you. I believe I always have, though I didn't know it until yesterday, I think." (*Emma* 1996a, 1h36min). In the 2009 adaptation written by Sandy Welch, Emma speaks among tears: "I find I do not know what to think" (*Emma* 2009, 4th episode, 48min58sec). These interactions are invariably followed by a kiss, which is also absent in the novel, but it can be argued that it is implied. After all, the couple decides to get married on the spot.

In *Emma*. (2020), directed by Autumn de Wilde, contrary to any expectation of closer resemblance to the novel in the new wave of recent adaptations, the scene unfolds close to the book up to the end of Mr. Knightley's speech, which he closes with an added "Will you marry me?". Emma sighs and has an unexpected nosebleed, then answers:

"I cannot! Harriet. She is in love with you! And she believes that you may love her too. You danced with her... And shown her kindness... You took notice of her at Donwell, and spoke of farming... And seemed on the verge of asking if her affections were engaged..." (*Emma*. 2020, 1h47min).

It is tricky to comment on such scene, for it seems, on one hand, to diminish any possibility of serious romanticism and enhance the narrative's comic trait by treating it as the comedy of manners that it is. On the other hand, the irrationality of it, with Emma acting incoherently and impulsively, is a contrast to her quiet attitude in the novel, in which the sweetness of Emma and Mr. Knightley's interlude is soon tempered by rational decisions after the climax.

In Jane Austen's work, as the narrator informs us, Emma avoids talking about Harriet to her now fiancé, a restraint that indicates both clarity in judgement and the preservation of her individuality after their engagement:

Emma grieved that she could not be more openly just to one important service which his better sense would have rendered her, to the advice which would have saved her from the worst of all her womanly follies—her willful intimacy with Harriet Smith; but it was too tender a subject. She could not enter on it (Austen, 2012, p. 652).

As seen, in the 2020 film not only does she bring up the subject, as she does so in a sort of altruistic outburst:

Figure 4: Emma gets a nosebleed



Source: screenshot captured on *The Independent* (Harrison, 2020).

In the following chapters, Emma's concerns about her housing situation is addressed: she would not have the courage to leave her father in Hartfield and move to Donwell Abbey, Mr. Knightley's property – the one she used to think should go to her (and Mr. Knightley's) nephew Henry, as the narrator reminds us with a rather sarcastic touch:

It is remarkable, that Emma, in the many, very many, points of view in which she was now beginning to consider Donwell Abbey, was never struck with any sense of injury to her nephew Henry, whose rights as heir-expectant had formerly been so tenaciously regarded. Think she must of the possible difference to the poor little boy; and yet she only gave herself a saucy conscious smile about it, and found amusement in detecting the real cause of that violent dislike of Mr. Knightley's marrying Jane Fairfax, or any body else, which at the time she had wholly imputed to the amiable solicitude of the sister and the aunt. (Austen, 2012, p. 645; our emphasis)

The miniseries *Emma* (2009) turns this issue into an ultra-emotional sequence, with Emma running to her fiancé's house tearfully to announce that they can never marry because she would never leave her father.

In the novel, there are no such outbursts. The idea of a marriage between Emma and Mr. Knightley borders on logic, and any minor inconvenience will soon be managed: "In general, it was a very well approved match. Some might think him, others might think her, the most in luck" (Austen, 2012, p. 655). In the final paragraph, the novel confirms its comic nature and social commentary on the frivolity of the rural petty bourgeoisie represented by Mrs. Elton:

The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own.—“Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business!—Selina would stare when she heard of it.”—But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union (Austen, 2012, p. 664).

As seen here, the overall tone of the denouement is cheerful, but there is no loss of irony.

***Lady Susan* and the epistolary form: what becomes of irony in the absence of a third-person narrator?**

A striking counterexample to the systematic romanticization of Austen on screen is *Love & Friendship* (2016), by Whit Stillman, an adaptation of *Lady Susan*, one of Austen's lesser-known early works. *Lady Susan* does not belong to the canonical constellation of Austenian heroines, and its epistolary form produces a narrative texture fundamentally different from the six major novels. Because the story unfolds almost exclusively through letters, the text offers no stable third-person guide to regulate moral judgment. There is no narratorial “voice of reason” mediating the reader's access to events; instead, readers must assemble character, motive, and ethical positioning from a patchwork of partial, self-interested, and sometimes mendacious testimonies. *Lady Susan* not only withholds overt moral commentary but also invites the reader to engage in interpretive labor typically performed by Austen's ironic narrators.

