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*[Jane Austen’s] knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.*

—“Review of *Emma*” (1815)

### Appreciation, Sympathy, and Emma

Miss Emma Woodhouse gets a bad rap. Even Jane Austen’s most loyal fans describe the leading heroine in *Emma* as “vain, selfish, and greedy....an incredible snob” (Lumsden). While such descriptors no doubt have relevance, they negate that Emma lives in a society and within power structures that shape and confine her. Emma is simply naïve. A more charitable view of Emma understands that she longs for relationships, she is doing the best she can, and she simply misunderstands the interactions and power dynamics in front of her. We should also remember that Emma is far from the only character with flaws. Perhaps most vividly seen with Mr. John Knightly showing “barely contained aggression” toward Mr. Woodhouse’s disabilities (James-Cavan par. 7). This essay will specifically analyze movements where Emma is naïve in her interactions with both Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton.

*Emma* opens with an announcement: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (689). In contemporary parlance, we might say that Emma is carefree, healthy, privileged, sheltered, and young—or inexperienced. Because of her father’s illnesses, overseen by Mr. Perry

who never actually speaks in the novel, Emma seldom ventures outside their home in Highbury (Kirkpatrick 30). Emma's mother dies when she is young. Emma only ever has a few acquaintances or friendships and is almost always treated as a superior because of her family's long residence. She is effectively encouraged by other characters to think highly of herself, as highlighted in an 1815 review attributed to Sir Walter Scott: "Amongst all these personages, Miss Woodhouse walks forth, the princess paramount, superior to all her companions in wit, beauty, fortune, and accomplishments, doated upon by her father and the Westons, admired, and almost worshipped by the more humble companions of the whist table." The novel tells us that her home village "afforded her no equals" (690). Further, readers learn from Mr. George Knightley that Emma is capable but lacking thus far in knowledge she might otherwise have: "Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists...very good lists they were....But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience" (706).

When it comes to knowing the vital sociopolitical functions of marriage, however, Emma is an expert. Her naiveté is not absolute. She has learned that marriage is a key to economic and social security and has acquired such knowledge through what Timothy J. Zeddies aptly names the *historical unconscious* (which, in brief, is a way of acknowledging and analyzing parts of life a person knows but is not specifically taught and/or parts of life that are constantly retaught and reinforced through everyday interactions and mores). Emma also learns about marriage through personal experience—her older sister, Isabella, marries Mr. John Knightley; her governess, Miss Anne Taylor, marries Mr. Weston, as readers also learn upon opening the book. Otherwise, Emma has little so-called life experience. Thus, it should come as no surprise that she should be interested in the subject of marriage, and it is only a next step that she should want to help match

the not-yet-married. Due to her wealth, her father's sickness, and her declarations to never marry, she does not set out to think about issues related to singledom as ever pertaining to herself.

We should also remember that Emma is not a real person, Austen created her; thus, we should also ask why Emma is created to behave as she does. Emma is more than her selfishness, naiveté, or immaturity. In addition to *Emma* being a representation of daily life, as captured in the epigraph, Emma's character is a way to show how the importance of marriage makes people abandon logic and rationality and makes them abuse their power. *Emma* shows that society, including other women in a manifestation of horizontal hostility, will clamp down on women who do not conform. Emma's character also allows readers to see how this society effectively makes marriage compulsory. Everybody knows Emma has no desire to marry but the novel ends with her becoming Mrs. George Knightley because of social forces, which include jealousy when Harriet eyes a single and very wealthy Mr. George Knightley. (Emma also has a brief flirtation toward Mr. Frank Churchill.) More than her father's desire for a caretaker, Emma's positionality (which includes whiteness) is what enables her to even consider a life without ever marrying without having to face the kind of changes to living standards that would threaten a single Jane Fairfax, for example. Collectively, Emma is naïve we might say because such allows Austen to critique the absoluteness of marriage in a woman's life and shows that women have more than one option, more than men (or one man) to pick from. As Austen has Emma tell Harriet, "A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her" (716). Ultimately, the conclusion of *Emma* preserves and restores the status quo. But, this does not diminish the challenges planted.

Emma's relationship with Harriet and desire to find Harriet an appropriate husband accounts for a large part of the novel. *Emma* describes Harriet as follows:

Harriet Smith's intimacy at Hartfield was soon a settled thing. Quick and decided in her ways, Emma lost no time in inviting, encouraging, and telling her to come very often; and as their acquaintance increased, so did their satisfaction in each other....[I]n every respect, as she saw more of her, she approved her, and was confirmed in all her kind designs. Harriet certainly was not clever, but she had a sweet, docile, grateful disposition, was totally free from conceit, and only desiring to be guided by any one she looked up to. Her early attachment to herself was very amiable; and her inclination for good company, and power of appreciating what was elegant and clever, shewed that there was no want of taste, though strength of understanding must not be expected. (700)

Emma's and Harriet's close bond has attracted significant scholarly attention. Some scholars such as Nicholas E. Preus argue that Emma is actually interested in marriage but adopts Harriet as a surrogate. He says, "Emma carries out a series of displaced sexual experimentations in her encounters" (200). Maureen M. Martin finds the power situated a bit differently: "Emma has tended to assume that, like a man, she could elevate her lowly bellowed to her own rank" (17). Martin sees Emma as using a "husband-like power" to "objectify Harriet" (12-13). Tiffany F. Potter and Mark K. Fulk interpret the attraction that manifests between Emma and Harriet using Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," specifically her concept of the lesbian continuum. Potter also complicates this continuum:

