Queer Pride…and Prejudice: How *Most Ardently* Adapts *Pride and Prejudice*

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Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that any book in possession of great popularity must be in want of an adaptation. *Pride and Prejudice* has had its fair share of adaptations, from films to plays to more books. This is in part because of its pervasive popularity, but also its long-standing themes that still resonate with readers over two hundred years later. Though the story has had hundreds of adaptations, which modify it to suit whatever whimsy an author possesses, it tends to maintain its position as a heterosexual and cisgender romance. However, there are notable deviations from this theme. *Most Ardently* by Gave Cole Novoa, released in 2024, is one such exception. The story follows *Pride and Prejudice's* footsteps and introduces us to the same familiar characters, plot and setting. It sets itself apart by centering the narrative on transgender Oliver (formally Elizabeth), who struggles to live, pursue love, and be a good child, all while staying true to himself. Though the book starts with an interesting interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* that seeks to introduce Queer people into the narrative, it may falter in its execution. This potential failure has implications both for the message of the book and how it may affect its audience and genre.

Pride and Prejudice Overview

Since its publication in 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* has continued to enrapture readers. Though its twenty million copies sold may seem small in relation to other books that can sell into the hundreds of millions, the impact of *Pride and Prejudice* is undeniable (Walsh). The academic community returns time and time again to this work, writing thousands of papers, reviews, and critiques. Combining this with the general population's pull to the novel emphasizes the importance of *Pride and Prejudice* in the current cultural climate. Numerous critics delve into the implications of *Pride and Prejudice*, but for this paper, we will only focus on the fundamentals of the book. Namely, we will provide answers to questions like what maintains *Pride and Prejudice's* relevance as well as exploring its central plot and messages.

To answer the first question, Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri's paper "Revisiting Classics: Relevance of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" uses relevance theoretic analysis to assess *Pride and Prejudice*'s undiminishing popularity. Relevance Theory has two main principles: that relevance is what most compels the human brain, and that inferential communication contains relevance (62). In engaging with this theory and the text, Khushu-Lahiri supposes that *Pride and Prejudice* communicates and maintains its relevance through discussion of still relevant topics. The first concept she discusses is gender. She observes that in the book the expectation that men of high social standing "must be in want of a wife" (Austen 9), implies that women must also want to be a wife (Khushu-Lahiri 66). Elizabeth's character is in conflict with this expectation, as her values prevent her from accepting proposals that she should accept according to societal norms. Khushu-Lahiri states that this decision creates a "dichotomy between femininity and being true to oneself" (66). She states that this dichotomy is one that women still struggle with in the current patriarchal world, maintaining the relevance of the text.

Khushu-Lahiri then focuses on the relevance of human traits and social class in *Pride and Prejudice*. She points to three main human traits, each of which she connects to a character: prejudice, which Elizabeth allows to cloud her perception of Darcy; pride, which inhibits Darcy from admitting his feelings due to Elizabeth's social standing; and cynicism, which causes Mr. Bennet to reject the social expectations around being a father, husband, and neighbor (67). Khushu-Lahiri argues that the experience and overcoming of these emotions are universal to human experience, and so causes the text to maintain relevance. Additionally, she addresses how the book links social class to the quality of someone's character. Austen portrays Elizabeth and Jane as being held in higher regard than their sisters and mother because they act in a much more respectable manner, despite being in the same family (Khushu-Lahiri 68). This separation of class based on not only wealth but conformity to social standards is something that Khushu-Lahiri states is still being done today, with traits and characteristics often being seen as differing between the elite and middle class (69).

Though Khushu-Lahiri's paper helps to explain some of the central themes that lead to *Pride and Prejudice's* relevance, it does not explore the importance of these themes to the book's message. The paper "Of Life and Happiness: Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" by Samina Ashfaqa and Nasir Jamal Khattak ventures an answer. They suggest that the characters who receive a happy ending may be significant in understanding the message of the book. To them, it appears as though Austen is only willing to hand out happy endings to those that manage to undergo the

lengthy process of overcoming their negative qualities. Austen punishes Lydia with an unhappy marriage for her shallow self-interest and disregard for her family's concerns (Ashfaq & Khattak 10). Meanwhile, Elizabeth, who manages to see past her injured pride and realize Darcy's true nature, achieves true happiness with him (15). Thus, taking shortcuts and not addressing negative qualities only leads characters to perpetuate their own misery (17). Though moral messages like this can seem rather simplistic, they provide a moral backbone to the work that makes it more than just a romantic story. It teaches about the value of taking the time to look past how things seem and get to how they are, even if the process is long and unenjoyable.