What we intend to argue here is that, even without an effective third-person narrator, it is possible to construct an ironic layer in the film adaptation of an epistolary novella. Returning to Booth's (1983) argument about the necessity of shared knowledge between two parties — knowledge unavailable to a third — we find in *Lady Susan* a protagonist with a strong and distinctive personality, relentlessly pursuing her own interests, oblivious to other people's feelings (including those of her own daughter, Frederica). The novella has been considered a “failure” by some critics, mainly because of the narrative twist at its end. Jane Austen left the text unfinished for about ten years, returning to it later to write a “Conclusion” that does introduce a third-person narrator (Owen, 2013; Speidel, 2020; Nojiri, 2023).

More recently, however, *Lady Susan* has been “adopted” by feminist criticism (predictably so, according to Margaret Drabble, cited by Owen, 2013). From this perspective, the inconsistency of *Lady Susan*'s narrative architecture is largely

compensated by the “successful subversive vitality” of “an extraordinary, non-conformist, powerful woman who utterly undermines the patriarchal strictures of her claustrophobic society” (Owen, 2013, pp. 83–84). The point here is not how Lady Susan should be morally judged — as a Machiavellian figure or as a champion of women’s social advancement. What matters is the fact that her judgment is not guided by any narrator and is therefore left in the hands of the reader.

Stillman’s adaptation, though playful and overtly stylized, manages to preserve this interpretive openness by assigning to the camera — and to the film’s paratextual devices — a role analogous to the missing narrator of the epistolary source. We will focus here on what can be argued to be most salient strategy, the series of onscreen inscriptions introducing the characters. Far from offering neutral orientation, these written vignettes function as miniature satirical interventions, laden with irony in a tone unmistakably resonant with Austen’s own. Their wry formulations duplicate, in cinematic form, the kind of evaluative mischief Austen’s narrators usually deliver through free indirect discourse. Here, the film exploits paratext as a commentator: it directs the viewer toward a humorous, gently mocking interpretive frame without dictating a moral verdict.

The film opens with Lady Susan Vernon (Kate Beckinsale) and her daughter Frederica (Morfydd Clark) leaving Lord Manwaring’s estate in great haste, after Lady Susan’s presence has provoked scandal, jealousy, and domestic turmoil. As mother and daughter rush into the carriage, they are watched from the entrance staircase by Lady Manwaring (Jenn Murray), the aggrieved wife, by Lord Manwaring himself (Lochlann O’Mearáin), and by Sir James Martin (Tom Bennett), who at this moment is Lady Susan’s chosen suitor for Frederica, strategically selected to secure both mother and daughter’s future.

This brisk and tumultuous exit is immediately framed by the first sardonic intertitles of the film, which successively introduce the four key figures of the opening sequence (See Figures 5 to 8). Rather than functioning as neutral identifiers, these captions operate as compressed ironic verdicts, establishing from the outset a comic economy of desire, kinship, and strategic marriage.

Figure 5: Introduction of Lord Manwaring



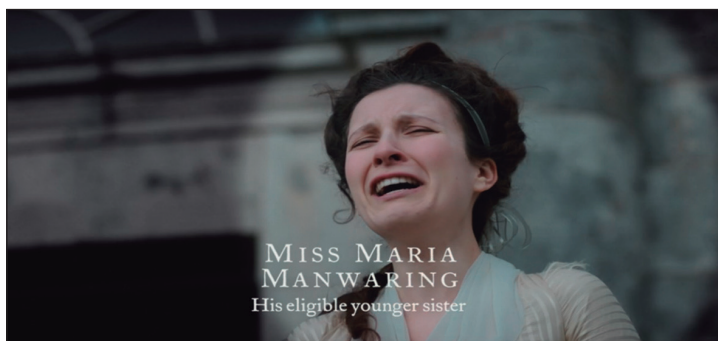
Source: screenshot captured from Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship* (2016), 2m01sec to 2m08sec.

Figure 6: Introduction of Lady Lucy Manwaring



Source: screenshot captured from Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship* (2016), 2m09sec to 2m14sec.

Figure 7: Introduction of Miss Maria Manwaring



Source: screenshot captured from Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship* (2016), 2m15sec to 2m22sec.

Figure 8: Introduction of Sir James Martin

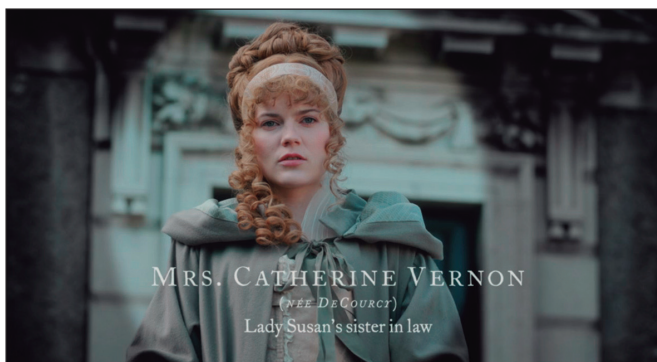


Source: screenshot captured from Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship* (2016), 2m23sec to 2m30sec.

