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Jane Austen Americanized: The democratic principle in recent adaptations of *Emma*

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Abstract

*When they first reached an American readership, Jane Austen's novels enjoyed mixed reactions among intellectuals. The main charge levelled against Jane Austen's fiction was that it conflicted with the democratic principles American society was based on. The next century brought about an explosion in the attention paid to Jane Austen, whether via adaptations, spin-offs, biopics, musicals, detective fiction, scholarly texts, societies or even websites. Most of these creative extensions of Jane Austen's ideas (and her personality) seem to embrace contemporary American values and sensibilities and therefore, logically, make attempts at revising some of the less palatable aspects of the English society of the Regency era. This paper focuses on two prime examples of such a revisionist approach to Jane Austen's most class-conscious novel, *Emma*, in Douglas McGrath's eponymous 1996 film adaptation and in *Clueless*, Amy Heckerling's 1995 satirical film based on the same novel.*

Jane Austen is one of very few writers to have become an icon of a specific time and also one of the most popular writers of all time. The literature of the long 18th century (of which Austen was a part) saw the arrival of the first successful professional woman writers and a massive growth in readership.

Yet she was not supposed to become a “global trend”, a darling of British and American readers especially. After her death, embarrassed by the fact that his aunt's name had been exposed to the public, her nephew wrote, let us face it, an untruthful biography, believing that he was doing his best for his late aunt's reputation.¹ The book reflects traits expected from ladies (such as domesticity, propriety, modesty and a lack of financial motivation) rather than a truthful account of Jane Austen's life and opinions.

Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed in her early motives . . . She could scarcely believe what she termed her great good fortune when *Sense and Sensibility* produced a clear profit of about £150. Few so gifted were so truly unpretending. She regarded the above sum as a prodigious recompense for that which had cost her nothing . . . So much did she shrink from notoriety, that no accumulation of fame would have introduced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen . . . in public she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress. (Copeland, 1997, 12) ²

The posthumous picture of Austen as a model “lady” by no means helped boost the market for her books in Britain; subsequently the output of her pen rose in popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. Although novels by women sold very well, male essayists and reviewers had a tendency to treat this fiction with disdain. The late-19th century reception of Austen among the *literati*, after her name had already been established, was not always positive. One of her famous detractors, Ralph Waldo Emerson, found Austen’s fiction “vulgar in style, sterile in invention, imprisoned in wretched conventions of English society, without genius, wit, knowledge of the world . . . Suicide is more respectable” (Favret, 2000, p. 168). Mark Twain is notable for his antipathy towards Austen’s fiction and his hostile joke is much quoted: “Whenever I take up *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*, I feel like a barkeeper entering the Kingdom of Heaven” (Twain, 2004, p. 306). James Fenimore Cooper’s literary debut was motivated by scoffing at Jane Austen’s fiction, claiming that even he himself would be able to write a better domestic novel (Favret, 2000, p. 168) – which he promptly attempted – and realized that a genuinely American topic, ripe for novelistic treatment, lay elsewhere.

The reason behind the general hostility towards Austen’s fiction was mostly pragmatic. Publishing novels and finding one’s readership meant securing a source of income. Naturally enough, male writers did not want to share the literary market with female competition. In the case of American readers, one more reason must be taken into account, and that is the lack of democratic principle in Austen’s fiction, a thing hardly palatable to any American patriot. As late as 1924, an English writer publishing in the *American Mercury*, Arthur Bingham Walkley, wondered whether fans of Austen’s fiction could truly exist in America, claiming that “I can no more conceive an American reader getting excited about Highbury and Box Hill . . . than I can myself about Appomattox or Old Point Comfort . . . Nor do I think that that Miss Austen had any sympathy with the democratic ideal” (Walkley, 1924, p. 320).