Despite this rather straightforward moral message, there are some who find issues with the book. Joseph Carroll offers an opinion that unites the two previous arguments, saying that "the fulfilment of their happiness thus strongly suggests an ideal concord between their specific cultural order and the elemental aspects of human experience" (Carroll 14). What Carroll means by this is that the characters' happiness is contingent on their values being compatible with their social protocol. However, he notes that this concord is not one every reader will agree with. It requires both an acceptance of Austen's cultural values and the idea of a normative heterosexual romance (Carroll 14). He states that readers who do not agree with Austen's values must "find some way of interpreting her perspective that makes it seem more alienated than it actually is" (Carroll 14). Carroll suggests that these varying interpretations often only differ in small amounts, changing what themes the readers focus on or where they place their tonal emphasis.

This is a rather significant criticism since, if the reader does not buy into a heterosexual marriage as a happy ending, then it disrupts the moral messaging of the book. If readers interpret Elizabeth's character as contradictory to her "happy ending," then the book would no longer reward her character development. In fact, all the characters in the book would appear to receive the same punishment, but with varying levels of severity. To solve this, readers would have to re-imagine the work to be reflective of their own personal values while maintaining the positive ending. Though Carroll suggests that this interpretation would be of little consequence, it shakes the foundation of the text. Attentive readers would have to find a way to re-imagine *Pride and Prejudice* that still allows for the themes that make it relevant to remain intact. Otherwise, these interpretations threaten the moral backbone that elevates the book past a simple romance.

Queer Readings of *Pride and Prejudice*

Though this kind of interpretation may seem like a tall order, there is a longstanding history of queering *Pride and Prejudice* in a way that maintains its themes. Not only does this history suggest that these interpretations can be done, but also that there may be a foundation within *Pride and Prejudice* to support them. However, these interpretations do change various aspects of the story, specifically in how the audience is meant to view the character Darcy.

Devoney Looser's *Atlantic* article "Queering the Work of Jane Austen Is Nothing New" states that the first ever Mr. Darcy to take the stage was a woman. University productions of *Pride and Prejudice* featuring all-woman casts were somewhat frequent in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This casting decision follows a trend of the time, calling back to the 1500s all-male productions of Shakespeare (Looser). However, the other plays following this trend were not romantic comedies and the display of two women playing each other's romantic interest was highly unusual. Though it was likely not the intention of the plays, this did serve to emphasize Queer readings of *Pride and Prejudice* (Looser). More intentionally, however, it's possible that the portrayal of Darcy by a woman might have served to satirize certain aspects of Darcy's masculinity; instances of a woman cracking Darcy's whip might be seen as more funny than swoon-worthy (Looser). This portrayal disrupts both the gender and sexual certainty of the original. If two women can successfully reproduce the story, despite an inability to provide an accurate representation of masculinity, it calls into question the necessity of masculinity in the story. This challenges the heterosexual basis of *Pride and Prejudice* while maintaining the original book themes through an identical plot.

Though these stage productions fell out of popularity by the mid-twentieth century, discourse about Queer readings of *Pride and Prejudice* continues to this day. An excellent Master Thesis by Jennifer Leeds, "Jane Austen's Open Secret: Same-sex love in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Persuasion,*" explores the Queer implications of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley's friendship. She argues that the book does not begin with compulsory heterosexuality but instead arrives at it slowly, allowing space for queerness in the process (13). Her main evidence for Darcy's queerness is his rejection of social decorum. Leeds claims that when Darcy makes statements like "there is not another woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with" (Austen 17) he is communicating to Bingley that he refuses to participate in heterosexual courting (Leeds 18). This refusal to participate in classic mating rituals such as dancing can definitely be read as

Queer. Even if he himself isn't, it aligns him with a rejection of straight culture, which Queer viewers would resonate with.

