Finding Austen: The Covert Gender Politics in Emma's Marriage Plots

Elizabeth Evelyn Campbell
Dickinson College

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Finding Austen: The Covert Gender Politics in Emma’s Marriage Plots

By

Elizabeth Campbell

Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements
for the Department of English

Dr. K. Wendy Moffat, Supervisor

English 404

April 20, 2012
First and foremost, I have to thank Professors Moffat and Johnston, because without either of them, this thesis wouldn’t exist. While Professor Moffat’s influence directly shaped my research and argument in a more significant way (thank you so much for introducing me to Woloch, Poovey, Miller, and Berlant and sparking my interest in a feminist interpretation of Austen), both Professor shaped my writing habits, taught me how to construct a worth-while thesis statement, and showed me how to argue with critics.

I also owe a great intellectual debt to Mary Poovey, D.A. Miller, Alex Woloch, and Lauren Berlant merely for writing. Without their work—Austen related or otherwise—I never would have arrived at my critical and theoretical framework.

Of my wonderful 404 classmates, all of whom have helped me in this process in one way or another, two deserve special mention. To Holly Bowers, my fellow Janite, I owe incalculable thanks. Not only did she orchestrate the love days that reduced my stress level, she was also always available to meet with me when I needed to talk through my ideas. She helped find the quote that I used to open my intro, swapped theses drafts with me at the one week mark, and was gracious enough to read through a later draft during crunch-time when my newly-diagnosed mono started inhibiting my ability to recognize a coherent argument. I’d also like to recognize my roommate Samantha Claussen, who has kept me sane (or not so sane) beginning when we were freshmen in Professor Moffat’s 220 and continuing through our 404 stressors. Her Disney-related research also provided entertaining distractions from my own thesis, both because I got to watch Disney movies and because I got to observe her over-the-top reactions to the films.

Thanks also goes my two other roommates—Alice Ettling and Nina Ligato—for convincing me to take Professor Moffat’s Jane Austen class over a year ago, and to Alice especially for reading through my entire thesis the night before it was due.

Finally, much love as always to my mom, who has a talent for sending well-timed care packages, and my fiancée, Danny, who patiently let me talk at him about literary theory night after night (and also introduced a healthy dose of irony into my life by proposing while I was writing about the loss of female agency in marriage). Also to Jeremy Ollayos, who provided a heroic soundtrack for the last week of this process, and Andy Shoemaker and Evan Camara, who taught me that sometimes you have to step away from the paper and have a drink.

Acknowledgements
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“Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material.” *(Emma 283)*

In Jane Austen’s *Emma*, “truth” always seems to be just out of reach. Emma cannot ascertain the realities of her neighbors’ affections, nor can she see the truth of Harriet’s social position. Jane Fairfax’s secret engagement with Frank Churchill is kept a mystery to all, just as Knightley’s love for Emma is withheld from the reader and Emma’s love for Knightley is concealed even from herself. The quest for truth and understanding is undertaken by both the characters and the readers, but Austen does not provide any illumination of the novel’s whole, complex picture until Volume III. At the beginning of the final volume in *Emma*, the truth rushes forth. Everyone’s romantic attachments are revealed, Harriet’s parentage is uncovered, and all of the “mistaken” conduct—largely committed by Emma—is made immaterial by the purity of her “feelings” and the revelation of the truth.

Although the aspects of *Emma* that are most unsavory to feminist critics—Emma’s gross misconduct and Knightley’s troubling criticism of her power as a matchmaker—are rendered unimportant to the characters, the would-be resolution between hero and heroine

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1 Quoted from the Third Norton Critical Edition of *Emma*, edited by Stephen M. Parrish and published in 2000 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. All quotations from this book will be cited parenthetically by page number and title. All other Austen novels will be cited in like manner with their titles abbreviated.

2 Which is, as we will see, the *only* manifestation of Emma’s power.
has done little to assuage the discomfort experienced by feminist readers. In fact, the perfect happiness of all of the characters is part of what is so disturbing, particularly in Emma’s case because her understanding of “truth” involves gratefully internalizing Knightley’s criticisms, limiting her expressions of personal power, and subordinating her own knowledge to her husband’s. Rachel Blau DuPlessis—a feminist critic who has done extensive work with nineteenth and twentieth century romance narrative strategies—provides a useful starting point for understanding why Emma’s marriage (and marriage plots in general) are so problematic for the feminist reader. According to DuPlessis, marriage plots, as one of the two possible resolutions for a romance plot, contain “ending[s] in which the [heroine’s] Bildung”—here meaning self-cultivation, strength, power, or sexuality—“is set aside or repressed” in favor of matrimony (3). For DuPlessis, Emma’s marriage unquestionably fits this paradigm. She writes: “At the point when [Emma] is sincerely repentant for her assumed powers, she is marriageable, and is therefore proposed to” (7). Emma’s repentance for her “assumed powers”—as manifested in her matchmaking endeavors and criticized by Knightley—is indeed followed immediately by Knightley’s proposal of marriage, thereby narratologically linking the repression of her power to her marriage.

However, while I believe that DuPlessis is correct in her analysis of Emma’s marriage, it would be unfair to Austen’s nuance and complexity to blindly apply DuPlessis’ evaluation of the marriage plot to all of Austen’s marriages. Such a blanket interpretation reduces Austen’s entire oeuvre to that old bit of ivory and signifies a regression in the

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3 Some feminist critics—such as Margaret Kirkham and Denise Kohn—break this mould and have managed to make compelling arguments in favor of the feminism of Emma’s marriage to Knightley, largely by casting Emma’s journey as one of increased rationality and self-knowledge. For a more complete understanding of the arguments of this critical school—and my response to them—see my analysis of Emma’s marriage in Chapter One.

4 The other resolution is death.
scholarly understanding of her work as political, challenging, and worthy of study. Moreover, I believe that identifying all of Austen’s marriages as a repression of woman’s power and agency restricts Austen’s gender politics and casts her, incorrectly, as a completely straighthaired Tory. In order to properly disentangle Austen’s politics and opinions from the ideological stew of her novels, one must recall Austen’s own words about truth: “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure” (Emma 283). Just as it is impossible to evaluate the truth of a situation from one individual’s perspective, so is it unwise to draw conclusions about Austen’s gender politics from one marriage plot.

In this paper, I will draw conclusions about Austen’s politics concerning female power and agency in marriage through an analysis of the three main marriages in Emma. These marriages—between Emma and Mr. Knightley, Harriet Smith and Mr. Martin, and Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill—are representative of all of the marriage types in Austen, thereby making Emma the site of a unique narratological interaction between all of Austen’s marriage plots. While Emma’s marriage is unique in Austen because she—as a wealthy member of the landed gentry—marries her social and economic equal, both Harriet’s and Jane’s marriages embody a typical Austenian marriage trope. Harriet Smith represents minor characters (such as Mrs. Norris from Mansfield Park) who believe that their hopes for an economically and socially beneficial marriage are realistic, yet end up marrying within their own social class. Jane Fairfax’s marriage, on the other hand, parallels the marriages characteristic of Austen’s heroines (excluding Emma): in spite of immensely difficult odds, they all marry their social and economic superiors. By using the dynamics between the

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5 The one exception to this rule is Anne Elliot from Persuasion, who marries below her station. However, while her social class is negatively affected by her marriage, her match does bring money into her impoverished family and her station in society is improved. Therefore, I argue that it qualifies as an example of the upward
marriages in *Emma* to bring Austen’s novels in conversation with each other, I will be able to combine the truths inherent in each of these marriage types and—through a narratological analysis of their interactions—I will conclude that Austen condemns the marriage practices of her time while simultaneously recognizing their dominance and inescapability.

The basis of my research relies heavily upon the work of previous Austen critics such as Marilyn Butler (*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic*), Claudia Johnson (*Jane Austen: Women, politics and the novel*), and Mary Poovey (*The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*). These critics have all made the case for a political Austen, and Gilbert, Gubar, Johnson, and Poovey are specifically concerned with Austen’s ability to convey politically charged (and even subversive) ideas through calm, unobtrusive, and ladylike writing. While these presuppositions are necessary for my argument, I am not concerned with rehashing these critics’ claims or using their methods, which are largely historical and cultural. My purpose is to bring the political Austen of these past criticisms into conversation with the most recent theoretical and critical work in narratological and affective studies: *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* by D.A. Miller (2005), *The One Vs. the Many* by Alex Woloch (2003), and *Cruel Optimism* by Lauren Berlant (2011). Although these critics differ in their subjects, aims, and methods of inquiry—Where Miller is concerned with narrative voice, Woloch is interested in the moral and narratological role of minor characters, and Berlant questions the stability of ideologies of the

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6 I was first made aware of Butler, Gilbert and Gubar, and Johnson through the critical history of Austen written by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan for *Jane Austen in Context* (Rajan 101) and through feminist critic and Austen scholar Janet Todd, whose article “Jane Austen, Politics, and Sensibility” contains a useful survey of the criticism (Todd 71, 74).
good life—all of them, when applied to Austen, provide a unique lens through which we can access Austen’s gender politics.

In the following chapters, I will analyze the loss or gain of female agency and power in each of Emma’s three marriages—using Harriet’s and Jane’s marriage plots to explore Austen’s other novels while likewise bringing those novels to bear upon my interpretation of the original marriages. I hope that, through my unique analysis of these interacting marriages, I will both provide a new vision of the political Austen, illuminate Austen’s opinions on the sustainability of female power and agency in marriage, and advance feminist Austen criticism.

