



Reading Novels Through Film: Analyzing the Reading of Female Characters in the 2022 Film Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the 2022 film adaptation of Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion* and targets the changes made at the level of female characters of the original source in the adaptation. It analyzes the underlying factors that shape this adaptation which proves to be a reading act and an interpretation in itself. Besides, it challenges the conventional notion of fidelity criterion as the common standard for evaluating this adaptation and sheds light on new insights on the use of this criterion. Rather than comparing and contrasting a novel and its film to consider deviations as failures, this research emphasizes that these creative choices introduced into the original source are an integral part of the adaptation process and highlight the adaptability inherent in the novel. The results of this study provide valuable understanding of the complexity of the adaptation process and demonstrate that deviations from the original source can enhance the artistic and interpretive aspects of an adaptation.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, film adaptations, reading function, fidelity principle.

الملخص

ترتكز هذه الدراسة على الفيلم المقتبس لعام 2022 عن رواية جين أوستن 'الإقناع' وتستهدف التغييرات التي تم إجراؤها على مستوى الشخصيات النسائية من المصدر الأصلي في عملية الاقتباس. هذه الدراسة تحلل أيضا العوامل الأساسية التي تشكل هذا الاقتباس الذي يثبت انه فعل قراءة وتفسيرًا في حد ذاته. إلى جانب ذلك، فإن هذه الدراسة تبين ان هذا الاقتباس يتحدد مفهوم معيار الإخلاص التقليدي كمعيار مشترك لتقييم الاقتباس وتلقي الضوء على رؤى جديدة. بدلا من المقارنة مقارنة الرواية وفيلمها لا اعتبار الانحرافات بمثابة فشل، هذه الدراسة تؤكد أن هذه

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الاختيارات الإبداعية المقدمة في المصدر الأصلي هي جزء لا يتجزأ من عملية الاقتباس وإبراز القدرة على الاقتباس الكامنة في الرواية. نتائج الدراسة تقدم فهمًا قيمًا لعملية الاقتباس المعقدة وتبين أن الانحرافات عن المصدر الأصلي يمكن أن تعزز الجانب الفني والتفسيري للاقتباس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جين أوستن، الإقناع، الأفلام المقتبسة، وظيفة القراءة، مبدأ الإخلاص.

Introduction

Since the twentieth century, film has grown into an industry that has found inspiration in literary productions. Literature, in its diverse forms, provides narratives for the medium of film to be projected on screens. This is particularly evident in the adaptations of novels by well-known authors from various historical eras. Initially, film adaptations of novels emerged to elevate the position of the developing film industry which faced skepticism. Similarly, filmic versions of novels became a promotion tool for specific literary works, introducing literary titles to a wider audience. Additionally, adaptations immortalized famous classic novels, transmitting their significance and fame throughout time.

With the increasing number of novels adapted into films, the topic of film adaptations has become a common subject of discussion, both in casual conversations and academic circles. Enthusiasts of both literature and film often rate film adaptations on the basis of how effectively a film succeeded or failed in reproducing an original narrative. On the other hand, scholars and film critics go beyond mere evaluation to delve deeper into the nature of these film adaptations, approaching them with a critical and less subjective perspective.

The main reason behind this analytical interest in film adaptations includes their interlinking nature as film adaptations join two different and, to a certain degree, similar artistic mediums: film and novel. They are both similar in the way the two tools are expressive of human creativity and experience using storytelling, yet through different techniques. Additionally, film adaptations come to emerge from a long creative making process impacted by various factors, including the production team's vision, fans' expectations, and societal and cultural contexts. These diverse aspects elevate film adaptations to the realm of academic research, demanding scholarly analysis.

One such classical novelistic source that has seen numerous adaptations followed by academic investigations are Jane Austen's works. One reason why the film industry still draws inspiration from her novels is the timeliness and relevance of the theme of women's experiences to contemporary viewers. Jane Austen has introduced through her six novels relatable female characters with a rich inner life and variant experiences of personal growth, relationships, marriage, and social constraints of her time. She offers a woman's perspective on human life. Consequently, filmmakers continue to bring Jane Austen's heroines into screen adding creative and modern aspects to shed light on the diverse range of female experiences and appeal to modern audiences.