Leeds goes on to argue that not only is a homosocial bond present between Mr. Bingley and Darcy, but that Darcy's eventual heterosexual coupling would not have been possible without it. She claims that Darcy only initially insults Elizabeth due to the jealousy he feels towards Elizabeth's sister when Mr. Bingley shows her attention (Leeds 23). Without his initial insult, calling Elizabeth "tolerable" and "slighted by other men" (Austen 17), Elizabeth would not have had her attention so keenly on him. Her inability to ignore Darcy or to pander to his ego is what first piques his romantic interest in her (Leeds 28). Elizabeth's disinterest in marrying Darcy, or his fortune, is distinctly against the feminine goals of the time which paints Elizabeth in a masculine light. Leeds argues that this masculine representation of Elizabeth is what cements Darcy's interest in her (29). Through this view, Leeds portrays homoerotic jealousy as the basis of the heterosexual pairing and an attraction to the masculine as the element that maintains it.

Though the persuasiveness of this argument is up to interpretation, Leeds's reading is made possible by a comprehensive understanding of the novel. It demonstrates the capacity that *Pride and Prejudice* holds for Queer readings. It is exactly interpretations like this that lead to retellings such as *Most Ardently*. As Hutcheon says in her book *Theory of Adaptation*, "the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation," (8). Though *Pride and Prejudice* itself may sell a story of compulsory heterosexuality, there is nothing stopping readers, and then writers, from telling a different one.

Theory of Adaptation

Before we can explore further how *Most Ardently* retells the story of *Pride and Prejudice* in a Queer light, we must first understand more about adaptations. This section will explore the concept of adaptations and set expectations for how this paper will assess *Most Ardently* as a retelling. One of the questions surrounding this paper is how heavily to judge *Most Ardently* in relation to *Pride and Prejudice*. Certainly, its inspiration cannot be ignored, as Hutcheon puts it, "If we know [the] prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly" (6). Seeing as it would be difficult to find someone who is oblivious to the story of *Pride and Prejudice*, recognizing this shadow is necessary when viewing its success. However, Hutcheon suggests that an adaptation's fidelity is not what determines its success. Instead, she stipulates three components that are crucial to a successful adaptation: product, process of creation, and process of reception (7).

For the first component of the product, Hutcheon focuses primarily on the transposition done with the original work. Transposition can be a change in medium, genre, frame or ontology (8). In the case of *Most Ardently,* it is a shift in frame, changing the framework of the story from a heterosexual romance to a Queer one, which a creates "a manifestly different interpretation" (8). Transposition, even when operating within the same medium, means change, so adapters will always have to make compromises and progressions (16). Moving away from the idea of fidelity, a persistent element within critiques of adaptations, means judging an adaptation by its choice of transposition.

The second, process of creation, is the idea of (re-)interpretation leading to (re-)creation. Hutcheon suggests that adapters are first interpreters and then creators. She describes this as a "double process" of first forming a new understanding of a work, and then creating something to be representative of it (20). In accordance with this idea, Hutcheon claims that an unsuccessful adaptation is not made from a lack of fidelity, but a lack of creativity and skill (20).

The third, process of reception, surrounds the idea of the audience's awareness and acceptance of the adaptations' intertextuality. Hutcheon's claims that "both the pleasure and the frustration of experiencing an adaptation is the familiarity bred through repetition and memory" (21). She goes on to note that sometimes adaptations are transgressive against their original work. In my example, *Most Ardently's* queering of *Pride and Prejudice* transgresses against the heterosexual values that the original maintained. Hutcheon states that not all audience members will appreciate such transgressions; however, they do serve to point out audience expectations around the work (22). The audience's expectations and experience of an adaptation is going to have an impact on its success. If the work transgresses against audience beliefs, though this may be done in valuable ways, it may negatively affect its reception.

Most Ardently

These three components, though not encompassing the entirety of adaptation theory, set up a lens which we can view *Most Ardently* through. How did Gabe Cole Novoa interpret, transpose, and create *Most Ardently*? What's transgressive about it, if anything? How was it received?