—Chapter One—

The Influence of an “Eccentric” Narrator: The Effect of Austen’s Narrator upon a Feminist Interpretation of Emma’s Marriage

Emma’s marriage to Mr. Knightley is unique among the marriages of Austen’s heroines because she marries her social and economic equal, yet Emma’s union is far more realistic from a historical standpoint than the marriages of any of her predecessors. Her marriage, then, is significant both because of its historical probability and because of its unique relationship to power and agency among the other dominant marriages in Austen’s novels. In

7 Juliet McMaster—noted literary critic, historian, and scholar of Austen—observes that Mr. Knightley maintains a slightly higher status than the Woodhouses by merit of his position as a wealthy landowner with a long-standing connection to his family home. The Woodhouses, instead of investing in their land, likely gather “income... from investment”—as signified by Emma’s comparatively small fortune of £30,000 (McMaster 119). However, this discrepancy in class is negligible as portrayed by the existing alliance between their two families (through John Knightley’s marriage to Isabella Woodhouse) and the fact that, at the end of Emma, Emma, Knightley, and Mr. Woodhouse all live in the same estate without social criticism.

8 Austen wrote Pride and Prejudice in 1796, Sense and Sensibility in 1797, Northanger Abbey in 1798, Mansfield Park in 1811, and Emma in 1814. Persuasion was written after Emma in 1815 (Sutherland 16).
those rare historical cases (and common Austenian unions) when Georgian women married above their stations, they automatically benefited from increased agency autonomy in the forms of spendable income and increased leisure time. While the vast majority of Austen's heroines do experience this particular form of increased agency through upward mobility, Emma's marriage plot is completely divorced from the questions of money and class. In the absence of these complicating variables, the dominant marriage plot in *Emma* is concerned solely with the question of female power and is therefore crucial for a complete understanding of Austen's gender politics.

Although it is not explicitly stated, from the very beginning of the novel Emma is obsessed with power as a force of influence. The concepts of influence and control are introduced in the first chapter of *Emma*, when Emma claims to have arranged the match between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston (5), and it soon becomes clear that Emma uses matchmaking to manifest her power by exerting her influence on others. This is most readily seen in her interactions with Harriet Smith, whom Emma is determined to mentor and guide into high society: “[Emma] would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers” (*Emma* 14). In this passage, Emma's “powers” could refer to the advantages she has as a member of the landed gentry—which are very real and very powerful indeed—but these benefits are already implied at the

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9 While the ideology of upward mobility is traditionally a Marxist issue, I argue that in the context of Georgian marriage practices and gender roles it is also distinctly feminist. While men were permitted to advance economically outside of marriage (take, for example, the Bingley family in *Pride and Prejudice*, whose fortune comes from trade, not inheritance), women could only improve their situations directly by making a beneficial match. Therefore, while upward mobility in general remains a question for Marxist criticism, upward mobility in marriage may be considered feminist.
invocation of her “situation in life.” The “powers” to which the narrator refers are the powers Emma’s of personal influence, not the powers of social standing. It is through the strength of her own character, then, that Emma plans to “improve” Harriet, “form her opinions,” and even raise her social standing (all three of which would require a great deal of influence). Because women were incapable of advancing in society outside of marriage, the only way that Emma could achieve this last goal would be to arrange a socially beneficial match for Harriet. This is the objective for which Emma strives, and it is the sole manifestation of her power in the novel.

Unfortunately—and problematically for feminist readers—Emma is criticized by Knightley for her matchmaking, and when she realizes her love for him (and simultaneously internalizes his rebukes) the matchmaking stops, and her strength is no longer exhibited. While marriage plots that end in the suppression of the heroine’s bildung are always troubling for a feminist reader, I argue that the ending of Emma is all the more disturbing because—as a strong, single, independently-minded woman with an estate to run and no social or economic constraints to pressure her into marriage—Emma appears to be the heroine in Austen who is most likely to fulfill the feminist dream of female autonomy. In spite of the narratological potential for feminist wish-fulfillment, I argue that this dream is never actualized because of another component of Emma’s narrative: the “eccentric” secondary narrator.

For a full understanding of what an “eccentric” is, I turn to Alex Woloch’s critical work, The One Vs. The Many, in which he explores the various roles of minor characters in realistic fiction. In this book, Woloch—a recent literary critic and scholar of the history of the novel—pays special attention to the issue of “asymmetric structure of characterization,”
which he uses to describe the phenomenon within a narrative when many characters are represented but attention flows towards one main character (Woloch 30-1). This structure, he claims, is often used “to bring out the interiority of a singular protagonist” while comparing their thoughts, actions, and ideologies to those of the masses, or minor personalities (Woloch 30). These minor characters add significant dimension to the realism of the novels that utilize the asymmetric structure of characterization (providing the wide range of people and social connections that one experiences in real life), but they occasionally serve a more important purpose in the narrative and moral structure of the novel. Woloch observes that each minor character—whom he calls “narrative workers”—“has a ‘case,’ an orienting consciousness that, like the protagonist’s own consciousness, could potentially organize an entire fictional universe” (22). In writing this, Woloch claims that each minor character, with his own personality, back story, and set of moral codes, is the protagonist in an alternate narrative of the same story. As a result, “Once these [minor] characters have been incompletely brought into the story... they inevitably threaten to destabilize the narrative,” to become whole, to impose their perspective on the dominant viewpoint (Woloch 22). The term Woloch assigns to the type of minor character that actively threatens to destabilize the narrative is “the eccentric.” This character—unlike its counterpart, “the worker,” whose orienting consciousness performs a function that aids the flow of the main narrative—“plays a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot” (25) and may either disrupt the primary narrative or uphold it depending upon where the reader’s sympathies are allied: with the protagonist or the eccentric.

10 Although Woloch has given them similar names, “the worker” is not the same as the “narrative worker.” The category of “narrative worker” is an umbrella term that includes both “the worker” and “the eccentric.”
For the purposes of this paper I will focus upon Austen’s use of the eccentric minor character type (as opposed to the worker) because it is through an examination of these dissonant characters that one can best assess the question of female agency and strength in her dominant marriage plots. However, before proceeding I do have one minor change to make to Woloch’s schema: I do not believe that Woloch’s classification of eccentrics must only pertain to minor characters. While minor character eccentrics do have bearing on this discussion and will be discussed in depth in Chapter Three, they are not the only force in Austen that functions in this way. As we will see, in *Emma*, the role of the eccentric is filled by the secondary narrator, and it is successful in its role as a destabilizing force. The secondary narrator disrupts the feminist narrative that *Emma* could have been—both in the modern and Enlightenment understandings of the feminism—and in doing so emphasizes the inequality inherent in her marriage to Knightley. I argue that this is possible first because the secondary narrator allies himself with Knightley in his criticisms of Emma’s power, and second because the reader is tricked into complicity with his judgmental voice.

Biased, opinionated, and often judgmental of Emma, the secondary narrator differs fundamentally from Austen’s remote, neutral primary narrator. However, in spite of these tonal differences, the two are often difficult to distinguish because the prejudiced voice of the secondary narrator only ever asserts its commentary for a few mere sentences before falling

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11 According to feminist critic Margaret Kirkham, the feminism of Austen’s time—also called Enlightenment feminism—was primarily concerned with the claim “that women, not have been denied powers of reason, must have the moral status appropriate to ‘rational beings’” (Kirkham 4). As we will see, the secondary narrator undermines this claim in addition to disrupting the modern feminist dream of complete female autonomy.

12 I refer to the secondary narrator as male because he mirrors Knightley’s criticism of Emma’s behavior. The sex or gender of the narrator is never explicitly stated. I am classifying it as male as a matter of convenience and to emphasize that this narrator is strongly linked to the “hero” of the novel, not the heroine. The primary narrator will be designated as “it.”
silent and allowing the primary narrator to resume. D.A. Miller—who conducts an unparalleled study of Austen’s dominant narrative voice and its covert portrayal of her politics in his slim volume, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*—provides a useful starting point in distinguishing between the two narrators in *Emma*. Miller writes of Austen’s style:

> Here was a truly out-of-body voice, so stirringly free of what it abhorred as ‘particularity’ or ‘singularity’ that it seemed to come from no enunciator at all… It scanted person even in the linguistic sense, rarely acknowledging, by saying *I*, its origination in an authoring self, or by saying *you*, its reception by any other… And in the other constituents of person—not just body, but psyche, history, social position—the voice was also deficient, so much so that its overall impersonality determined a narrative authority… without equal.

(Miller 1)

Miller argues that this impersonality—the non-identity of the narrator—is political. When Austen was publishing her works between 1811 and 1816, “marriage [was] virtually the only respectable ‘occupation’ for women,” and writing for publication was considered particularly scandalous because it “catapulted women directly into the public arena, where attention must be fought for” in a traditionally unladylike fashion (Poovey 35).13 The restriction upon women to marry or be without “occupation” is even reflected in Austen’s novels, where there are many young women actively seeking marriage, a plethora of married women, a number of unhappy old maids, but no successful, unmarried woman. When Jane Austen—unmarried and 36 years old—self-published her first novel, she became an exception to this rule. This is

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13 Poovey argues that Austen’s negotiated this social stigma against woman writers by “writing inside the ideology of propriety” while still managing “to criticize the way it shaped the deformed women’s desires” (47).
not to say that she was socially or financially independent\textsuperscript{14} or that her books gained her significant recognition during her lifetime. I am merely stating that as an unmarried woman with an intellectual hobby and an income, Austen was a cultural anomaly. Miller recognizes this fact and claims that Austen uses her narrative voice—devoid of “body… psyche, history, social position” and even a biological sex—to replace her \textit{self}. Jane Austen—the critical, sarcastic, intelligent old maid—could not, according to Miller, appear in an Austen novel,\textsuperscript{15} so the author denounces her personhood in favor of a non-person: her narrator.

