

# **Intertextual Ever Afters: Fictionalised Biography and Compensatory Adaptation in *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane***

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## **Abstract**

*The paper aims to explore the fusion of intertextual borrowings and imaginative historical recreation in John Madden's 1998 Shakespeare in Love and Julian Jarrold's 2007 Becoming Jane in an attempt to establish the full extent of the similarity between the strategies employed in their scripts and the relevance of the insights they provide into issues concerning literary authorship and a wider cultural landscape. This will entail both a comparative assessment of the two cinematic endeavours and a side-by-side analysis of each film script and the literary work whose plot it mirrors (Romeo and Juliet and Pride and Prejudice respectively). Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which isolated lines or entire episodes from William Shakespeare's tragedy and Jane Austen's novel are subtly adapted or simply pilfered to fill in gaps in two similarly elusive biographies and to account for the inspiration behind two of literature's most enduring couples, whilst also somehow compensating for the missing element of romance in the real lives of their creators. In focusing on the complex fusion of literary biography and adaptation to be discovered under the surface of apparently facile (albeit bittersweet) romantic comedy, this exploration will ultimately try to assess each film's relevance in the context of the constantly escalating interest in William Shakespeare and Jane Austen and the daunting intertextual (and multimedial) universes radiating from these two centres of the western and universal canon.*

**Key words:** *adaptation, authorship, biopic, intertextuality, reception*

## **Introduction**

While the public's fascination with "celebrated lives and the privileged insight that the screen seems to promise" via "the snappily titled 'biopic'" (Hand 2016: xi) is, by no means, a recent phenomenon, the popularity of

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dramatizations focusing on the lives of literary figures only dates back to the early 1990s, having since then escalated into a considerable and still growing trend (Shachar 2016: 199). Likewise, the academic establishment has only lately started to consider all the ramifications of cinematic engagements with “literature, literary culture and literary readerships as audiences” (Higson 2011: 103) and to explore the potential of this “unappreciated genre [...] of low repute” (Bingham 2010: ix-3) that initially tended to command almost “as much critical derision as industrial visibility” (Vidal 2014: 2). Primarily disparaged for its frequently “cavalier [...] handling of historical fact,” the biographical picture has also found some staunch defenders among those who argue that capturing “the essence of a life” (Vidal 2014: 1-2) does not necessarily entail a mere “recounting of the facts” of someone’s existence and can rely on a number of unconventional approaches in its “attempt to discover biographical truth” (Bingham 2010: 7), simultaneously reconstructing and deconstructing the “life, repute and legacy of [...] its renowned subjects” (Hand 2016: xi).

Regarded by some scholars as “one of the most intriguing and ubiquitous examples within the field and practice of adaptation” (Hand 2016: xi) and by others as a related but distinct subgenre whose appeal relies mostly in its ability to provide “an engagement with respectable literary culture that goes beyond the adaptation itself” (Higson 2011: 103-104), the biopic is an essentially fluid and eclectic cinematic form. Its narrative weaves “the partly factual, partly fictional story of a real person’s life or a significant portion of that life” and often “combines melodrama, history, psychological drama, biography, and documentary” (Hollinger 2012: 158). While the need to “‘complete’ history” by filling in “what didn’t happen with what a viewer might wish to see happen” (Bingham 2010: 8) is a common feature of numerous categories of films, this endeavour acquires a particularly interesting dimension in the case of literary biopics. The latter are frequently characterised not only by a “romantic vision of key moments in the life of a writer” purporting to “throw light on the creative process or the source of the writer’s fiction” (Higson 2011: 103-104) but also by an intricate fusion of biography and fiction. To give but two examples, biopics such as *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Becoming Jane* (2007), the two cinematic productions analysed in this paper, engage in acts of reverse autobiography, working on the assumption that texts such as *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* and *Pride and Prejudice* respectively might have drawn inspiration from real incidents and relationships from the lives of their

creators. Therefore, they use details and protagonist profiles lifted from the literary sources to fill in biographical gaps, embellishing an otherwise fragmentary and dry personal narrative with unlikely yet appealing elements of adventure and romance.

