5.06 Anatomy of a 90s Literary Teen Movie Adaptation

Angourie [host]
Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

> 'Okay, let's open up our books to page 73, *Sonnet 141*. And listen up. "In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes, / For they in thee a thousand errors note; / But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise, / Who in despite of view is pleas'd to dote." Now, I know Shakespeare's a dead white guy, but he knows his shit, so we can overlook that.' – Daryl Mitchell as Mr. Morgan in *10 Things I Hate About You*, 1999

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Angourie [host]
Hello and welcome to The Community Library, a fortnightly podcast for anyone interested in stories and how and why we tell them.

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Angourie [host]
Hi, I'm Angourie Rice, I'm an actor, podcaster, and I have seen *Clueless* so many times I can almost recite it by heart. I have always loved books and movies, but it wasn't until I was a teenager that I discovered the world of 90s teen movies adapted from literary classics. *Clueless* from *Emma*, *10 Things I Hate About You* from *The Taming of the Shrew*, *She's the Man* from *Twelfth Night* – which I actually watched as research for my English Lit unit on *Twelfth Night*. I did not read the whole play, but I sure as hell watched all of *She's the Man*, and got a decent grade on my essay. Don't try that at home, kids. It's not like we didn't have teen adaptations of classics while I was growing up in the 2010s. *Easy A* from 2010 was based on the 1850 novel *The Scarlett Letter*, while *Sierra Burgess is A Loser*, 2018, was a modern retelling of the 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. It's also not like adapting a classic to the present-day had never been done before the 90s. The 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story* – which was turned into a film in 1961 and is my Mum's favourite musical, so I grew up watching it – that was a modern American take on *Romeo and Juliet*. But the late 90s seemed to have a boom of teen flix adapted from classic lit, all starting with *Clueless* in 1995. And because I love classic literature, and teen movies, and 90s fashion, today we're looking at the anatomy of a 90s literary teen movie adaptation.

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In my research for this episode, I tried to compile a list of all the teen films from the 90s and early 2000s that were adapted from classic works of literature. Ha, what a fool I was!

Literature and film are much too complex to abide to the hard and fast rules of a comprehensive list. There first comes the question of what constitutes a classic. Is Bernard Shaw's 1913 play *Pygmalion* too late? Is Nietzsche's *The Joyful Science* too obscure? And then comes the question of what constitutes a 'modern-day adaptation'. Can Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* be considered a modern adaptation if it uses Shakespeare's original text? Is *John Tucker Must Die* an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, or does it just have a similar premise? Is the 2004 *Spongebob Squarepants Movie* a retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*? All very important questions.

Buzzfeed articles claiming a Shakespeare text as the basis of a teen movie is very tricky, because Shakespeare has been around for so long, and his texts adapted, transposed and reworked so many times, that certain narrative features or premises that he popularised don't necessarily belong to him anymore. Forbidden love in a 90s teen film doesn't immediately classify it as an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Not every makeover story is an adaptation of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, though we can certainly blame him for a lot of them. There is nothing new under the sun – we can find threads of classic literature and art running through our current media. In a sense, everything can be considered an adaptation. So how do we weed out the true adaptations from the 'inspired bys', and the 'loosely based ons'?

Well, I watched many 90s teen movies for this episode – well, not all were for this episode, it's kind of hard to distinguish research and a Saturday night when my research is just watching 90s teen romcoms, which I do anyway. I love being my own boss! Of the many that I watched, and the some that I impatiently sat through – I have chosen three films to represent this genre, and to help me illustrate the anatomy of a 90s teen movie literary adaptation. *Clueless*, 1995, *10 Things I Hate About You*, 1999, and *Cruel Intentions*, also 1999. Spoilers for all three books and films ahead …

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EMMA / CLUELESS

> 'Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing; but I have never been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall.' – *Emma* by Jane Austen, 1816

> 'I am just not interested in doing it until I find the right person. I mean, you see how picky I am about my shoes, and they only go on my feet.' – Alicia Silverstone as Cher in *Clueless*, directed by Amy Heckerling, 1995

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Jane Austen's 1816 novel *Emma* follows the story of Emma Woodhouse, a young, rich and single woman who fancies herself a matchmaker, but has no interest in marrying herself. But as Emma's marriage plans for her friend Harriet become complicated, she begins to question her past behaviour.

1995's *Clueless*, written and directed by Amy Heckerling, follows young, rich and single high-schooler Cher Horowitz. When new girl Tai arrives at school, Cher decides to take her on as a protégée and educate her in becoming popular in high school, all the while matching her with the perfect guy. Drama – and, of course, fabulous outfits – ensue.

Clueless began when writer and director Amy Heckerling was commissioned by Paramount to write a new teen movie. She remembered a book she had loved as a teenager, Jane Austen's *Emma*, and set to work on adapting the story for a modern teen audience. *Clueless* was an unexpected commercial and critical success. It was praised for its clever balance of satire and sincerity, distinctive visual style, and memorable dialogue. Roger Ebert, in his review of the film, correctly predicted that '[Cher's] dialogue could be anthologized.' But the fact that *Clueless* was an adaptation of *Emma* wasn't widely known in 1995, and that was on purpose. In an essay titled *Shakespeare Goes Hollywood*, Lynda Boose and Richard Burt write:

> '[T]he connection between *Clueless* and Jane Austen's *Emma* got intentionally excluded from the film's promotional packet and was left to become known via strategically leaked news items designed to be circulated by word of mouth to intrigue the elite without turning off the intended teen market.'