While it is true that Austen’s primary narrators are almost divine in their simultaneous aloofness and complete narrative authority, Miller does not address the few times in which Austen breaks this pattern and allows a narrative voice to develop a sense of personhood. This takes place sparingly in almost all of her novels\textsuperscript{16}, but happens to the greatest significance in \textit{Emma}. Here, the secondary narrator regularly interjects his own subjective judgments into the broader, impersonal narrative, often passing judgment upon Emma in the same way that Knightley does. To observe the difference between the two narrators, I present my analysis of the following passage:

[Emma] was the… [daughter] of a most affectionate indulgent father, and had… been mistress of his house from a very early period. Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses, and her place had been supplied by [Miss Taylor] as governess…

\textsuperscript{14}See “Biography” by Jan Fergus in \textit{Jane Austen in Context} for a detailed account of Austen’s earnings.

\textsuperscript{15}This is not to say that Austen’s novels are devoid of social critiques or political opinions. It merely suggests that her politics are not voiced by her narrator, but are rather communicated covertly by sympathetic characters or through the narratological progression of her novels.

\textsuperscript{16}Most noticeably \textit{Northanger Abbey}, in which the narrator will occasionally use the first person. However, we may observe by reading Austen’s later work (although among the last published, \textit{Northanger Abbey} was the first written) that the personhood of the narrator was discarded as she matured in her writing.
Yet the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint [upon Emma]; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away... Emma did just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own.

The real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. *(Emma 1)*

There is no hint of bias in the narration of Emma’s upbringing as recounted in the first paragraph. The speaker adopts an almost list-like method of conveying events, moving methodically from the detail of the indulgent father, through to the lack of authority exerted by Miss Taylor. Austen’s word choice does not suggest any, partiality—or as Miller would say “‘particularity’ or ‘singularity’”—nor does the narration display the “body... psyche, history, [or] social position” of the speaker, thereby indicating that the first paragraph is voiced by the primary narrator.

In contrast, the second, much more brief, paragraph, is rich with bias and indications of social position and political opinion, all based upon the information provided by the primary narrator. While it is more than possible to surmise from the first paragraph that Emma led an undisciplined childhood, the secondary narrator is unsatisfied with leaving this deduction to the reader’s interpretation and interjects that “The real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (1). These observations were heavily implied a mere sentence earlier, when the primary narrator recounts that “Emma [does] just what she like[s]” and “is
directed chiefly by her own judgement” regardless of the advice that others give her, but the secondary narrator rehashes old territory. He is not content to let these observations exist without commentary and consequently makes a statement by calling them “evils.” Now, two of Emma’s primary character flaws—the “disposition to think a little too well of herself” and the “power of having rather too much her own way”—are demonized, and the reader is informed that these “evils” are a “danger”. The narrator’s use of the word “power” in this context is particularly crucial, as it links Emma’s power as a matchmaker—in which she expects to use her influence over others to get “her own way”—with her flaws, a connection which, courtesy of the secondary narrator’s alliance with Knightley, thrives in the reader’s perception of Emma.17

Several chapters later, Mr. Knightley recounts the same sentiments: “Emma is spoiled by being the cleverest of her family... ever since she was twelve, Emma has been mistress of the house and of you all. In her mother she lost the only person able to cope with her” (Emma 23). In this excerpt, the term “[spoil]” literally means “to detract from” (“spoil”). The notion that Emma’s personality was detracted from—or somehow reduced in value—because she is “the cleverest of her family” and the “mistress of the house” perfectly mirrors the opinion of the secondary narrator that the “evils” of her personality stem from “a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (because of her cleverness) and “having rather too much her own way” (as a result of her position of power).

Wendy Moffat, author of “Identifying with Emma: Some Problems for the Feminist Reader,” explains why these similarities between Knightley and the secondary narrator are particularly damaging to the reader’s perception of Emma’s power and autonomy in

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17 The only way a reader could resist the bias of the secondary narrator is through a strong sympathetic connection with Emma. The role of sympathy in the effect of the secondary narrator upon Emma’s marriage plot will be addressed shortly.
marriage. She reminds us "that the narrator is not a character"—although he may have opinions like one—and therefore does not interact with characters but with the reader. Therefore: "Knightley's dialogue corrects Emma while the narrator's ironic voice speaks to the reader" (Moffat 55). This is crucial because, as Moffat writes, "[the narrator] cannot act or determine action, but [he] can spur readers to conclusions which may affect our actions in the anterior world" (Moffat 55). The reader, then, is bombarded by two accounts of Emma's failings (both of which are linked to her desire to control others), one from Knightley—directed towards Emma—and one from the secondary narrator—aimed directly at the reader, with the result that reader begins to accept Emma's power as damaging. Moffat asks: "Why do we need a commentary on Emma's faults from the narrator if they are enumerated so voluminously and directly by Knightley? Is Emma's self-delusion so dangerous, or so seductive to the reader that she requires this kind of compensatory correction?" (54).

Moffat's pervasive question of "why"—why does Austen allow both her narrator and hero to criticize the heroine—is at its root a question of authorial intent and, I argue, a question of Austen's gender politics. I will provide my answer to this question once I have put Emma's marriage in conversation with Harriet's and Jane's marriages. Emma's marriage plot is just one facet of Austen's gender politics, and although the conflation of the secondary narrator's voice with Knightley's criticism inhibits (or completely disrupts) the reader's interpretation of Emma's power as positive, it would be unfair to conclude that Austen believed in the repression of female power and agency based upon this single case.

Having explored the connection between the secondary narrator and Mr. Knightley, the only question that remains is that of reader sympathy. In order for an eccentric force to

18 As all of Austen's narrators, he is unembodied.
successfully destabilize a narrative, the reader must identify with his position. This may happen in one of two ways. For eccentrics that are also minor characters, the reader must sympathize with the fragmentary opinions of the minor character. If a minor character eccentric is unsympathetic, then the narrative and its associated values are enforced, not destabilized. This phenomenon will be examined more fully when I begin my analysis of Jane Fairfax’s marriage in Chapter Three. For a non-character eccentric—such as the secondary narrator in *Emma*—the reader’s relationship to the dissonant voice may be more complicated. A reader need not like or sympathize with a narrative voice in order to accept its opinions. In fact, feminist readers often openly dislike the secondary narrator because he demonizes Emma’s strength, yet he still complicates and problematizes their readings of the novel.

I argue that the reader is in some ways tricked into complicity with the secondary narrator because of its resemblance to Austen’s primary, apolitical, unbiased narrative voice. For the vast majority of *Emma*, the narrator is exactly as D.A. Miller describes: “out-of-body,” “free of... ‘particularity’ or ‘singularity’” and even of “psyche, history, [and] social position” (1). As we have seen, this impartiality is discarded when the second narrator appears, but the biased voice of this narrator always only lasts for a few mere sentences before disappearing once more into the voice of the primary narrative. This makes it difficult to distinguish between the two narrators, especially for the average, recreational reader of Austen, who may not realize that a second narrator exists at all and instead believes that his judgment of Emma’s character is as impartial as the rest of the narration.

This issue is further complicated later in the novel when Emma begins to internalize Knightley’s criticism. At this point, the primary narrator also has the ability to explicitly
relay Emma's flaws because it may simply relay Emma's own thoughts. Rachel Oberman—a scholar of fused narrative voices—describes such instances as "the third-person narrative rendering of a character's unspoken (mental) discourse" which, in *Emma*, allows "Emma's subjectivity to [fuse] to the narrator's omniscience" (2). These passages of "narrated monologue" cause confusion because they create moments in which it is unclear whose opinion is being given, Emma's (as voiced by the primary narrator) or the secondary narrator's. For an example of this narrative uncertainty, take the narration that recounts Emma's inner turmoil when she finally realizes the harm that she has done to Harriet: "How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, he let her on! It struck her with dreadful force, and she was ready to give it every bad name in the world" (*Emma* 268). While this passage exemplifies the harsh, judgmental voice that is otherwise characteristic of the secondary narrator, it also mirrors the vocabulary of Knightley's voiced criticisms to Emma, and considering that the secondary narrator and Knightley mirror each other in their diction and opinions, it becomes almost impossible to differentiate who is speaking.

I do argue, however, that this passage from *Emma* is an example of narrated monologue, not the opinions of a secondary narrator. It is clear from her future interactions with Knightley that Emma does actually regret her behavior towards Harriet and credits

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19 Once Knightley learns of Emma's involvement in Harriet's rejection of Mr. Martin—a gentleman farmer—in favor of the pursuit of Mr. Elton—a clergyman of high status in the community—he calls her "foolish" and "imprudent," even going to far as to say that it would be "Better to be without sense, than to misapply it as [she does]" (*Emma* 40-2). The term "foolish" and the implied senselessness of her actions parallel Emma's understanding of her behavior as "irrational" and mad. Similarly, "imprudent" corresponds with "improper," "inconsiderate," and "indelicate." Even "blindness" is used in Knightley's condemnation when he claims that Emma's "infatuation [with Harriet]... blinds [her]" to Harriet's social status and subsequent lack of marital prospects.
Knightley for his correction of her behavior (Emma 303, 304), so it is logical that Emma would internalize his critique and reflect his opinions in her own thoughts. The fused monologue makes it possible for the primary narrator to impartially recount Emma’s extremely critical opinions, yet the resulting voice seems so similar to that of the secondary narrator that it is difficult to distinguish which is which. In fact, I argue that from this point forward—because Emma has so thoroughly come to believe that all of Knightley’s critiques were just—the first and second narrators merge so that there is no functional difference between them concerning their account of Emma’s behavior.

