

Overview

Emma on Film: Male and Female Perspectives

Throughout this book, I have discussed each of the individual *Emma* adaptations in detail and have considered the various interpretations of the novel that they represent. While some adaptations offer visions of the novel that are more consistent or more effectively realized than others, each, in its own way, offers a gloss on the text that I find rewarding to contemplate. For example, the first television adaptation from 1948, written by Judy Campbell, anticipates Casey Finch and Peter Bowen's 1990 new historicist interpretation of the novel as a study in gossip and female discourse. Campbell's screenplay shows the gossips of Highbury acting in opposition to Emma: working to reunite Harriet and Robert Martin after Emma drives them apart; drawing attention to Jane Fairfax's suffering when Emma would prefer to ignore it, and expressing hopes that Emma would marry Mr. Elton when she prefers to remain single. Though occasionally funny, the gossips are treated as a serious social force that actively works to shape the outcome of the narrative. In its interest in the Highbury community, and its attention to class and gender issues, Campbell's *Emma* is a social critique.

In contrast, the second adaptation, the NBC Kraft Television Theatre version (1954), echoes some of the views of the novel presented by Maaja A. Stewart and Beth F. Tobin. The Kraft *Emma* teaches its heroine not to take it upon herself to blur class and status distinctions in a highly structured society in which she has no chance of success in marrying the natural-born Harriet to the clergyman, Mr. Elton. In the attention it pays to the pain that Emma causes Elton and the Robert Martin character, this adaptation is more interested in the world of

Highbury than it is in *Emma*, making it an intriguing social critique despite its frequently distracting use of broad humor.

A dark portrayal of “petticoat government” can be found in Vincent Tilsley’s screenplay (1960), which depicts vain upper-class women neglecting (or victimizing) the more socially vulnerable women who depend upon them for support. In a similar fashion, Paul Delaney has written of the novel’s portrayal of unjust female rulers, who use their powers to oppress both the men and the women who occupy social positions beneath them. However, Tilsley’s screenplay diverges from Delaney’s reading when it suggests that Mr. Knightley is just as prone to jealous abuses of his authority as the women of Highbury when he assumes a hostile attitude towards Frank due to the young man’s amorous attentions towards Jane and Emma. In granting primacy to issues of class, the Tilsley adaptation is a social critique.

As another social critique, the Glenister-Constanduros film argues that Emma and Knightley need to learn humility and empathy for their romantic rivals by creating a scenario in which the two are briefly compelled to hide their engagement from a disapproving Mr. Woodhouse. The experience of having to endure the trials of an interfering parent and a secret engagement cause the two to recant their former harsh appraisals of Frank and Jane. It also encourages them to be more empathetic towards one another, thereby improving their prospects for a happy marriage as well as enhancing their social awareness. The Glenister-Constanduros adaptation is also the most effective in presenting Highbury as a claustrophobic environment that isolates Emma and stunts her intellectual and emotional growth.

Offering a more idyllic portrait of Highbury and a heroine with a sweeter demeanor, the Douglas McGrath *Emma* presents a reading of the novel as a fairy-tale-like domestic Bildungsroman. Its reading of the novel is akin to Denise Kohn’s since it dramatizes the heroine’s journey towards “intellectual independence and self-understanding” (46). The film ends with Emma remaining “strong and assertive” but becoming “more caring and sensitive to others” (46). In this adaptation, Emma’s seasoning is mirrored by Mr. Knightley’s, since he also grows as a character. The two prove themselves worthy of one another when they complete their maturation at the end of the film, and

they form an idealized bond of marriage based on equality and mutual respect.

In the Lawrence-Davies film, Emma's vivid imagination and love of romantic literature obscures her vision of the real world, thereby deluding her that she can marry Harriet above her station and leaving her nearly blind to the sufferings of Jane Fairfax. Only through the tutelage of Mr. Knightley, who is often angered by the frivolities of Emma and Frank, does she learn to have a more realistic, and more democratic, view of Highbury society and her place within it.

