

42 | Saturday **xtra** |

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THE SEX SECRETS OF JANE AUSTEN

A smouldering Theo James stripped nude for the role of Sidney Parker in last year's BBC production of *Sanditon*.

Was it Colin Firth's wet shirt that had fans all hot and bothered or was the beloved author a lot less innocent than we thought? **Kerry Parnell** reports



It's 25 years this month since Colin Firth got the world's women hot and bothered as Mr Darcy in the BBC series of *Pride And Prejudice*. The image of him emerging from a lake with a dripping wet shirt clinging to his chest began a Darcy mania that hasn't abated since.

And while the scene seems tame today, it started a trend for Austen adaptations to get sexier and sexier, with last year's *Sanditon* series featuring sex scenes and full frontals, and the big-screen version of *Emma* featuring a nude Mr Knightley.

But was it Colin and his soggy cotton that ruffled us up, or was sex, in fact, always lost in Austen?

The answer is a bit of both, according to historians. We may have



come to view Jane Austen as the ultimate portrait artist of polite society, all heaving bosoms and repressed emotions, but she was far from innocent, says British historian Lucy Worsley.

Worsley, who wrote the biography *Jane Austen at Home*, says the author, although never married, was much more aware of sex than people today realise.

"She knew more than many people realise about what was considered at

the time to be deviant sex," Worsley writes. And although she almost certainly had not had sex herself, it didn't mean other women around her were so chaste.

"Women lower down the social scene might very often have sex before marriage, it's been estimated that one third of brides went to the altar pregnant and if you were in the aristocracy then they took affairs pretty lightly," Worsley says.

In fact, one of Jane's early attempts at a novel — the unfinished *Lady Susan*, gives a totally different perspective to the writer. Thought to have been written when she was about 20, the tale follows the widow Lady Susan, who ruthlessly works her way through lovers, while trying to marry off her daughter.

Strong, abrasive, manipulative and

sexually aggressive, this is a heroine unlike any of the innocent young women Austen would become famous for creating.

"Lady Susan's character is more extreme than we expect from Jane Austen," author Margaret Drabble writes in an introduction to the story, calling her "a self-declared and unashamed adulteress".

She explains that Austen wrote at a turning point for British morals — at the tail-end of 18th century openness and the start of 19th century prudishness.

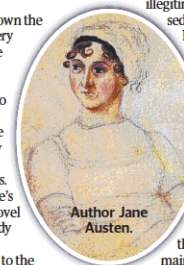
"Lady Susan is an 18th century work," she says. "There are adulterers, rakes and illegitimate babies in the later novels but we do not see them close-up and the most violent events take place offstage."

Many of her novels did have sex scandals in them — including Lydia Bennet running away with George Wickham in *Pride And Prejudice*, Henry Crawford committing adultery with Maria Rushworth in *Mansfield Park*, Harriet Smith's probable illegitimacy in *Emma* and the seduction and ruin of the two Elizas in *Sense And Sensibility*.

With this in mind, perhaps it makes it less shocking that our on-screen adaptations have evolved into something a little more explicit.

Andrew Davies, who penned the 1995 Colin Firth/Jennifer Ehle adaptation — still seen as the definitive version all these years later — maintained sex was always in Austen.

"Jane Austen had always been done as rather staid social comedy. Sue Birtwhistle, who produced it, and I were saying that 'this book is really all about sex and money — the driving engine of the plot is Darcy's desire for Elizabeth



Author Jane Austen.

She knew more than many people realise about what was considered at the time to be deviant sex

Historian Lucy Worsley

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DAILYTELEGRAPH.COM.AU SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 5 2020

Colin Firth in that scene from the 1998 production of *Pride and Prejudice*: (below) Firth and Jennifer Ehle finally lock lips as Lizzy and Mr Darcy.



and the snag is that she's unsuitable,' so it's like the selfish gene is triumphing in that his desire won't be denied," he told *The Boar*.

A prolific screenwriter, Davies' credits also include *Emma*, *Vanity Fair*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Bleak House*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *War & Peace*, *House of Cards*, and most recently *A Suitable Boy*.

He returned to Austen last year for *Sanditon*, the series based on her final, unfinished, novel.

He took the 11 existing chapters and not so much ran with them but sprinted into the horizon, penning plots such as the hero Sidney Parker emerging from the sea naked and giving innocent Charlotte Heyward a quick education, as well sex scenes.

"Of course, these things did go on in Regency times. We all know that. It's just that people didn't speak of them, and Austen chose not to write them into the foreground," Davies told *i* News.

It's a notion director Autumn de Wilde agrees with, as she also sexed up this year's big-screen adaptation of *Emma*, starring Anya Taylor-Joy as Emma Woodhouse and Johnny Flynn as Mr Knightley.

It included what has become the obligatory male nudity, this time the slow undressing of Mr Knightley.

Taylor-Joy told *News Corp Australia*: "It was something that Autumn really wanted – in our first conversation, that was always there. We have so much of the male gaze in films. She really wanted to employ the female gaze, just to contrast.

"Johnny was a really good sport about it because for the first time, he was one of two guys in a room full of women. Luckily, he is a wonderful man and he was up for it."

Two hundred years later, you get the feeling Lady Susan, and Austen, would approve.

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PERIOD POWER COUPLES

The 1995 BBC TV production of *Pride and Prejudice*, written by Andrew Davies, was a turning point for Austen on-screen. Taking a giant leap from the staid period drama we were accustomed to, Davies' sexual tension-filled script, featuring the seminal moment of Colin Firth walking out of a lake in a wet shirt, became the gold standard of Jane Austen productions.

