

## *Emma* and Literary Scholarship

Lionel Trilling famously observed in 1957 that “the difficulty of *Emma* is never overcome” (viii), and that no matter how many times the novel is read, we will never be able “to flatter ourselves that we have fully understood what the novel is doing. The effect is extraordinary, perhaps unique” (ix).

In recent years, Austen scholars have come more and more to the conclusion that the “difficulty” that Trilling sees in interpreting *Emma* is not actually a difficulty at all. It is, in fact, the central beauty of the text that it is open to so many divergent and fascinating readings. In the previous chapter, I described the novel as being akin to a crystal held up to the light, able to project different—but equally beautiful—readings. I also observed that this prismatic quality of the novel is the chief reason it was able to inspire so many different filmic adaptations. Hence, it is important to discuss what kind of scholarly readings the novel has supported over the years before proceeding to an analysis of the individual films themselves.

Admittedly, since the scholarly interpretations of the novel are so diversified, they are difficult to categorize and make generalizations about. However, it is possible to suggest that there are two essential ways in which most scholars read the novel—firstly, as a domestic Bildungsroman, and secondly, as a social critique. The domestic Bildungsroman school of *Emma* interpretation includes those scholars who read the novel as if it were a coming-of-age story, or a tale of moral reform. These readings, though themselves often starkly different from one another, tend to emphasize the need for the title character to shed her snobberies, outgrow her overactive imagination, and put an end to her alienation from other women. Notably, such readings may be framed with a charitable eye towards the heroine, in which case her maturation is viewed as empowering and as a normal process for a woman of her age, or they may have a more moralistic

and disapproving tone, condemning Emma for her flaws and seeing the exposure of her many errors as a humorous chastening and humiliation of the character.

On the other hand, scholars who regard the novel as a social critique tend to view it as a story of the pressures placed on young women to conform to certain modes of behavior deemed appropriate to class, status, and gender. These readings generally cast Emma's home life with her hypochondriac father as a form of domestic imprisonment, view her marriage to Mr. Knightley as predetermined by societal expectations, and regard the claustrophobic setting of Highbury as a site of boredom and repression. Critics who see Emma as existing in a very confining world are all the more apt to look kindly upon her revolutionary attempts to shake up the status quo with her matchmaking, her sponsorship of Harriet, and her reluctance to marry and befriend those whom society demands that she marry and befriend. In many such readings, several of the personal "faults" that were assigned to Emma above seem to be revealed either as secret virtues or as a natural consequence of the confining society in which she lived. Indeed, Knightley might ultimately come to a similar conclusion himself, since he is inspired to proclaim Emma "faultless in spite of her faults" at the end of the novel.

The word *Bildungsroman* literally means "formation novel" and defines a storytelling mode that focuses on the maturation and education of a central protagonist. Although the genre traditionally has featured a male hero who comes of age during the course of a long, sometimes picaresque, journey, *Emma* breaks the conventions traditionally attributed to the *Bildungsroman* by featuring a heroine who essentially stays at home. According to Denise Kohn, author of "Reading *Emma* as a Lesson on 'Ladyhood': A Study in the Domestic *Bildungsroman*":

The main problem in recognizing *Emma* as a *Bildungsroman* is that the genre has always been associated with the theme of journey or quest. And *Emma* is the antithesis of the novel of quest: it is a domestic novel....What seems to be the safety of the world of domesticity—compared to the world of quest—caused both male and female readers to dismiss the domestic setting. But heroines such as Emma do have to overcome obstacles in order to become adult, and these obstacles are often domesticated or different versions of those that heroes face on their quest for independence....It is also crucial to realize that the development of the domestic heroine differs from

the development of the men, because female development is based upon a definition of self within a web of personal relationships. Although the domestic heroine must achieve intellectual independence and self-understanding to become an adult, she does not want to physically and emotionally sever herself from her family and friends. (47–48)

To read the novel as a Bildungsroman is to read it either as the gradual maturation of Emma Woodhouse or, less charitably, as the moral reform of Emma Woodhouse. In either case, Bildungsroman critics tend to view the character as growing less fanciful, less snobbish, and more empathetic to the less fortunate women of Highbury as she learns to better understand her own heart and the world around her.

