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Emma: Jane Austen's Most Imperfect Heroine and Most Perfect Novel

Mielőtt elkezdeném az előadásomat el szeretném mondani, hogy hogyan is lettem én Jane Austen „mániás” és hogy, legalábbis itt, miért azonnal az a válasz, hogy, ha Tóth Zsófi, akkor *Emma*. Ugyanis ez igazából Sárítól eredeztethető. Egykoron elveszett kis másodévesként lemaradtam a Jane Austen kurzus elejéről és úgy „könyörögtem be” magam. Sári valami olyasmit mondott, hogy na jó, megkockáztatja, hogy a TO leszedi a fejét, mert természetesen tele volt a kurzus. Azután senki sem akart az *Emma*-ból referálni, mert nyilvánvalóan ez volt a leghosszabb regény, de én elvállaltam és igen jól sikerült az előadás. Nemsokára meg is kérdeztem Sárít, hogy nem lenne-e témavezetőm a Major Paper-nél, és aztán így is maradtunk vagy 11 évig. Az első 4-5 év az *Emmaról* szólt, aztán témát váltottam a doktorinál, de úgy gondoltam, hogy Sárira mindenképp az *Emmával* szeretnék emlékezni.

In this paper, I intend to argue that in *Emma*, Jane Austen created her most imperfect heroine within the realm of her most perfect novel. Although, I immediately must make a little amendment: Emma herself, due to her complexity, is not entirely imperfect but also perfect. As Tony Tanner claims, “Emma is ‘perfection’, ‘faultless in spite of her faults’, and many more enchanting things besides” (188). No other Jane Austen heroine is as complex as she is. She is the unique combination of good and bad to an extent that no other Jane Austen character is.

We could say that Austen was experimenting with the possibility of a flawed, yet, lovable heroine/character but did not manage or intend to create such complexity, only in the figure of Emma. For example, there is evidently Lady Susan, who as a (anti-)heroine of the story bearing her name, could be a viable candidate for this title but she is still a *femme fatale* figure, who does not really possess any positive characteristic features and does not do any good to anybody. Another viable candidate could be Mary Crawford from *Mansfield Park*, who is almost perfect except for her total lack of morals and her entirely corrupted world view. Additionally, she is not the heroine in the story though, because of her liveliness and exuberance, she often seems to be much more the heroine of the story and she is much more attractive, as

Dominique Enright suggests (15), than the actual heroine, the insipid Fanny. Yet, she is still and also a traditional *femme fatale* figure, whom Austen would never allow to be her major character.

Thus, it is evident that Austen was experimenting with creating a unique character, a heroine, that is an exceptional combination of good and bad, who somehow manages to keep that delicate balance and bring forth something memorable and unparalleled. the realization of all that is Emma Woodhouse. And even if in Emma's complex character Austen managed to create the synthesis of good and bad, she was still uncertain whether people would accept or like Emma: "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (Austen-Leigh 117), and as James Austen-Leigh declares in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, "[s]he was very fond of *Emma*, but did not reckon on her being a general favourite [...]" (ibid). Claudia L. Johnson also observes that "with Emma, Austen knew she was taking a risk" (122). Emma is also an exceptional heroine from various other points of view. She absolutely stands out from the circle of the Austen heroines. She is different from all of them, for example, because of her physical attractiveness, outstanding intelligence, artistic capabilities, financial situation, social status and most of all, her power position, which is the source of most evil she causes (although unintentionally). It is important to emphasize that she is a well-meaning person, and every terrible thing she does or says, when she causes harm to other people, is not the result of ill-intention but her improper management of her own power and capabilities. Tony Tanner is also of the opinion that Emma "is given to error but not, at all, to evil" (199).

First, let us have a closer look at her differences which distinguish her from the other Austen heroines. The novel starts with her brief description and introduction:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. (Austen 2002, 23)

First of all, Austen usually does not create a physically attractive, outstanding or beautiful heroine. Generally, the heroines themselves are more or less pretty or good-looking, but mostly not even that. For example, how could we forget what Mr Darcy says about Elizabeth Bennet: "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men" (Austen 1997, 9). Another memorable example is Anne Elliot, who is considered to be an old maid with no hope of ever marrying and who "had been a very

pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and [...] her father had found little to admire in her” (Austen 1996b, 5). Yet maybe, the worst case of all is Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, who is a tomboy and an absolutely hopeless case concerning feminine matters: “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine” (Austen 1993, 3). Emma, however, is precisely called beautiful and pretty: “Pretty! say beautiful rather. Can you imagine any thing nearer perfect beauty than Emma altogether – face and figure?” (Austen 2002, 49) Yet, it is also added that “Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it; her vanity lies another way” (ibid).