How, then, is it possible to completely distinguish the primary narrator from the secondary narrator? I argue that, at least for the recreational reader and quite possibly even for the feminist critic, it is functionally impossible. The secondary narrator’s strong association with the primary narrator, even from the beginning of the novel, is what destabilizes the narrative of female autonomy that Emma has the potential to be. By the end of the narrative it is so difficult to separate the omnipotent, divinely authoritative, impartial narrator from the political, opinionated voice that views Emma’s strength as toxic. As such, the reader begins to accept the secondary narrator’s account of Emma as foolish, dangerous, and flawed as factual and beyond reproach in the same way she accepts the unbiased truths conveyed by the primary narrator.

What effect does the reader’s identity with the secondary narrator have upon the reader’s perception of Emma’s power? The answer to this question lies back in the link between the secondary narrator and Mr. Knightley. While Knightley’s criticism of Emma is harsh—perhaps overly so—it is not wrong. His main critique of her actions as a matchmaker
is that she has done Harriet harm by encouraging her to reject Mr. Martin’s proposal in to pursue Mr. Elton. (Emma 40-1) As a bastard daughter of unknown parents, Harriet is without social standing or riches. Historically speaking, Knightley is right when he says that Mr. Martin—a respectable farmer—is of higher rank than Harriet is, just as he is correct to point out that “Men of family would not be very fond of connecting themselves with a girl of such obscurity—and most prudent men would be afraid of the inconvenience and disgrace they might be involved in, when the mystery of her parentage came to be revealed” (Emma 41).

It follows that, because Emma tries to arrange a match between Harriet and the esteemed Mr. Elton, Knightley’s criticism of Emma as being “foolish,” “[senseless],” “imprudent,” and “blind” is justified (if unnecessarily aggressive). It is not wrong, then, for Emma to recognize the truth in Knightley’s words and adjust her behavior accordingly, as she does. Therefore, it is possible that Emma’s acceptance of his opinions may be seen as an improvement of her character. This view has lead to a fairly common reading of Emma as a journey of increased self-knowledge and understanding, and this interpretation has, in turn, sprouted a school of feminist critics who believe that Emma’s marriage to Knightley is for Emma’s benefit, even in the feminist senses appropriate to Austen’s time.

Margaret Kirkham, feminist critic and Austen scholar, explains: “The essential claim of Enlightenment feminism was that women, not having been denied powers of reason, must have the moral status appropriate to ‘rational beings.’” The “feminists” of Austen’s time, then, “were in general confident that an improvement in the status of women would be brought about through increasing their powers of rational understanding and reflection”

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20 Historian John Gillis explains the social stigma of Harriet’s illegitimacy when he writes that illegitimacy was “only a little better than prostitution in the eyes of the educated elites” (130). Therefore, for most of the citizens of Highbury, Harriet’s very existence spoke of impurity and sexual immorality.

21 Endorsed by Margaret Kirkham and Denise Kohn, to name a few.
(Kirkham 4). Therefore, for Kirkham and other critics of this school, Emma’s romantic relationship with Knightley is considered “feminist” because it is the catalyst for Emma’s increasing rationality and self-knowledge. Furthermore, Knightley, as “the Enlightenment feminist’s ideal of a man of sense”—in that he values “Reasons and Nature… in woman as well as in men”—is considered a desirable husband (Kirkham 128), and the equality of husband and wife is emphasized (Kirkham 131).

While I agree that *Emma* does recount a journey of self-knowledge and understanding, and that Emma’s reform at the end of the novel is desirable, I disagree with critics who identify Emma’s marriage to Knightley as feminist. First, there is the issue that Emma’s increased rationality and greater understanding is brought about through the direct intervention and criticism of a man. In *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Marianne and Kitty are criticized for their sensibilities by other women—namely Elinor and Elizabeth—thereby recognizing that women are capable of sense, while in *Emma*, the only woman who may have had an influence on Emma’s sensibility (Miss. Taylor) sees nothing wrong with her conduct. Instead, reason must come from an outside—or male—source, thereby suggesting that it does not originate in women. As troubling as this is, the far more important problem is that—in spite of Kirkham’s assertion to the contrary—the reader cannot see Knightley and Emma as equals. I argue that this perceived inequality between husband and wife—in reason and power—is a direct result of the influence of the secondary narrator.

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22 Here sensibility is defined as “the quality of being easily and strongly affected by emotional influences” ("sensibility"). Sensibility was viewed as a primarily feminine trait in Georgian England (as it is today), and was particularly abhorrent to Enlightenment feminists because it is in direct opposition to reason. Until her reformation in the beginning of book three, Emma is influenced heavily by sensibility. Critics such as Janet Todd find Austen to be distinctly anti-sensibility (Todd 76).
With the secondary narrator criticizing Emma and legitimizing Knightley’s views from page one, how can the reader—who, as we have seen, accepts the secondary narrator’s account of Emma as factual—be expected to view the two as equal? When one has been built up and the other demeaned, how can they be equivalent? One must be understood to be greater than the other. This is the effect that the secondary narrator has, and it is damning. Without this eccentric force, the ending of Emma would be comparable to the ending of Pride and Prejudice and therefore much less problematic. As Emma is criticized by Mr. Knightley, so is Elizabeth Bennet chastised by Mr. Darcy. As Emma realizes the truth of Knightley’s critiques when she falls in love with him, so does Elizabeth repent her snobbishness when she comes to love and appreciate Darcy. The women go through the same pattern, yet at the end of their respective novels, Elizabeth is much more equal to Darcy than Emma can ever be to Knightley. This is because the narrator in Pride and Prejudice is Austen’s typical narrator as described by Miller. Because the narrator is impartial, both Elizabeth and Darcy are seen as flawed, and both grow as characters. Although Knightley attempts to admit that he may have been harsh in his criticisms—saying that his “interference was quite as likely to do harm as good” (Emma 304)—the reader is more likely to see his interference as, at least theoretically, incredibly beneficial to Emma’s character and therefore excusable. This is because the secondary narrator emphasizes Emma’s flaws while completely ignoring Knightley’s.

However, the problem of Emma’s diminishing power is not created by Knightley’s superiority alone. Had Knightley influenced a change in Emma’s personality and then exited the narrative (or remained in a periphery position), his impact on her character would not have been nearly as problematic. It is marriage to Knightly—to the superior, teacher
figure—that is so damaging. As we have seen, Emma manifests her personal power and
strength through matchmaking—this is, in fact, the only way she demonstrates power in the
novel. Emma’s power, therefore, is linked to the subject of Knightley’s criticism, and when
she internalizes his critiques the matchmaking stops, her strength is no longer exhibited, and
Emma’s character is flattened so she becomes nothing more than a loving, doting wife to a
superior husband.

—Chapter Two—

Austen’s Cruel Optimism: The Political and Social Ramifications of
Harriet’s Unfulfilled Marital Expectations

Unlike Emma’s marriage plot—which is foreseeable but brief and abrupt—Harriet’s
marriage plot is long, complicated, and comparatively difficult to predict. Speaking in terms
of narrative proportion alone, Harriet’s would-be marriage plot is introduced in Volume I
(when Emma schemes to marry her to Mr. Elton) and doesn’t come to a close until the end of
Volume III (when she finally marries Mr. Martin of Abbey-Mill Farm), while Emma’s
infatuation with Knightley begins in Volume III and ends a mere fifty pages later with their
marriage. In spite of the fact that Harriet’s marriage plot takes up the majority of Emma
while Emma’s is so short, Harriet’s marriage gets very little critical attention. This is likely
due to a number of legitimate factors—Harriet’s uninteresting, one-dimensional character
and Emma’s status as heroine both immediately come to mind—yet Harriet marriage plot is
worthy of analysis because while it is deeply concerned with class division and social
climbing, it does not fulfill the common Austenian ideology of upward mobility and
increased female agency through marriage. In fact, Harriet’s marriage represents the most
realistic type of marriage in Austen: in which the woman marries within a reasonable range of her social status and neither gains nor loses power.

I argue that Austen uses Harriet's marriage to critique this stasis of power while simultaneously criticizing the marriage and class systems that prevent women from improving their own extremely limited agency.

Although feminist critics take issue with the marriage plot because it often requires the heroine to discard or repress her self-cultivation, strength, or sexuality in favor of matrimony (DuPlessis 3), historically speaking marriage was one of the only ways for women to increase their agency in Georgian England. As John Gillis observes, women “lived at home, dependent on their parents until marriage” (Gillis 162). While it is true that, in marrying, a woman shifts her object of dependence from her parents to her husband, she does climb the social ladder merely by moving from the position of maiden to lady of the house. Juliet McMaster, noted Austen critic and historian, observes that “Once married, a sister gains prestige over a sister, whatever her place in the age sequence” (McMaster 120). This prestige may sometimes take form as a mere status symbol—such as being seated in a place of honor at the dinner table—or may translate into a small increase in agency: married women do not require a chaperone to attend balls and other social functions, thereby giving them greater autonomy.23 Those few particularly fortunate women who marry above their

23 Austen includes these social distinctions in her novels, most noticeably in Pride and Prejudice when Lydia—newly married to Mr. Wickham—takes Jane’s customary seat at their mother’s right hand (P&P 205)* and later boasts about chaperoning her older sisters to the balls (P&P 206)

*Quoted from the Third Norton Critical Edition of Pride and Prejudice, edited by Donald Gray and published in 2001 by W. W. Norton & Company
station in either class or wealth may also experience an increase in agency in the forms of spendable income and increased leisure time.