Of all of these three imperfections—imaginism, snobbery, and coldness towards other women—Emma's tendency to be too much of a fantasist (or imaginist) is the one which readers generally find the most endearing and forgivable. According to a Bildungsroman reading of the novel that focuses on Emma's runaway imagination, Emma has read a few too many romance novels, and does not have enough experience in the real world to truly understand how society works. Hence, Emma is apt to see Frank Churchill as an idealized Byronic figure and thinks too well of him, leaving her vulnerable to his charms and credulous of his lies. She has also concocted a fanciful fiction around the parentless Harriet, whom she believes to be of noble birth simply because orphaned characters in novels are invariably revealed to be the children of counts and barons during the closing chapters. This error causes her to entertain rather lofty aspirations for finding a wealthy, upper-class husband for the lowly Harriet. Other symptoms of Emma's imaginism include her painting an idealized physical portrait of Harriet, whom she makes too tall, and her romantic-fiction-induced assumption that Jane Fairfax fell in love with the married Mr. Dixon when he saved her from a boating accident.

A. Walton Litz is emblematic of critics who interpret the novel in this fashion. In his 1965 book *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development*, he wrote that "[t]he basic movement of *Emma* is from delusion to self-recognition, from illusion to reality" (132). According to Litz, the heroine knows neither how to properly view the world around her, nor understands the workings of her own heart, but her perceptions are aligned by Mr. Knightley, a character who is shown to be a realistically noble role model, as opposed to an idealized figure.

A more contemporary critic who reads the novel in a similar fashion is Loraine Fletcher, who writes in "Emma: The Shadow Novelist" (*Critical Survey* 4, 1992), that *Emma* is "[a] novel about Romanticism, balancing the claims of unique disruptive imaginism against the claims of Christian patriarchy, and finding—it's a close-run thing—for the latter." For Fletcher, Emma and Frank Churchill are "fictionalizers and self-fictionalizers" inspired by the romanticized figures from the sentimental fiction of the time, who are in need of correction, but whose whimsical perspectives are missed when they are altered or expelled from the world of the novel (36–44).

Domestic Bildungsroman readings tend to associate Emma's imaginism with a form of childishness that needs to be shed in order for Emma to reach maturity. The novel does indeed seem to support this critical view of Emma's imaginism, especially since her whimsical plan to marry Harriet to a well-off clergyman results in the disruption of Harriet's romance with farmer Robert Martin, causing great emotional pain to all parties involved and nearly condemning Harriet to a life of impoverished spinsterhood. Because of these plot developments, many readers assume that Emma's match-making practices, which are strongly linked to her imaginist worldview, should be condemned by the reader for their destructiveness.

Another domestic Bildungsroman reading of the novel emphasizes Emma's need to shed her snobberies and her elitism on the path to maturity and adulthood. While many critics agree that Emma is an elitist, there is some disagreement over the exact nature of her elitism and its causes. For Beth Fawkes Tobin, Emma's snobbery is a function of her vanity, and of her fear of other, less socially important women than herself, whose real virtues and beauty would outshine hers if they occupied the same privileged position in society.<sup>1</sup> Other critics have viewed Emma's snobberies as a defensiveness born of confusion concerning the sweeping cultural changes that she was seeing in her lifetime. John Mosier has made a strong case in favor of reading Jane Austen as, in the words of Frederick Engels, a chronicler of the "progressive inroads of the rising bourgeoisie on the society of nobles that reconstituted itself after 1815" (241) and the surest sign of this concern in *Emma* itself is the inclusion of characters such as the Coles, Mrs. Elton, and Mr. Weston, all of whom are buying their respectability. Emma's attitude towards this rising middle class seems somewhat in-

consistent, as she approves of Mr. Weston's upward mobility but gives little support to the Coles and Mrs. Elton. Since she personally likes Mr. Weston, her snobberies seem chiefly directed against those she is indifferent to, or those she actively dislikes.