The next attribute of the character is intelligence or cleverness. The Austenian heroines are usually not dimwits and they are generally quite or relatively intelligent but they are never concretely called clever or strikingly intelligent, Emma however is (Austen 2002, 23). It is even stated that

Emma is spoiled by being the cleverest of her family. At ten years old, she had the misfortune of being able to answer any questions which puzzled her sister at seventeen. She was always quick and assured: Isabella slow and diffident. (Austen 2002, 48)

Artistic skills and excellence in arts are always shortcomings of the Austenian heroines. Let us just remember the ‘neglected education’ of the Bennet girls, who did not have proper masters and whose musical as well as drawing talents and skills leave much to desire in *Pride and Prejudice*; or Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* is a good musician but cannot paint or draw while Elinor can but she cannot play music. And again, ‘poor’ Catherine Morland is a very simple girl, who “never could learn or understand anything before she was taught” and who was not able to learn how to play “the old forlorn spinet” and whose “taste for drawing was not superior” (Austen 1993, 3-4). So, evidently the heroines usually do not excel in arts. Emma, however, is quite good at music as well as painting/drawing. This is acknowledged, for example, at the Coles’ party (Austen 2002, 188) or in connection with Harriet’s portrait (Austen 2002, 52-57).

Still, the most outstanding differences across the heroines arise from financial situation, social status and power. The financial situation is usually the most strenuous trouble of the Austen heroines. These young women are always financially-challenged, and are in great need of a lovable, proper, yet, wealthy husband who might save them from perishing or living at the mercy of some male relatives for livelihood. Although they never strive to catch someone only for money. Austen is always strict about this: never marry solely for money because that brings misery, love always has to come first in marriage but income also has to be taken into consideration because poverty

destroys familial bliss (McMaster 290-291)). Emma is different from this aspect, too, as she is the only heroine who can afford not getting married and who, in fact, does not intend to marry since the Woodhouses are one of the richest families, if not the richest one in their region, thus she does not have to worry about her livelihood. She is very well aware of this: “And I am not only, not going to be married, at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all” (Austen 2002, 84). After disclosing the possibility of love that she does not presume as a probability in her case, she adds:

Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s. (ibid)

Social consequence is strongly tied to this financial situation since the Woodhouse family is the first in consequence in the community. They are the first family and absolutely at the top of the social ladder. Since Emma is the mistress of the Woodhouse estate, she is the first lady of the community. In fact, this is what leads to all of the troubles because she is too young, inexperienced and obstinate to have such a power. She has the potential to become a good leader but this role fell onto her too early and resulted in all of her mismanagement and misuse of power. As Mr Knightley so aptly utters:

And 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. She inherits her mother’s talents, and must have been under subjection to her. (Austen 2002, 48)

Evidently, her power results from all of these advantages. As Claudia L. Johnson in her discussion of the novel states, “[w]hat makes Emma unusual” is “that she is a woman who possesses and enjoys power, without bothering to demur about it” (125), and also adds that “Emma’s very difference makes her and her novel exceptional” (124). In fact, the problem of having too much freedom, power and no one questioning anything Emma thinks, says or does is also precisely articulated by the narrator pointing out the source of all evil she commits as the most perfect-imperfect heroine: “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 [...]” (Austen 2002, 24). This all makes her a bit insensitive, arrogant, intolerant and impatient with other people, who are, in fact, dependent upon her and are at her mercy. By thinking that she can do

whatever she likes, even to people under her (this is what she learned as a child due to inadequate guidance), she becomes slightly inconsiderate and thoughtless hurting people's feelings, ruining friendships, messing up relationships, making disadvantaged people miserable etc. Johnson also states that it is actually her power that Emma has to overcome in this story (127).