By far the most beneficial marriage agreement, therefore, would be to marry into the upper classes, as the majority of Austen's heroines do, but this was no easy feat. When Austen was writing, "both betrothal and [marriage were] the subject of passionate controversy, an issue not so much of religion but of class" (Gillis 135). Young people were ideologically encouraged to marry for love but were expected to choose their attachments from a group of approved potentials, usually bachelors of equal or higher social standing. Marrying any member of the upper class, however, was remarkably difficult because—as Gillis writes—among the wealthy in particular, "betrothal became a family affair" (114). Another historian of marriage in England, Macfarlane, corroborates, stating that "upper strata" families "maintain[ed] stricter control over love and courtship behavior" in order to protect their money and the purity of their titles (Macfarlane 136). Where marriage did break the class boundaries, it was often in the case of an alliance between blood and money, when the "aristocracy [was] enriched, and the merchant class... [promoted] its grandchildren into rank and title" (McMaster 125). That is to say, marrying into both class and money was effectively impossible: in order for an engagement to take place, the bride (and groom) needed to possess at least one.

Without some scrutiny, one would never guess this truth by reading Austen's novels. Five of her six heroines marry above themselves in either rank or wealth (Emma, obviously, is the odd one out), and while these matches are certainly cast as unusual within the contexts of their respective novels, they are hardly considered scandalous by the general population (as they certainly would have been in the Georgian Era). Because Austen often emphasizes
these unrealistic marriages, historically accurate social limitations (at least where marriage is concerned) are subordinated in her oeuvre. However, these limitations are present in the opinions or marriage plots of at least one minor character per novel. Harriet’s marriage plot, then, is unique because while the other historically accurate marriages in Austen are peripheral in their respective novels, Harriet’s is crucial to the story arch of *Emma*.

As Emma fails to rise in her marriage to Knightley, Harriet does not benefit socially or economically from her match, yet—unlike in Emma’s case, where questions of class, money, and upward mobility are absent—these issues are still incredibly present in Harriet’s character and marriage plot. On the very page of Harriet’s introduction, Emma observes her current social status and comes to the conclusion that, by the merit of her birth, she deserves higher connections: “Those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury... The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her. The friends from whom she had just parted, though very good sort of people, must be doing her harm” (*Emma* 13). This passage is particularly interesting because—as the reader is informed mere paragraphs earlier, and as Emma is well aware—“Harriet Smith was [a] natural 24 daughter of” unknown heritage (*Emma* 13). As we have seen, as an illegitimate child of uncertain parentage, Harriet would have been an outcast in high society. Those connections that she has—the Goddards and Martins—are far from “doing her harm,” as Emma suspects. Instead, they provide her with every advantage. Without such respectable, albeit low-class, friends, Harriet would have been completely helpless. Yet Emma, through her willful blindness to Georgian social norms, believes Harriet

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24 Here meaning illegitimate.
to be a gentleman’s daughter and therefore entitled to the benefits associated with that social class.

Emma’s incorrect assumption about Harriet’s family and social class results in a scheme to “see [her] permanently well connected,” namely through marriage (Emma 18). Emma first plans to match Harriet with Mr. Elton—a respectable, wealthy clergyman—and then Mr. Frank Churchill—a well-connected, widely known, and even more wealthy gentleman—and while Harriet first modestly rejects the notion that she is worthy of such high class men, by the end of the novel she believes that even a marriage to the great Mr. Knightley is possible. When Emma becomes engaged to Knightley instead, Harriet is understandably hurt, but is soon after engaged to Mr. Martin, a gentleman farmer who is much more her equal. The tragedy of Harriet’s marriage to Mr. Martin is not necessarily one of unhappiness—her accommodating, docile nature seems to suggest that she would ultimately be content in any situation, and she was in love with Mr. Martin before Emma’s negative influence—but one of unfulfilled expectations. In believing that she could marry a member of the upper class, Harriet necessarily expected (or, if she didn’t, then the educated reader certainly did) an increase of agency through her marriage. In marrying Mr. Martin, no extra agency is afforded to Harriet beyond the typical improvements experienced by all married women.

In her new book on affect theory, Cruel Optimism, Lauren Berlant provides a useful lens through which the question of agency in Harriet’s marriage may be illuminated.

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25 When arguing with Knightley, Emma says the following in support of her view of Harriet’s parentage: “Her allowance is very liberal; nothing has ever been grudged for her improvement or comfort” (39). However, even though Harriet does live quite comfortably, Emma fails to realize that the support provided to her could be afforded by people of many classes, not just a gentleman. It is far more likely that Emma’s estimation of Harriet’s social class is based upon her soft blue eyes and natural graces.
Berlant has published several of the most recent critical works concerning affect theory and American culture. She is primarily concerned with the affective components of being an American citizen in this modern era, and her most recent book, *Cruel Optimism*, is a study of what happens when the ideologies associated with citizenship disintegrate. *Cruel Optimism* is a study of the deconstruction of the fantasy of the good life—including many aspects of the American Dream such as upward mobility, meritocracy, stability, and durable intimacy. It is an examination of optimistic attachments to objects that are "an obstacle to [one’s] flourishing." Attachments to these objects are deemed "cruel" because the objects themselves "[impede] the aim that brought [one] to [them] initially," and hence reveal that the cultural fantasies concerning an individual’s potential and future are futile (Berlant 1). Harriet’s marriage embodies Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism because she becomes attached to the idea that she can marry someone like Elton or even Knightley, while the reality of her situation dictates that Mr. Martin, a farmer, is her only prospect. Moreover, as long as she believes in the ideology of upward mobility through marriage, Harriet eliminates her realistic marriage opportunities, thereby making it more likely that she will end up an old maid, dependent upon her anonymous, absent father until his death, at which point she would be financially orphaned. Her attachment, therefore, can only be described as cruel in its unattainability and harmfulness.

In bringing *Cruel Optimism* into conversation with Austen, I am not discouraged by Berlant’s focus on modern American issues. Yes, the fantasies of the good life that she describes are distinctly American, but I believe that they are also distinctly Georgian and—more importantly—distinctly Austen. We have already seen that upward mobility (particularly through marriage) is an incredibly important aspect of Austen’s ideology, and
meritocracy and stability are likewise significant (and likewise related to marriage). However, even after discarding the temporal and spatial distance between the literature that Berlant chooses to analyze and Jane Austen’s works, it is still unlikely that Berlant would view Austen’s marriages as exemplars of cruel optimism because of the importance Berlant places upon this psychological realization of the phenomenon. In order to illustrate the application of her theory in a variety of forms, Berlant examines several modern and postmodern texts in each chapter. Although these works vary in length, style, and theme, each poem, short story, and novel she explores illustrates a manifestation of cruel optimism, often through a psychological moment in which the object of attachment is explicitly revealed as toxic or unattainable, thereby exposing the attachment itself as cruel because it is inherently fruitless. As a romance writer working with a very specific formula, Austen could not have allowed such a distressing moment to cast a shadow on any of her romance plots. All of her newlywed characters must, at least on the surface, be seen to live happily ever after, even Harriet, who marries a man of much lower class than she had come to aspire to. However, even though Austen necessarily omits the explicit realization of cruel optimism, Harriet’s marriage—along with the marriages of some of her other minor characters—is inextricably linked to Berlant’s theory.

The set-up for Harriet’s realization of cruel optimism is impeccable—complete with her total belief in the upward-mobility script and clear knowledge that Emma created these high expectations—yet it never comes. Because the primary narrator never approaches

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26 Durable intimacy is also assumed to be important—unsurprisingly as Austen is a romance author—but cannot be analyzed in terms of cruel optimism because Austen’s novels end at the moment of marriage making any durable intimacy mere speculation.

27 These include an untitled poem by John Ashbery, “Exchange Value” by Charles Johnson, The Intuitionist by Colson Whitehead, Pattern Recognition by William Gibson, and many others.
Harriet’s consciousness after her initial introduction, the reader is not permitted to witness her reactions to Emma’s engagement to Knightley or her own eventual understanding that she had been misled. There is only a vague sense of “resentment” communicated by means of a letter and viewed through Emma’s guilt-ridden conscious (Emma 296) and the physical pain of Harriet’s “tooth amiss.”

Although seemingly insignificant and all too convenient as a plot device, Harriet’s tooth ache speaks to the cruel optimism of her situation. The significance of Harriet’s tooth amiss was first observed by Mark Blackwell—an Austen scholar who has been recognized by the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies for his expertise on live-tooth transplantation and dentistry in eighteenth-century England. In his article “Harriet’s ‘Tooth Amiss’ and Transplantation in Emma,” Blackwell claims that teeth in Austen “invoke a complex of ideas about consumption, social class, and the uneasy movement between different ranks and competing social circles”—as they did in Georgian England. He also argues that in Emma specifically “Harriet’s ‘tooth amiss’ functions as a figure for Harriet herself” (477). Blackwell provides convincing evidence that live tooth transplantation—the operation that Harriet most likely sought—was “often accused of promoting inappropriate interactions between poor tooth donors and wealthy transplant patients,” thereby associating a painful and questionable medical procedure “with the social transplantation that Emma attempts to effect with Harriet” (Blackwell 497). However, in addition to emphasizing

28 When she leaves the dinner at Hartfield “with highly gratified feelings, delighted with the affability with which Miss Woodhouse had treated her all the evening, and actually shaken hands with her at last!” (Emma 15).

29 See Blackwell 480-485 for examples from Sandition, Persuasion, Pride and Prejudice, and Catharine or the Bower to support his claim.