As Maaja A. Stewart explains in *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fiction* (1993), "[t]he imperial British culture that brought unprecedented wealth to England also increased the poverty of the underclass and of women in all classes," (137) causing a cultural shift that bewildered Emma:

Emma's unfulfilled relations with women are determined by her radical confusion about the relation of class to gender, a confusion exacerbated by the shift that the novel registers from a society divided by status to one defined by class. This confusion about class and women becomes especially striking in a heroine who is notorious for spelling out with ruthless genteel snobbery the exact degree of status that can be conferred on men like Mr. Martin, Mr. Elton, and Mr. Cole. In contrast to this clarity, Emma consistently tries to ignore or reinterpret the real class standing of women like Miss Taylor, Harriet Smith, Miss Bates, and Jane Fairfax.

Emma's confusion and potential anxiety about the asymmetrical relation of class and gender assume two forms. In the first, typified by her interactions with Harriet Smith and Miss Taylor-Mrs. Weston, Emma ignores economic and class differences and attempts to confer her own status on the other women. In the second, dramatized in her interactions with Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax, Emma attempts to avoid any relationship with those whose destiny and "nature" or class status glaringly do not harmonize. In the first place, Emma mimics the role of a man by assuming control over the status of women; in the second, Emma refuses to acknowledge her kinship with women whose destinies have marked them as victims of the class structure. Both responses displace attention from the material condition of women's lives. (153)

While Emma's views on class and status might seem abstract, they assume tremendous importance when one remembers that Emma bases a great many of her actions in the novel on assumptions about what kinds of relationships are appropriate for her to have with the other residents of Highbury. Also, as Stewart explains, these class and status issues cannot be viewed as distinct from gender issues, as the novel is principally concerned with Emma's relationships to other women, all of whom occupy social positions beneath Emma.<sup>2</sup> These thoughts about Emma's snobberies in relation to other women bring us to a discussion of the flaw that critics have most often attributed to

Emma in recent years—she is alienated from members of her own sex. While Stewart attributes this alienation to specific social causes, it is equally possible that the root of the problem is psychological. The early death of Emma's mother and the marriage of Emma's sister might well have left Emma feeling abandoned by the women in her life. Also, the soothing, uncritical attentions of her governess, Miss Taylor, might have accustomed Emma to flattery, causing her to seek out relationships with the same power dynamic and to forgo more equitable and challenging friendships with women.

Janet Todd makes a similar argument in *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980), suggesting that Jane Austen was skeptical of women's ability to form meaningful, honest relationships with one another as equals. Todd finds evidence of this skepticism in all of Austen's novels, but focuses much of her attention on Emma's unhealthy interactions with the women of Highbury. In her study of *Emma*, Todd observes that Austen places Emma in the company of Harriet and Miss Taylor (both of whom she can manipulate) for most of the novel. Emma's relations with the other women in the novel are no healthier. She is most resentful of Miss Bates, the spinster she fears she may one day become, and of Jane Fairfax because Jane is an intelligent woman of her own age who competes with Emma for the affections of those around her.

It is only at the end of the novel—when Jane's secret engagement is revealed and the two apologize to one another for nurturing ill feelings—that there is a promise of potential friendship. However, Austen rapidly writes Jane out of Highbury, causing Emma to remark that their time together was ending just as they were getting to know one another. For Todd, a friendship between Emma and Jane could have been the most rewarding and intimate female friendship in all of Austen's novels, but Austen refused to portray it. What makes Todd's reading of the novel so intriguing is that it suggests that Emma is never able to fully overcome her alienation from other women, making the text a story of a woman who never completely achieves the maturity and self-fulfillment she should (274–301).

If some of the above readings—which focus on Emma's need to reform her attitudes about imaginism, class, and gender—seem too hard on Emma, and seem to moralize too much about her behavior, then it is important to note that there are some domestic Bildungsro-

man critics who notably see Emma's personal growth as her empowerment instead of as her chastening or humiliation. For example, Denise Kohn posits that "[o]ne of Austen's greatest achievements in *Emma* is that she writes a novel of education—a Bildungsroman—that instructs her readers to deconstruct the pervasive images of 'Ladyhood' created by her period's conduct-book writers" (45).