Jane Austen isn't even credited as inspiration or source material, not in the film's credits, or on the IMDb credits. But nevertheless, *Clueless* started a trend of literary adaptations about and for teens. Though, our next two movies take us to the end of the decade, 1999.

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THE TAMING OF THE SHREW / 10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU

> 'Tranio, I burn, I pine! I perish, Tranio, / If I achieve not this modest young girl.' – *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act I, Scene I, by William Shakespeare, 1590

> 'I burn, I pine, I perish.' – Joseph Gordon Levitt as Cameron in *10 Things I Hate About You*, directed by Gil Junger, 1999

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William Shakespeare wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* between 1590 and 1592. The story follows two sisters: the beautiful and pious Bianca, and her shrewish older sister Katherina. Bianca cannot be courted until her older sister marries, and so the suitors of Bianca convince the eccentric Petruchio to marry Katherina against her will, leaving Bianca free for the taking.

10 Things I Hate About You, released in 1999, follows two sisters: the pretty and popular Bianca, and her ill-tempered older sister Kat. Their over-protective father instates a rule that Bianca can't date until her sister does, and so an admirer of Bianca pays the school bad boy Patrick to date Kat, leaving Bianca free for the taking.

The Taming of the Shrew – which will henceforth be referred to as *Taming* – has long been one of Shakespeare's most problematic plays. The plot revolves around the 'taming' of a woman into submission – which is exactly as awful as it sounds, and is just abuse played for laughs. The play ends with an epic monologue in which Katherina admits women's inferiority and their duty to obey men. Whether Shakespeare wrote it as a satirical feminist critique, or just a sincerely misogynistic monologue, we'll never know. But as Kate Wyver wrote in her review of a production staged in February of 2020: 'If you're going to stage this play today, you have to figure out a clever way to deliver the ending.'

10 Things I Hate About You – which will henceforth be referred to as *10 Things* – didn't just change the ending of the play; it changed the narrative voice of the story, while still maintaining Shakespeare's premise and key characters. The film was adapted by Karen McCullah and Kirsten Smith, who also gave us such gems as *Legally Blonde*, *Ella Enchanted*, and another Shakespeare adaptation, *She's the Man*. *10 Things* was generally well-received, particularly praised for its charming performances from the young cast, and its cleverness in taking an outdated and problematic play and turning it into something actually enjoyable.

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DANGEROUS LIAISONS / CRUEL INTENTIONS

> 'I managed to put on at will that air of detachment you have so often admired. […] If I was feeling unhappy, I practised adopting a look of serenity or even joy. I even went so far as to deliberately cause myself pain in order to make an attempt at the simultaneous expression of pleasure.' – *Dangerous Liaisons* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, 1782
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> 'Do you think I relish the fact that I have to act like Mary Sunshine 24/7 so I can be considered a lady? I'm the Marcia fucking Brady of the Upper East Side, and sometimes I want to kill myself.' – Sarah Michelle Geller as Kathryn Merteuil in *Cruel Intentions*, directed by Roger Kumble, 1999

[upbeat rock music fade out]

Dangerous Liaisons is a 1792 French epistolary novel by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. At its centre are two aristocrats, former lovers, who embark on a sophisticated game of seduction and manipulation for their own amusement. While the Marquise de Merteuil challenges the Vicomte de Valmont to seduce an innocent convent girl, Valmont is also occupied with the conquest of a virtuous married woman.

Cruel Intentions is a 1999 teen drama about the prep school elite of New York. At its centre are two scheming step-siblings, who embark on a sophisticated game of seduction and manipulation for their own amusement. While Kathryn Merteuil challenges Sebastian Valmont to seduce an innocent family friend who has transferred to their school, Sebastian is also occupied with the conquest of the school principal's daughter Annette, who has sworn chastity until marriage.

Dangerous Liaisons is heralded as one of the most important literary works of late 18th-Century France. *Cruel Intentions*, however, was one of the more forgotten teen films of late 20th-Century America. These texts will be referred to as *Liaisons* and *Intentions* from here on in, to save everyone's time. The thing that sets *Intentions* apart from *10 Things* and *Clueless* is that it's not a rom-com, and neither is its source material. *Liaisons* was a clever critique of the upper classes of the French aristocracy, framed as a non-fiction exposé. A witty prologue from the "author" tells us that the following letters are real, and a true account of a public scandal, while a foreword from the "publisher" is doubtful that they are anything more than sensationalised fiction. All of this – the prologue and the foreword – were actually written by Choderlos de Laclos; it's kind of like a satirical framing device. But for all its wit and scandal and sex and cynicism, *Liaisons* ends rather tragically. It's a cautionary tale of the danger of the power the upper classes hold, and how they abuse it. *Intentions*, however, ends with … well, here's how Roger Ebert puts it in his review: 'the ending […] lacks the courage to take the story to its logical conclusion, and instead contrives a series of moralistic payoffs that are false and boring.' It's true that the ending is falsely moralistic, but I don't find it boring – I think he's being a bit harsh, there. Regardless, *Intentions* took a risk with adapting a story that wasn't wholesome or romantic, showing us a different – if not somewhat contrived and unrealistic – side of rich white teens in America.