An example of Jane Austen adaptation is a recent film that shares the same title of the original novel: *Persuasion*. Released on July 8, 2022, by Netflix, the film is produced by Carrie Cracknell and features a screenplay by Ron Bass and Alice Victoria Winslow. The cast includes Dakota Johnson, Cosmo Jarvis, and other actors. Originally, *Persuasion* novel, first

published in 1817, exposes a variety of human experiences, such as regret, love and the feelings that come with, navigated by the female protagonist, Anne. From this standpoint, the recent film of *Persuasion* follows this tradition of portraying female characters and the social context that surrounds them.

However, a wave of harsh criticism on this recent adaptation has been projected through internet articles and websites for reviewing films. Ever since the release of the trailer, headlines such as “Netflix’s *Persuasion* is an absolute disaster” and “‘*Persuasion*’ Is An Adaptation Gone Awry: Review” topped the internet. Among the comments directed towards the film, a distinct category of individuals expressed their disappointment with the film’s divergence from the novel in terms of its language, point of view, and, most significantly, the portrayal of the protagonist, Anne. The depiction in the film “broke its protagonist out of her shell to address the audience directly and make her thoughts more easily understood” (Screen Rant)³. Some of online reviews on Internet Movie Database (IMD) range from comments such as “another poor attempt from Netflix to copy & paste classics” and “what makes it worse is that it had the potential to be something amazing but falls so very short”.

These critiques and comments surrounding the film adaptation of *Persuasion* are rooted in fidelity principle. Fidelity criterion has long served as the foundation for evaluating film adaptations, used by both viewers and researchers. Researchers investigate the degree to which a film is faithful to an original source in capturing the essence of the story, its characters, and its themes. This evaluation directly calls to compare and contrast a novel and its film. The more the film deviates from the original source the more it is subjected to intensive criticism. This is evident in the perception of some viewers of the 2022 adaptation of *Persuasion*, in which the deviation from the exact depiction of the protagonist Anne generated harsh comments. Yet, this fidelity criterion alone is considered insufficient for the analysis of film adaptations for its unproductivity and the prejudice it establishes between two separate artistic media. For instance, the comments directed to the film *Persuasion* limit the understanding of the complexities of turning a novel into a film and the artistic choices made by the production team.

Some definitions describe adaptations as reproductions or copies, while their function can be seen as interpretive and reading tools. Filmmakers share the role of readers and interpreters. Glenn Jellenik (2007) communicates that adaptations of all kinds serve as a reading strategy of the original source by which they offer a different interpretation from the lenses of the filmmaker (p.15). In other terms, a filmmaker targets a narrative text in the purpose of shaping a reading out of it and to communicate it to viewers through the medium of film. This reading is a reinterpretation that affects the making process of an adaptation. Here, fidelity criterion becomes productive in which comparing and contrasting reveal the creative choices made by the filmmaker to adapt with the factors that surround the adaptation.

In the light of this perspective, it is essential to examine the crew production’s reading of the novel *Persuasion* in its latest adaptation, particularly in terms of representing female characters, and how this reading was conveyed through the medium of film. Additionally, it is crucial to explore the factors that led the production crew to opt for

such a reading of the protagonist Anne and other female characters and how the production team adapted to these factors. Such aspects are worthy of investigation to understand better the adaptation beyond a viewer's point of view. The questions this research paper attempts to answer are: What are the underlying factors that led to changes in the reading of female characters of the original story in the latest film adaptation *Persuasion*, and what insights does this new reading offer regarding the process of creating an adaptation?

The paper aims to achieve several specific objectives in the study of the recent film adaptation of *Persuasion*. Firstly, it seeks to identify and explore the key factors that influenced the process of transforming the novel *Persuasion* into a film, particularly focusing on the alterations made on the depiction of female characters. Additionally, the study aims at revealing the reading derived from the original narrative and expressed through the medium of film. By accomplishing these objectives, the study aims overall to shed light on the potential of perceiving film adaptations as a creative tool, emphasizing the importance of rigorous analysis rather than superficial conclusions.