Lord Manwaring, for instance, is described as “divinely attractive” not only in a physical sense, but also in terms that implicitly condense wealth, visibility, and social authority. Sir James Martin, characterized as “a bit of a rattle,” appears as a wealthy yet naïve and socially inept figure, whose marital future (Frederica Vernon or Maria Manwaring) is openly negotiated by others, underscoring his function as an instrument within the marriage market rather than as an autonomous agent. Lady Manwaring, in turn, is introduced simply as “his wealthy wife,” a formulation that foregrounds economic status over emotional depth and suggests the primacy of material interest in the constitution of marital bonds. Miss Maria Manwaring is described as “eligible,” not because of any personal fortune, but through her proximity to a powerful male figure within the family network. This places her in a structurally distinct position from Frederica Vernon, whose social value depends almost entirely on the urgency of securing a rich husband – an urgency repeatedly articulated by Lady Susan herself. Taken together, the intertitles outline a hierarchy in which social worth and marital prospects circulate less through individual qualities than through proximity to masculine wealth and authority; they also help to organize the understanding of the network of relationships and intrigues described in the letters of various characters in the novella.

It should also be noted that the frames shown are not frozen images but excerpts from moving scenes, in which the characters gesture and display dynamic facial expressions. This, in itself, enhances the jocular tone of the presentation. The following scene depicts Lady Susan’s brother-in-law’s estate. The property, known as Churchill, becomes the setting in which other central characters of the narrative are introduced.

Figure 9: Introduction of Catherine Vernon



Source: screenshot captured from Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship* (2016), 2m39sec to 2m43sec.

Figure 10: Introduction of Charles Vernon



Source: screenshot captured from Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship* (2016), 2m44sec to 2m48sec.

Figure 11: Introduction of Reginald de Courcy



Source: screenshot captured from Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship* (2016), 2m49sec to 2m53sec.

These three last title-cards, although they frame the actors in motion, present them in a markedly more restrained manner – almost static – without the exaggerated pathos of the preceding frames, in which nearly every character appears shouting or in tears. This shift in tonal and visual disposition is fully consistent with the nature of these characters. Catherine Vernon, explicitly identified as Lady Susan's sister-in-law, emerges as a figure of resistance, capable of curbing Lady Susan's maneuvers toward her "young and handsome" brother, Reginald. Mr. Charles Vernon, Catherine's "obliging husband," completes this arrangement of strong-willed women and comparatively less assertive men, reinforcing the film's recurring comedic pattern of gendered asymmetry in social power.

In Churchill, Mrs. Catherine Vernon receives a letter announcing the imminent arrival of her sister-in-law, Lady Susan – a piece of news she receives with visible unease. Her brother, Reginald, remarks with thinly veiled malice on Lady Susan's reputation as "the most accomplished flirt in all England" (3m05sec), which is an adaptation of a vitriolic letter written by him to his sister in the novella:

I congratulate you and Mr. Vernon on being about to receive into your family **the most accomplished coquette in England**. As a very distinguished flirt I have always been taught to consider her, but it has lately fallen in my way to hear some particulars of her conduct at Langford: which prove that she does not confine herself to that sort of honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable (Austen, 2024, n.p.; our emphasis)

In the film, Mr. Charles Vernon hastens to counter this judgment by suggesting that such fame stems less from misconduct than from envy provoked by Lady Susan's beauty and social distinction. A strategic cut then shifts the scene to London, where Lady Susan visits her friend Alicia Johnson. It is there that the repercussions of her reputation become concrete: Lady Manwaring has written to Alicia's husband, Mr. Johnson – who acts as a kind of moral guardian on Lady Manwaring's behalf – urging him to sever Alicia's contact with Lady Susan, which he promptly does.

At Alicia's house, Lady Susan comments with striking candor on this interference. She suggests that Lady Manwaring should not have married a man like Lord Manwaring if she were inclined to jealousy, affirms without embarrassment her own fondness for him, and adds that, during her stay at Langford, she had been determined to act with discretion, "with no flirtation," and only in private. She delivers these statements with remarkable composure, ease, and self-possession. This unguarded display of confidence sharpens the ambiguity surrounding her character: condemned by society as an incorrigible flirt, Lady Susan nevertheless appears wholly impervious to moral censure, continuing to act as though nothing in her conduct were in the least reproachable.

This carefully staged ambiguity in the construction of Lady Susan's character is inseparable from the broader comic architecture of the film. Much more could be said about the film's sustained choreography of humor and irony, which permeates not only its intertitles but also its dialogue and narrative construction; however, constraints of space make such an undertaking impossible here.