Interpretation & Transposition

In an interview with Yu-Hung Tien and Mariam Wassif, Novoa, when asked about his reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, stated "I knew Elizabeth's struggle intimately because it was mine." As a transmasculine person, Novoa resonated

with the strict expectations around gender performance that Elizabeth has to adhere to in *Pride and Prejudice*. Similarly, he resonated with the theme of "finding unlikely love" due to his own experiences: he found love even when "cis heteronormative society made it feel impossible" (Tien & Wassif). Given this, it's clear that his interpretation and inspiration in adapting *Pride and Prejudice* stems from a deeply personal resonance to the original text. Hutcheon states in her book that "adapters' deeply personal as well as culturally and historically conditioned reasons for selecting a certain work to adapt and the particular way to do so should be considered" (95). In this case, it is clear that Novoa's personal experience as a transmasculine person in the western world significantly impacted his reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, which then impacted his recreation of it.

Novoa begins his interview by stating that *Pride and Prejudice* is about "rigid gender norms, societal expectations, and finding unlikely love" (Tien & Wassif). This, along with the way he reinterprets Darcy's "morose attitude at the balls and aloof nature" as being Queer, fits well with interpretations like Leeds's, which sees Darcy as Queer and Elizabeth as masculine. Novoa then moves past interpretation and into creation when he does not simply claim that Elizabeth is masculine, but instead creates a version of her that is instead a he.

The creation of Oliver as the main character in *Most Ardently* is the most notable deviation from the original *Pride and Prejudice*. Changing the original Elizabeth's gender has huge implications for the plot, character relations, and implicit values of *Pride and Prejudice*. It takes a book that begins with characters struggling to adhere to the socially prescribed rules of their world and who learn to conform to them, and turns it into a book that begins the same, but instead must teach the world to change. This transposition of the gender experience in *Pride and Prejudice* has all the creativity and ingenuity to create an exceptional adaptation. The idea takes root in the spirit of *Pride and Prejudice* and yet transgresses against it in a way that creates the perfect opportunity for new meanings and understandings around the work.

It addresses Carroll's concern around *Pride and Prejudice's* maintenance of heteronormative romance as the default and it creates the opportunity for Queer people to become visible in history and this classic (Tien & Wassif). Despite the positive impact of this change, it does threaten the foundation of the text. If the execution is found lacking, the moral backbone of *Pride and Prejudice* that maintains it as an important book could be threatened. Novoa must ensure that if he removes the element of heterosexual marriage, he must replace it in equal part with an aspect of the text which restores meaning to the work.

Creation & Execution

Novoa starts his novel with Oliver already aware of his masculine identity and having come out to a few close friends and his sister. Though he maintains a feminine appearance for much of his day Oliver can live part of his life as male when he dresses appropriately and secretly goes out into the world. This clarity of identity that Oliver starts the book with means that his main conflict is not a matter of discovering himself, but instead whether to reveal himself.

His positionality on coming out stays rather consistent throughout the book. At the end of the first chapter, he states that "One day, the rest of the world would know the truth, too" (4) indicating that he does not plan on staying in the closet forever. He also signals disdain for the idea of anyone conforming to societal values who does not want to. During a conversation with Charlotte, who in this adaptation is a lesbian, Charlotte mentions how she would marry Mr. Collins if he proposed because she is not in a privileged enough position to deny the offer. Oliver seems aghast at the suggestion and says, "I just don't believe any of us should have to accept circumstances that will stand in the way of our happiness" (160). Charlotte points out that many people don't have that option and need to "choose a middle ground if [they] hope to survive" (161). To this Oliver agrees, but thinks that to live his life as someone's wife would not "feel like survival at all" (161). This conversation is a very telling one, both in setting up the expectations of their world, and also digging into Oliver's positionality.