30 According to Blackwell, when Austen was writing Emma “Dentistry was... strongly associated with trendy metropolitan tastes and social aspiration... [and] good teeth [signified] not only one’s beauty and one’s physical health but one’s moral and social standing” (478, 479).
Harriet’s displaced social position in *Emma*, the pain of her tooth amiss is the closest thing we as readers come to approaching any of the psychological pain generally associated with the realization of cruel optimism. Although a crude physical representation of a more poignant emotional crisis, the narratological placement of Harriet’s troublesome tooth is extremely significant to a complete understanding of her cruel optimism and her marriage plot.

The reader is informed that Harriet’s tooth had been troubling her for “some time,” and that she had long desired to consult a dentist (*Emma* 297), yet these details are narrated, not demonstrated. The reader only learns of Harriet’s tooth after Emma’s engagement to Knightley, so while Harriet may have been experiencing pain for some time, the revelation of her discomfort is narratologically linked to the emotional pain she must have felt upon hearing that Emma is promised to marry the man whom Harriet loves. Of course, Harriet’s pain in this instance is not proof of cruel optimism—feeling hurt at a friend’s betrayal is natural with or without a loss of expectation. However, when combined with the fact that Harriet’s trip to the dentist results in her engagement to Mr. Martin, her pain is also linked to the surrendering of her cruel expectations. Mere pages before her engagement is announced, she exclaims to Emma that “I hope I know better now, than to care for Mr. Martin, or to be suspected of it” (270), yet, she still marries him. The only possible explanation for this surprising change in her opinion is that she realized her hopes of marrying so high were futile and instead fell back on her attainable class position of her first love.

Even given the pain she experiences—as represented through her tooth—Harriet’s cruel optimism is latent in the plot of *Emma*. As one of the three main marriages, Harriet must be seen as happy with her match, and her happiness cannot be marred by a damaging
psychological realization of false expectations. However, even though Harriet is not permitted to understand the cruel optimism inherent in her situation, there is another character in Austen who experiences the fully psychological ramifications of being attached to a marriage ideology that is too good to be true: Mrs. Norris. I argue that in bringing the cruel optimism of Mrs. Norris’ marriage plot back to bear on Harriet’s situation, the full, problematic ramifications of Harriet’s marriage are illuminated.

Mrs. Norris’ marriage plot is recounted in the first few paragraphs of Mansfield Park and is therefore incredibly brief. The reader learns that six years after her sister had the “good luck” to marry Sir Bertram, Mrs. Norris (then Miss Ward) “found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr. Norris... [a man] with scarcely any private fortune” (MP 5). The Ward sisters, each with seven thousand pounds, were not particularly wealthy, and so the citizens of Huntington are right to exclaim in the greatness of Maria’s marriage to a member of the landed gentry, yet none “scruple[d] to predict [the sisters] marrying with almost equal advantage” (MP 5). Mrs. Norris, then, was encouraged by her family and community to become optimistically attached to the ideology of upward mobility “with all the [associated]
comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income,” yet, after six years without a marriage proposal, she is “obliged” to marry “a friend of her brother-in-law,” a clergyman named Mr. Norris (MP 5). The fact that she was “obliged” to marry a man so below her acquired standards strongly suggests that she had no choice in the matter. Indeed, Mr. Norris was likely her only option.

In marrying a member of clergy, particularly a clergyman with close ties to Sir Thomas, Mrs. Norris became completely dependent upon the Bertrams. Although the Norrises have a comfortable living of under a thousand a year, this income and their house was provided by Sir Thomas. Mrs. Norris, then, became effectively subordinate to two men: her husband (which was to be expected in marriage) and her brother-in-law. Mrs. Norris, therefore, suffered a loss of agency and power through her marriage, a fact that is further emphasized by the cruel optimism of her expectation to marry above her station.

Because Mrs. Norris’ marriage plot is so brief and narrated retrospectively without any fused monologues to illuminate her inner thoughts, her situation—like Harriet’s—passes without the characteristic psychological realization of cruel optimism. However, Mrs. Norris’ actions throughout Mansfield Park seem to indicate that she did realize the cruelty of her attachment to romantic marriage ideologies. Embittered by her own unsatisfactory marriage, Mrs. Norris is determined that no one (except perhaps her beloved Bertram nieces) should be permitted to enjoy happiness where she experienced pain. She becomes obsessed with class and social standards and regularly disapproved of any hint of Fanny’s social elevation (through marriage or otherwise).

Although a respectable class of men—and often emphasized in Austen for their virtues—clergymen could hardly be compared to a member of the aristocracy, or even a member of the landowning gentry (McMaster 120-1).
Although their situations do differ—Harriet does seem genuinely happy to marry Mr. Martin at the end of *Emma*, and one cannot imagine her pleasant, docile nature morphing into Mrs. Norris’ cruel, meddlesome personality—the commonality of cruel optimism allows Mrs. Norris’ case to illuminate the problems with Harriet’s marriage. As we have seen, Mrs. Norris is bitter primarily because she realizes that the luxuries she could have enjoyed if she married above her station are forever out of her reach. Because one of the unquestionable benefits of rising in wealth or status is the advantage of increased agency, Mrs. Norris’ anger emphasizes the lack of agency she—and all women who fail to become upwardly mobile through marriage—experience,\(^ {35} \) and this in turn draws attention to the fact that women can only gain power and agency through matrimony. With this in mind, Mrs. Norris’ and Harriet’s marriages become the most historically accurate type of marriage in Austen, and I argue that Austen uses Harriet’s cruel optimism to critique the class system that limited women’s agency and power, even in marriage.

True, Harriet’s marriage is not nearly as problematic as Emma’s: while Emma loses her personal power by marrying Knightley, Harriet only fails to gain power. However, in comparing Harriet’s marriage to Mr. Martin to what she *could have had* with Mr. Knightley, Austen emphasizes that a mere stability of power (while preferable to a loss) is not enough. The cruel optimism of Harriet’s situation speaks to the pain and hardships that women had to endure as second-class citizens of Georgian England, and the benefits afforded by marriage are not sufficient to offset that injustice. I am not suggesting that Austen campaigned for (or even believed in) complete equality between men and women. To do so would ahistorical and anachronistic. Instead I suggest that she recognized some of the flaws in the Georgian

\(^{35}\) Excluding, of course, those perfunctory benefits of going to balls without a chaperone and sitting at a more honorable place during meals.
marriage system, a system that controlled even a woman’s ability to develop her own limited agency. Through Harriet’s marriage plot she observes and critiques these flaws.

—Chapter Three—

Jane Fairfax’s Progressivism: A Study of Austen’s Upwardly Mobile Marriages

In many ways, Jane Fairfax’s marriage is perfectly opposed to Harriet’s. As we have seen, marriage between the upper and lower or middle classes generally only took place in Georgian England when the floundering aristocracy was enriched through their union with a wealthy merchant-class family, thereby making it incredibly difficult for a member of the lower or middle class without wealth or social standing to marry into a family with both (McMaster 125). Harriet’s case displays historical fact with painful accuracy, while Jane’s marriage flouts reality: as a poor, middle class, would-be governess, she marries Frank Churchill—a member of a renowned, wealthy, and distinctly upper-class family—and, one can assume, reaps the associated benefits of increased power and agency. Of the marriages in Emma, Jane’s is the most historically unrealistic, yet the trope it represents (of upward mobility through marriage) is one of the most common in Austen’s body of work, particularly among her heroines. In fact, almost fairytale-like instances of upward mobility are so prevalent in Austen that historically accurate Georgian ideologies and marriage practices are subordinated and repressed. This is obviously not the case in Emma, as both Emma’s and Harriet’s marriages are realistic, yet it would be unwise to underestimate the significance of Jane’s marriage because although it plays a minor role in the plot of Emma, it represents a major ideology in Austen and therefore calls all of her other novels into conversation with the marriages in Emma.
While Harriet’s marriage plot is extended and Emma’s is brief, Jane Fairfax’s—in terms of page count—is almost non-existent. Although she and Frank were engaged before the beginning of the novel (and were presumably romantically attached for even longer), their engagement is kept a complete secret until the tenth chapter of Volume III, the few available details of their romance plot are not revealed until four chapters later, and they are rapidly scheduled to be married before the end of the novel. Because Jane’s marriage plot is—narratologically speaking—so short and the details so scarce, very little evidence can be gathered from *Emma* that would indicate whether she experienced an increase or decrease of agency in her marriage to Frank (or if, like Harriet, her power remained the same). However, because Jane Fairfax’s marriage so clearly echoes the marriages of Austen’s other heroines because she succeeded in marrying so far above her station, a survey of Austen’s earlier novels may inform the politics of Jane’s power and agency.

In order to examine the political aspects of the dominant marriages in *Pride and Prejudice, Sense & Sensibility, Northanger Abbey,* and *Mansfield Park* I return to Woloch’s schema of asymmetric characterization. Woloch argues that the representation of minor characters emphasizes the interiority of a singular protagonist while simultaneously affecting the narratological and moral structure of the novel (30, 31). This is precisely what happens in Austen—in *Emma* through her use of the secondary narrator—and in her other novels through more typical minor character eccentrics. Because these minor characters are within the structure of their respective narratives, they function slightly differently than the secondary narrator in *Emma,* who operates outside of the plot and influences reader response.