### *Shakespeare in and out of Love*

John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* opens, like almost every biopic (Custen 1992: 51), with title cards that firmly anchor the cinematic narrative in the historical London of 1593 and the "glory days of the Elizabethan theatre" (Madden 1998), whilst simultaneously invoking the two "households, both alike in dignity" (Shakespeare [1597] 1994, I.1: 1) of *Romeo and Juliet* via the image of rival playhouses "fighting it out for writers and audiences" (Madden 1998). The film then goes on to desecralize the legendary Bard of Avon into "a starving hack with a bad case of writer's block" and to bootleg literary episodes into a "pseudo-biography of Shakespeare's life" by means of a "star-crossed romance between Will and heiress Viola De Lesseps" which "both mirrors and intertwines" (Rothwell 2004: 248) in rather transparent fashion with *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. In addition to Will and Viola as the alleged real-life inspirations behind Romeo and Juliet - doomed not by "ancient grudge" (Shakespeare [1597] 1994, I.1: 3) but by the equally insurmountable barriers of class and prior commitment - the various members of the Capulet household and entourage are recognizable in Viola's highly pragmatic father, largely absent mother, devoted nurse and noble yet essentially unappealing suitor.

At some level yet another adaptation of the most frequently screened "play, Shakespearean or otherwise" (Brode 2000: 42), the film also represents an act of "appropriation in that it fabricates a biographical story of the dramatist's early theatrical career" (Wray 2011: 513) by suggesting that Will's personal experience of true love transforms into the well-known tragedy of "star-crossed lovers" (Shakespeare [1597] 1994, I.1: 6) by means of "an unmediated, transparent act of composition" whereby "Will appears to write his 'original' love story as he lives it" (Lehman and Starks 2002: 11). The almost magical transformation, "as if by alchemy" (Anderegg 2004: 48), of words spoken spontaneously by the various characters into the familiar lines of the play is mediated quite convincingly by a script which not only edits "together moments from rehearsals and a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* with the amorous and entrepreneurial adventures of the film's own

characters" (Anderegg 2004: 41) but also features humorous intertextual nods to contemporary culture: "Henslowe: The show must... you know... Will: Go on." (Madden 1998) It moreover combines the finality of the lovers' separation with the hopefulness of the open ending generated by the seamless transition from the tragic denouement of *Romeo and Juliet* to the (rewritten) opening lines of *Twelfth Night*.

As an interesting detail of this fusion between reality and fiction, the triple occurrence of the same words from *Romeo and Juliet* - "Oh, I am fortune's fool!" (Shakespeare [1597] 1994, II.4: 136) - in a variety of contexts posits art and life in a continuum, highlighting, in equal measure, the Aristotelian concept of art and Wilde's "reverse mimesis" (Burwick 2001: 161) whereby "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (Wilde 2004: 26). First, the line is uttered by the besotted playwright as he prepares to attempt a risky ascent to Viola's balcony: "Oh, I am fortune's fool, I will be punished for this!" (Madden 1998). It then emerges during the first public performance of the play, featuring - after Viola's banishment from the theatre - Will in the role of Romeo, only to be followed within minutes by a whispered reiteration in the course of Will and Viola's painful reunion: "Oh, I am fortune's fool. You are married?" (Madden 1998). Occupying an equally prominent place at the centre of two crucial scenes that not only blur the boundaries between reality and fiction but also mark the beginning and ending of Will and Viola's short-lived romance, this leitmotif helps create a sense of circularity. It moreover provides a smooth passage from off-stage despair to flawless performance in which the two actors simultaneously deliver their respective lines and convey a very personal message, rendered considerably more poignant by the fact that Viola is given the chance to play the lead heroine. Her emergency appearance in the role of "the Capulet commodity Juliet" rather than that of "the young wayfarer" she had auditioned for and rehearsed has been interpreted as a reminder of the fact "that she 'wears the pants' only in fiction - not in the real performance where money is on the line" (Lehman 2002: 139). Yet, it is quite interesting to point out that Will's address occasions another blurring of gender roles the moment he adapts one of Juliet's lines to allude to Viola's new civil status - "If you be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed." (Madden 1998) - much in the same way in which, in an earlier dialogue, he had used Ophelia's words from a yet unwritten play to voice his disappointment: "I was the more deceived." (Madden 1998) The back and forth movement "from gender role to gender role" and from "bed to stage" in which Romeo and Juliet's lines "become exchangeable,

