

COMMENTARY BY KRISTEN R. LOYD

An England Worth Saving: The Domestication of World War II Propaganda in *Pride and Prejudice*

MY HUSBAND TOOK A SHORT-TOUR DEPLOYMENT to Afghanistan while I completed my MA program in Ohio. We planned for the separation like two officers plan for anything—we followed a checklist. Wills. Check. Deployment brief. Check. Counseling. Check.

Hey, spouse. Wondering what your deployed family member may like in his or her care package?

Why, yes, what could I buy, bake, and box that will make a three-hundred and sixty-five day separation feel almost worth it?

Body wash, Yoohoo, and homemade oatmeal cookies. Check, Check, Check. For a year, I sent these care packages and wrote letters describing the mundane activities of mid-western, graduate life. My husband and I talked on the phone every day, and when he came home for his two weeks of mid-tour leave, we acted as though he had never left. Ours was a marriage refusing to miss a beat. It wasn't until I finished my master's essay on the topic of women in wartime that I realized we'd not only missed a beat, I had become a one man band.

I was the woman left behind. The care packages, letters, e-mails, phone calls, and two-week vacation full of normalcy were all tiny acts of preservation adding up to a grand gesture that said, "Don't worry, nothing will change while you're gone." Out of love, instinct, or perhaps social conditioning, I had unconsciously fulfilled the role of a marital bookmark. It's only now with the deployment behind us that

I realize that the following commentary stemmed from my own preoccupation with domestic preservation, which has more to do with maintaining an ideal than a daily routine.

On September 3, 1939, following the German invasion of Poland, Britain declared war on Germany. Over the next ten months, the German blitzkrieg spread west and eventually took to the sky and sea to bring the war to the United Kingdom. Allied forces quickly realized that they were in desperate need of support from the United States; unfortunately, after their participation in the First World War the American people wanted nothing to do with another European conflict. In fact, a 1939 poll by the American Institute of Public Opinion estimated that 96.5 percent of Americans favored neutrality.

Isolationism was not a new concept for the United States; following the American Revolution, the forefathers recommended it as a way to keep a newly formed nation focused on its own growth and development and to prevent the loss of the independence its people fought so hard to gain. In the 1930s, as the United States struggled to climb out of the Great Depression, its leaders once again sought to protect the fragile national economy; this prompted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to sign the first Neutrality Act on August 3, 1935. The legislation imposed a partial arms embargo against warring nations and by 1936, the provisions also prohibited American citizens from loaning funds to these countries. In 1938, as tensions in Europe grew, the United States also passed the Foreign Agents Registration Act to stop the infiltration of foreign propaganda. As Nicholas Cull points out, "The American people were wary of any British attempt to drag them into war for the second time in a generation," but this did not deter the British campaign for United States involvement.¹ In 1937, Sir Ronald Lindsay, the British ambassador to Washington, was commissioned to determine the best way to secure the United States as an ally. In the end, Lindsay felt that evoking images of "Old England," the birthplace of America, was essential to this process and that such "nostalgia would always be Britain's strongest suit in an appeal to the United States."² This meant presenting the United States with an Americanized stereotype of England, a version of England that perhaps existed only in Austen novels.

In addition to the newsreels, newspapers, pamphlets, radio broadcasts, and documentary films, British propagandists used feature films to take advantage of American pathos. Robert Calder, author of *Beware the Serpent*, notes that in spite of American watchdog groups,

[. . .] the films that most effectively drew Americans to the British struggle came from Hollywood, whose studios, unlike those in Britain in 1939, were well funded, firmly established, and influential. The American cinematic picture of Britain was almost always sentimental and archaic, but in a country where three-quarters of the people saw a movie each week, it touched the sympathies of millions of Americans.³

He offers the opening legend of the 1942 film, *Mrs. Miniver*, as an example of this filmic sentimentality:

This story of an average English middle-class family begins with the summer of 1939; when the sun shone down on a happy, careless people, who worked and played, reared their children and tended their gardens in that happy, easy-going England that was so soon to be fighting desperately for her way of life and for life itself.⁴