36 Because *Persuasion* features a marriage that is much more historically realistic than the other upward mobility plots—it is a union between wealth on Frederick’s part and class on Anne’s—it does not have the same bearing on Jane’s marriage.
According to Woloch, minor character eccentrics grate against the dominant narrative and are consequently “wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed (within the discourse, if not the story)” (25). Because the dominant narratives in Austen’s novel—*Emma* excluded—are concerned primarily with upwardly-mobile marriage plots, the eccentrics must be those who oppose these marriage or, in other words, represent traditional Georgian marriage ideals. Of course, these minor characters are not eccentric at all in the historical sense, but Woloch’s term is still fitting because, in the context of Austen’s novel, these minor characters do appear to be strange, irrational, or deviant. In order to examine how this effect is achieved and determine the political and moral ramifications, I turn to my analysis of Austen’s most popular novel: *Pride and Prejudice*.

From the first iconic line, *Pride and Prejudice* identifies itself as a story about money and marriage: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (3). While this line is intended with a certain dose of irony—unmarried women and their mothers, not the men themselves, saw wealthy bachelors as in want of wives—it does introduce and link the ideas of marriage, wealth, and (by extension of wealth) class, a link that is stronger in *Pride and Prejudice* than in any other Austen novel. Therefore, I will primarily use *Pride and Prejudice*—and Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s marriage—to analyze the case of upward mobility in marriage while occasionally referencing the other novels that follow the same paradigm.

Of Austen’s novels *Pride and Prejudice* is the most concerned with money. When each major character is introduced, the narrator takes pains to provide a summary of their financial history and current status, particularly when the character in question is a
marriageable gentleman. The issues of marriage, wealth, and class are intertwined throughout the novel, ending in the marriage between the novel’s heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, and the incredibly wealthy Mr. Darcy. In marrying Darcy, Elizabeth goes from being the second-eldest daughter of a country gentleman to a member of the landed gentry whose husband has £10,000 a year. It is, as McMaster asserts, “the greatest ‘match’ in [Austen’s] novels” (117), and certainly the most fantastical from a historical standpoint. But from whose perspective is this marriage great? The Bennets—as a family of women who by law will lose their estate and income to a male cousin when Mr. Bennet dies—are naturally overjoyed (doubly so by Jane Bennet’s marriage to another wealthy gentleman, Mr. Bingley). The majority of Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s acquaintances are equally supportive, but there are, however, two minor characters in Pride and Prejudice who not only disapprove of Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s marriage, but are mortified and offended by it: Lady Catherine and Miss Caroline Bingley.

The basis for these women’s objections is clear—both take issue with Elizabeth’s inferior social position in comparison to Darcy’s—and as we have seen, their protestations are completely validated by their historical context. As Darcy is hardly in want of riches or title, and Elizabeth is not in a position to provide either—much like Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, respectively—their marriage would not be seen as socially acceptable by members of the upper class in Georgian England. Lady Catherine—Mr. Darcy’s independently wealthy aunt—is correct in pointing out that the engagement of a wealthy gentleman to a “young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the [gentleman’s] family” is highly unusual and even “scandalous” (PP 231, 230). Similarly,

37 For example, the moment Darcy’s name is mentioned, the reader learns that he has “ten thousand a year,” and, perhaps more importantly, that all of the characters also know (P&P 8).
Caroline—Mr. Bingley’s sister, an unmarried woman with “twenty thousand pounds” in her own right (PP 11)—is right in agreeing with her sister that the Bennet women, “with such a father and mother, and such low connections” will have “no chance” of being “well settled” in marriage” (PP 25). However, these facts and their associated class-conscious mentalities are dismissed—or “wounded, exiled, [or] expelled,” as Woloch might say (25)—by the fact that both Lady Catherine and Caroline Bingley are completely unsympathetic characters. In Pride and Prejudice, the reader’s sympathies are strongly allied with Elizabeth from the beginning. She is witty and intelligent, occasionally sarcastic, and deeply affectionate towards those she cares about. She is, in short, a genuinely likeable character. However, the reader’s sympathy for Elizabeth does not mean that one cannot sympathize with any character with whom the heroine disagrees.³⁸ Lady Catherine and Caroline Bingley are unsympathetic in their own right.

Arrogant, conceited, class-conscious, and without manners, Lady Catherine is viewed unfavorably by the reader from the moment of her introduction. When Elizabeth visits her at Rosings with Mr. and Mrs. Collins, the narrator presents Lady Catherine as snobbishly proud, saying that “Her ladyship received them civilly, but it was clear that their company was by no means so acceptable as when she could get nobody else” (P&P 114). She then proceeds to largely ignore her guests and regularly refocuses conversation so it revolves around her and her own achievements. However, the true, aggressive unpleasantness of Lady Catherine’s character does not reveal itself until Volume III, when she hears rumors about Elizabeth’s engagement to Darcy (which, at this point, had not yet transpired). In this

³⁸ Take, for example, the case of Charlotte Lucas, a friend of Elizabeth’s who (much to Elizabeth’s disappointment and disgust) marries unhappily. Although Charlotte fundamentally disagrees with Elizabeth on matters of marriage—specifically marrying for love—I argue that she has an incredibly sympathetic case by merit of her good character, loyal friendship, and pitiable situation.
instance, she appears at the Bennets’ home unannounced “with an air more than usually ungracious,” referring to the individual Bennet women as “that” and abusing the smallness of the estate’s park and the quality of rooms. She then proceeds to walk with Elizabeth and “insult [her] in every possible method” for her pretension of loving Darcy (PP 229, 233). During this interaction, she goes so far as to accuse Elizabeth of using her female “arts and allurements” to make Darcy “forget what he owes to himself and to all his family,” claims that Elizabeth must be “lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy,” and demands that she promise “never to enter into... an engagement” with Mr. Darcy” (PP 231, 233). Lady Catherine is so out of line that the reader cannot sympathize with her position. This is especially true of modern readers, yet even Austen’s contemporaries—who would have understood Lady Catherine’s objections to an engagement between Elizabeth and Darcy—would have viewed this behavior as inappropriate. Because, as we have seen, the marriages of the upper class were considered family affairs (Gillis 114), it would have been suitable for Lady Catherine to voice her opinions and disapproval to Darcy, yet she does not do that.39 Rather than go to her nephew, she pays an unannounced visit to the Bennets, insults their home and conduct, and rudely confronts Elizabeth without a complete understanding of the situation to which she so strongly objects.40 Therefore, in light of her conduct, Lady

39 Mrs. Ferrars of Sense and Sensibility exemplifies a suitable Georgian reaction to the similar engagement between her son and Lucy Steele: she attempts to convince him to call off the engagement and, when he refuses, disinherits him. However, later, when Edward’s younger brother, Robert (now the heir to their family fortunes) enters into an engagement with the same woman, he suffers no consequences. Therefore Mrs. Ferrars’ rigid class consciousness—which she expresses again in her objections to Edward’s engagement to Elinor—is viewed in an unsympathetic light because it is unreliable, irrational, and linked more to favoritism than to any real social concerns.

40 The only other eccentric character in Austen who commits such a serious social breach is General Tilney from Northanger Abbey. After learning that Catherine is not as wealthy as he suspected, he ejects her from his home—where she had been staying for an extended period—and sends her to her family without a chaperone by way of public transportation. His obsession with class structure and objections to Catherine’s engagement
Catherine’s perfectly reasonable preoccupation with class separation appears as an unreasonable obsession.

Caroline Bingley’s class consciousness is similarly dismissed. As had already been mentioned, Caroline Bingley has “a fortune of twenty-thousand pounds” and is accustomed to “associating with people of rank” (PP 11). As a result of these luxuries and her general wanting of good character, both Caroline and her sister (the married Mrs. Hurst) are “proud and conceited... [and] think well of themselves, and meanly of others” (PP 11). Both Caroline and Mrs. Hurst feign friendships with Jane Bennet through the majority of Pride and Prejudice but find “mirth... at the expense of the dear friend’s vulgar relation[s]” (PP 25), thereby demonstrating that, while they may admire an individual’s character, they does not care for personality as much as wealth and connections. In fact, Caroline seems to only care for wealth and connections. Her fortune, the reader learns on the very page of her introduction, “had been acquired by trade”—making it dirty, low money by Georgian standards (McMaster 123)—and her brother’s estate, Netherfield, is rented, not owned, making the Bingleys little more than posh tenants (PP 11). In an effort to improve both her class and wealth, Caroline is set on marrying Darcy and regularly tries to ruin his opinion of Elizabeth out of jealousy and spite. She is so concerned with maintaining wealthy acquaintances, however, that even after Darcy’s marriage to Elizabeth “she thought it advisable to retain the right of visiting at Pemberley... [and] dropt all her resentment... [paying] off every arrear of civility to Elizabeth” in spite of her mortification with the union (PP 253). Caroline is, to the end, a petty class-conscious social climber who cannot help but scramble for the approval of the upper class.
In putting such class-conscious opinions of marriage in the mouths of such despicable, unreliable, or unlikeable minor characters, Austen dismisses historically-accurate Georgian ideologies as petty, ridiculous, and cruel. Judith Lowder Newton, feminist historian and Austen critic, argues that this dismissal “[denies] the force of economics in human life” and that “In the reading of [Pride and Prejudice], the real force of economics simply melts away,” thereby allowing Elizabeth’s marriage to Darcy to be unchallenging in the social and economical context of the novel (61). Although Newton refers specifically to Pride and Prejudice, her analysis can also be applied to Sense and Sensibility, Northanger Abbey, and Mansfield Park because narratological dismissal of the class- and money-conscious eccentrics takes place in all four of these novels (most significantly in Mansfield Park, when Mrs. Norris physically exits the narrative because she no longer feels supported by the Bertrams). While the force of economics is weaker in Pride and Prejudice (and in the rest of Austen’s novels) than in historical Georgian England—as signified by the fact that Darcy marries Elizabeth in spite of economic considerations and family disapproval—Newton is wrong to assume that money has no bearing on the novel. Pride and Prejudice is positively rife with class tension and money matters. The Bennet’s—and specifically Elizabeth’s—social status is regularly emphasized both by specific characters (sympathetic and otherwise) and by the narrator itself. The reader is never allowed to forget the Bennets’ impending poverty or Mr. Darcy’s unreachable wealth, and small reminders of cost and class differences are scattered throughout the novel. While it is true that the dominant marriages in Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Northanger Abbey, and Mansfield Park seem to minimize the “force of economics in human life,” these forces do not simply melt away. Instead, when Austen dismisses the eccentrics’ opinions regarding economic and social marriage
ideologies, she does not—as Newton argues—merely dismiss these principles from the novels in order to make her ending appear more realistic and less controversial. Instead, she does something far more radical. First, the presence of these realistic expectations reveals how truly progressive—from an economic standpoint—her dominant marriage plots are. Second, in casting the eccentric’s voices as irrational, absurd, petty, and cruel—and in having the heroes and heroines blatantly disregard them—the novels suggest that women should be allowed to drastically increase their autonomy through marriage to a member of the upper class. Yes, the fact that Elizabeth climbs the social ladder so incredibly high does lend a fairytale quality to her marriage, but if *Pride and Prejudice* is a fantasy, it is still a fantasy of female autonomy, just as the rest of Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility, Northanger Abbey,* and *Mansfield Park* are, although to varying degrees.