interchangeable" (Coursen 2003: 85), echoing the gender-swaps familiar from other plays by Shakespeare, may not save Viola from a life of "domestic slavery on a Virginia tobacco plantation" (Lehman 2002: 139) but reinforces the impression that, throughout her brief romantic involvement with Will, her position is that of an equal partner rather than a subordinate.

As far as the presence in the film of actual historical figures from Shakespeare's artistic entourage is concerned, far from serving a merely comedic purpose, the numerous instances in which Will is the reluctant recipient of enthusiastic praise of his chief rival's genius also act as reminders of the fact that, while posterity has bestowed upon Shakespeare the undisputed status of "Center of the Canon" (Bloom 1994: vii), in the 1593 London captured in the film nobody would have "compared him to the brilliant Christopher Marlowe" (Brode 2000: 41). Voiced by fans ranging from random boatmen - "I had that Christopher Marlowe in my boat once!" (Madden 1998) - to the unfeeling Mr. Fennyman - "Of course, it was mighty writing. There is no one like Marlowe." (Madden 1998) - these expressions of unadulterated admiration culminate in the memorable scene in which almost all the aspiring actors auditioning for *Romeo and Ethel* regale Shakespeare with the same lines from *Doctor Faustus*:

Second actor: I would like to give you something from *Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe.

Henslowe: How refreshing!

Second actor: "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, and burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" (Madden 1998)

While the informal eulogy shared with Viola - "Marlowe's touch was in my *Titus Andronicus* and my *Henry VI* was a house built on his foundations." (Madden 1998) - merely echoes the critical opinion whereby early Shakespearean drama is likely to have benefitted from the influence of a then more illustrious contemporary, the cinematic narrative takes this indebtedness considerably further:

Marlowe: Romeo is... Italian. Always in and out of love.

Will: Yes, that's good. Until he meets...

Marlowe: Ethel. [...] The daughter of his enemy. [...] His best friend is killed in a duel by Ethel's brother or something. His name is Mercutio.

Will: Mercutio... good name. (Madden 1998)

Marlowe's actual input on plot development is as much of a joke as the idea that a play the action and characters of which were borrowed from *The*

*Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, a 1562 poem “based on earlier versions of the same well-known and popular story”, could “have been named anything very different from what it is” (Anderegg 2004: 42). Nevertheless, scenes like the one above serve as reminders of the initial “joint ownership” (Aaron 2005: 17) of plays later on attributed to a sole genius, illustrating the tradition of “collaborative authorship or division of labour” (Vedi 2012: 9), an equally common practice in Elizabethan theatrical production and the contemporary film business. Likewise, far from conveying the impression of shameless plagiarism, Shakespeare’s portrayal as “a literary magpie, hearing many of the lines he will eventually write spoken first by other characters” (Purcell 2009: 160) highlights his ability to respond “to every mood, every position and disposition” (Bate 1998: 152), as well as to often unlikely sources of inspiration.

Written by a team combining the literary expertise behind “the most celebrated (post)modern combination of veneration for Shakespeare with irreverent pastiche” (French 2006: 138) and an insight into the mechanisms of Hollywood production, the script represents a relatively safe fusion of homage and irreverence, yet it has been the target of considerable criticism for its ostensibly “‘lowbrow’ treatment of Shakespeare and the Shakespearean text” (Anderegg 2004: 43). The decision to rebrand Will Shakespeare as a romantic hero, a lover rather than an intellectual, thereby “granting him humanity” (French 2006: 153), might be indeed dismissed by somewhat inflexible scholars as a rather gratuitous move aimed to attract a wider audience and condemning the film to the questionable status of romantic comedy. However, it is perhaps more important to observe how much information about the Elizabethan theatre industry and drama in general the film nevertheless delivers, simultaneously providing “a popular and welcome counterweight to modern scholarly edited texts, which tend to ‘freeze’ Shakespeare’s plays in a way that would amaze the dramatist” (Halio 2003: 58), were he still alive and able to see them.