Oliver clearly exists with a lot of privilege, given he's in a position where if he does not wish to marry, he does not have to. However, he does not seem to recognize his privilege and, in fact, looks down on Charlotte for doing what she needs to do in order to survive. When Charlotte eventually accepts Mr. Collins's proposal of marriage, Oliver states that he "cannot accept that" because he "refuses to settle for a future that will deny [him] the happiness [he] deserve[s]- the happiness [they] *both* deserve" (184). Though this sentiment is coming from a place of wanting to live a happy and authentic life, it makes it clear that Oliver's beliefs are unable to change regardless of circumstance (where Austen's character's are). Charlotte has no other option, and Oliver is unable to see that. Oliver seems to be given one set of values and does not deviate from them. He thinks that he should not compromise happiness for survival, and he judges other people accordingly. These values do not shift or expand to allow the other people in his life to be recognized.

However, despite this strong opinion, he is rather passive when it comes to his own journey. Every time Oliver comes out to another character, it is only due to

advantageous timing or force. When he comes out to his father, it is because he was caught sneaking out. He only comes out to Darcy because he runs into him accidentally, not because he sought him out. He comes out to his family because, if he did not, he would be blackmailed into marriage. For a character so enraptured with the unity of happiness and authenticity, he takes no initiative in enacting it. This passivity, in addition to a surface level understanding of his and other Queer people's circumstances, leads to his character being rather two dimensional.

This two-dimensionality is never challenged by the other characters, as they all accept Oliver almost instantaneously after he comes out. He is never forced into a position where he needs to confront that living authentically comes with consequences, because, for him, it doesn't. Even the antagonists, Mr. Collins and Mr. Wickham, serve only to enable Oliver's passivity. By putting him into a position where he has to choose between coming out or living as Mr. Wickham's wife, Oliver is set up to make a decision that only cements his existing values. Not only does it deprive him of *choosing* to come out, but it does also not challenge him to develop a more robust understanding of himself. By Novoa's ending the book this way, readers are left feeling as though Oliver has not changed. The book began with a character determined that the world would change for him, and it ends with the world doing just that. He does not have to change, make compromises, or deal with hard realities. Though this lack of internal conflict allows the book to ignore difficult problems, it limits Oliver's character from developing in a way that would compel audiences to resonate with him.

Unfortunately, Oliver is not the only character in *Most Ardently* who lacks depth. Many of the characters are only given one or two defining characteristics. However, where Oliver's character is unchanging, these characters may be too quick to change. Mrs. Bennet starts the book wanting Oliver to conform to societal values including wearing dresses, enjoying balls, and marrying. Like in the original, she pressures Oliver to accept Mr. Collins's proposal saying that if he does not, she will "never speak to [him] again" (Novoa 155). These beliefs and actions make it clear that Mrs. Bennet thinks that Oliver should maintain a heteronormative appearance at all costs. Oliver himself states that he cannot "imagine a world in which his mother would embrace him with a smile and a word of encouragement" (229) upon his coming out. However, counter to this, when Oliver comes out to her at the end of the books she is instantaneously accepting saying "I suppose your vehement distaste for dresses makes all the sense in the world now" (280).

Instead of this change reflecting growth or development, it instead reads as a flagrant disregard for her established character. Mrs. Bennet's instantaneous acceptance means that she had no time to grow or develop new opinions. This instant change insinuates that Oliver's conception of her was reflective of his anxiety instead of her true character. However, her actions in the book make her old-fashioned position seem undeniable. Though Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is also quick to change her opinion when the engagement between Elizabeth and Darcy is announced, the change is in accordance to her values. In the original, Mrs. Bennet pressures her daughters to marry for money and status. The only reason she doesn't like Darcy is because she thinks his callous manner is depriving her daughters from an opportunity to marry him. If marriage is then offered, her dislike for his temperament is not longer relevant. However, in *Most Ardently* her values of heteronormativity are being challenged by Oliver's coming out, making her acceptance contradictory to her values. This contradiction results in the book feeling empty, unable to even support even simple character concepts. Characters, including Mrs. Bennet, end up being puppets providing conflict or acceptance depending on what is advantageous to the story.