Kohn explains that, "[i]n the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world of a rising middle class and declining upper class, social status and survival depended not only on money but also on manners—those culturally constructed markers that define community membership.... During a period of what seemed like class chaos to many Britons, readers increasingly turned to the rising artistic form of the novel to find narrative guidance for their behavior" (46). And what they found in the heroine of *Emma* was not the shy, silly heroine of most conduct books, but a far more complex character who grows during the course of the novel. "So while the character of Emma is a celebration of female individualism and power, Austen also shows how Emma abuses her power by crossing the threshold of propriety and domesticity in her manipulation of Harriet and insensitivity to Miss Bates. By the end of the novel, however, Emma as a character is strengthened by her experience, gaining greater social and self-knowledge. As Austen's portrait of an ideal 'lady,' she is strong and assertive but is also more caring and sensitive to others" (46).

Although domestic Bildungsroman critics may differ about the nature of Emma's personal flaws, they tend to agree that, if Emma's quest to improve herself ultimately succeeds by the end of the novel, it is because she has learned the proper mode of behavior from her interactions with another major character. Critics in recent years, including Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have emphasized all that Emma learns from the other female characters, particularly Jane Fairfax. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar explain that Jane Fairfax and Emma are doubles in their antithetical natures:

Jane is totally passive and quiet, despite the fact that she is repeatedly humiliated by her lover. Indeed, although Jane Fairfax is eventually driven to a gesture of revolt—the pathetic decision to endure the 'slave-trade' of becoming a governess rather than wait for Frank Churchill to become her husband—she is a paragon of submissive politeness and patience throughout her ordeal (157–158).

...A player of word games, a painter of portraits and a spinner of tales, Emma is clearly an avatar of Austen the artist. And more than all the other playful, lively girls, Emma reminds us that the witty woman is responding to her own confining situation with words that become her weapon, a defense against banality, a way of at least seeming to control her life....Yet Austen could not punish her heroine more than she does....The very brilliant and assertive playfulness that initially marks her as a heroine is finally criticized on the grounds that it is self-deluding....Not only does the female artist fail, her efforts are condemned as tyrannical and coercive. (158–159)

So, for Gilbert and Gubar, what is the nature of the lesson that Emma learns in the novel?

The civil falsehoods that keep society running make each character a riddle to the others, a polite puzzle. With professions of openness Frank Churchill has been keeping a secret that threatens to pain both Emma and Jane Fairfax. Emma discovers the ambiguous nature of discourse that mystifies, withholds, coerces, and lies as much as it reveals....Although Emma is the center of Austen's fiction, what she has to learn is her vulnerability as a female. (158–159)

Although Gilbert and Gubar make an excellent case for Jane Fairfax as the one from whom Emma learns the most about herself and her position in society, there has been a long tradition in literary criticism granting Mr. Knightley the primary role of tutor to Miss Woodhouse. A strong argument can be made to that effect, and many critics who view the novel as a domestic Bildungsroman cast Mr. Knightley in this light. Firstly, Mr. Knightley appears to be more perceptive and more prescient than Emma. He predicts that Emma's involvement with Harriet Smith will lead to trouble, and the novel seems to bear out the validity of his fears. He is also proved correct in his worries that Frank might reveal himself to be more of a Churchill than a Weston at heart. Also, while Emma is the first to determine that Jane nurtures a secret and forbidden love, Knightley is the first to discern that her love is Frank and not Mr. Dixon. As a protector of impoverished gentlewomen, Mr. Knightley also outshines Emma, giving food and attention to Miss Bates and insisting, properly, on making Jane's life in Highbury as comfortable as possible. Perhaps most importantly, it is also Mr. Knightley who is afforded the distinction of chastising Emma following her ill-judged behavior at the Box Hill picnic.

In various ways, Emma offends virtually all gathered during the Box Hill excursion. She humbles Mrs. Elton by assuming the position



of the head of the gathering, she flirts openly with Frank Churchill (making both Jane and Mr. Knightley jealous), and she slyly labels the poor Miss Bates a talkative bore in front of the whole assembly. Mr. Knightley disapproves of all of these actions, but he focuses on Emma's insult to Miss Bates, whose poverty should secure Emma's public support and compassion instead of her derision. Since many critics agree that Mr. Knightley is correct to criticize Emma for her ill treatment of Miss Bates, his role in this key segment is central to a reading of Mr. Knightley as the hero of the novel and even, possibly, as the voice of the author herself. The segment in which Mr. Knightley humbles Emma is also critical to the novel because she weeps after hearing Mr. Knightley's words. The tears signify her shame over realizing the error of her ways. They are also a sign of the growing love that she feels for Mr. Knightley, since her tears are partly from disappointment that her actions have garnered such strong disapproval from one she esteems so highly.