Most positive reviews have also chosen to point out the considerable, if largely inconspicuous, skill behind a product that somehow manages to simultaneously function as an art film and a highly commercial blockbuster, much like the mistaken identity “crowd tickler” (Madden 1998) that Philip Henslowe enthuses over in the opening scene, allowing the cultural elite to “share in-jokes denied to hoi polloi” (Rothwell 2004: 248) yet pleasing both categories in almost equal measure:

[T]he film is in general ingeniously designed to appeal to a variety of audiences, to both flatter the susceptibility of those for whom ‘art’ is pretty

much a bore as well as the more or less 'academic' or 'educated' audience, the teachers and students who can recognize the allusions to Elizabethan theatre and sixteenth-century culture. (Anderegg 2004: 42)

Written in the "layered style" (Thompson 1999: 1) advocated by David Lodge, the script combines a series of sophisticated allusions clearly "aimed at Shakespeare scholars" with jokes that "anyone who has survived the ninth grade in the US can enjoy" (Desmet 2002: 11). While not all viewers are likely to distinguish accurate historical facts from blatant inaccuracies, even those unfamiliar with the actual canon can appreciate the ways in which the fictitious transformations undergone by the ludicrously titled *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter* manipulate "the mystique of Shakespearean authorship" by redefining "Shakespearean drama as a labor of love" (Lehman and Starks 2002: 10) and outline the stages of the apparently fluid metamorphosis of a creative idea into a compelling spectacle.

### **Losing Darcy, Finding Jane**

Prompted to a large extent by the enthusiastic public and critical response to *Shakespeare in Love*, *Becoming Jane* displays the same tendency to romanticize "authorship by depicting real life inspiration, insisting on the link between author and heroine" (Cartmell 2012: 29), and relies on similar intertextual strategies to fill in biographical gaps by means of details, character profiles and episodes lifted from a familiar work of fiction. While this has resulted in parallels that are conspicuous enough to prompt "accusations of being dangerously derivative" (Cartmell 2012: 29), it should be noted that the latter biopic does not merely replicate its more prestigious cinematic precursor but engages in a complex fusion of biography, fiction and adaptation that blends together embellished historical details, elements from Austen's text and nods to recent films. Based on Jon Hunter Spence's 2003 semi-biographical *Becoming Jane Austen*, the almost homonymous 2007 British-Irish romantic drama directed by Julian Jarrold constitutes "a logical extension of previous adaptations' tendencies to unite the central character with the author" (Cartmell 2010: 114) in an endeavour to compensate for the fact that the limited insight contemporary scholarship has into Austen's life appears "too dull or uneventful to make it likely cinematographic material" (Gómez-Galisteo 2011: 235).

The efforts made to reincarnate the various protagonists of *Pride and Prejudice* as members of Austen's household and its relatively wide

network of acquaintances surpass the similar endeavours made in *Shakespeare in Love* in both scope and subtlety. Thus, even the least enthusiastic Austenite among its viewers can notice the numerous parallels between the intelligent and independent Elizabeth Bennet and her creator, as well as between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their considerably less irresponsible and improper historical avatars. More dedicated readers can also recognize Jane Bennet's endearing combination of optimism and diffidence in Cassandra's timid musings, Mr. Bingley's amiable character in Robert Fowle's good-natured behaviour, Mary's misguided attempts to entertain others and Lydia's flirtatiousness in Lucy Lefroy's appalling musical performance and dubious amorous overtures, and Mr. Collins' efforts to ingratiate himself with all in John Warren's obsequious interventions. What is, however, even more interesting to observe is the fact that, far from merely featuring the ostensible historical original behind each individual character, the film script actually appears to both merge distinct novel identities into cinematic conglomerates and divide the features of certain fictional protagonists between several on-screen personas; thus it not only pre-empts the naive tendency to draw overly-simplistic parallels between reality and fiction but also highlights the intricate fusion of different sources of inspiration behind each of Austen's complex creations.