Though the majority of *Most Ardently*'s characters fall into this category, there are those whose depth hints at untapped potential. When Darcy is first introduced, he appears tactless and cold. However, as Oliver gets to know him better, we see that Darcy's previously callous behaviour was because "he was in a space where he had to pretend to be someone he wasn't" (117). This representation of Darcy incorporates his character from *Pride and Prejudice,* while also adjusting it to suit a Queer perspective. When in the company of men, and where Darcy is not expected to "flirt with a future that would never –could never–make him happy" (117), he is kind and lighthearted. It explains Darcy's foul temper in the original as not just a dislike for social decorum, but as something that expands on and deepens his character, similar to what Leeds suggests.

One of the valuable gains from this representation on Darcy is that it shows the realistic implications of being a closeted Queer man in a time when he could not come out without serious penalty. One thing that Novoa talks about in his interview is how important it is to him that the public realise that Queer people have existed throughout history. Queer people's inability to come out, or to be recognized as Queer, has limited our exposure to historical cases of those identities. Showing Darcy's struggle with his sexuality creates a realistic portrayal of why so many Queer people have remained undiscovered in European history. After Darcy and Oliver kiss for the first time, with Darcy being unaware that

Oliver is also Elizabeth, he panics. He runs off and, a few days later, proposes to "Elizabeth." This panic and attempt to conform to heteronormative standards is something that creates realism in his journey. It would also likely resonate with many Queer readers whose character has been influenced negatively by being forced to stay in the closet. Finally, it creates a realm of growth for Darcy, forcing him to outgrow his internalised homophobia and accept his queerness in order to be happy.

However, Darcy's development seems to halt completely after Oliver comes out to him. To set the scene, Oliver and Darcy are talking for the first time since Darcy ran off and proposed to "Elizabeth" when Oliver comes out to him. Even though realising his queerness is obviously a difficult process for Darcy, he accepts Oliver almost immediately. He empathises and even laughs when he realises that in his "panic about kissing a boy, [he] ran off to ask a *boy* to marry [him]" (255). This acceptance, though a bit surprising, is not itself an issue. Darcy has been exposed to gender queerness before in the form of molly houses and has generally proven to be accepting of other people's queerness. However, it is a bit startling when Darcy is suddenly open to being in a queer relationship with Oliver. They both admit that they "enjoyed kissing" (256) and soon Darcy accompanies Oliver to tell his family he is trans, after threats from Mr. Wickham arrive. Though this sequence of events makes for an easy happy ending for Oliver, Darcy's development seems to be forgotten in the mix. The complexity of his character is quickly overshadowed once the spotlight resettles on Oliver. This is disappointing, as outside of Darcy's character there is little depth to be found. Darcy shows the potential that the book has to execute an interesting interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* and yet his character alone is not sufficient to enrich the entire book.

The two-dimensionality present in almost every character[17] means that any message *Most Ardently* tries to achieve will likely not resonate with readers. We get the sense that *Most Ardently* is trying to tell readers that if they stay true to themselves they will achieve happiness. However, this lesson is ineffective if it is demonstrated in a world that lacks realism and depth. This disconnect between reader realities and Oliver's realities results in a book that is encouraging in concept but falls flat in execution.

Reception

[17] Though there are also many two-dimensional characters in *Pride and Prejudice,* the main characters are not.

Despite these criticisms, *Most Ardently* is still a somewhat successful adaptation. *Most Ardently's* Goodreads page, a website dedicated to the rating and commenting of books, has over six thousand ratings for a total score of 4.05 stars out of 5 ("Most Ardently"). The majority of the ratings fall either in the four- or five-star category with only 23% percent of ratings falling below that ("Most Ardently"). Scrolling through the comments, we find many of them praise the book both as an adaptation and as a piece of priceless representation. Particularly, lots of the comments note the positivity and acceptance in the book as a positive feature ("Most Ardently"). However, investigating the comments further reveals a distinct lack of positive comments that address the plot, characters, or message. Some reviews note that they enjoyed the romance element of the book, but very few mention any other aspect of the plot ("Most Ardently"). The lack of depth in these comments seems to resonate with the lack of depth in the book. This suggests that readers that enjoyed *Most Ardently* most likely engaged in it from a more aesthetic perspective, appreciating it as a simple story with the type of representation that many Queer readers have been seeking.