For many domestic Bildungsroman critics, such as Nigel Everett, Mr. Knightley's wise example as landowner and first man of Highbury makes him symbolic of society as a whole, and of the idealized value system of the Christian patriarchy. Therefore, as Emma aligns her worldview to match his, she has ended her fruitless rebellion against the dictates of a just system and embraced the Tory values that made England a global superpower. Also, although such readings have fallen out of favor since their post-World-War-II heyday, some Bildungsroman critics have suggested that Knightley's principal task in the novel is to awaken Emma's cold heart with love. These critics (who include Edmund Wilson, Marvin Mudrick, and Mark Schorer) see Knightley as the only man strong enough to domesticate Emma, ending her resistance to marriage and redirecting her affection from an unnatural crush on Harriet to healthy feelings of romance for him. Critics who read the novel as a social critique, however, generally adopt strikingly different views of the character than those presented by domestic Bildungsroman critics, as we shall see later on in this chapter.

Because Emma's love for Knightley increases as she grows in knowledge and sensitivity, many domestic Bildungsroman critics see the romance between Emma and Mr. Knightley as linked directly to the story of Emma's moral improvement. The possible connection be-

tween Emma's maturation and her romance with Knightley grants tremendous symbolic weight to the marriage that takes place between the two at the end of the novel. Hence, any interpretation of the ending of the novel and the significance of the marriage bears great weight on an interpretation of the overall themes of the story. For many critics, the marriage between Emma and Mr. Knightley at the end of the novel is problematic because it is unclear how the famously ironic Jane Austen intends her readers to interpret the final line, which describes "the perfect happiness of the union" between the two central characters.<sup>3</sup> However, domestic Bildungsroman critics tend to read the closing lines of the novel literally and anticipate a happy marriage between Emma and Mr. Knightley.<sup>4</sup>

In her 1975 book *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler describes the plot of *Emma* as "the classic plot of the conservative novel" in which "the heroine's classic task, of choosing a husband, takes her out of any unduly narrow or solipsistic concern with her own happiness" (250). Butler writes that the moral reform of Emma that accompanies this quest is facilitated by Mr. Knightley, whose jealousies and imperfections do not call into question his essential "rightness" throughout the novel. The reform is also qualified by the fact that even at the end of the novel Emma makes mistakes, among them being her assumption that Mr. Knightley is about to proclaim a love of Harriet when he is really trying to propose, and her continuing to harbor sympathies for Frank Churchill.

One key point that distinguishes Butler's analysis from other critics who see the novel as principally about the reform of Emma is that Butler explores the social limitations placed upon the character, and the pressures on Emma to marry:

Emma is vulnerable, and one reason is that her stake in Highbury is not deep. Her very claim to social precedence is so precarious, while she remains a spinster, that she is superceded by Mrs. Elton. When she marries Mr. Knightley her rank will be secured, and she will become involved in the land by sharing in its ownership....At the end of the novel Emma is about to assume a clearly defined and permanent role in the community, and what is left outside has been touched with the insubstantiality which Burke gives to the people and the ideas that will not belong. (274)

Here Butler appears to recognize the validity of some of the claims of scholars who read the novel as a social critique by acknowl-

edging the external pressures placed upon Emma to marry. However, these observations do not compel her to conclude that the novel is anything other than a traditional, conservative work. There are, of course, other interpretations of the novel that cast the novel as conservative and patriotic, and that see Highbury as idyllic and Donwell Abbey as an impressive imperial seat. For example, in "The View of Donwell Abbey," a chapter in his 1994 book *The Tory View of Landscape*, Nigel Everett described Austen's novels as gradually demonstrating the author's "increasingly unambiguous desire to contrast Old England with the new uniformity of a shallow, urban-inspired sophistication" (183). In the context of this agenda, Austen depicts Donwell Abbey as "the essential idea of England herself" as a seat of freedom, beauty, and virtue (197).

However, there is an undeniable claustrophobia inherent in the small community, and a critic such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, who sees the novel as more of a social critique than a coming-of-age story, seems largely correct in describing Highbury as a "landlocked, static world" (86) and in pointing out that "the entire action [of the novel] except the Box Hill picnic takes place within an area of two square miles" (60–61).