To try to answer the research question, a close reading of the characterization of the novel and the film is used as a tool to explore the depiction of female characters and the elements that contributed to that depiction. Then, the depiction in both the novel and the film will be compared in order to reveal similarities and differences in terms of offering a different reading of the novel. Additionally, an examination of interviews conducted by internet websites with the production team of the film adaptation offers valuable insights into the decision-making process behind the creation of the film. These interviews shed light on the motivations, creative choices, and intentions of the filmmakers, providing a deeper understanding of the reasons that influenced various aspects of the adaptation.

1-Approaching a film adaptation of a novel

Initially, the making-process of an adaptation begins with reading and interpreting the original narrative. Therefore, this very adaptation functions more as a strategy for reading (Jellenik,2007). Through their engagement with the original material, the filmmaker and screenwriter undertake a comprehensive reading process aimed at understanding and extracting the core elements and essence of the source narrative. During the reading process, they examine the dynamic interactions between the characters, their relationships, motivations and the influences of the setting. They immerse themselves in the unfolding key events and significant moments. In doing so, they shape a deep understanding of the narrative structure and themes of the source material. Subsequently, the filmmaker and screenwriter resume the role of an interpreter, actively shaping meaning from the various interactions between the story's elements, including the characters, setting, and events.

This interpretive process involves a comprehensive analysis of the source material from different perspectives, such as the writer's intentions, the broader cultural and societal context surrounding the novel and the motivations of the characters. Once the reading and interpretation process is complete, the filmmaker and screenwriter proceed to communicate the extracted meaning from the source novel through the medium of film. They transform the written text into a visual and performative narrative which is then presented to the viewer.

This reading of the novel can deviate to a certain degree from the intended meaning by the author as specific factors come into play to impact the making of the adaptation. In the film adaptation *Persuasion*, these factors resulted in shaping a new reading of the depiction of female characters.

2-MainFemaleCharacters and the Fidelity Principle

The film adaptation of *Persuasion* presents a nuanced portrayal of its main female characters, exhibiting a mixture of faithfulness and unfaithfulness to the original novel. Throughout the adaptation, the depiction of the characters Anne Elliot, Lady Russell, and Elizabeth Elliot undergoes notable alterations, reflecting the creative choices made by the filmmakers. These changes, while diverging from Austen's written descriptions, contribute to shaping a new reading of the source material. In contrast, characters like Mary Elliot, Henrietta, and Louisa Musgrove remain relatively faithful to Austen's original narrative, with their personalities and motivations aligning closely with the source material.

2-1. Anne Elliot

The protagonist in the film adaptation shows a resemblance to her literary counter part, embodying many of the same core traits and characteristics. Anne, "with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character" (Austen 7), is different from her family in her treatment of people, her reactions to diverse situations, and her perception of the world around her. To her family and their acquaintances, she chooses to be selfless, thoughtful, and considerate. For instance, when her father, Sir Elliot, and her sister, Elizabeth, look down on sailors, Anne intercedes: "The navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men... sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow" (Austen 21). Her defence of sailors shows her empathy for others. In the film, she shares with her father that a good reputation is the result of honesty, integrity and compassion, and thinking of others (5:25-5:37).

Anne is also observant and highly tentative to details in an attempt to have a better understanding of a given situation. In the film, Captain Wentworth admits to her that she always knows what to do in urgent situations "anticipating the needs of others, direct and focused, calm and thoughtful" (57:12-57-29). Anne also follows an open-minded approach to life, where she allows herself to see things from different perspectives and consider alternate viewpoints. In particular, with the complexities of her love story with Captain Wentworth, she attempts to decipher her own feelings and hers to come to a better outcome to their heartbreak.