Reflecting these readings of *Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Northanger Abbey,* and *Mansfield Park* back onto Jane Fairfax’s marriage is slightly complicated largely because Jane’s marriage plot is a peripheral story in *Emma.* However, with the role of eccentrics having been explored in Austen’s other works, it is possible to see an eccentric character for Jane situation: Mrs. Churchill. Mrs. Churchill is Frank’s Aunt (although mother-figure is a more telling title41), and although she never makes a physical appearance, her personality and influence are scattered throughout *Emma.* Her ill humor regularly prevents Frank from visiting his father, she uses her illnesses to manipulate those around her, and all of the characters in *Emma* have a poor opinion of her (*Emma* 78-9, 168).

Significantly, it is only after her death—which is considered “a clearer of ill-fame” by those

41 Frank was born to Mr. Weston and first wife, the former Miss Churchill. After Miss Churchill died (presumably of an illness), Mr. Weston found himself unable to support his son—who was then only a few years old—so Frank was taken into the care of Miss Churchill’s brother and sister-in-law (*Emma* 8).
who “disliked [her for] at least twenty-five years” (*Emma* 254)—and after her influence has faded that Frank and Jane announce their engagement. Although there are no indications of Mrs. Churchill’s social opinions prior to her death, once Jane’s engagement is announced Mrs. Weston confides to Emma that Mr. Churchill “act[ed] exactly opposite of what [Mrs. Churchill] would have required” when he gave his blessing to Frank and Jane (*Emma* 262), thereby suggesting that she would have objected to their attachment, presumably because of Jane’s inferior social status. Given this new information, Mrs. Churchill becomes representative of characters like Lady Catherine and Caroline Bingley. The presence of an eccentric character combined with the influence of all of Austen’s other upwardly-mobile marriages emphasizes the progressivity of Jane’s marriage to Frank and subsequently emphasizes her increase in power and autonomy as a newly-made member of the wealthy upper class.

---Conclusions---

One lingering question remains from my analysis of Jane Fairfax’s marriage: why isn’t Jane the heroine of *Emma*? Based upon Austen’s previous works and perceived progressivity, she should be, yet she is seemingly unimportant to the plot. Literary theorist and scholar of Austen, Wayne Booth argues that the readers are not permitted to enter Jane Fairfax’s consciousness because doing so would reveal the mystery of her engagement to Frank Churchill (qtd. in Moffat 46), while Moffat suggests “that Austen avoids Jane’s consciousness in order to plumb the reader’s affection for malicious glamour, to play upon and test the reader’s delight in the fantasy of freedom” (Moffat 46-7). Of these two interpretations, Moffat’s is more substantial because she recognizes the “fantasy of freedom”
inhomogeneous in Jane Fairfax’s marriage plot; however, a more complex reading of Austen’s subordination of Jane Fairfax is political in nature. As the only character in *Emma* who achieves increased autonomy and power in marriage, the fact that Jane isn’t the heroine is incredibly provocative and immediately engenders questions about Jane Austen’s gender and marriage politics. The obvious reading—that Austen is narratologically dismissing the concept of increased female power and agency in marriage (a reading that would be supported both by the subordination of Jane’s marriage plot and simplistic reading of the cruel optimism in Harriet’s marriage plot)—is troubling from a feminist perspective, but also incorrect because while Jane’s connection with Frank is so peripheral in *Emma*, it brings with it the ideological weight of Austen’s previous novels.

Although unrealistic, the heroines’ marriages in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Mansfield Park* have garnered the sympathy and affection of countless readers, from Austen’s time until present day. Modern readers are enamored of the romance and the upward mobility plot, but even Austen’s contemporaries would have been appreciative of her endings. As Poovey observes: “Austen’s contemporary readers would no doubt have been all too familiar with the facts and pressures” that made upward mobility in marriage so challenging, “and, merely by alluding to this shared experience [through her inclusion of eccentrics], Austen enhances the gratification that [the heroine’s] improbable success provides” (206). The joy that these successes create in Austen’s readers result in an almost overpowering sympathy for her heroines, the women—like Jane Fairfax—who experience increased power and agency in marriage.

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42 It is significant to note that while Austen contemporaries had access to *Northanger Abbey*, many of them may not have read it until after being exposed to *Emma*. Although it was written earlier, *Northanger Abbey* was published posthumously in 1818 (compared to *Emma*’s publication date of 1816). Therefore, *Northanger Abbey* may or may not have influenced a Georgian reader’s interpretation of Jane Fairfax’s marriage.

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With Jane’s case so strongly sentimentalized by the sway of Austen’s previous novels, her marriage plot becomes an influential power in *Emma*, one that threatens to destabilize the dominant marriage plots. To help expound upon this idea, I return to Woloch’s schema of asymmetric structure of characterization for the final time. If we apply his analysis of eccentrics, not to characters or even narrative voices, but to ideologies and marriage plots, Jane Fairfax’s marriage becomes an eccentric force in *Emma*. When compared to Emma’s dominate marriage plot—which ends in a loss of power—and Harriet’s secondary marriage plot—which results in only a perfunctory increase in agency—Jane’s marriage plot is suitably oppositional to warrant the title of eccentric, yet it is not “wounded, exiled, expelled, [etc.]” as eccentrics so often are (Woloch 25). Instead, her upcoming marriage is alluded to in relation to Emma’s and Harriet’s in the last few paragraphs of the novel:

> Before the end of September, Emma attended Harriet to church, and saw her hand bestowed on Robert Martin... Robert Martin and Harriet Smith, the latest couple engaged of the three, were the first to be married.
>
> Jane Fairfax had already quitted Highbury, and was restored to the comforts of her beloved home with the Campbells... [She and Frank Churchill] were only waiting for November.
>
> The intermediate month was the one fixed on, as far as they dared, by Emma and Mr. Knightley. (*Emma* 318)

In placing Harriet’s, Jane’s, and Emma’s marriages so close together—both spatially on the page and temporally—Austen invites a comparison between the three and, more significantly, allows Jane Fairfax’s marriage to throw up one last flare of meaning. DuPlessis
claims that subordinated plots or ideologies may assert their influence at the end of a story because it is during the ending that “subtexts and repressed discourses can throw up one last flare of meaning” (DuPlessis 3). Although DuPlessis claims that the reemergence of these repressed discourses is often unintentional on the part of the author (DuPlessis 6), I argue that the presence of Jane’s marriage—and its political ramifications—were a part of Austen’s design. Emma’s and Harriet’s marriage plots could have taken place in precisely the same way with precisely the same significance if Jane Fairfax had been absent from Emma.43 Jane’s marriage must have been significant for Austen to include it and to equal it to Emma’s and Harriet’s marriages by having all three weddings take place in three consecutive months (and alluded to in three consecutive paragraphs).

However, the full significance of Jane Fairfax’s presence at the end of the novel is not realized until one re-evaluates her role as an eccentric. As we have seen, her marriage plot is incredibly sentimentalized and therefore has a unique ability to undermine Emma’s and Harriet’s problematic marriages. In this way, Jane’s marriage functions like the secondary narrator: both hold significant power over our interpretations of the text, one through sentiment and sympathy, the other through falsified narrative authority. With the influence of all of Austen’s previous works at her back, the fantasy of upward mobility inherent in Jane’s marriage overshadows the realism of Emma’s loss of power and Harriet’s disappointing stasis, thereby emphasizing and critiquing the problems of power and agency inherent in marriage for Georgian women while also acknowledging that that these problems are dominant and even inescapable. Her marriage, then, is the perfect counterpart to Harriet’s: while Austen uses Harriet’s marriage to criticize Georgian marriage practices, she uses

43 Although Frank Churchill would have had to play a role because Emma believed Harriet to be in love with him instead of Knightley.
Jane’s to destabilize their oppressive dominance. It follows that Jane Fairfax’s marriage is not, as Moffat says, used to “test the reader’s delight in the fantasy of freedom” (47). Instead, Austen depends upon her reader’s delight and sympathy in that fantasy and exploits it for her own critique on Georgian society. Therefore, while Emma’s marriage to Knightley may very well be the most problematic and anti-feminist union in Austen’s entire oeuvre, Emma the novel provides a powerful political—and ultimately feminist—critique about the problems that women face in marriage.

Word Count (excluding footnotes): 14,853
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