Most Americans had a negative perception of Great Britain as a colonial power, as Calder puts, “dominated by a rigid class system”; therefore, filmmakers focused on England’s domestic scene, an area supposedly free of such politics.⁵ The United States’ public and political leaders had to believe that Great Britain and the British way of life were worth saving. *Mrs. Miniver* was able to garner American sympathy by its portrayal of Hitler’s destruction of an Anglicized version of what American audiences would no doubt see as small town U.S.A. The plot consists simply of a family struggling to survive as the war approaches. As a domestic patriot, Mrs. Miniver strives to maintain normalcy in her family, household, and community even when the bombs begin to drop. Ysenda Graham, biographer of the real woman upon whom the character Mrs. Miniver was based, suggests that in the minds of Americans, “Mrs. Miniver became synonymous...with all that was saintly and self-sacrificing in wartime womanhood.”⁶ Through the wartime plight of women, United States citizens finally identified with the threat to Britain. Oddly enough, Greer Garson, who previously played the role of Elizabeth Bennet in the 1940 film version of *Pride and Prejudice*, played Mrs. Miniver. Arguably, some of *Mrs. Miniver*’s success as a propaganda piece resulted from its intertextual dialogue with the earlier film. When the audience saw Garson, they could have also seen Elizabeth Bennet, another British domestic heroine, thus making Mrs. Miniver all the more familiar and sympathetic to American audiences. *Pride and Prejudice* paved the way for the success of *Mrs. Miniver*. The British people and their way of

life were preserved by focusing film propaganda on the role of women in a wartime environment.

Both Sue Parrill's *Jane Austen on Film and Television* and Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield's *Jane Austen and Hollywood* identify the 1940 *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation as an example of the popular screwball comedy genre and as propaganda "to get the United States into the war as England's ally."⁷ Calder believes the British knew the social charges against them: "complacency, superciliousness, stinginess, bad manners, inhospitableness, snobbery, and lack of a sense of humour."⁸ In order for a piece of propaganda to be successful, they would have to distance themselves from this perception. Leonard and Huxley's *Pride and Prejudice* is an Anglicized screwball comedy, presenting Austen (however falsely) as the mother of the genre, and her female characters as recognizable in (not alien to) present-day life. Even the English past is made recognizable and capable of interpretation and consumption, especially through the female characters of Austen's fiction. Domesticity becomes apparently universal, and Austen's text is seen as relevant to social life more than a century after its publication. This is most noticeable in the director's treatment of the marriage theme, female costuming, and the scandal over Lydia's elopement.

Screwball comedy received its start in American cinema and as Wes Gehring describes in an overview of the genre: "generally presented the eccentric, female-dominated courtship of the American rich, with the male target seldom being informed that open season had arrived."⁹ Using this trope as a guideline, Huxley and Leonard started Austen's transformation with the first line of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (*P&P*, 1). What Fiona Stafford calls Austen's "ironic reference to the difficult situation of women of the period, whose property became their husbands' on marriage" becomes comic fodder for the 40s audience.¹⁰ One Hollywood advertisement read, "Bachelors Beware! Five Gorgeous Beauties are on a Madcap Manhunt!"¹¹ Despite the socio-historic differences between marriage in the early nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, women's desire to marry is presented as an ageless international theme that connects Britons and Americans. The screwball convention of women trying to "land a husband" or "catch a man" in connection with *Pride and Prejudice*'s marriage plot brought the universality of female sexual anxiety in a patriarchal culture into focus and made the 1940 filmic adaptation a successful piece of propaganda. Americans could finally relate to the English through this presumably common female experience.

The film opens on Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth, and Jane in a Meryton dress shop. The prize, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley (both eligible bachelors), and the competition,

Charlotte Lucas (a single woman) enter frame soon after. Exaggerating the competition between the Bennets and the Lucases, the scene ends with a carriage between the Bennets and the Lucases as they race home to be the first to have their male heads of house call on Mr. Bingley. In the novel, Charlotte is described as “not handsome” and “very plain;” she is certainly no competition for any of the Bennet girls (*P&P*, 32-33). However, in the film Charlotte is as attractive as any of the Bennet sisters and so a much more likely candidate for marriage. Poised on the brink of a war that promises to increase the population disparity between the sexes caused by WWI, English women would certainly have been in competition for eligible husbands. To drive home the point Elizabeth (Greer Garson) asks, “Why is England cursed with so many more women than men?” This statement echoes the general frustration of all women, both British and American, looking for an eligible bachelor to provide for them. Huxley’s inclusion of this statement, although not in the original text, does speak to the irony of the Bennets’ situation in the novel: “[A] son was to join in cutting off the entail, as soon as he should be of age, and the widow and younger children would by that means be provided for. Five daughters successively entered the world, but yet the son was to come; and Mrs. Bennet, for many years after Lydia’s birth, had been certain that he would” (*P&P*, 234). Obviously, the marriage anxiety in the novel is much different in the context of the 1940 adaptation, but it is made to seem universal in order for Americans to relate to the national British crisis.

Nostalgic female costuming in the 1940 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* also attempted to close the cultural gap between Britains and Americans. In her essay about the film, Linda Troost notes that, “The director relocated the film to the 1830s so that costumes . . . would look more opulent and Gone-with-the-Wind-like . . . these are costumes that evoke solid morals and strong character.”¹² All of the women resemble Scarlet O’Hara during *Gone with the Wind*’s party scene at Twelve Oaks, and in keeping with the pastiche, the Netherfield ball is replaced with a Netherfield garden party. The costume choice adds additional layers of intertextuality to the film. First, female fashion is being used to evoke images of the Civil War era, which might reasonably lead audiences to thinking about the war in Europe. Also, *Gone with the Wind* was put to film in 1939, which means the film’s heroine, Scarlet O’Hara, was still fresh in the minds of many Americans. The director is deliberately identifying with the American female war experience in hopes that all Americans will relate to England’s current wartime situation.