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To deconstruct the anatomy of a 90s literary teen movie adaptation – yes, I'm aware this phrase is a mouthful, but I tried to cut it down and I can't, every single word is important – we must first understand why there was a boom of these types of films in the first place. Of course, money comes into it. With the success of *Clueless*, of course studios were going to snatch up any teen rom-com with a similar tone or premise – though none of them, in my opinion, would ever match up to it. But there was a bigger, more philosophical trend that was taking America by storm; in art, philosophy, academia, literature, and yes, even in movies for teenage girls. We've got to talk about – [music stops]

POSTMODERNISM

[music starts again and fades out] Like all academic theories, postmodernism is a broad and complicated topic, but today we're going to be looking at a small part of it that concerns attitudes towards high and low culture, and its representation in film. Postmodernism arose as an rebellion against its preceding movement: modernism, of course. One aspect of modernism in art is its insistence on a divide between 'low' forms of art, and 'high' forms of art. This of course creates a strict hierarchy of what is considered worthy and good, and what is considered trashy and bad. Shakespeare, for example, is traditionally considered high art, because his works – supposedly – can only be understood and appreciated by a small group of intelligent people. A chick flick, on the other hand, is traditionally considered low art, because it's an accessible artform that can be understood and appreciated by a large group of people, regardless of their class, education, or intelligence.

So postmodernism came along with an aim to destroy modernism's hierarchies and binaries. As Wikipedia puts it: 'Postmodernism emerged in a time not defined by war, or revolution, but rather by media culture.' So with the 80s and 90s came advancements in

accessible technology and widespread digital marketing. America became even more commercialised than it was before. Pop culture became about youth culture, and youth culture was about MTV, the mall, Calvin Klein jeans ads, and the very first bulky hand-held mobile phones. The idea of postmodernism was to take all this lowbrow, accessible, commercialised stuff, and place it in direct contrast with the highbrow, exclusive, limited stuff. Postmodernism sought to break down the barriers of 'high' and 'low' art by highlighting this contrast, or remixing them and reframing them. And this is where we get the central idea of the teen movie literary adaptation. It's a blend of highbrow; a literary classic, and lowbrow; a chick flick.

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THE KITSCH AND THE CLASSIC: CLUELESS

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Jane Austen's time – Regency England, 1816, to be exact – was one of societal expectation and regulation. From courting to calling on houses, from fortunes to the piano forte, from marriage to marmalade; there were unspoken societal rules and expectations for everything. Austen was writing in and about a microcosmic village society, in which every decision to walk or dance and where and when and with whom, could have dramatic effects on you and your family's respectability and prospects. Austen's novels are so clever because they paint a vivid picture of the insular community in which she lived, and how so many flawed and real people had to fit into it. And her novels are considered timeless because they discuss class, wealth, social standing, family, and relationships, all through the lens of the high society in which she lived.

Amy Heckerling, the writer and director of *Clueless*, seamlessly transplants the dilemmas of Regency England's high society to the backdrop of an LA high school in the 90s. This, in itself, is a premise that can be read with a postmodernist lens. But *Clueless* does more than this as a postmodern film. Lynda Boose and Richard Burt write:

> 'In a postmodern way that effectively mocks all the presumed distinctions between high and low culture, *Clueless* does not merely relocate high culture to a low site (Los Angeles) […] Instead, […] *Clueless*'s repeated reference to technologies such as movies, televisions, mobile phones, head sets, car radios, CDs, computerized wardrobes, intercoms, and other devices that record, transmit, amplify, and likewise reshape meaning, formulate the mediating power of Los Angeles as the contemporary site where high/low distinctions are engaged in endlessly resignifying themselves.'

Almost every review or article I read about *Clueless* mentioned the way its opening sequence is shot like an MTV music video. The camera uses long lenses, blurry slow-motion, quick cuts and dramatic angles. It's all so vibrant and overwhelming it's hard to know what you're actually looking at. It's a collage of shiny cars, colourful shopping bags and LA palm trees, all set to the song 'Kids in America'. Now, at first glance, this seems pretty over-the-top and on-the-nose, but the film never loses its self-awareness or intertextual

commentary. After our montage comes to a close, the very first line of the film is: 'So okay, you're probably going, is this like a Noxzema commercial, or what?' For those of us who weren't living in America in the 90s, Noxzema is a brand of skin cleanser, and its 90s television commercials featured fresh-faced girls laughing and having lots of fun as they washed their faces and got ready for the day. Andrew Urie writes of *Clueless* in his article *Hyping the Hyperreal*:

> '[T]he film's unique postmodern visual dynamics […] constitute an insightful parody of hyperreal media culture and its particular connection to feminine teen consumerism amidst the image-saturated society of mid-90s era Los Angeles.'

But what I think makes *Clueless* so special as a film is that it's not only a critique of the consumerism of teen-girl media culture, but also a celebration of it. It critiques without ever being cynical or mean. *Clueless* chronicles the journey of a girl finding a way to still love fashion and all things fluffy and pink, while being a better person for herself and the people around her. She learns to appreciate that just because others have different priorities or opinions, that doesn't mean they're wrong or stupid. She says:

> 'I realised all my friends were really good in different ways. Like Christian, he always wants things to be beautiful and interesting. Or Dionne and Murray, when they think no one is watching, are so considerate of each other.'

And though Cher goes through this 'makeover', she still remains faithfully herself. Caring, fashion-loving, and just a little bit less clueless. Much like Emma Woodhouse in Austen's original novel. *Emma* simultaneously critiques and perpetuates the insular society in which Austen lived. The flaws and failings of Emma's community – and the way it has spoilt and jaded her – are carefully pointed out, but even in her realisation of this, Emma doesn't go too much against the grain. Much like Cher, she realises the way she's been spoilt, but still finds dignity and merit in her town's community. And she still marries, and marries well, and will surely live a very comfortable life after the final page.