If some of the period piece adaptations seem too nostalgic and conservative in their staging, and too interested in the novel as British "Heritage," then *Clueless* arguably escapes the trap of traditionalism by setting the story in the present. In effect, *Clueless* faithfully evokes the core thematic concerns of the novel—including education, female friendship, civic responsibility, proper courtship rituals, and provincialism—without recreating Austen's *milieu*. While the film's handling of these issues is very much contemporary and American (especially in its treatment of AIDS, multiculturalism, and sexuality), its interest in these issues is very much in keeping with the spirit of Jane Austen.

Examining the *Emma* adaptations as a group, it becomes fairly clear that they offer diverse and contradictory readings of the novel. In fact, it is both the strength and the weakness of the films that they offer unequivocal visions of the text. For example, the McGrath *Emma* can be praised for its emphasis on romance and comedy, and its retelling of the story of the novel as a domestic Bildungsroman, just as it can be faulted for being too light and too uninterested in social issues. The Lawrence-Davies adaptation, *Jane Austen's "Emma"*, successfully stresses the serious social issues facing Regency England, offering an intelligent reading of the novel as a social critique, but it can be criticized for being too somber and for having too little romance and humor. And yet, as Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield have indicated, the film adaptations may be stronger when viewed together than they are when screened individually because they complement one another. In fact, viewing both together gives one a more faithful picture of the book than viewing each one separately, as the two bring polar opposite interpretations of the novel to the screen. Based on the experiences of Troost and Greenfield, one might infer that watching any

combination of the other adaptations could prove just as interesting to other academics, or even to students in an undergraduate classroom.

However, if, like me, one were to examine *all* of the *Emma* adaptations as a group rather than confine oneself to the 1990s adaptations, then a potential problem comes to light. If there is a weakness with the body of *Emma* adaptations as it exists today, it is that too many of the production teams were dominated by men, and this masculine influence seems to have affected the readings of the novel that the films provide. Of the eight adaptations, only *Clueless* was directed by a woman (Amy Heckerling), and only the Davies-Lawrence version had a female lead producer (Sue Birtwistle). The Kraft adaptation was co-written by a man and a woman (Martine Bartlett and Peter Donat), and three adaptations were written exclusively by women: the 1948 television adaptation (Judy Campbell), the lost American television version from 1960 (Claire Roskam), and *Clueless* (Heckerling). The other four adaptations were written exclusively by men: Vincent Tilsley, Denis Constanduros, Douglas McGrath, and Andrew Davies. Considering the loss of the Roskam script, which cheats modern-day readers of her vision of the novel, and noting that Amy Heckerling is the only female *auteur* with the power of writer-director, then the imbalance seems fairly clear.

A brief comparison of the adaptations written by men with the adaptations written by women makes the difference in sensibilities between “male” and “female” crafted adaptations readily apparent. As a group, male scriptwriters are more likely to emphasize class issues over gender issues and they show more interest in granting interiority to Mr. Knightley than they do in bringing Emma’s perspective to the forefront. They tend to cast Mr. Knightley as a lover-mentor and privilege the romantic elements of the story. Also, in screenplays by men, Emma and Mrs. Elton are generally used to exemplify unjust feminine authority whereas Jane Fairfax and Mrs. Weston are depicted more sympathetically because they represent more passive, traditional modes of feminine behavior. Male adaptors also cast Emma as an elitist and a snob, emphasizing her disdain of Robert Martin and the Coles while conveniently forgetting that one of Emma’s chief concerns is raising the social status of her female

friends, Harriet and Miss Taylor, by seeking to marry them to men of a higher station.