A century later, compliance with the status quo (and therefore an apparent lack of a democratic ideal) is still retained in Austen’s novels (even more so in *Emma*, which I have used

for my article) and yet contemporary consumers, mostly academic and even lay persons, are more acutely aware of Jane Austen's satirical gift – and the degree of ambivalence her fiction is imbued with, since satire, with its power of unsettling hierarchies, presents an antithesis to orthodoxy (Bakhtin, 1971, p. 14).

Jane Austen has been proclaimed a satirist by many.³ It is said that a satirist should be a detached author, smug and self-confident, who looks down on the follies of society from his/her high horse of absolute certainty. Nevertheless, the best satire is rife with ambivalence since satirists do not necessarily write from a confident position – they are often too baffled by life's complexity. This “protean” characteristic of satire in general and Jane Austen's satire in particular enables her texts (*Emma* included) to be read in a double context and even construed as a covert criticism of the English class system. The very slipperiness of class distinction and Austen's ambivalent legacy may have enabled Mary Favret (2000, p. 176) to take a leap of faith in claiming: “There seems to be some oscillation here: Austen turns a dispassionate eye on the world of British society, with its conventions and idiosyncrasies, at the same time, she creates in her novels a world of free agents, a world that looks vaguely American.”

Jane Austen is known to the American public chiefly through the silver screen. Carol M. Dole (1998, p. 59) is convinced that “American films, by and large, participate in the national dogma of individual achievement . . . This ethics of individualism, combined with our democratic ideals, fosters a myth of classlessness deeply ingrained in our culture.” Should she be right, a contemporary consumer might approach American-made adaptations of Jane Austen's classics in a similar way to early readers of Austen's novels in America, since the important ingredient – the American ideal of classlessness – is present even two centuries later.

My objective is to trace the boundaries of class (or, alternatively, to find their non-existence) in contemporary American treatment of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Since most contemporary consumers of classical literature, Americans at the forefront, perceive an adaptation as a gateway to the author, I have selected the two most recent film adaptations of *Emma*: Douglas McGrath's eponymous 1996 version of the classic, and Amy Heckerling's 1995 *Clueless*, Austen's novel reimagined within the setting of a 1990s Beverly Hills high school.

When the 1996 adaptation is analysed, a keen observer must conclude that the script is more than conscious of class distinctions and strives hard not to ratify them. Emma, the ultimate snob, jealous guardian of the status quo and Austen's chief target of satire, is presented as a good-hearted, lovable creation and her less palatable behaviour is smoothed over, downplayed or presented as one of her funny quirks. Emma's inner circle of friends and acquaintances includes only members of her own class and not well-to-do tradespeople such as the Coles. Her attempts

to get an invitation to a party of people she would normally snub are scripted in such a clever manner that the effect of Emma's manoeuvring emerges as funny, not ridiculous or the butt of satire.

Another case in point is that in both the book and the adaptation Emma chooses Harriet Smith, a simple, uneducated girl of mysterious parentage, as her bosom friend. She labours under the misapprehension that Harriet must be a natural (though illegitimate) daughter of a gentleman, which elevates her socially to the point of earning even Emma's friendship and deserving of a good match. It is interesting to watch the film's attempts to "make Harriet equal" to Emma, one of them being that the set of dresses worn by Harriet becomes smarter and more elaborate to mark Harriet's social rise in Emma's circle. In the scene in which Emma is shocked and horrified into recognition of her true feelings for Mr Knightley by Harriet's suggestion that she herself admires him, also believing their feelings are mutual, Emma and Harriet's dresses are similar in colour, but Harriet's is much more elegant.

Ultimately, all the loose ends are tied and the unmarried protagonists choose a partner appropriate to their rank, with Harriet accepting the proposal of her initial suitor, a prosperous farmer, Mr Martin, the best option for an illegitimate daughter of a tradesman (as opposed to a gentleman of noble blood). This information never makes it to the screen.