Sir James Martin's ingenuous absurdities alone would merit a separate analysis: his solemn reflections on the "twelve commandments," his earnest search for both a church and a hill within the Churchill estate, or his naïve announcement to Alicia that, scarcely a day after his marriage, Lady Susan had informed him that he was to become a father. This declaration will later be further ironized when the spectator realizes that Lord Manwaring is in fact spending an extended season with Sir James and Lady Susan on their own property. The film thus accumulates layers of farce that oscillate between social blindness, strategic concealment, and comic delay, constantly inviting the spectator to reassess appearances.

The final scene radicalizes this ambivalence. Frederica appears radiantly grateful to her mother for what she perceives as a supreme sacrifice – the mother's marriage to Sir James Martin – which has indirectly enabled her own union with Reginald. The moment is staged as openly romantic: Frederica sings a pastoral ballad ("Over the mountains... love will find out the way", (1h28m), drawn from *Percy's Reliques* and arranged by Roger Quilter (OVER, n.d.), whose lyrics proclaim the triumph of love over obstacles. Frederica may genuinely believe in this moral resolution; yet the spectator is invited to recognize that what truly "found a way" was not love but Lady Susan's intricate network of calculation and manipulation. In a sense, the film does offer a happy ending – nearly everyone appears content. But this harmony is irreducibly indebted to Lady Susan's intrigues, which leaves open a final, troubling question: whether she is merely a morally unscrupulous agent or, paradoxically, a pragmatic benefactress who understands the world as it is and survives it without relinquishing what she values most: money, social position, and her bond with Lord Manwaring.

Final remarks

Jane Austen portrayed relationships among the rural minor aristocracy and bourgeoisie of late 18th to early 19th-century England in a critical way, showing how financial interests and the need for young women to find an eligible groom guided marital decisions. Although she did this in a light and funny way, there is no way to confuse the entirety of her literary work with the Romanticism expressed by other authors of her time.

On screen, however, her novels are usually adapted with more sweetness and less acidity, more passion and less social criticism, as we have demonstrated in the examples of adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. According to

the hypothesis examined here, from a formal point of view, this phenomenon is related to the absence of the ironic third-person narrator, who is often responsible for forming a pact with the reader against the characters, criticizing them openly or between the lines. Without this commentator to remind us of their ulterior motives, the characters' actions and speeches may seem naïve and open-hearted.

However, our counterexample shows that the absence of verbal narration and insider look is not an impediment for the establishment of an ironic tone, because irony can be redistributed across different adaptive strategies. Films derived from novels with an ironic third-person narrator frequently convert that irony into emotional legibility and romantic reassurance – perhaps more due to commercial reasons than formal ones, a new hypothesis that future studies on the reception of Jane Austen's audiovisual adaptations may seek to understand. By contrast, *Love & Friendship* erects a saturated landscape of sarcasm and theatrical excess while masquerading as a romantic comedy – an arrangement that allows naïve spectators, much like Frederica herself, to read it as a story with a happy ending, even as the film consistently supplies all the elements necessary for a rigorously detached and ironic apprehension of its own narrative world.

COSTA, C. B; PISETTA, L. M.R. . Culpe (a falta de) o narrador: mais romance, menos ironia nas adaptações cinematográficas de Jane Austen. **Itinerários**, Araraquara, n. 62, p. 17-13, jan./jun. 2026.

■ **RESUMO:** *A acidez austeniana nem sempre é bem traduzida no cinema, na TV e no streaming. Esta é a hipótese norteadora do presente estudo, que relaciona o ganho sistemático de romantismo que acompanha a migração da obra de Jane Austen para as mídias audiovisuais à obliteração do narrador em terceira pessoa. Ilustramos esse fenômeno selecionando trechos de variadas adaptações de Orgulho e Preconceito e Emma, seus romances com o maior número de recriações audiovisuais. Nossa discussão mostra como, apesar de sua enorme popularidade na atualidade, as obras de Austen são frequentemente mal interpretadas como mais amorosas e ingênuas do que de fato são, exemplificando, assim, como pode ser difícil adaptar a literatura a um novo meio. Como contraexemplo, no entanto, examinamos a adaptação da novela epistolar Lady Susan, cuja ausência de um guia narrativo no texto original permite que o filme Amor e Amizade (2016), de Whit Stillman, recrie a ironia de Austen por meio de recursos cinematográficos como intertítulos e enquadramento visual. Neste caso, o diretor mobiliza estratégias cinematográficas para recuperar o humor afiado, muitas vezes silenciado nas adaptações dos principais romances, demonstrando que a ironia austeniana pode, sob certas condições, ser transposta com sucesso para o cinema.*

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Jane Austen; adaptação cinematográfica; narrador irônico.*

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