It is characteristic of Jane Austen that...she portrays a society that closely restricts mental space—particularly of women, who are allowed very little solitude or freedom....The sense of being hedged in, being watched and discussed by the whole community, characterizes most of her novels. Paradoxically, it also forces her characters—at least the central ones—to be very private. What are the areas of life where thoughts, feelings, and information can be shared, and what are the areas where secrecy is desirable, forms one of the implied moral debates of her work. (74)

Mukherjee further describes Highbury as a world in which class divisions are clearly delineated and reinforced by events in the novel, in which annoying outsiders are expelled, and in which a recurring "motif of spatial enclosure...becomes a metaphor for [the] stasis" that constitutes life in Emma's social circle (65). In this community, no action taken by any resident or visitor is too trivial to go uncommented upon, and the smallness of the social circle forces intimacy and civility upon those who would much rather not have to spend time in one another's company. The world of Highbury is so confining and personally invasive, in fact, that Mukherjee concludes that, "[i]n this hot-

house atmosphere, unless a person is very determined and strong willed, the pressures of the group, constant interaction, gossip and rumor will predetermine the course of his or her life" (85).

Mukherjee, like other critics who read the novel as a social critique, does not moralize about the personal flaws of the characters in *Highbury*, but laments that the society is repressive to the point that it forces strict conformity and punishes and expels all those who fail to fit seamlessly into a provincial lifestyle. Despite the fact that he is aware of Jane Austen's moral interest in "true speaking," Tony Tanner also qualifies as a critic who reads the novel as a satire of the confining life of bourgeoisie women in Regency-period England. In his 1986 critical survey *Jane Austen*, he writes:

Emma often has to have recourse to silence rather than utter her real feelings—her one slip in this matter, her joke at Miss Bates' expense, looms amazingly large and serves to indicate, among other things, what a degree of repression such a community, and its matters, depends upon. And it would be wrong to mentally gloss over the difficulties—the tediums, the longueurs, the "inelegances" of that society. (193)

Tanner is intrigued by Austen's repeated use of the word "evils" when discussing Emma's situation, and meditates on the possibility that the "evils" do not originate from within Emma, but from society itself:

The real "evil" or terror in Emma is the prospect of having no one properly to talk to, no real community, in fact. Imagine those long evenings Emma has only her father to converse with, which she has to get through with the aid of backgammon. For a person of her "wonderful velocity of thought" they must be nearly intolerable. Hence Emma's dread, near the end, when she foresees the possibility of all the society she knows dispersing for one marital reason or another....We have noted how various and potentially discordant are the discourses within this small society, so that it is a question of who really listens to, or is heard by, whom. But the image of Emma spending long hours with her father and no one else brings home to us the real threat to her and her position. Not that she might not find sexual satisfaction (that question is scarcely raised), but simply—and terribly—that she be condemned for years to have no one to talk to wittily, playfully, rationally, or in any way at all that transcends pork, eggs, muffins and gruel. That would be a doom indeed. (203)

Because of the evils of Emma's situation, Tanner finds her small personal flaws—such as her overactive imagination and her unrealistic expectations for finding Harriet a privileged husband—highly un-

derstandable and forgivable. Other cultural critics go even farther in their defense of Emma, to the extent that they chasten scholars who read the novel as a domestic Bildungsroman for being too judgmental about the protagonist's foibles. As Casey Finch and Peter Bowen observe:

[i]t is Emma's matchmaking, of course, that leads her to the series of blunders over which so many Austen critics are fond of moralizing. But while critics—along with Mr. Knightley—chastise Emma, few remember at the same time that the novel itself is unashamedly in the business of matchmaking. Few remember that at the very moment when Emma attempts to renounce matchmaking Emma has made its most glorious match. (555)

Examining the issue from a slightly different angle, Claudia Johnson suggests that Emma's matchmaking cannot be dismissed as trivial and feminine precisely because so many of the men in Austen's novels use match-making as an important political and economic tool. In her book *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1988), Johnson explains that

