From Austenmania to Firthmania, or how Mr. Darcy Changed the Life of Colin

Margarita Carretero González and María Elena Rodríguez Martín
University of Granada

Abstract

Although British actor Colin Firth was first known internationally for his performance in Milos Forman’s Valmont, the villain viscount of Chordelos de Laclos’s Les Liaisons Dangereuses will forever remain in the popular imagination as the one played by John Malkovich. The year 1995, however, brought a change to Firth’s acting career when he was cast to play the character of Mr. Darcy in a BBC adaptation of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice. For six weeks the new Mr. Darcy was subjected to constant scrutiny, not only on British TV screens but also in the press.

This paper analyses the evolution of a cultural phenomenon that has transformed the British actor into a sexual icon, a representation of the new, sensitive man of the 1990s, who, having successfully—although painstakingly—avoided being typecast as the protagonist of Austen’s novel, is now even treated on a first name basis on the increasing number of websites fans have dedicated to him.

The release of the 2005 version of Pride and Prejudice is the latest in the burst of Austenmania that has swept the English-speaking world in the last decade and, to a lesser extent, other countries. Previous to this, Austen had even made it into Bollywood with the film Bride and Prejudice, which was, incidentally, not particularly successful in our country. In contrast, the filmic analogies of Bridget Jones’s Diary and Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason, loosely inspired in Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion, respectively, were box-office hits worldwide. Although Jane Austen has never gone out of fashion, after the Metro Goldwyn Meyer adaptation of Pride and Prejudice in 1940, there had been no version of a Jane Austen novel for theatrical release until 1995 (Parrill, 2002: 5). The boom of the nineties gave the name to the cultural phenomenon of Austenmania, used to referred to the renewed popularity the English novelist’s works experienced after the success of Clueless, Persuasion, Sense and Sensibility, and two versions of Emma, all shot and released in the mid-nineties, together with the famous television series that will occupy most of our attention in this paper. The Austenfever of the nineties came to a short halt with the box office failure of Patricia Rozema’s Mansfield Park (1999).

However, even if Austenmania is a term of the nineties, it is just a new way to refer to a phenomenon which already grew in the late nineteenth century, when Austen’s novels became popular and increasingly available to a wider readership in the United Kingdom. Janeitism is defined by Claudia L. Johnson (1997: 211) as “the self-consciously idolatrous enthusiasm for ‘Jane’ and every detail relative to her”. Together with Austenmania, Austenfever or Austenitis, Janeitism is a term to refer to a phenomenon which transcends the written word. According to McMaster (1996: 13), this includes “the stage, screen and television adaptations, … a growing trade in made-to-measure Regency outfits; Jane Austen sweatshirts, watches and tote bags; and nighties embroidered with the legend, ‘Not tonight, dear — I’m reading Jane Austen.’”

In the age of TV and DVD the above quotation could be transformed into a “Not tonight, dear – I’m watching Jane Austen”, or even, “I’m watching Mr. Darcy”. This Mr. Darcy surely would be no other than the one acted out by Colin Firth in the BBC series of 1995. In fact, there seems to be an agreement that this miniseries launched Austenmania, and the appeal of the leading male character played a decisive role. If the amount of books published after Roger Sales’s hardback edition
of Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England (1994) was not reason enough for him to write an afterword for the paperback edition of 1996, the BBC’s successful adaptation certainly was. This afterword, entitled Austenmania, is perhaps the first instance of academic attention paid to this social phenomenon, focusing, however, on its spin-off: Darcymania.

Mr. Darcy is one of the characters that has captivated the female imagination for over 200 years, but Colin Firth certainly gave it a new dimension that transformed Austenmania into Firthmania, to such an extent that Firth confessed to be looking forward to the new adaptation, hoping it would help him “shed his image as Jane Austen heartthrob Mr. Darcy” (NetGlimse.com). Notwithstanding Matthew MacFayden’s correct performance, it is difficult to see his too softened Darcy as a successful substitute to Firth’s. However, one could argue that MacFayden’s Darcy is a post-Firthian one, taken to the extreme of the new man Firth reserved for the second part of the miniseries.