The viewer's first glimpse of the extensive grounds and elegant mansion in the vicinity of the modest Austen estate, as well as the overbearing and controlling personality of its owner in conjunction with her affectionate introduction of her nephew - "Wisley is indispensable to my happiness." (Jarrold 2007) - are likely to prompt an immediate analogy between Lady Gresham and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, somewhat clouded by the realization that Mr. Wisley does not quite share the masculine appeal of the various cinematic incarnations of Mr. Darcy. Notwithstanding his tall person, social awkwardness and considerable wealth, Mr. Wisley is a less convincing candidate for the enviable status of real-life Darcy than the penniless Thomas Lefroy. The latter's good looks, sophisticated London airs and, above all, blatant disregard for the feelings of others single him out as the likely historical inspiration behind Austen's most eligible bachelor, even before his casual dismissal of Austen's literary efforts - "well, accomplished enough, perhaps, but a metropolitan mind may be less susceptible to extended, juvenile self-regard." (Jarrold 2007) - echoes Darcy's equally cavalier response to Elizabeth's physical charms: "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no

humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men.” (Austen 2006: 12) This impression is further augmented by Austen’s irritated reaction to his behaviour in the course of a gathering where, in yet another echo of Chapter III in *Pride and Prejudice*, the “scarcity of gentlemen” (Austen 2006: 11) puts a damper on the festivities: “Well, I call it very high indeed, refusing to dance when there are so few gentlemen.” (Jarrold 2007) The fact that, in this particular instance, it is Lefroy who overhears Austen’s rude remark results in the same gender reversal already discussed in reference to *Shakespeare in Love* and reinforces the idea that the fatal flaws of pride and prejudice equally apply to the male and female protagonists.

The same combination of straightforward parallels and intricate fusions characterises the rest of the text, with certain scenes – Mr. Austen’s insistence that “Jane should have not the man who offers the best price but the man she wants” (Jarrold 2007) or Mrs. Austen’s outburst upon becoming aware of her daughter’s refusal to marry Mr. Wisley – unambiguously echoing familiar literary episodes. Other analogies are considerably more fluid. Thus, Lady Gresham’s righteous indignation in the face of Jane’s rejection of Wisley – “My nephew, Miss Austen, condescends far indeed in offering to the daughter of an obscure and impecunious clergyman...” (Jarrold 2007) – might strike viewers as the closest cinematic equivalent to Lady Catherine’s unwelcome intervention until Judge Langlois’s condescending behaviour and refusal to sanction his nephew’s union with Jane provide an even more appalling example of narrow-mindedness, arrogance and interference in the lives of others. Likewise, the clear echo of Darcy’s sentiments in Mr. Wisley’s dignified decision to curtail his pursuit of Jane – “I am vain enough to want to be loved for myself rather than my money.” (Jarrold 2007) – reinforces the idea that, for all of Lefroy’s appeal, Lady Gresham’s unassuming nephew is a closer match for the protagonist that emerges from the novel. Indeed, for some viewers it might also serve as a confirmation of the fact that the current view of Darcy as the heart-throb of British fiction owes less to Austen’s original description than to the irresistibly handsome actors invariably cast to play him.

While *Shakespeare in Love* expands its intertextual scope to engage other texts than *Romeo and Juliet* in its playful dialogue with canonical literature and popular culture alike, *Becoming Jane* mostly widens its horizons by means of nods to the 2005 adaptation of Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*, even though the more dedicated admirers of the 1995 BBC