[i]n Austen's fiction the making and prohibiting of matches preoccupies country squires like Sir John Middleton and great gentry like Darcy himself just as much as it does well-meaning gossips like Mrs. Jennings...[In *Mansfield Park*,] Sir Thomas's principal activities are much the same as Emma's: he manages his household—with less aplomb—and he oversees the destinies of those around him. This he accomplishes principally by encouraging or discouraging specific marriages. That this is Emma's activity as well, and that this constitutes socially significant activity, are points that merit emphasis. Progressives and reactionaries fought their ideological battles in the arena of family and neighborhood, and the whos, the whys, and the why-nots of matchmaking were not idle concerns of meddling women with nothing better to do....[In addition,] far from being above applying his own understanding to other people's business, [Mr. Knightley] oversees the personal affairs of his neighbors more closely than Emma does, and his indignation over Emma's 'interference' with Harriet Smith is due in part to the embarrassment he feels for his own, now futile, interference with Robert Martin. (131)

Indeed, Johnson has emerged as one of Emma's chief defenders, and has put forward strong rebuttals for the most common attacks upon Emma's character, which have come from both conservative and liberal quarters. Johnson most effectively challenged readings of the novel—which were popular shortly after World War II, but which

are rarely heard now—that Austen satirizes Emma for her opposition to marrying, and problematizes Emma’s frigidity and homoerotic attraction to Harriet.<sup>5</sup> In *Equivocal Beings*, Johnson turns her attention to the homoerotic attraction between Emma and Harriet, and to traditional critical views of Emma as “frigid” or “autoerotic,” writing that

...quite susceptible to the stirrings of homoerotic pleasure, Emma is enchanted by Harriet’s “soft blue eyes”; displaying all the captivating enjoyment of “a mind delighted with its own ideas,” Emma is highly autonomous and autoerotic; and, finally, displaying shockingly little reverence for dramas of heterosexual love, Emma’s energies and desires are not fully contained within the grid opposed by the courtship plot. (195)

As Johnson has indicated, critics of the post-World War II era had previously noticed Emma’s lesbian inclinations, most notably Edmund Wilson in his review essay “A Long Talk About Jane Austen” (1944), Marvin Mudrick in “Irony as Defense and Discovery” (1952), and Mark Schorer in “The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse” (1959). In fact, these authors exhibited some anxiety about Emma’s disinclination towards marriage and heterosexual romance, suggesting that she would never fully shed her “cold” or “lesbian” traits sufficiently enough to have a successful marriage. For Johnson, all of these essays by post-World War II critics are “cheerfully misogynist” and seem to miss the point that Austen’s novel does not make an issue of Emma’s independence or her reluctance to marry. Instead, it criticizes Emma for not being enough of a democrat while praising her for not mirroring the “conventional femininity” represented by Mrs. Elton, Isabella Knightley, and Harriet Smith. The femininity represented by these characters, who dote far too much on the men in their lives, is “a degradation to which Emma does not submit” (202).

In addition to challenging these conservative critics, Johnson has also refuted a common complaint advanced by some feminist critics that Emma’s marriage to Mr. Knightley is a sell-out in which she allows herself to be tamed by a lover-mentor figure, suggesting that the end of the novel has a far more subtle and subversive message. The ending of *Emma*, “which seemed tamely placid and conservative...takes an unexpected turn” when Mr. Knightley chooses to live at Hartfield with Emma and her father. Thus, “the guarantor of order himself cedes a considerable portion of the power which custom has allowed him to expect. In moving to Hartfield, Knightley is sharing

her home, and in placing himself within her domain, Knightley gives his blessing to her rule" (143). This reading suggests at least a more equitable relationship between Emma and Knightley than the lover-mentor readings would generally allow for.