The BBC 1995 Pride and Prejudice was a cultural phenomenon that left an imprint on all future adaptations. The final episode was watched in Britain by 10 million viewers, “the highest that there has even been for a classic serial”. The video was released before the final episode and sold 12,000 copies in the first two days rising up to 50,000 within the week (Sales, 1996: 228). By 2001, it had earned the BBC 1,620,225 pounds (Giddings and Selby, 2001: 122, qtd. in Parrill, 2003: 4). Sales of the novel itself also went up and the National Trust properties where the film was shot welcomed an increasing number of visitors. As Roger Sales (1996: 229) points out, there is nothing new about Austenmania, but “the popularity of this particular adaptation of Pride and Prejudice has transformed Jane Austen into an even more newsworthy, or topical, figure than she has ever been”. Looking at what the papers had to say at the time, it is safe to infer that Colin Firth’s Darcy inadvertently contributed to this extraordinary response.

While The Independent assured, the day before the final episode, that “lovelorn women and adoring marketing men [were] murmuring just one name: Darcy” (Sales, 1996: 228), the statements appeared on The Times directly pointed at Colin Firth’s appeal as the main reason behind all the noise. On 20th November, the newspaper claimed that “a million women, no more and no less, wanted to unbutton the damp white shirt that was worn by Colin Firth when he played Mr. Darcy”. One month later, the focus was laid on his breeches: “Nothing came close to Colin Firth and those trousers. ... The sight of Firth wearing button flap, full-front breeches sent women everywhere into fainting fits”, while The Independent transformed him into a national symbol, claiming that Firth was their man of the year because he was “a sex symbol to outshine all Hollywood’s hunkiest”. For Sale, the trousers “were speaking for, as well as to, England” (Sales 1996: 230-1). Helen Fielding’s description of Bridget Jones’s gatherings with her female friends to play repeatedly the famous scene in which Darcy takes a plunge into a pond attired with just his breeches and the famous white shirt was certainly not a product of her imagination.

Whether the appeal resided in the character or in the actor is a controversial issue that has received a certain amount of scholarly attention. Bowles (2003) observes that the crazy Darcy phenomenon is inextricably linked to Colin Firth’s appeal, an opinion shared by Cardwell (2002) or Sales (1996). In contrast, Graham (1997) and Parrill (2002) agree that the appeal resided mostly on the character, an opinion shared by Firth himself (Blum, 2003: 166). Perhaps Parrill’s statement — “Colin Firth is the definitive cinematic Mr. Darcy” (2002: 65)— provides us with a clue to solve this apparent riddle. It is the fusion Darcy-Firth that works so magically on screen, in a script perfectly orchestrated to bring out the sexual tension that underlies the novel, focusing on how it is experienced by the character of Darcy, rather than Elizabeth.
When confessing his fear of not being able to equal his predecessor in the role, Sir Laurence Olivier (Birtwistle & Conklin 1995: 98), Colin Firth seems to have overlooked the fact that his performance was addressed to a completely different audience. Certainly his Mr. Darcy had to be more palatable to the nineties woman; to a certain extent, he had to embody some of the values required of the New Man. On those occasions when the camera abandons Elizabeth’s point of view, the viewer has the opportunity to see a progressively changed Darcy. We witness his growing interest in Elizabeth when he looks at her from a window, with a somewhat worried look, just covered by a bathing robe, having just got out of a bath. It seems as if this basic attire freed him to a certain extent from the bigotry that had ruled his opinion of the heroine. His marriage proposal to Elizabeth is presented almost entirely from her point of view. Most of the scene is shot from a low angle, following Elizabeth’s perspective from her sitting position. He is perceived as arrogant, conceited and self-confident in that his proposal cannot be rejected. After he is humbled by her negative, the camera abandons its focus on Elizabeth and decides to follow Darcy walking back to Rosings in order to write the letter in which he discloses to her all of his dealings with Mr. Wickham. An agitated Darcy struggles to put his thoughts into paper. His formal attire once more cast away, shirt opened, hair dishevelled and troubled expression, Darcy spends the whole night pouring out the faithful account of the events leading up to Elizabeth’s false impressions. A flashback offers the viewer a short account of Darcy and Wickham’s childhood, their time at university and the latter’s intended elopement with Georgiana, Darcy’s younger sister. There are a series of visual details of events not present in the novel that the script introduces in order to give prominence to Darcy’s memory, adopting in this way his point of view and making it more relevant than it is in the original. In the novel, the character of Darcy only timidly reveals itself as a subject outside Elizabeth’s perspective. In the miniseries, we have the advantage against Elizabeth of seeing him struggling with his fencing master in an attempt to overcome his passion for the heroine, a struggle that has led to one of the most famous scenes of this adaptation: that in which the character of Mr. Darcy removes his clothes and, left with a white linen shirt and breeches, dives into a lake in a sort of cleansing ritual. This new Darcy, jacket and whip in hand, wet shirt clinging to his chest and hair slightly wet, is the one that unexpectedly Elizabeth confronts, in a walk around the gardens at Pemberley. From that moment, she perceives a changed character, much more likeable, one with whom she can now even share some conspiratorial looks he later reminiscences about when alone.