mini-series might prefer to engage in comparisons between Lefroy's glamorous attire - "Green velvet coat, vastly fashionable." (Jarrold 2007) - and the garment repeatedly favoured by Colin Firth's Darcy - "No, no, the green one." (Langton 1995) - for momentous encounters with Elizabeth. Not only do the costumes created for *Becoming Jane* and the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* reveal the endeavour to simultaneously satisfy historical accuracy and contemporary fashion, but the same strategies are employed to constantly direct the viewer's gaze towards the central female protagonist. Even more conspicuously, the same skilful combination of camerawork and choreography is employed to convey the growing attraction between Tom and Jane, with dancing scenes used as the background of their escalating romance: in Wright's 2005 adaptation, the brief illusion of Darcy and Elizabeth dancing alone emphasises the extent to which, in a room full of people, they are oblivious of anyone else; likewise, in the corresponding scene in the biopic, the two are equally incapable of toning down their gestures of affection, tearing their gaze away from each other or indeed realizing that their feelings are painfully visible to everyone else with a vested interest in their movements.

The ending entails a reversal of these circumstances, in the sense that the very formal and public setting of the protagonists' last encounter only allows for the delivery of a personal message through de agency of literature, in a scene highly reminiscent of Will and Viola's tearful on-stage farewell. Notwithstanding the relatively large crowd in attendance, Jane's *Pride and Prejudice* reading functions as an extremely intimate confession meant to be decoded by a single member of her audience, all other listeners being blissfully unaware of the fact that Elizabeth's sobering realization mirrors the perfect compatibility between two people whose 'happily ever after' remained unfulfilled:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; [...] But no such happy marriage could now teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was. (Austen 2006: 344/Jarrold 2007)

## Conclusions

Produced by the same studio and based on a similar endeavour to depict "the lives of prominent writers" whilst "focusing in some way on the

process of writing” (Higson 2011: 103) and revisiting familiar texts in search of “clues to help imagine the lives of their creators” (Hwang 2014: 93), *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane* share an impressive number of features. Common denominators range from their focus on “a visionary with a pure, one of a kind talent or idea who must overcome opposition” (Bingham 2010: 7) to the limited time span only covering a brief episode in the dim and distant youth of a canonical writer and the premise of an impossible relationship as the inspiration behind a timeless literary couple. The decision to use details gleaned from a work of fiction to fill the gaps in a largely unknown personal history, simultaneously transforming a not particularly eventful biography into a quite sensational narrative and compensating for the somewhat unfair lack of (documented) romance in the real lives of famous writers is part of a relatively widespread phenomenon, largely championed by fans determined to enrich the love lives of their cultural idols with “embellished or invented” (Schuessler 2016: 1) amorous interludes.

As elaborated on by the curators of the 2016 “Will & Jane: Shakespeare, Austen and the Cult of Celebrity”, an exhibition featuring artefacts as diverse as historical documents and questionable popular culture tributes, the list of similarities between the two writers comprises elements that go “beyond sheer literary genius” and range from “their scantily recorded intimate lives, which leave tantalizing holes to fill” (Schuessler 2016: 1) to a current “celebrity status [...] created through repetition and reproduction” (Rea 2016: 1). While this last parallel might be quite easy to dismiss as a natural side-effect of the contemporary tendency to recycle and re-commodify the culture of the past, it is quite interesting to observe that the intrinsic similarities between the Shakespearean and Austenean spirit had been pointed out almost a century earlier by a writer whose own ratio of literary success to personal happiness seemed at least as unfortunate:

[W]riting without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought ... and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare. (Woolf 1992: 73-74)

While the impact of the “parallel cultural afterlives” accompanying their gradual and inexorable metamorphosis into “icons, beloved almost as much for their imagined personalities and our feelings of intimacy with them as for anything they wrote” (Schuessler 2016: 1) has dispelled most of the aura of mystery surrounding their biographies and innermost thoughts, there is no denying the illusory nature of this familiarity: “Like with Shakespeare, it’s hard to read Austen and know what her opinions really were about much of anything” (Fowler 2005: 285). One can only hope that the fascination cinematic productions such as *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane* might exert over a largely uninformed public can help add romantic appeal to literary history without simultaneously transforming its texts into forgettable consumerist items, keeping its authors alive in collective memory and drawing new generations of viewers turned readers to the texts whose plots and characters they revisit and reshape.

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