Women scriptwriters, on the other hand, have tended to be more interested in creating a sense of female community and a specific style of women's discourse to bring *Highbury* to life on screen. Educational concerns are more central to the scripts by Heckerling, Campbell, and Bartlett, all of whom emphasize the importance of Emma's honing her pianoforte skills, improving the quality of the portraits she paints, and finally sitting down to read all the great books that she has earmarked for study. In contrast, based on the adaptations that have been filmed thus far, scripts by men either downplay these concerns or omit them altogether.

Mrs. Elton and Mrs. Churchill are less grotesque and less prominent figures in adaptations by women, and less sympathy and screen time is afforded to Frank Churchill and Robert Martin. Mr. Knightley remains a wise figure, but his flaws are more apparent in dramatizations produced by women. As a case in point, Judy Campbell and Amy Heckerling allow the heroine to tease the Mr. Knightley character: Campbell has Emma tease Mr. Knightley for being too rustic, while Heckerling allows Cher to tease Josh for being pretentious and maudlin. Both screenwriters also have their heroines offer strong cases in defense of the nature of their relationship with Harriet/Tai. In general, Campbell and Heckerling are successful in recreating the witty repartee and the verbal cunning that Austen grants the Emma from the novel. Alternatively, male scriptwriters tend to cast Emma as too much in the wrong to adequately defend herself from Knightley's criticisms; consequently, should she ever have occasion to tease Mr. Knightley, her barbs have a hollow and defensive ring to them.

In pointing out this gender imbalance in the *Emma* film canon, I do not wish to argue against the validity of readings of the novel offered up by men. If I were to do so, I would undermine myself, and call into question my qualifications for writing about Jane Austen on the basis of my gender. However, if one were to compare all of the *Emma* adaptations produced by men to all of the *Emma* adaptations crafted by women, it becomes fairly clear that men and women tend to read the novel differently, and to bring different aspects of the novel to the screen. That being the case, it seems all the more important that women have as many opportunities as men to adapt Jane

Austen's novels to film and television. In fact, given the gender and the prominence of the author concerned, women should probably have *more* opportunities to adapt Austen works than men.

Putting aside, for the moment, the issue of the gender of the filmmakers, a second notable criticism can be made of the group of *Emma* adaptations as a whole: not one of the many film and television dramatizations of the novel make manifest the radical subtext that certain scholars have found hidden beneath the surface narrative. In other words, even the female scriptwriters who make Emma a stronger and more complex character than she is in most adaptations by men seem to stop short of making their portrayal of the character as revolutionary as it could be. Both Allison Sullo way and Claudia Johnson have contended that the book is far more subversive than it has often been allowed to be by traditional literary critics. The same point might be made about the film and television adaptations. For example, Sullo way has suggested that Mr. Knightley's worldview is far more flawed than any of the adaptations of *Emma* to date would lead us to believe. Also, one might argue that no film version of *Emma* has presented as positive a portrayal of the heroine (including her matchmaking endeavors and her "masculine" personality traits) as Johnson does in her scholarly writings. Nor does any film seriously explore Emma's possibly homoerotic attraction to Harriet, which Johnson also considers.¹ Many of the individual adaptations have elements of radical academic readings built into their fabric—including the Glenister-Constanduros version, which makes something of an antagonist out of Mr. Woodhouse in the final segment—but none of them provide a thoughtfully subversive reading of *Emma* in the style of Patricia Roczema's groundbreaking film version of *Mansfield Park*. Therefore, should studio executives ever wish to produce another adaptation of *Emma*, they might easily distinguish their new film from those made before in two obvious ways. First, they might consider basing their film on more radical scholarly interpretations of the text than have been seen in the past. Secondly, they can hire women with extensive knowledge of both Jane Austen and film-making techniques to make the movie rather than, once again, assigning a male screenwriter and a male director to the project.