The Civil War era in America was highly romanticized despite its largely devastating effects on American families and towns. *Gone with the Wind* presents

audiences with this duality. During the Twelve Oaks barbeque, when the men enthusiastically decide to join the war effort, the guests cheer, and the festivities continue as if war were just another picnic. On the heels of the men's enlistment announcement, Scarlet accepts a marriage proposal from Charles Hamilton; war will not keep her from marriage, even to a man that she does not love. The parties evidently continue, despite a number of war deaths (including that of Scarlet's husband) and the Confederate women put together a dance auction to raise funds for the war. The event is intended as a means of preserving the appearance of a stable home environment despite the battles raging through the North and South. Scarlet too does her best as a woman to protect her home Tara and to maintain domestic order; it is her sole motivation throughout the film. Although forced to leave Tara, when she returns she works the land and even remarries so that she can pay her estate tax. As in Austen's period, women living during the Civil War preserved the identity of the North and South by securing the home front. In 1940 England, Britain needed the United States' support to maintain its domestic stability, and the Americanization and Southernization of the women's costumes in *Pride and Prejudice* was an attempt at gaining this support through evoking a shared wartime experience.

Leonard continues in the same nostalgic vein by appealing to American audiences' sentimentality about the home. In the novel, the eviction of the Bennets due to male entail is inevitable; however, the film allows for the possibility of preserving the home by making the loss of Longbourn dependent on domestic fracture.¹³ Furthermore, by changing the reason for the Bennets' move from an obscure British law to sexual impropriety, the director is attempting to appeal to contemporary American audiences. British property law is not nearly as universal or interesting as a sex scandal. Shortly after the news of Lydia's elopement, we find the Bennets packing their belongings to leave Longbourn. Jane tries to comfort Mrs. Bennet by assuring, "You'll feel so much better when we've moved away from this place. This house with its sad associations and now that people are being so dreadfully unkind, it's no wonder you're ill." Mr. Collins insists that their departure from Longbourn is "a wise decision" and that they should find "a secluded spot where no one has ever heard of [their] unhappy daughter." This scene is about loss. If England is lost, so is America's heritage; yet during this scene, Darcy's letter arrives, and Mrs. Bennet rejoices: "We shan't have to leave Longbourn! People can't say anything now that they're married." The Bennet family and their home is saved. With a hero, the preservation of the English home and America's motherland is now possible.

As Robert Calder observes, “For the most part, the film industry in the United States had always been a ‘dream factory’ providing Americans with the mythical Britain they wanted to see . . . What did it matter if America was mobilized to help a Britain that had never existed so long as it helped preserve the one that did exist?”⁴ In the case of the 1940 filmic version of *Pride and Prejudice*, the Americanization of the marriage plot, the use of Civil War costuming for the female characters, and the threatened loss of Longbourn help construct that “mythical” picture of Britain. By focusing on the seemingly familiar British domestic microcosm, Leonard and Huxley successfully related the larger national crisis to American audiences.

Notes

1. Nicholas J. Cull, “Overture to an Alliance: British Propaganda at the New York World’s Fair, 1939-1940,” *The Journal of British Studies* 36.3 (1997): 327.
2. Quoted in Cull, “Overture to an Alliance,” 333.
3. Robert Calder, *Beware the British Serpent: The Role of Writers in British Propaganda in the United States, 1939-1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen UP, 2004), 245.
4. Calder, *Beware the British Serpent*, 252. German-American director William Wyler’s 1942 film was based on the fictional English housewife created by Jan Struther in 1937 for a series of newspaper columns.
5. Calder, *Beware the British Serpent*, 22.
6. Ysenda Maxtone Graham, *The Real Mrs. Miniver: Jan Struther’s Story* (London: Murray, 2001), 2.
7. Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, ed., *Jane Austen in Hollywood* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1998), 15.
8. Calder, *Beware the British Serpent*, 34.
9. Wes D. Gehring, “Screwball Comedy: An Overview,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13.3 (1986): 178.
10. Noted in Austen, *P&P*, 311.
11. Troost and Greenfield, *Jane Austen*, 14.
12. Linda V. Troost, “The Nineteenth-century Novel on Film: Jane Austen,” ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 76.
13. In English law, male entail describes the restriction of the inheritance of an estate or property to the male line.
14. Calder, *Beware the British Serpent*, 257.

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