Clueless is a defining moment in pop culture history. Among the lists of postmodern films to come out of the 80s and 90s, such as *Blade Runner*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Fight Club*, *Clueless* is distinctly different in that it was made by, about, and for women – specifically teenage girls. And, as far as I can tell, it was the first in the chick flick genre to adapt a literary novel into a movie for teens. It was a clash of the kitsch and the classic, the old and the new, successful with the critics who defined 'official' culture, and the teens who defined pop culture. And Hollywood took note.

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SHAKESPEARE GOES HOLLYWOOD: 10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU

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In 1996, Lynda Boose and Richard Burt predicted the boom of teen film adaptations of Shakespeare in the late 90s and early 2000s. In their essay *Shakespeare Goes Hollywood*, they wrote:

> 'Dealing with specific filmic reproductions or appropriations of Shakespeare means that "the popular" must be thought through not only the media and institutions in which Shakespeare is now reproduced – mass culture, Hollywood, celebrity, tabloid – but above all, youth culture. For as Shakespeare becomes part of pop culture and Shakespeare criticism (especially film criticism) follows suit, both move into an arena increasingly driven by a specifically youth culture, and Hollywood has picked up on that fact.'

Boose and Burt's essay was written pre-*10 Things*, *She's the Man*, and *O.*, which came out in 1999, 2006 and 2001 respectively – all adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. At the time of Boose and Burt writing their paper, only Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet* had been released as the first teen-oriented film adaptation of Shakespeare's play. *10 Things* was the next direct adaptation, inspired by Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

As I mentioned before, a feature of postmodern film is blending the old with the new. Also meta commentary, and *10 Things* is rife with meta commentary. While *Clueless* distanced itself from any allusions to Jane Austen in its marketing – and in the film itself – *10 Things* did the opposite. The film's taglines made the Shakespeare reference clear: 'How do I loathe thee? Let me count the ways' and 'Romeo, oh Romeo, get out of my face.' The names of characters and places are also retained from Shakespeare's *Taming*: such as Kat, Bianca and their high school Padua – or else they are a reference to Shakespeare himself: the sisters' surname being Stratford, the town in which Shakespeare was born. *10 Things*' script also surreptitiously incorporates Shakespearean language into the dialogue. Of course, when Cameron spies Bianca he says 'I burn, I pine, I perish.' Cameron's friend Michael encourages Patrick to continue pursuing Kat by saying 'sweet love, renew thy force,' the opening line of Shakespeare's sonnet 56. Michael also refers to Kat as 'the shrew' – which is of course taken from the title of Shakespeare's play. And there are perhaps more words and phrases that I didn't even catch. In an interview on the Script Apart podcast, co-writer of the script Kirsten Smith said: 'I still have my big book of Shakespearean sonnets where I went through with a highlighter and tried to pull out words that I could throw into teen dialogue.' Reappropriating Shakespeare's quotes into the dialogue of teenagers completely demolishes the distinction between high culture and low culture.

But Shakespeare still exists in the world of the film, and so there's another level of the blend of the old and the new within the story of the film. Kat and Patrick's English class begins studying Shakespeare's sonnets, and the students are even tasked with writing their own version of sonnet 141. Kat's final declaration of love to Patrick is this very poem. She has written it about Patrick after finding out he was paid to take her out, and she performs it in front of the class. Her poem is angry, and heart-broken, but ultimately an act of forgiveness. And this poem is one of the most vivid contrasts we get of remixing the old with the new, the Shakespeare with the teen romcom. The poem is the perfect Shakespearean declaration of love, akin to Romeo's monologue to Juliet on the balcony, or indeed its inspiration, *Sonnet 141*, or even Katherina's monologue to Petruchio at the end of *Taming* – but in *10*

Things it's still distinctly youthful, funny and self-aware. Kat talks about how she hates his big dumb combat boots, and the way he drives her car, and the fact that he didn't call. She even says: 'I hate you so much it makes me sick, it even makes me rhyme.' And I think this poem rings so true of what it's like to be a lovesick teenager, because the concept is taken from one of the writer's teenage diaries. Kirsten Smith says of the script's co-writer, Karen McCullah:

> 'Karen was telling me about her diary in high school, lists that she had found: 10 Things I Hate About Anthony was this boyfriend of hers, and I wrote down on a piece of paper, "10 Things I Hate About You," and then parenthetical "(movie title)".'

Kat's poem is dramatic and petty, but the love is sincere, and that's something that teen romcoms and Shakespearean comedies have in common.

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DANGER VS. CRUELTY: CRUEL INTENTIONS

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Like *Clueless*, *Cruel Intentions* avoids all reference to its source text within the world of the film, but like *10 Things*, it retains many of the character names: Merteuil, Valmont, and Cecile. Unlike *Clueless*, which uses modern technology as a punchline, or *10 Things*, which forgoes the use of communication technology completely, *Intentions* incorporates mobile phones and computers in a way that was true to the time, though it still finds a way to justify communicating via letters rather than email – 'Email is for geeks,' says Sebastian. Other than that, however, this is a story firmly set in the present day – or, in the present day of the 90s – with no allusions to 18th Century France, or seemingly any satirical commentary of the media-driven culture of the 90s.