All of the women with whom Emma has significant relations are in weaker positions in the social hierarchy than she is. And it is here that Rich's theory of the lesbian continuum shows limitations. In application, the concept must be expanded to include the theorizing of power relations *between* women within the lesbian continuum. As it stands, Rich's theory offers a utopian view of relationships between women. (194)

Here I offer another possibility: Emma and Harriet are both naïve and due to constraints of geography and due to structures of their society are effectively forced into a kind of “compulsory friendship” as single women who take a liking toward one another. Harriet does not see the power Emma has over her, and Emma does not see the power she has over Harriet. At one crucial moment, Harriet addresses Emma: “What shall I do? What would you advise me to do? Pray, dear Miss Woodhouse, tell me what I ought to do” (715). Both have righteous intentions when it comes to providing each other company and security, especially Emma in her efforts to arrange a marriage between Harriet and Mr. Elton.

While readers can likely detect Mr. Elton’s growing feelings for Emma, Emma remains ever-convinced that he is deeply in love with Harriet. Emma is naïve and sees herself outside the bubble of people who need to marry. Mr. Elton delivers a charade (“a kind of riddle in which each syllable of a word, or complete word or phrase, is enigmatically described,” per the *Oxford English Dictionary*), and Emma tells Harriett, “Take it...it is for you” (726). Throughout Harriet’s equally innocent behaviors and questions—“What can it be, Miss Woodhouse?—what can it be? I have not an idea—I cannot guess it in the least. What can it possibly be? Do try to find it out, Miss Woodhouse. Do help me. I never saw any thing so hard”—Emma encourages her to see it as a declaration of love (727). Emma tells Harriett, “I congratulate you, my dear Harriet, with all my heart. This is an attachment which a woman may well feel pride in creating” (728).

When Mr. Elton later declares his love for Emma, her shock is sincere and clear. Emma says, “I am very much astonished, Mr. Elton. This to *me!* you forget yourself—you take me for my friend—any message to Miss Smith I shall be happy to deliver; but no more of this to *me*, if you please” (760). Mr. Elton’s unwanted outbursts continue. Horrified and bewildered and violated and realizing her naiveté, Emma adds:

It is impossible for me to doubt any longer. You have made yourself too clear. Mr. Elton, my astonishment is much beyond any thing I can express. After such behaviour, as I have witnessed during the last month, to Miss Smith—such attentions as I have been in the daily habit of observing—to be addressing me in this manner—this is an unsteadiness of character, indeed, which I had not supposed possible! Believe me, sir, I am far, very far, from gratified in being the object of such professions. (760)

Mr. Elton sees Emma and believes her for the taking, believes her *his*, and repeatedly attempts to control and silence her, metaphorically raping her (Gudmarsdottir; Pegues 11; Wilson). But, Emma is never silent and becomes one of many literary and actual “figures of power, resilient survivors, and transgressors...no less than victims of abuse” (Gudmarsdottir 220).

Such a reading is somewhat in contrast to Celia A. Easton’s analysis of this interaction that begins, “No one is raped in Jane Austen’s *Emma*” (par. 1). Easton recognizes the violence directed toward Emma—that Mr. Elton “takes advantage of the circumstances,” that he “insists that he has only been responding to ‘encouragement,’” and that Emma is stuck—but does not extend it to a metaphoric rape, only to how women’s demands are disregarded (par. 1, 15, 19, 21). By using the suggested framework of a metaphoric rape, we can better recognize the operational and systemic violence at hand. By naming this violence in such strong ways, we can better appreciate some of what Emma feels while being attacked. By naming it for what it is, we can acknowledge that a naïve person like Emma necessitates additional understanding. That Emma keeps this *metaphoric rape* a secret is yet another indication of it meriting such language. Indeed, other actions in *Emma* are generally known among characters and happen in the open.

While on the note of this consent-less, violent encounter, one more encounter deserves mentioning that is otherwise beyond the scope of this short paper. Mr. George Knightley’s

behavior, at least according to some more contemporary insights from Feminist Theory and Queer Studies, is at least somewhat predatory and also falls within the domain of sexual violence (Fischel; Pegoda). Toward the conclusion, he finally confesses his long-term plan to Emma: “The good was all to myself, by making you an object of the tenderest affection to me. I could not think about you so much without doating on you, faults and all; and by dint of fancying so many errors, have *been in love with you* ever since you were *thirteen at least*” (944; emphasis added). Is Mr. Knightley, with the addition of his age and wealth, just seeking to control a naïve but strong woman by locking her in marriage? People tend to see Mr. Knightley with an idealized gaze, as “the voice of reason and propriety” (Martin 12).

*Emma* prompts curiosity. With its range of characters, discourses, and events, the novel is anything but naïve. Throughout *Emma* we see Emma and those around her navigate situations that test their abilities to negotiate comfortable, satisfactory places in nineteenth-century Britain. Possible directions for future research include more work that considers readings of a naïve Emma. The presence of illness and disability is common throughout the novel—colds, headaches, and fevers are ubiquitous but never ail Emma. Also, she does not seem to realize how much her father’s illnesses impact her life, positively and negatively. On this note, Mr. Knightly, thinking he can merely move in with the Woodhouses, underestimates the emotional and physical demands associated with being around and caring for someone facing prolonged health challenges. Additional research can certainly consider other issues of consent and *Emma*, as well as insights provided by Sound Studies—there are remarkably few sounds in outside of speech—or by Digital Humanities. By underscoring Emma’s naiveté here, I advance a way to further recognize how Austen creates power dynamics and a more forgiving, gracious way of seeing Emma, our proto-feminist.

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