Sarolta Marinovich, when discussing the issue of female subjectivity and how women's identity is constructed taking the example of the tale of *Snow White*, claims that to be able to find one's true identity a woman has to act as the Evil Queen does: "[t]he egotistically self-assertive and active Queen has to destroy the angel-in-the-house myth frozen in the transparent glass coffin of Snow White" (80). Emma quite successfully performs this recurringly. Yet, what Marinovich adds later is also true "that the wicked Queen and Snow White are in some sense one: the divided self of a woman. While the Queen struggles to free herself from the submissive Snow White in herself, Snow White must struggle to repress the assertive queen in herself." (ibid) This is also essential because Emma is not evil *per se*. She does not primarily intend to do harm, she is just too fanciful and strong-willed to be certain that everything is fine as she imagines and everybody should do and think what she does because that is right. In this sense, she is not really in quest of her identity because seemingly she is very sure of herself. Her identity is not questioned until the very end of the novel.

But revelation, the moment of epiphany comes to all Wicked Queen trainees. Analyzing Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's poem *The Other Side of the Mirror*, Marinovich suggests: "[t]he horror of this moment of revelation when she realizes there is another face of her, the self-disgust, the self-hatred is more intense because she cannot find a voice to articulate it" (81). Although Emma's epiphany and (self-)revelation of seeing herself truly and completely do not involve so much disgust and self-hatred, this moment or rather moments and hours are not less intense, painful, or agonizing. She can hardly find a voice to articulate it. I provide a few examples from the text to demonstrate how this revelation occurs:

She was *bewildered* amidst the *confusion* of all that had rushed on her, [...] *humiliation* to her, [...] The *blunders*, the *blindness* of her own head and heart! [...] she was *wretched*, [...] This was the knowledge of herself, [...] She was most sorrowfully *indignant*, *ashamed*, [...] With *insufferable vanity* had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with *unpardonable arrogance* proposed to arrange everybody's destiny. She was proved to have been *universally mistaken* and she had not quite done nothing – for she had *done mischief*. She had *brought evil* on Harriet, on herself, and she too feared, on Mr Knigley. (Austen 2002, 327-328 – *emphases mine*)

Although Emma's revelation does not occur concretely in front of a mirror, the image Harriet shows up to her functions the same way and triggers her self-examination and awakening. As Marinovich argues, "[t]he mirror functions here as a medium of self-examination, of awakening, of discovering and coming to terms with female sexuality leading to the assertion of womanhood, as one possible way to find one's identity" (84). In fact, this is what happens to Emma when she realizes in Harriet's symbolic mirror-image her true self, wishes, desires, and eventually, identity. She immediately turns into a woman proper who suddenly comes to terms with herself: she wants Mr Knightley for herself. What Marinovich argues about Wolf-Alice is true about Emma, as well: "[A]ffirming her own womanhood she gets liberated and strong," (87) actually and ironically because of her love for a man. Yet, it also has to be noted that this man, Mr Knightley, does not change her power position, situation and sense of self entirely. He is the one who moves into 'her' house, thus indirectly accepting her rule and respecting her domain.

Emma as the most exceptional heroine is formed on the pages of Austen's most acknowledged and recognized novel. This novel is considered to be her greatest, most accomplished, complex and perfect masterpiece (Bush 136). Douglas Bush declares, "*Emma* is a masterpiece [...]: in texture it is hardly less 'light, and bright, and sparkling' than *Pride and Prejudice*; its exquisite craftsmanship is partly manifest, partly well below the surface; and it has no such faults as have been found in the other novels" (137). He also adds that it is its unique heroine that makes it "a much more complex and subtle work of art than *Pride and Prejudice*" (ibid), making the novel a "masterpiece of development, of organic unity of form and tone" (Bush 167). David Lodge is in agreement with Bush when stating that while "romantic-sentimental [...], it is far more serious and realistic" (Lodge 165). In *Emma*, Austen really achieved the culmination of her career: she 'was kindly commanded' to dedicate *Emma* to the Prince Regent (Duckworth xi), which Marilyn Butler calls her "finest novel" (61). Alistair M. Duckworth also proclaims the period following the publication of *Emma* "the height of [Austen's] success" (18). Walter Scott also wrote a "highly favourable notice" of the novel in the *Quarterly Review* in March, 1816 (Grey 281-282). Additionally, David Grey contends that "[i]n *Emma*, Jane Austen recovered the wit and energy of *Pride and Prejudice* while maintaining the complex narrative effects of *Mansfield Park*" (282). And I think no other novel and heroine exemplify more what Duckworth claims in his closing sentence than *Emma/Emma*: "[r]ecent biographies have shown us that Jane Austen was no saint; she was something better: one of the greatest novelists in the history of English fiction" (18-19).



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 From left to right: Anna Kérchy, Sári and Zsófia Anna Tóth.

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