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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

# Jane Austen
# EMMA

AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
BACKGROUNDS
REVIEWS AND CRITICISM

THIRD EDITION

*Edited by*

STEPHEN M. PARRISH
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

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view of Darcy. Emma is unconscious of the fact that the place is identified for her with its proprietor, that in being there—indeed in luxuriating in it—she is unconsciously imagining union with Mr. Knightley. She never thinks: 'To be mistress of Donwell might be something!' Yet the warmth of her response (here indistinguishable from the narrator's) is important for moving the narrative impetus forward. It suggests that Donwell is a place that, while realistic on the surface—the planning of its gardens is almost as awkward as Sotherton—offers a resting place for dreams. The house and its surroundings—the farm, the orchard, even the abundance of strawberries—augur satisfaction, fulfilment, amplitude. Seeing Harriet and Mr. Knightley admiring the view of the farm, Emma's description warms to 'all its appendages of prosperity and beauty, its rich pastures, spreading flocks, orchard in blossom, and light column of smoke ascending' [236].

In his notes to *Emma*, R. W. Chapman points out that 'the orchard in blossom' when the season is said to be 'about Midsummer' is 'one of Miss Austen's very rare mistakes of this kind'. The 'light column of smoke ascending' is also oddly unseasonal. But perhaps 'mistake' is too simple an explanation for these effects: what is being presented here is not a place but an idyll, the fantasy of the pastoral paradise. There is an enthusiasm that seeks to represent Donwell and its estate, not just as admirable and august, but as having *everything*—strawberries at their peak of ripeness, sunshine, 'spreading flocks', 'ample gardens washed by a stream', prosperous farmland, and the domestic hearth: a rich constatation of all that desire encompasses.

But by representing Emma's desire in the image of, as contained by, the house, garden, and estate, Jane Austen performs a narrative and ideological hat-trick. Erotic longing is united with a conservative political and social agenda. Emma's desire is not to possess the house, but rather the house is made an eloquent embodiment or vessel for that desire, which is thenceforth seen to be inseparable from the social institutions that may contain it. It is Donwell, thus, that persuades the reader that Emma's destiny is to be with Mr. Knightley—persuades one both of the social propriety (in the largest sense of fitness and likelihood of happiness) of the union, but also, more subtly, that Mr. Knightley will answer to Emma's needs just as much as to her desires: permanence, strength, and that stability that is also 'abundance', and growth which is an implicit warranty of sexual amplitude.

All this can be accomplished because Donwell is 'low and sheltered': this is an outdoor scene in which freedom is liberty, structured within an ordered, established, social world. At Box Hill, in the next chapter, the open air is an empty space, people wander off in all directions, social relations are unstructured, and the limitations of innovation and freedom are manifest. Soon follows the scene where Emma, confined to the Hartfield drawing room and with nothing to look forward to but



a string of similiar evenings with her father, revisits the past: an indoors that encapsulates boredom and deprivation. When, next day, the proposal takes place, it is in the garden. Here, in this wonderful proposal scene, two intelligent people, each fearing that the other is devoted to another person, try their best to hold back their own emotions, and to give all their energy, their attention, their care, to further the other's happiness.

What Emma learns in this novel is not to think like Mr. Knightley, but that she has always, in fact, thought like him. There is no element of capitulation in the novel's ending, rather one of celebratory recognition. Their reconciliation would be the conclusion of a conventional romantic narrative, but Emma and Mr. Knightley converse a good deal after their private engagement. Unlike Elizabeth and Darcy who, in a similiar situation, educate each other into the intimacy of equals, Emma and Mr. Knightley enjoy already their reciprocal knowledge. They chafe and tease each other, working through the past, replaying their relationship in different terms: it is almost as if Austen were presenting Emma and Mr. Knightley as an already married couple. These scenes are by no means simply occasions for Emma to confess to being 'wrong'. 'What had she to wish for? Nothing, but to grow more worthy of him, whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own. Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future' [313]. This is Emma thinking—vivaciously, but also extravagantly—as usual.

## SUZANNE FERRISS

## Emma Becomes Clueless†

* * * Recent film versions of *Emma* invite speculation about the novel's appeal in the 1990s. Written in 1816, *Emma* traces a classic comic arc: a misguided matchmaker, overconfident in her abilities, learns the error of her perceptions and discovers love in the process. As in other Austen novels, the female protagonist's success comes through marriage, a clear reflection of the text's comic roots and also an indication of its essential conservatism. Apart from the outspokenness of its protagonist, the novel bears few signs of the nascent feminism introduced in Britain by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), published decades earlier. What accounts, then, for the novel's current vogue in the popular media? Three cine-

† From *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, eds. Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998) 122–29. Reprinted with permission of The University Press of Kentucky. Page references to this Norton Critical Edition, when different, are given in brackets following Ferriss's original citations. Footnotes are the author's.

matic versions of *Emma* have appeared since 1995. Two of the three, Douglas McGrath's *Emma*, featuring Gwyneth Paltrow, and Diarmuid Lawrence and Andrew Davies's *Emma*, with Kate Beckinsale, go to great lengths to evoke the Regency period. In the Merchant-Ivory school of filmmaking, they lure audiences with the traditional promise of escape into a cinematic reconstruction of the past. Plunged into an ornately costumed, socially stratified society characterized by lavish, but tasteful, displays of wealth, inordinate amounts of leisure, and strong family values, moviegoers may leave behind the burdens of contemporary existence: economic uncertainty, family conflict, racial strife. As faithful adaptations, both productions succeeded owing to their remoteness from our day.