Intentions doesn't seek to blur the lines between high culture and low culture further than its premise as a modern adaptation of a literary classic – in fact, Kathryn and Sebastian are intent on keeping themselves – the upper class – separate from those in the lower, such as the guileless Cecile and her earnest cello teacher, Ronald. Kathryn and Sebastian are obsessed with maintaining the status divide through beauty, wealth, and manipulating those beneath them. *Liaisons* works as a satire, exposing the dangerous power of the upper classes. *Intentions* does that too, but, as Roger Ebert pointed out, it only goes so far. Rather than driving home a tragic and biting cautionary tale, the film tries to shift the audience's sympathy in favour of Sebastian – a move that is not entirely successful, in my opinion. Where *Liaisons* critiques social hierarchy through intense and unrelenting satire, *Intentions* leaves us with a 'aw, but he's not that bad, actually!' Annette gets out with her dignity, and she'll be fine because she's rich, while Cecile and her cello teacher Ronald, the real victims of this story, are left by the wayside. We assume they're fine? In this way, *Intentions* does not really deconstruct the barriers between high and low – at least, not in the way that *Liaisons* did as an merciless satire of the upper classes. But the film's premise was still born out of 90s boom of postmodernism, and that's important.

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RETCON AND REDEMPTION

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So, we've taken a look at why these literary adaptations became so prevalent in the 90s, and how the influence of postmodernism can be seen in the films themselves – though less so in *Cruel Intentions*. But let's look at how these narratives are constructed, specifically what things have to change when you're adapting a text that's 180, 200, even 400 years old. Some things are timeless: love, friendship, deception. Some things have changed: technology, marriage, sexual politics. There are some narrative changes that are consistent across almost all films in this genre. High society becomes high school. Courting becomes dating. Marriage becomes boyfriend and girlfriend. A ball becomes a party, or a prom. Duelling with swords becomes a fist-fight, or a gun fight. Dancing seems to stay the same, as do makeovers. Letter-writing sometimes becomes a phone call, but sometimes does not.

Of our three films, *Clueless* is the most effortless adaptation. Other than the obvious and consistent changes that I just listed, there are only two key differences in the plot of *Clueless* from its original text. The first is the reason as to why Emma/Cher can't be with Frank Churchill/Christian. In Austen's novel, it's because Frank Churchill is secretly engaged. Secret engagements – even secret dating, isn't really believable to a modern audience, and so in Heckerling's adaptation, Christian is gay, and that's why he's not interested in Cher. Another change, and definitely a very controversial one, is Emma/Cher's connection to the romantic hero: Mr Knightley/Josh. In Austen's novel, Mr. Knightley is Emma's sister's husband's brother, if you can follow that! He's more than a friend of the family; they are in-laws, and he's their neighbour who helps out with taking care of Emma's father. In *Clueless*, Cher is an only child and Josh was *briefly* Cher's step-brother, who now works for her dad's law firm. But if you want to hear more of my opinions, my strong opinions on this topic, I did a whole episode on the changes between *Emma* and *Clueless*, which I'll link in the show notes for you. But the important thing to note with *Clueless*, is that despite these changes, our attitudes towards the characters remain the same from book to film. The basic framework of the heroes, the villains, who we sympathise with and who we hate, is retained from Austen's novel: we love Cher/Emma, we feel sorry for Tai/Harriet and we despise Elton/Mr. Elton. But this is not the case with *10 Things* and *Intentions*, both of which take a distinctly different approach when it comes to adaptation, and actually reinterpret the texts to create new meaning. And I think this is because the texts on which these films are based are what one might now call … 'problematic.' Let's start with *10 Things*.

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WHO'S TAMING WHO?

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I hated *The Taming of the Shrew*. Like, a lot. I hated it a lot. To be fair, I read it in its original form; just words on a page, I didn't watch any interpretations or adaptations, which

definitely makes or breaks a production today. A production at Shakespeare's Globe in 2016 'turn[ed] the problematic comedy into a feminist tragedy,' according to Mark Lawson's review for The Guardian. A recent production in February of 2020, however, received a one star review from Kate Wyver for The Guardian, who wrote the production 'lacks the most basic clarity and does nothing to question the play's misogyny. […] In 2020, it's a director's job to twist the tone or take a stand. But no, this production charges unironically ahead.'

So the big question is: is *Taming* a feminist critique of the oppression of women that was way ahead of its time? Or is it just plain ol' misogynistic? Well, I conclude it is the latter. If we take the play at face value, it's a cruel story that frames gendered violence as a comedy. But critical thinking isn't about taking things at face value, so we have to dig a little deeper. But even by the textual evidence, the play does not deconstruct the oppression of women and gender politics; rather it conforms to it. It punishes the women who don't conform until they do. And then if we choose to read the play as a satire, well … satire only works as well as the audience understands it, and we must consider the socio-political context in which that audience lived. At the time *Taming* was written and performed, women's subservient role in a marriage was taken for granted – not something to be questioned at all. Would the audience of late 16th-Century England have been primed enough by their rigid society to question the gender politics of marriage after watching a high concept satire? I'm inclined to think not. And what happens when that satire fails? Well, you're left with a cruel and misogynistic play, that's what. Now, to be fair, I will reiterate, I have not studied *Taming*, nor have I seen a stage production or a faithful filmic adaptation, such as the 1967 Zeffirelli film with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. That film is apparently very good, you believe their romance, and Katherina's final monologue is delivered very tongue-in-cheek, not serious at all. But even then, I think it's pretty grim that the only way a woman can exercise her power is by being ironically subservient. Because even if it's ironic, it's still submission.