More importantly, Anne has a secretive nature, hiding her feelings from others. In the novel, when she first hears that Captain Wentworth is back, she starts to experience intense feelings, yet "she was assisted, however, by that perfect indifference and apparent unconsciousness...which seemed almost to deny any recollection of it [the past]" (Austen32). In the film, when other characters push her to pursue Captain Wentworth, she acts indifferently at the expense of her true feelings for him, expressing to her sister in law: "You

are very sweet, but I am not interested”(19:50-21:21). This reflects a profound sense of loneliness as Anne gets absorbed in her own inner life, making herself distant from her family and acquaintances. Another reason for her loneliness is the lack of appreciation and value from her own family, in which Austen explains that “she had never...known the happiness of being listened to, or encouraged by any just appreciation or real taste. In music she had been always used to feel alone in the world” (49). In the film, she only opens up to Lady Russell about her lasting feelings for Captain Wentworth and her regrets, sharing:” Fredrick Wentworth was the only person, save you and my mother, who ever really saw me” (6:50-9:20).

Anne is also obedient to social conventions and authority figures. As a dutiful daughter, she commits to her tasks and does what is expected of her at the expense of her own feelings and needs. Years before, Anne broke off her engagement with Captain Wentworth because Lady Russell expressed how imperfect a match this marriage could be. Even after that, Anne still respects social conventions. When she is asked improperly to nurse her younger ill sister, Mary, Anne is “glad to be thought of some use, glad to have anything marked out as a duty” (Austen 35).

It is important, however, to note that the film adaptation introduces some differences in the portrayal of the protagonist. Anne demonstrates acts of rebellion transmitted through her sarcasm. She is sarcastic in her talks about her family and their vanity and pride where she expresses that “[o]ne’s family is only escapable by two things, marriage and death. Both seem unlikely in the immediate future” (02:45-02:55). She turns to heavy drinking as a reaction to her eight-year heartbreak. Additionally, Anne is sometimes reckless. While in the novel, she pays attention to her actions and words to avoid any inappropriate behaviour, in the film, she blurts out comments in serious situations without weighting her words. She acts inappropriately without considering consequences, such as in the scene where she took a sip from her drink and started screaming Captain Wentworth’s name, who was in the next house in an upper-class gathering(23:23-24:00).

In essence, while in the novel Anne hides her inner self under the mask of calmness and reservedness, in the film she projects a sarcastic and reckless persona. And while the reader accesses her thoughts and feelings through words, the viewer sees her true self in scenes where Anne speaks up to the camera about her deepest thoughts and reflections. In scene (1:07:07-1:07:35), she looks at the camera addressing the viewer and shares a perspective on life expressing “How is it that life can remain static, almost obstinately resistant to any change for years at a time, and then without warning become flooded with so much newness within the course of few weeks?”

2-2.LadyRussell

The depiction of Lady Russell in the film follows the one of the novel to a certain extent. “[O]f steady age and character, and extremely provided for” (Austen 7), Lady Russell is a close friend and advisor to the Elliot family, particularly to Anne. Ever since the death of her close friend, Lady Elliot, Lady Russell committed to taking care of the three daughters, and the matters of the whole family. She is a responsible, intelligent, and pragmatic woman in which she makes decisions and draws solutions based on what is likely to be effective. When the Elliot family fell in debt, her reaction was one of concern and compassion, offering advice and assistance where possible. Lady Russell gives importance to social rank, and she judges people based on their economic status. Years ago, she was the one to persuade Anne to break off her engagement with Wentworth as she conceived it as an unfortunate alliance. To her, for Anne to “involve herself at nineteen in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him” would end anger Anne’s wellbeing. Her views on relationships differ from Anne’s and she shares her thoughts on marriage on scene (6:50-9:20) where she expresses that “marriage is transactional for women”, in which marriage is an arrangement to secure financial status, instead of a partnership between two individuals who care and love each other.

However, Lady Russell is as well thoughtful especially of Anne’s feelings in which “she [Anne] was a most dear and highly valued god-daughter, favourite, and friend”(Austen 8). She always attempts to make Anne feel included and worthy. Although she has different perspectives, her relation to Anne in the novel and the film is deep in which Anne still takes Lady Russell’s opinions into consideration and the woman tries to learn from her past mistakes and give enough room for Anne to make her own decisions.