The film seems to persuade the audience that Emma's final embrace of Harriet at her wedding does not spell the end of their intimate friendship. Austen (2000, pp. 317–318) suggests that people separated by social strata must drift apart: "The intimacy between her and Emma must sink, their friendship must change into a calmer sort of goodwill; and, fortunately, what ought to be, and must be, seemed already beginning, and the most gradual, natural manner." Jane Fairfax, by education, accomplishments and class an ideal (future) friend for Mrs Knightley as stipulated by Austen, is never mentioned in the film in this context.

Perhaps one more point to add: Emma's anger at Mr Elton's marriage proposal (a country vicar who dared to raise his eyes to the uncrowned queen of Highbury) is cleverly mixed with Emma's compassion for the disappointment suffered by Harriet, whose hope of attracting Mr Elton she nurtured. Emma's grief on behalf of her friend is enough to take the audience's minds off her initial monstrous snobbery.

At the Box Hill picnic, Emma insults Miss Bates, the impoverished spinster, and gets a verbal thrashing from Mr Knightley, who has always acted as her advisor and moral guide:

Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance. I wouldn't quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in this situation—but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor, she has

sunk from the comforts; and, if she lives to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done indeed! (Austen, 2000, p. 246)

It is necessary to point out that the diatribe between Emma and Mr Knightley that follows is not inspired by Emma's irreverent approach to far too many people, but his chastisement is unleashed by Emma insulting "one of them", an impoverished lady (as opposed to a common woman). Yet Jeremy Northam's immaculate acting conveys his deepening attachment to Emma and the whole scene may leave a different impression from the one Austen stipulated.

In the 1996 adaptation of *Emma* the status quo is to go unchallenged as a result of the pairing off of the couples according to their social status. However, every disquieting proof of it is either downplayed or disguised according to a premeditated plan. Class assumptions do exist, yet they need to be evaded at any cost.

Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* offers many opportunities for satirical treatment of class-based assumptions. Its equivalent of "Emma", the teenage socialite Cher Horowitz, born and raised in Beverly Hills, also attempts to rule her world, that is, her litigator father and the high school she attends. Just like Emma, she plays matchmaker whenever she can, and she also takes under her wing a newcomer called Tai ("Harriet") in a flannel shirt, and initiates her makeover into a well-dressed member of the popular clique of students. Just like Emma, Cher's attempts to assert control over others are brutally rebuffed. On the same day that she fails her driving test she realizes that Tai feels confident in winning Josh (the Mr Knightley character, Cher's step-brother) in preference to Cher, "a virgin who can't drive". At this point Cher cries "I have made a monster!" and the film makes an admission of class distinction in modern American culture.

Dole (1998, p. 73) points out that "popular culture treatments of high school social stratification tend to disguise class as clique." During the film, Cher encounters several high school cliques – popular guys and girls (her own base) – wannabes, the BMW Mafia and "Loadies" – boys associated with a penchant for flannel shirts and drugs. Before Tai is remodelled into her popular new identity, she feels drawn to Travis despite Cher's warning.

The ending matches Josh appropriately with Cher and Tai with Travis (who has started a 12-step programme and ditched his flannel garb) and the most fundamental determinants of status do not disappear but deepen.

Both films, *Emma* as well as *Clueless*, though to differing degrees, shoot numerous holes in the credibility of the American myth of classlessness. Contemporary filmmakers are fully aware of the fact, striving hard to disguise the very existence of class systems by evading,

downplaying or ignoring the problem altogether. As Sue Parrill (2002, p. 133) would have it, “American films undermine the notions of class while subscribing to it.”

¹ Women joined men in writing literature despite the presence of many obstacles: publishing fiction could threaten a woman’s reputation, as well as her social position, since proper women were “modest, retiring, essentially domestic and private. Authorship of any kind entailed publicity, thrusting oneself before the public eye—thus loss of femininity” (Copeland, 1997, p. 13).

² Mr Austen-Leigh’s memoir was published long after the death of Jane and even Cassandra – which meant nobody could object.

³ By nobody more obviously than Marvin Mudrick in his *Satire as Defence and Discovery*.

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