So *10 Things* comes along and changes *Taming*. Completely. It's still an adaptation; you've got the characters, and the side characters, and the set-up, and the couplings at the end. But the key differences are tone and voice. Whose story is it? Who's taming who? And this is another important element of a 90s literary teen movie adaptation: what gets retconned, and who gets redemption.

Retcon is short for retroactive continuity. To paraphrase Wikipedia, my favourite source, it refers to a literary device in which the content of an established fictional work is adjusted, ignored, or contradicted by a subsequently published work, which breaks continuity with the former. Retcons often occur in series, such as comic books or TV shows, where the creators might reintroduce a character thought to be dead, or create an alternate universe or timeline. As Merriam-Webster dictionary puts it, 'A *retcon* allows an author to have his or her cake and eat it too, as it enables the return of dead characters, the revision of unpopular elements of a work, and a general disregard for reality.' Despite this saltiness of this article that I read from Merriam-Webster, retcon was added to the dictionary in October of 2021.

Though *10 Things* and *Intentions* aren't sequels to *Taming* and *Liaisons*, they are adaptations, adaptations can still retcon elements of the original work. Disney frequently does this with its live action remakes of its animated classics, *Beauty and the Beast* and

Aladdin being the most prominent ones that come to mind. *10 Things* changed many things about *Taming*, but the most prominent change is the tone and the voice of the story. *Taming* is the boys' story. It's about Lucentio trying to win Bianca, and Petruchio trying to tame Katherina. But in *10 Things*, by shifting the focus to the two sisters, Kat and Bianca, we get a feminist reworking of the text in which the female characters are dynamic and believable, because we're right there with them the whole way. We see Kat's emotions and motivations, and as a result she becomes a much more sympathetic and understandable hero of this story, rather than the scheming Lucentio or the cruel Petruchio in *Taming*. Carmen Paddock writes in an essay entitled *Why 10 Things I Hate About You is the Greatest Shakespeare Adaptation*:

> '*10 Things*' characters […] are treated with far more heart and sympathy than Shakespeare's originals. […] This character treatment does as much to strengthen the film's feminist credentials as its revision of the central romance and heroine; allowing both Kat and Bianca complete dignity […] and freedom to subvert the rebel/conformist dichotomy they seem to embody at the start.'

Paddock makes such an important point here: Kat and Bianca are allowed complete dignity, something which is not afforded to their *Taming* counterparts. Though the girls make mistakes – Bianca more than Kat – the story does not concern itself with changing either of them, rather it gives them the space to learn while still maintaining their personalities, values and opinions. The male characters' objective in *Taming*, meanwhile, is to teach the women, and crush all personality in the process.

10 Things also changes the whole idea of the act of 'taming'. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare makes it very clear who's taming who, but *10 Things* questions the idea of dominance and subservience in a relationship. Though Patrick's objective at the start is to sweeten up Kat, he soon realises that none of his usual tricks will work, and she soon realises that behind his tough exterior, Patrick is not as 'vile as [she] thought.' The thing that makes *10 Things* work is that Kat and Patrick are accidentally perfect for each other: they're headstrong, uninterested in people's opinion of them, and reluctant to be vulnerable. They both have bad reputations, and struggle with being perceived in that way. 'The only thing people know about me is that I'm scary,' says Kat. 'Yeah, well, I'm no picnic myself,' replies Patrick. This is just one example of how balanced this core romance is, and how it allows for a complex and believable relationship without compromising on the vivid personalities and character dynamics from Shakespeare's *Taming*. *10 Things* is not about 'taming the shrew' at all, but if we're to keep with Shakespeare's metaphor, it's about two shrews finding each other. [laughs] Oh God, okay, next section!

[upbeat rock music fade in]

PUTTING THE HERO IN ANTI-HERO

[upbeat rock music fade in]

Before we get into this section, I would like to offer a content for brief mentions of r*pe and sexual assault. To skip over it, please skip over the red text. For listeners, please skip to 46 minutes and 53 seconds.

Liaisons isn't a problematic book, per se. It shows characters doing problematic things, and doesn't necessarily punish them for it, or let the audience know that this is bad behaviour. But of course, this is the author's objective: to highlight the ruthless and self-centred nature of the elite classes. The audience is privy to all their terrible deeds: rape, assault, manipulation, blackmail, and we judge them accordingly. On one of the last pages, a peripheral character notes: 'I see in all this that the wicked are punished. But I do not find any consolation for their unfortunate victims.' But … the wicked aren't *really* punished. At least, not in a way that's specific to their crimes. Valmont dies, which is a form of punishment, though that also means he never has to face the consequences of what he's done. Merteuil, meanwhile, is ostracised from polite society, though it's suggested she flees to Italy and continues her antics over there. The innocent victims, meanwhile, don't fair too well: Cecile's reputation is ruined and she becomes a nun, while the Presidente de Tourvel literally dies of a broken heart. So … *Liaisons* is a critical satire of the upper classes, and it's not kind to anyone, but least of all the innocent, particularly the innocent women.