The main difference, however, introduced into the character of Lady Russell is her involvement in multiple affairs in her European travels. Unlike the novel, where she remains a devoted widow, in the film, she discloses to Anne that she has engaged in uncommitted relationships (1:08:50-1:09:00). This alteration introduces a distinct aspect to her character, reflecting a departure from her previously established persona as a steady and loyal widow.

2-3-Elizabeth Elliot

As the eldest daughter and her father’s favourite, Elizabeth Elliot holds superiority in the decision-making regarding the matters of the Elliot family. She inherited from her father the good looks and vanity. So often, she looks down to individuals who are less handsome and less aristocratic and rather values acquaintances with high social rank. By the end of the novel and the film, she remains single as she cannot find the perfect partner that corresponds to her taste. To her younger sisters, Anne and Mary, she is indifferent and neglectful of their emotional needs. This is also common in her attitude with her family’s acquaintances. In the novel, the character of Elizabeth is depicted with depth, exhibiting multifaceted qualities in which she proved to be responsible for her family ever since her mother’s death. Austen showcases that “Thirteen years had seen her mistress of Kellynch Hall, presiding and directing with a self-possession and decision which could never have given the idea of her being younger than she was”(9).

In the film adaptation, on the other hand, she is portrayed as a flat character, lacking the complexity and depth portrayed in the original source material. The film simplifies her character, presenting her with fewer layers and nuances compared to her literary counterpart. The reason behind that is the limited duration of the film in which it is challenging to fully explore the complexities of her character. Unlike the novel, which has the luxury of spanning several chapters and pages to delve into the complexities of Elizabeth's thoughts, emotions, and growth, the film adaptation is bound by a restricted timeframe.

2-4 -Mary Elliot

The character of Mary in both the film and the novel stands out as a striking example of faithful depiction. Both mediums present her in a consistent manner, capturing the essence of her personality, traits, and overall portrayal. She is the youngest of Sir Elliot daughters, Mary is the first to get married to "an old family of respectability and large fortune"(Austen 8), the Musgroves, fulfilling her duty of expanding her family's status. She experiences health anxiety as she excessively worries about having a serious illness. This is a hint of the self-centred and demanding nature of the Elliot family, "inheriting a considerable share of the Elliot self-importance, [she] was very prone to add to every other distress that of fancying herself neglected and ill-used" (p.39). She often complains of being neglected and uncared for. She asks for others' attention, complains about her physical and mental health excessively and she obliges people to take care of her. Yet, she shows love in her unique way. Even though she is difficult, she still cares for her sister Anne and wants the best marriage match for her. This consistent portrayal allows the viewer to connect with and understand Mary's character in a similar way, regardless of the medium.

2-5-Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove

The two sisters in the film follow closely their depiction in the novel. Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove, "young ladies of nineteen and twenty" (Austen 42), are Mary's sisters-in-law. They are "like thousands of other young ladies, living to be fashionable, happy, and merry" (42). Louisa is dynamic, lively, and adventurous. She lacks carefulness and sometimes acts impulsively without considering consequences. Both in the novel and the film, Louisa falls on the steps and severely injures her head when she tries to show off her lack of fear to Captain Wentworth. Her sister, on the other hand, is more reserved, sensible, and introspective. Both sisters enjoy male attention and they navigate their feelings, cautiously for Henrietta and impulsively for Louisa. Louisa experiences a relationship with Captain Benwick, a melancholic person grieving the loss of his fiancée and Henrietta gets involved with Charles Hayter, a talented artist of a lower social rank than that of the Musgroves. At the end of the story both sisters get engaged to their pursuers.