While some domestic Bildungsroman critics would disagree with this interpretation on the grounds that it undermines Mr. Knightley's authority and grants too much moral clout to Emma, Allison Sulloway goes even farther in challenging Mr. Knightley's position as the novel's moral compass in her reading of the novel as a social critique. Sulloway contends that Mr. Knightley cannot be considered the novel's voice of morality because his world-view is too limited. She focuses her attention on the debate between Emma and Mr. Knightley over Frank Churchill's apparent lack of ability to stand up to his surrogate mother and go pay his respects to his father and the new Mrs. Weston. It is a particularly morally ambiguous conversation and one in which I have often suspected that Emma has more of a point than many conservative critics would allow. As Sulloway explains:

Knightley invariably interrupts Emma with all the cool authority he exercises over Miss Bates and Mr. Weston. On one such occasion, Emma makes an unusually exasperated retort: "You are very fond of bending little minds; but where little minds belong to rich people in authority...they have a knack of swelling out, til they are quite as unmanageable as great ones." Emma's comment itself has "a knack of swelling out" until it encompasses even the kind, complacent Knightley himself, as well as Emma's other target, her gently predatory father. But she hurls this accusation at Knightley during a debate when she is begging him to consider "the difficulties of dependence," the daily frustrations "of having tempers to manage," the impossibility for anyone "who has not been in the interior of a family" to "say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be." She is ostensibly defending the conduct of Frank Churchill, although it is indefensible, as Knightley insists. But he is too deaf to anything she says, too used to dismissing her articulate speech as the petulant utterances of a spoiled child, and too used to playing the social arbiter in Highbury to hear the personal despair behind Emma's excuses for Frank. She reminds Knightley that he has "no habits of early obedience and long observance to break through," but for dependent people, including herself, "it might not be so easy to burst forth at once into perfect independence," and to "set all...claims...of gratitude and regard at naught...Oh! The difference of situation and habit! I wish you would try to understand!" (Sulloway 165)

In Sulloway's reading of the novel, Knightley's reflections upon the status of women of the time are categorized by "euphemistic" de-

scriptions of their plight, brief expressions of sympathy, and a series of arguments “favoring women’s disenfranchisements, without actually admitting that [he] is doing so” (166–167). The narrative style and content of the scenes in which Mr. Knightley makes moral observations, especially those concerning Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates, “offers ‘received opinions’ in so sensible a way that no realistic person can altogether refute them. And then it undercuts them, before, during, and after Knightley has uttered them, but in such a way that they might easily be ignored, as they have been for almost two centuries” (167). Since Knightley seems to have such a poor grasp of Emma’s true feelings and situation here, Sulloway’s observations somewhat call into question the notion that he will be an understanding and empathetic husband.

Having canvassed the readings of the novel that could be categorized as domestic Bildungsroman readings and those that could be called social critique readings, what conclusions may be drawn? It would appear that the readings all have insightful comments to make about the most dramatic and most controversial moments in the novel—the Box Hill segment, the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley, Emma’s failed attempts to find Harriet a husband—but that they tend to view these segments from opposing angles. Generally speaking, the domestic Bildungsroman critics seem to place their sympathies more with the society at large than with Emma, and are most satisfied when Emma’s more creative and selfish impulses are stifled or redirected to more socially beneficial ends. These critics may disagree about how Emma must change—either she must change to ally herself more firmly with the patriarchal Christian worldview represented by Mr. Knightley, or she must change to be more sympathetic to the impoverished gentlewomen of Highbury (or do both)—but they agree that Emma must change from within. Social critique critics view the novel with more empathy for Emma, and champion the rights of the individualist and the iconoclast by criticizing society for forcing Emma to fit in and become exactly like what everyone expects her to be. This reading is more tragic and less comic than the Bildungsroman readings tend to be. And social critique critics tend to hope that, at the end of the novel, Emma has retained as much of her old mischievous self as she can, married to the serious Mr. Knightley; they further hope that Emma changes her husband as much, if not



more, than he changes her. She has, at least, helped him learn to enjoy dancing.<sup>6</sup>

While it is always possible for any given reader to choose one particular interpretation of the novel as either a domestic Bildungsroman or a social critique and to be convinced of the essential correctness of that decision, it is equally possible to remain perpetually unsure. In a similar manner, many of the film adaptations wrestle with the problem of dramatizing Emma's situation. Some films choose to depict Emma as the chief architect of the conflicts in the story, just as others emphasize the tensions created by her adversaries, or by the restrictive nature of Highbury society itself. And still others strive to achieve a balance in their depiction of both Emma and Highbury, showing the virtues and vices of both in equal measure.

Having examined the issues of adaptation and interpretation that each film version must contend with when accepting the challenge of adapting Jane Austen's *Emma*, we can begin a discussion of each of the first four extant television dramatizations as critical interpretations of the novel put to film.