Intentions is a surprisingly faithful adaptation of *Liaisons* … until the ending, that is. One of the wicked, Kathryn, is punished. But Sebastian Valmont, though he still dies, is offered … redemption. And this is the weird thing about *Intentions*: in an adaptation of *Liaisons*, if you're going to try and redeem the bad man and make us love him as much as Annette does, you might want to try and change some of the more problematic things he does, rather than simply pulling on our heartstrings at the end with *Bittersweet Symphony*. It's a great song, though. Such a good song that it almost makes the end scene make sense. Almost. The thing about *Cruel Intentions* is that there appears to be some cognitive dissonance going on between the first hour and ten minutes, and then the last twenty minutes. *Intentions* does not change or fix any of the most heinous things Sebastian does; all of which are adapted from the book: sharing a girl's nude photos online, threatening to out a gay man, and actual rape, just to name a few. And because none of that is changed, *Intentions* asks the audience to absolve his crimes because he did one selfless thing: he fell in love. But love does not conquer all, and it especially does not conquer my disdain for Sebastian. And it's not like I'm reading this film incorrectly – everything about the film tells us that Sebastian is the hero, or rather, the anti-hero. The film begins with him, we follow his journey, we're supposed to – maybe not care about him, but certainly understand him. And in the final scene, he is framed as the anti-hero who has redeemed himself through being honest and sharing his journal Annette, who then, after his death, shares it with the school to reveal Kathryn's bad behaviour, because somehow she's the evil mastermind and Sebastian's guilty of nothing? And even if he were guilty, he's not around to face the consequences. Thou shalt not speak ill of the dead. In/Frame/Out said in a video entitled *Cruel Intentions Twenty Years On*:

> 'The funeral scene is supposed to act as an epilogue that plays out like cinematic Stockholm syndrome: victims holding vigil for their tormentor as if every crime committed was paving the way for Sebastian's personal growth.'

This very acutely points out the strange incongruity of the final scene with the rest of the film. Sebastian does one good deed, and bam, he's redeemed, all past crimes are ignored. But Sebastian's 'personal growth' isn't really a strong enough storyline to make a case for his redemption. He is still scheming and manipulating very close to his bitter end; giving himself – and the viewer – only ten minutes to do a full 180 and change his mind – and ours – in deciding that he wants to be a better person. If *Intentions* had made Sebastian's crimes less heinous, his redemption arc would have been much more believable, and the moralistic ending would have made sense. If *Intentions* had left all of Sebastian's wrongdoings as they were, and also the kept the original ending from the book, that, too, would have made much more sense. But instead, *Intentions* seeks to at once be a satirical cautionary tale and a moralistic redemption arc. And then it ends up being neither.

Despite all of this, I still really like the film, I wanna put that out there, I really like this movie! I love the main cast's performances, the soundtrack is mwah, *chef's kiss*, and I think that the first two thirds is a really great adaptation of *Dangerous Liaisons*. The point of my critique of this film is to argue that retcon and redemption can sometimes be really successful, in the case of *10 Things*, and sometimes less successful, in the case of *Intentions*. Either way, both of these films were pushed to shift the viewer's perspective and understanding of the main characters, because even if motivations and situations don't change over time, sometimes the audience's sympathy does. Who gets to tell the story, who gets redemption, and who gets dignity, is clearly an element of storytelling that has changed over the past 400 years.

[upbeat rock music fade in]

SOME THINGS DON'T CHANGE, BUT THEY SHOULD.

[upbeat rock music fade in]

When considering these three stories, we cannot ignore the whiteness and heteronormativity of both the original texts and their modern adaptations. In *Clueless* and *10 Things* we see the sassy black friend trope, in Cher's friend Dionne in the former, and in Bianca's friend Chastity in the latter. Erica Gerald Mason defines the trope in an article entitled *The End of the Sassy Black Friend*:

> 'Day or night, the SBF [Sassy Black Friend] must be available to offer sympathy, then crack an outrageous joke. Most importantly, SBFs never have problems of their own.'

Erica also writes about how harmful this this trope is:

> 'Grouping Black women's sparkle under the blanket term of "sass" is lazy at best, insulting at worst, and harmful even in the most casual of situations. Happiness is as nuanced as the person experiencing it. The magic of Black optimism in spite of generations of oppression is not a punchline – it's a facet of an otherwise whole personality.'

This trope is clearly present in both *Clueless* and *10 Things*. Dionne and Chastity are there to aid the white protagonists' journeys; they don't have character arcs of their own. And of course they don't: they're the side characters, and that's the function of a side character. But the issue is the consistent pattern in this genre of black women being cast only in the role of the best friend, rather than the heroine with a fully-fledged character arc.

Looking at *Intentions*, the only non-white character is Ronald, Cecile's cello teacher, and only in *Intentions* is race discussed. Ronald becomes involved with Cecile, and when Cecile's mother, Mrs. Caldwell, finds out, she is horrified, fires Ronald and tells him to stay away from her and her daughter. Ronald says: 'I would like to think that in these times, someone of your stature could look beyond racial lines,' to which Mrs. Caldwell replies: 'Oh, don't give me any of that racist crap. My husband and I gave money to Colin Powell.' Colin Powell is an American politician who was the first black man to be Secretary of State. So she's arguing that she can't be racist, because she supported one black American politician. Which we all know, is not how it works. Despite Mrs Caldwell's protestations, the film makes it clear that her issue with Cecile seeing Ronald is rooted in racism. Cecile's mother's disapproval of her daughter's secret relationship with the music teacher also features in *Liaisons*, though there her disapproval stems from the fact that Danceny – as the character is called in *Liaisons* – belongs to a lower social class than Cecile's family. And, Cecile is already betrothed to a wealthy man. So, *Intentions* keeps class divides, and also explores racial divides. Though this conflict is only addressed in that one scene, and it's not really discussed again.