Comments that delve deeper are typically reviews with three stars or fewer. These reviews explore and criticize the book's characters, themes, plot changes, and values. To provide a brief overview, the most common complaints are as follows: historical inaccuracy, Darcy's misogyny, a general lack of focus on women, unnecessarily evil villains, Oliver's shallowness, and a dislike of some of Novoa's plot changes ("Most Ardently"). It's important to note that many of the negative reviews start with how excited the reviewer had been for the book ("Most Ardently"). This excitement, however, only ended up amplifying their disappointment when the book did not meet their expectations. Based on these reviews, it seems as though readers who wanted *Most Ardently* to capture "what it would be like to be trans in the Regency era" (Chad Chrysanthemum) were left disappointed by a book uninterested in exploring the nuance involved with that concept. In this way, *Most Ardently* fails to meet readers' expectations of addressing the complicated and interesting challenges around being Queer in a historical context. Hutcheon states that, when a book goes against its audience, it serves to reveal something about reader expectations (22). In this case, it may reveal that some reader expectations were too high.

Since *Most Ardently* was first published in January of 2024, there are many professional reviews of the book at the time of writing. However, one review by Aaren Tucker, a Canadian scholar, gives an overall positive verdict but states that "the overall flattening of Austen's complex characters also unfortunately invites

unfavorable comparisons to her most enduring work" (148). Despite this, Tucker praises the book's representation of historical happy Queer people. However, the criticism handed to the book is very telling when viewing *Most Ardently* as an adaptation. An adaptation should reimagine its predecessor and, with its new interpretation, create a story that resonates with the original and amplifies a different aspect of it. If an adaptation results in good Queer representation but a "flattening" of the original story, then it has simply taken the original and used it for parts. *Most Ardently* takes the plots and characters of *Pride and Prejudice* and flattens them, removing the nuance and complexity that made the original a classic.

Personally, as a trans reader who was excited to read this book, I found it lacking. Trans representation is important to me, for that reason I often find myself seeking it out. It makes me, and many other trans people, feel seen and validated. Adaptations such as this write us back into the narrative. They take classics and stories that were never made for us and rewrites them so they can be. However, the reason *Pride and Prejudice* is a classic is not solely because it features a heterosexual romance: it is because of the comments it makes on society and decorum, its wit, its exploration of personal failings and how overcoming them is rewarded. *Most Ardently*'s disregard of almost every one of these aspects results in a book that may be representative and entertaining enough, but empty. For readers who are simply desperate to see positive and happy trans representation, *Most Ardently* may do enough. However, for readers who want trans people to be featured in interesting and meaningful stories, this book does not deliver.

Likewise, a happy ending is not the same as a perfect one. Oliver gets his perfect ending, and though it is refreshing to see a trans character who is loved and supported, it feels unrealistic. Many Queer people will have experience with someone like Mrs. Bennet, who perhaps loves them, but struggles to see them for who they are. The Mrs. Bennets of the world do not simply flip on a dime: Queer people living in relation with them must give them the time to see if love is enough to turn the tide of their opinion. Regardless, taking the time to grow and learn to be comfortable in yourself is the true happy ending. Oliver is never given the opportunity to discover this, or anything else. To me, true representation is more than just showcasing a trans person, it's about showing a person. A person who is just as rife with flaws as the rest of us. A person whose happiness requires real work and growth. A person who struggles with their body and mind in a way that is unique, but also unquestionably human.

Conclusion

With adaptations becoming more and more prevalent and an outcry for more Queer representation, the writing and publication of a book such as *Most Ardently* is no surprise. However, there are still very few like it. *Most Ardently* is one of the first of its kind and that means its success as an adaptation matters. It sets an expectation for the demand of these books and sets genre conventions for how they are written. *Most Ardently* doesn't just retell a class in a Queer light, it proves that queering a classic can be done and that there is an eager audience invested in its success. This makes its lack of depth and nuance disappointing; however, this disappointment does not condemn it. *Most Ardently* still provides positive representation for those that need it, and it sets an example for works that follow. Future works can take inspiration from *Most Ardently* but seek to do more. Though there should be many more books that seek to tell happy trans stories, this does not mean that those books should shy away from showing queer characters who are real and complex.

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