It undoubtedly influenced all that followed. Many would argue nobody – apologies to Matthew Macfadyen – has ever filled Mr Darcy's white shirt as well as Firth. But the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow, Theo James, Anya Taylor-Joy and Johnny Flynn have continued to up the sexual tension and star quality in the productions that followed:

1940: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE
GREER GARSON AND LAURENCE OLIVIER (inset right)

Before Colin Firth waded out of that lake, the king of classics, Laurence Olivier, had been the definitive Darcy in the 1940 movie, with Greer Garson as Lizzy. The duo gave old-Hollywood performances, but the movie, with a screenplay by Aldous Huxley, was turned into a light rom-com with a silly ending.



1995: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE
JENNIFER EHLE AND COLIN FIRTH

Despite his misgivings about following Olivier, Colin Firth went on to totally own Darcy and Jennifer Ehle also gave the best performance of Lizzy to date, winning a BAFTA for her effort. The BBC TV series also made the career of screenwriter Andrew Davies, who went on to write *Bridget Jones's Diary* featuring, of course, Firth.

1995: SENSE AND SENSIBILITY
KATE WINSLET AND ALAN RICKMAN

The big-screen also saw Kate Winslet take on the role of Marianne Dashwood alongside Emma Thompson, who wrote the screenplay. She gave a terrific performance against a trio of leading men – Hugh Grant as Edward Ferrars, Greg Wise as Mr Willoughby and Alan Rickman as the honourable Colonel Brandon. The movie was well received – earning six Oscar nominations, with Thompson winning for best writing.



1995: PERSUASION
AMANDA ROOT AND CIARAN HINDS (inset below)

The year 1995 was an Austen bonanza, also featuring a BBC movie version of *Persuasion*, starring Amanda Root as the dowdy Anne Elliot against Ciaran Hinds as Captain Wentworth. One of the quietest of Austen's couples, they shouldn't be overlooked by their sexier stablemates as they gave a classy performance – as did Sally Hawkins and Rupert Penry-Jones in the 2007 TV movie version.

1996: EMMA
GWYNETH PALTROW AND JEREMY NORTHAM

Gwyneth Paltrow turned out to be a very creditable Emma, against the suitably-disapproving Jeremy Northam as Mr Knightley. The picnic scene where spoilt young Emma thoughtlessly insults Miss Bates and Mr Knightley crushes her with his disappointment was their finest moment. The lovely movie, which also starred Toni Collette as Harriet Smith, won an Oscar.

1999: MANSFIELD PARK
FRANCES O'CONNOR AND JONNY LEE MILLER

Although one of Jane Austen's least-loved leading ladies, Frances O'Connor played Fanny Price admirably against Jonny Lee Miller's Edmund Bertram in this movie. Miller was at the height of his fame, having recently starred in *Trainspotting* – and had previously appeared in a TV version of *Mansfield Park* as Charles Price. He gave Austen another shot as Mr Knightley in a 2009 TV series of *Emma* with Romola Garai.

2005: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

KEIRA KNIGHTLEY AND MATTHEW MACFADYEN
A decade after Firth and Ehle, Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen had another crack at it on the big screen. Although they were big shoes to step into, Knightley gave a spirited performance as Lizzy in this lavish production and received an Oscar nomination. She also had good chemistry with the admirably-repressed Macfadyen.

2007: NORTHANGER ABBEY

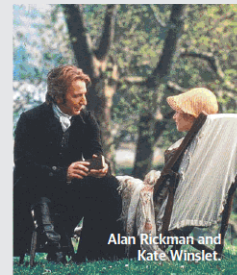
FELICITY JONES AND JJ FEILD (inset above)
Jane Austen's gothic satire got the full-treatment from Felicity Jones as high-spirited but innocent Catherine Morland against J.J. Feild as the witty



Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen.



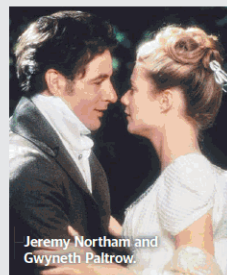
Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth.



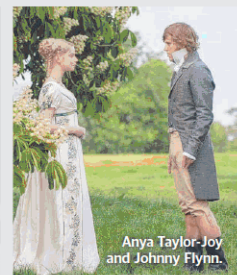
Alan Rickman and Kate Winslet.



Jonny Lee Miller and Frances O'Connor.



Jeremy Northam and Gwyneth Paltrow.



Anya Taylor-Joy and Johnny Flynn.

and clever Henry Tilney in this TV movie, with special mention to Carey Mulligan who played the meddling Isabella Thorpe.

2019: SANDITON
ROSE WILLIAMS AND THEO JAMES

Special mention goes to the newest Austen couple – Rose Williams as young, innocent Charlotte Heywood and Theo James as the dark and moody Sidney Parker. The TV series continued Austen's unfinished novel, with scriptwriter Andrew Davies saucing up the plot for modern viewers, including sex scenes and nudity from the leading man. *Sanditon* devotees are desperate for the duo to complete their unfinished business, but as yet, no second series is secured.

2020: EMMA
ANYA TAYLOR-JOY AND JONNY FLYNN

Some 24 years later,

Anya Taylor-Joy took on the role, telling *The Sunday Telegraph* she hadn't watched Gwyneth's version, but did check out *Clueless* instead. She gave a marvellous turn as the indulged heroine in the sumptuously-filmed movie. But it was Johnny Flynn as Mr Knightley that heated up the screen and made them a couple to remember, particularly during his slow strip.



Rose Williams and Theo James.