In *Liaisons*, much emphasis is placed on the class divide between Danceny and the rest of the characters: Cecile's family, Valmont and Merteuil, and the Presidente de Tourvel (the equivalent of Annette in *Intentions*). But even though Danceny actually kills Valmont in a duel at the end of the book, they part as friends, and Danceny helps collate and distribute all the letters to take down Merteuil. Danceny is the only character who does not belong to the upper class of the rest of the characters, and he is the only one of Valmont and Merteuil's victims who gets out relatively unscathed. As I mentioned, Cecile and the Presidente de Tourvel do not fare as well.

Ronald's role in *Intentions* is very similar, that is until the ending. Ronald instigates the 'duel' between him and Sebastian, which leads to Sebastian's death. He doesn't directly kill Sebastian, rather the tussle leads them onto the road, and Annette gets involved and is thrown into oncoming traffic, and Sebastian jumps in front of a car to save her. After this scene, Ronald is not seen again. Instead, *Cecile* is the one who hands out copies of Sebastian's journal, while Annette drives off in Sebastian's car. Of Kathryn and Sebastian's victims, Ronald is the only one who doesn't get any sort of resolution, which I see as a problem with *Intentions*' storytelling, and I think it's a by-product of the strange moralised ending that paints Sebastian as some kind of hero.

Heteronormativity is also a key component of these three films. *Clueless* features one gay character: Christian, but as I mentioned previously, his queer identity is a plot device in order to prevent him from getting together with Cher. *10 Things* seemingly has no queer characters, though there is a strong case for queer readings of Kat. *Intentions* features two gay characters: one is Sebastian's friend, and the other is the closeted guy he's sleeping

with, Greg. Sebastian uses Greg's secret to blackmail him. Also in *Intentions* we get a kiss between Kathryn and Cecile – which, however queer-bait-y fetishized it was in 1999, is actually true to the book. Merteuil lusts after Cecile and it's heavily suggested that they have casual relations. In these films, however, where it is present, queerness is nothing more than a plot device or a B-plot. The key romances are all heteronormative. By the end of *Clueless*, all the characters are neatly coupled up into straight couples: Cher and Josh, Dionne and Murray, Tai and Travis, Amber and Elton, even the teachers, Mr. Hall and Miss Geist. Same with *10 Things*: Kat and Patrick, Bianca and Cameron, Mandella and Michael, even the villains: Chastity and Joey. This is not the case with *Intentions*, but then, it's not a rom-com with a happy ending. Even so, all the relationships – the main relationship in *intentions* that we root for, which is Annette and Sebastian, is of course a hetero relationship.

The overwhelming straightness and whiteness of these adaptations is, of course, very true to each source material. Lesley Stern writes of *Clueless* in her essay *Emma in Los Angeles*:

> 'The film opens with a declaration that these are 'Kids in America', but the image gives us a very particular kind of 'America' and particular kind of kids. [Cher's] conception of the Beverly Center as the center of the world serves as an index of Hollywood's imperialism – its promulgation of a universalizing insularity, its relentless celebration of consumer culture and ready-to-go false consciousness.'

So, Stern points out how both Austen and *Clueless* universalise the problems of the white and relatively rich in their insular environment, as are these texts universalised in our culture. Stephen Holden, in his New York Times review of *10 Things*, also points out the narrow glimpse of teenage-hood *10 Things* represents. He writes:

> 'Like most other recent teen-age comedies, "10 Things I Hate About You" takes place in a super-affluent, all-American never-never land where high schoolers drive fancy new cars and have lavish wardrobes.'

And as we've already explored, the whole idea of *Intentions* is that it's about the white and affluent upper classes.

In terms of race and class and sexuality, all three of these films stay true to their source material in their whiteness, wealth, and heteronormativity … but they don't have to. There's a lot of conversation around adapting classic literature for a modern audience to include topics that are prevalent today, that weren't included or discussed in the mainstream literature of the time. How much can we twist a classic narrative before it becomes something completely different? At that point, perhaps it becomes a question of if we should be revisiting classic stories at all, and instead focus on original narratives. This is a much bigger conversation for another time, because these are not questions for *Clueless*, *10 Things* and *Intentions*. These films have already been made, and were made 20 years ago. These are questions for the future of modern adaptations of literary classics. A recent film that I think takes all of this into consideration is *The Half of It*, a Netflix film that came out in 2020, which was loosely based on the 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The main character is Chinese-American, and it features a queer love story at the centre of it. If you haven't seen

it already, I highly recommend, I really loved it. Because as much as I love *Clueless* and *10 Things*, and I think they're important cultural touchstones, I'm excited for more films like *The Half of It*: adaptations of classic literature that incorporate themes that weren't included in these classic texts; such as race, cultural heritage and queer identity. I'm looking forward to discovering the anatomy of a 2020s literary teen movie adaptation.

[upbeat rock music fade in]

Thank you very much for listening to this episode, I hope you enjoyed it. This episode was very research-heavy, and of course all my quotes will be cited and linked on my website, angourieslibrary.com. There you can also find extra articles, videos and resources I consulted to help write this script, and a full transcription of the episode if you prefer to read along [hello transcription readers! ☺] You can also follow me on Instagram, @the_community_library, that's where I hang out most. And I will chat to you in two weeks' time! Bye.

[upbeat rock music fade out]