3-The Film Crew's Reading of Persuasion

The changes brought to the portrayal of female characters, Anne Elliot and Lady Russell, in the film adaptation suggest a new reading that explores the theme of diversity in love where women with variant experiences of romantic relationships are depicted. It acknowledges and celebrates the idea that love comes in different forms and exists between people with distinct personalities. The film, most importantly, showcases love that accepts and respects individuals for who they are and who they choose to love. By depicting Anne as

reckless and rebellious, the film embraces the depth and diversity of human experiences, highlighting that love is not exclusive to those who fit societal norms or adhere to traditional expectations. This alternative portrayal challenges stereotypes and encourages a broader and more inclusive understanding of love and relationships. This reading is extended through the other female character, Lady Russell, who finds her own way of practising love. These alterations at the level of the depiction of Anne Elliot and Lady Russell go back to the filmmaker's own vision of producing an accessible film to a broader audience where female characters with different personalities and reactions to the world around them create an inclusive filmic piece. In an interview for *The Wrap*, filmmaker Cracknell links the changes to her own experiences with persons who felt excluded from narratives due to the lack of representation of their own culture. She shares:

I always wanted to cast the film in a color conscious way. I was interested in making a piece of work that could appeal to a really broad and diverse audience. I think, growing up as a white British woman, I always saw myself represented in these classic texts when I watched adaptations on the BBC. And from conversations with friends of mine, I knew that they loved watching Jane Austen adaptations but never saw themselves in those stories, because those stories were not about their culture. (Verhoeven,2022)

The filmmaker, therefore, slightly changed the character of Anne Eliot and other females to create an inclusive film that depicts a variety of personalities in an attempt to allow the viewer to find himself in one of these characters. Overall, the film adaptation communicates that love transcends social judgments and that individuals with unconventional qualities or life paths just deserve happiness and fulfilling relationships. This reading is expressed at the ending where Anne shares, "there are many kinds of love. For some, the right partnership can be a lucrative endeavour. For others, true connection is reward enough. It's okay to find love on your terms... don't let anyone tell you how to live. Or who to love"(1:40:00-1:41:30).

On the other hand, faithfulness to the depiction of the other female characters is driven by the production team's intent to infuse the adaptation with a new perspective while maintaining a sense of connection to Austen's work. Screenwriter Ron Bass expresses that "I wanted to make the characters and story accessible, understandable and emotionally resonant for a contemporary audience, balancing change with wanting to keep it Austen."(Bitran,2022) By preserving the essence of the characters Mary Elliot, Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove, the filmmakers ensure that the adaptation retains a sense of authenticity and respects the source material. This fidelity to the depiction of these female characters allows the film to capture the nuances and dynamics of their relationships, their interactions with other characters, and their individual journeys throughout the story.

These alterations serve to communicate a new reading of the narrative consisting of women experiencing diversity in love. The factors influencing these changes and the new reading of the source material can be attributed to the production team's own vision, the change from the written to the visual medium, and the preferences of the audience. The team production made choices that align with their reading of the novel and the demands of the

film adaptation. The change in medium from written text to visual storytelling necessitates adjustments in the portrayal of the female characters (besides language and point of view) as the unique properties of film in an attempt to convey meaning and capture the essence of the original story. It goes without saying that the considerations of the audience play a crucial role in shaping the adaptation, as filmmakers strive to engage and resonate with viewers.

Conclusion

While a viewer's experience of watching a film adaptation may seem entertaining, involving only their time and attention to the story, it is important to recognize the laborious and challenging process that occurs behind the scenes. An adaptation emerges from a long and challenging making process that navigates the complexities of turning a literary work into a visual medium. Initially, filmmakers start as readers of the source material and turn into interpreters of the meaning behind the story. They shape a new reading out of the source material and transmit it through the medium of film. Throughout this endeavour, a multitude of elements come into play, influencing the final outcome of the adaptation. Here potential answers to the problematic that conducted this research emerge regarding the film adaptation *Persuasion*. The underlying factors that led to changes in the reading of main female characters of the original novel in the film are the production team's own intentions, the change in medium and audience. The new reading offered by the team production emphasizes that female characters experience diverse stories with romantic relationships. All these stories, with their complexity and difference, are valuable.

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