Even if the script has made the effort of sharing with the viewer Darcy’s side of the story, it has also contributed to transform the character into an object of beauty for the female viewers to enjoy. As Lisa Hopkins (1998: 112) has it, the BBC production is “unashamed about appealing to women –and in particular about fetishizing and framing Darcy and offering him up to the female gaze”. It is no exaggeration to affirm that his performance in Pride and Prejudice transformed Colin Firth into a sexual icon. However, has Firth succeeded in being perceived as someone other than Mr. Darcy in the collective female imagination? Far from it, one can infer, if we are to follow the scene in which Bridget interviews the actor in Bridget Jones: The Age of Reason (1999). She seems to be unable to differentiate the actor from his role, being especially obsessed with the conditions under which the “lake scene” was shot. However, an Internet search shows that, even though Mr. Darcy is the most appealing of the characters he has embodied, Firth’s allure goes beyond this role. A Google search for “Colin Firth” shows approximately 2,900,000 results in 0.28 seconds and, although most of them point out to Mr. Darcy as the part that earned him worldwide admiration, Darcymania has unquestionably led to Firthmania in the fandom world. The website ColinFirth.com, for instance, leaves no trace of his role as Mr. Darcy, but follows the actor’s career and public appearances from 2001.
Up to 1988, Firth showed a certain tendency to play the role of tortuous, neurotic and even creepy characters. In *A Month in the Country* (1986), he played a shell-shocked, stuttering Tom, attempting to heal the wounds caused by World War I while trying to overcome his passion for the vicar’s wife. Alexander Scherbatov, his part in *Nineteen Nineteen* (1984), is a Russian aristocrat obsessed by his desire for his sister; while Adrian LeDuc, the sociopathic film fanatic he played in *Apartment Zero* (1988), earned him a reputation for being attracted to psychologically unstable characters (*Colin Firth Career Timeline*). His recent performance in *Trauma* (2004) owes a lot to the tormented characters of this initial stage in his career.

In 1989, Milos Forman chose him to play the leading role in *Valmont*, a film somewhat overshadowed by the success of Frears’s *Dangerous Liaisons* the previous year. Firth’s *Valmont* decidedly lacks the appeal of Malkovich’s as a villain, although both play the same character. Arguably, Firth’s softer facial features could not compete with Malkovich’s devilish looks.

It may be argued that his physical appearance presents him as the suitable actor for the roles of the sensitive man that seem to favour him in the female gaze: the rejected lovers of *Love Actually* (2003) and *Hope Springs* (2003); the steadfast, loving counterpart of unfaithful, riotous Hugh Grant’s Daniel Cleaver in the *Bridget Jones* saga; or the man trapped into a transactional family whose art is appreciated just as a means of making money, such as his Vermeer of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003).

Firth’s public life also contributes to his image as the new sensitive man. In 2001 he was chosen to blow the candles on the cake at Amnesty International’s 40th anniversary. More recently, he presented the European Union a petition on Fair Trade after a campaign organised by Oxfam and supported by more than 10 millions signatures (*ColinFirth.com*). To top it all, he seems to be blissfully happy in his private life. He has two sons with his beautiful Italian wife Livia and they live in a house in sunny Tuscany. He accepted a role in *The Playmaker* (1993) – a film he later described as “complete rubbish” – just so that he could be with his son Will (from a previous relationship with actress Meg Tilly), who was in Los Angeles at the time (*Colin Firth Career Timeline*). A socially-committed actor, good family man and dashingly handsome, it should come as no surprise that Colin Firth keeps captivating the female imagination of women at the beginning of the 21st century.

References