Of course, as I observed earlier, it is both the strength and the weakness of the films that they offer imbalanced, unequivocal views

of the text. They tend to emphasize either masculine or feminine concerns and either liberal or conservative politics. They tend to give primacy either to the story of Emma or the story of Highbury. They relate the story either as a domestic Bildungsroman or as a social critique. This tendency to focus on certain aspects of the novel to the detriment of others has been off-putting to critics that expect an adaptation to recreate the effect of the novel in its entirety. On the other hand, Troost and Greenfield have effectively defended the tendency of the film adaptations to “unbalance the novel into...different directions” on the grounds that “a two-hour adaptation cannot and should not try to do everything” (*Filming 2*).

That having been said, perhaps it is time for an adaptation that strikes more of a balance between the conflicting readings of the text, and that comes closer to capturing Ian Watt’s view of the novel as both personal and social at the same time. There is always the danger that any film meant to appeal to all audiences will ultimately appeal to none, and that an adaptation that tries to recreate the novel as a whole will fail to do as much justice to it as a less ambitious and less “completist” adaptation. However, in an ideal world, the best possible adaptation of *Emma* is one which strives to recreate the various subtleties and mysteries of the text in a manner that leaves it up to each individual viewer to determine its meaning. A model adaptation would glean influence from both domestic Bildungsroman and social critique readings of the novel and strive to balance the two, just as it would not neglect more iconoclastic readings of the novel in favor of purely traditional interpretations. It would allow the viewers to feel an intimate connection with Emma while keeping them at enough of an objective distance to have a broader view of Highbury as a whole. Therefore, the model adaptation would present viewers with multiple perspectives on characters and events, offering them the opportunity to come to their own conclusions about the story. In doing so, the film would preserve some of the ambiguities found in the novel rather than present possible solutions to the mysteries devised by the production team on behalf of the viewers.

As William Galperin writes in “Byron, Austen, and the ‘Revolution’ of Irony” (1990):

...it is *Emma*’s greatest achievement that its manifest and indirect content are forever separate, if still mutually dependent. Regardless of how we interpret

Emma, in other words, whether as a novel about the proper chastening of a selfish young “imagist” or, more radically, as an allegory about the pressures on women to conform, it is *Emma*’s purpose at some level to show the complicity of these disparate narratives and, with the latter in particular, to suggest the synonymity between a “cover story” and the “story” for which it provides a cover (66).

An ideal adaptation of *Emma* would create a similar effect by juxtaposing complementary and contradictory possible interpretations of characters, themes, and events, simultaneously supporting and undercutting both radical and conservative interpretations (perhaps by dramatizing the same scene more than once—from differing perspectives—in a style akin to Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 film *Rashomon*?). Of the adaptations of *Emma* made to date, *Clueless* comes closest to recreating this effect because it has proven to be more open to diversified and conflicting interpretations than any other adaptation. And yet, even the least dramatically successful of the adaptations, the NBC Kraft Theatre special, retains enough of the feel of the novel to cause the viewer to meditate upon issues of class, gender, and education as they are raised in the story.

One of the principal strengths of the novel is its ambiguity and the onus it places on readers to be careful interpreters of events. Like any scholarly reading of the text which attempts the same project, any adaptation which assumes a consistent ideological position regarding the characters and story offers a possible solution to the mysteries of the text but does not recreate the ambiguities and subtle nuances of the text itself. However, the adaptations of *Emma* made thus far are successful, not because they attempt to recreate on film the effect of reading the novel, but because they present coherent, insightful interpretations of Austen’s narrative. At their best, these adaptations are dramatically satisfying films that offer an interpretation of Jane Austen’s novel that will inspire viewers to read *Emma* for the first time, or to read it again to test the filmmaker’s view of the story against their own. Although the films do not *recreate* the novel on screen, they encourage close, consistent readings of the text, and strive to make an early 19th century work relevant to a contemporary audience. In these ways, at least, the *Emma* films are all worthy of Jane Austen.

Adaptations in the Classroom: Final Thoughts

The 1990s Jane Austen adaptations are more than ten years old now, yet they remain an important source of discussion and debate in the academic world, especially since classroom professors are often confronted with the question of whether or not to use them as teaching aids. The hope is that the films will enrich student readings of Austen, but the fear is that the striking visual presentations will distract students from developing an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the artistry and subtleties of the original texts.

Seeking a resolution to the issue, M. Casey Diana conducted a classroom experiment to determine whether students would be better readers of Austen if they saw a film adaptation first or read the novel first. Diana divided the class in half, with one group assigned to watch Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* film before reading Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, and the other group to read the book first and then see the film. At the conclusion of the experiment, Diana found that those students who had seen the film first were more eager to read the novel, and were better interpreters of the text, than the students who began with the novel and saw the film afterwards.

In my own teaching experience, I have also concluded that film adaptations can be valuable pedagogical tools if used properly. While I have not repeated the experiment, I have found over four years of teaching Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* that my students often have an easier time grasping the complexity of the novel when I use the film adaptations to supplement class discussion than when I made a conscious decision not to screen the films. However, each time I show a film adaptation to my students, I have the nagging doubt that the film is doing the students' work for them, and it is actually harming their understanding of the novel. I am not alone in this fear. Based on his own experiences teaching Austen's novels alongside their respective adaptations, critic Robert Eggleston believes that the primary texts are in danger of being eclipsed by the lush film adaptations that "reduce the novel to a two-hour experience" (4) and are, thus, more easily digestible by current and future generations who are already losing their ability to read with care. The core of Eggleston's argument appears to be that the films visualize and interpret the novel on the students' behalf: the films save the students the

trouble of imagining setting and the physical appearances of the characters, and they simplify the story and themes of the source text, bringing a work of high art down to a level that an undergraduate can comprehend with ease. By implication, the films foster lazy and limited readings, as well as offer students the opportunity to avoid reading the novel at all.

Although they are not as concerned with pedagogical issues, Seymour Chatman and Anthony Lane sound much like Eggleston when they assert that films do much (or all) of the work of visualizing and interpreting the source novel on behalf of the audience. Chatman, for example, notes that films conjure up the world of the novel on screen, ensuring that "its appearance is determined for all of us" (101). Also, films take round characters, with whom readers have long felt a strong "sense of intimacy" and who have seemed "virtually inexhaustible objects for contemplation," much "like real-life friends and enemies" (Chatman 132-133), and enforce their visualization on screen. Consequently, "The all too visible player...seems unduly to circumscribe the character despite the brilliance of the performance" (Chatman 118-119). In a similar fashion, *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane has suggested that the disadvantage filmmakers face when adapting Austen is that "they have to decide on a tone and stick with it, whereas the atmosphere of the original resists any such definition," thereby dooming those familiar with the novel "to sit through the movie sighing for the lost astringency of the book" (76).

Many other Austen devotees probably experience similar frustrations when watching the adaptations, most likely because they feel as if the films strip them of much of the interpretive power that they held as readers of the source narrative. This would be true even if they essentially agree with an adaptation's conceptualization of the novel, but if readers feel out of sympathy with the film's interpretation then their frustration would likely be even more pronounced. In the case of the *Emma* adaptations, a viewer who has read the novel as a social critique is likely to reject an adaptation that retells the story of the novel as a domestic Bildungsroman, just as one who reads the novel as a domestic Bildungsroman is likely to reject a film version that treats the novel as a social critique. The reasoning is that filmgoers like best those film adaptations that dovetail with their own readings. And yet, it is just as possible that readers will find a film

adaptation that challenges their preconceived notions of how to interpret the book to be something of a revelation in the way in which it presents an alternative vision of the story. Therefore, film adaptations can be valuable, not just for students and for those who have never read the book, but also for those who are already familiar with the text.

As John Mosier observes, “Probably the most successful adaptations of literature to film are those which cause the viewer to conclude...that the filmmakers have a point, an interpretation which deserves a hearing” (228).

I agree.