Amy Heckerling's inspired update, *Clueless*, brings the novel into our own era, successfully translating *Emma* into the California high school culture of the 1990s. Heckerling offers a series of suggestive parallels between Austen's heroine and her cinematic counterpart, Cher (Alicia Silverstone), despite their surface differences. Clueless features the same key themes relating to the roles of women (the fallibility of matchmaking and flirtation; the danger, in the words of the novel, of a girl "having rather too much her own way" and thinking "too well of herself' [Austen 1]). In fact, Heckerling's version presents women of the 1990s as less empowered or enlightened than women in the original novel. Ironically, the more faithful adaptations are more modern in their re-presentations of *Emma* than the "modernized" *Clueless*.

In Heckerling's hands, Austen's novel proves itself to be surprisingly malleable and readily adaptable to the contemporary period. Some updating is only minor: photography substitutes for portraiture, convertibles for carriages, parties in the Valley for fancy dress balls. Others are less obvious: Mr. Woodhouse's preoccupation with his digestion and Emma's concerns about his health undergo a contemporary twist in Cher's imposition of a low-cholesterol diet on her father. Even Emma's mother's death receives the 1990s treatment: Cher's mother died undergoing liposuction. More significant changes challenge the rigidity of time boundaries: class differences in the novel are complicated as the film adds racial and sexual diversity to the mix (the orphaned Harriet Smith becomes a Hispanic transfer student, Frank Churchill is revealed to be gay, and Emma's best friend becomes a moneyed African American).

Heckerling exploits the contemporary medium of film to create an Emma for our time. This, in itself, is a significant achievement, for Austen's works cannot be described as intensely visual. Austen was, after all, writing well before the invention of photography. She was also, as Martin Amis has noted, "notoriously cerebral—a resolute niggard in her descriptive dealings with food, clothes, animals, children, weather, and landscape" (34). Rather than simply filling in the visual gaps in the plot—clothing Austen's characters in period costume and placing them against the sumptuous settings of drawing rooms and English landscapes—Heckerling employs cinematic techniques to capture the satiric dimension of the novel. She reveals the glaring gap between the heroine's perceptions of events and the events themselves. While written in the third person, the novel is told from Emma's point of view. The reader perceives events as Emma does, and thus is deliberately misguided. The chief delight of the novel comes through revelation, through the comic recognition of Emma's lack of insight. Swayed by Emma's own confidence in her perceptions of events, the reader is equally startled when her views are found to be wildly in error.



Cinema inevitably transforms narrative point of view. Since the photographic medium represents exterior states, film can only suggest interior states through subjective point-of-view shots, visually rendering the protagonist's perceptions.[1] The cinematic convention of rendering subjectivity can be seen in *Emma*: as Emma gazes on a portrait of Frank Churchill, the image metamorphoses into the real man, an embodiment of Emma's fantasy. This, however, suggests but cannot reveal Emma's thoughts.

To gain insight into her heroine's thinking, Heckerling employs the alternative technique of voice-over for Cher. Cher's first-person voice-over neatly captures the contradiction between actual events and her perceptions. As a commentary on events, a voice-over is always temporally distinct from the visually realized events, occurring in narrative time necessarily after the events pictured have unfolded. Simultaneously, the voice-over illustrates the disjunction between Cher's perceptions and reality, and her confidence in her own misguided views for it emphasizes her outspokenness. The film is intensely verbal. As one of the film's reviewers noted, "almost all the humor in *Clueless* is verbal—a patter of quotable epigrams, asides, and ironic by-play" (Doherty).

Emma is an "imaginist" (Austen 335)[218]. The term neatly captures Emma's tendency to view events from her own perspective—as imagined, not real—as well as her predilection for scheming. As a matchmaker, Emma plots her moves like a novelist, and critics have viewed the novel as a commentary on the act of writing itself. Heckerling represents this self-referential dimension cinematically. The film's opening montage, set to the tune of "Kids in America," offers images of Cher and her contemporaries at play, shopping, and relaxing poolside. Cher intrudes to comment that their lives look like "a Noxema commercial." Named after famous infomercial stars, Cher and her best friend, Dionne, inhabit and control a superficial world governed

1. In film, we thus experience a curious admixture of subjective and objective point-of-view shots, one following on the heels of the other. Were this to happen in, for example, the same paragraph of a novel, the reader would be hopelessly confused.

by fashion and makeup. As such, Heckerling stresses the "image" in "imaginist."

Matchmaking is still central to the story of the film but more clearly allied with the heroine's "imaginist" tendencies. Cher's two matchmaking efforts center on "making over" women: Miss Geist, the spinster teacher, and Tai, the transfer student. Cher and Dionne strip Miss Geist of her glasses and dowdy sweater. Tai undergoes a more rigorous regimen to change her hair color, her body (through exercise), her accent, and her vocabulary. In a fitting comment on the 1990s, image is everything. To Cher, makeovers offer "control in a world of chaos."

The film's emphasis on the superficial is at once a commentary on the contemporary media's dominance and a reflection of the novel's emphasis on signs, particularly on their misinterpretation. For this reason, *Clueless* is most faithful to *Emma* in its recreation of the plot involving Mr. Elton, Harriet Smith, and Emma. Determined to find a match for the clergyman, Mr. Elton, Emma fixes on Harriet Smith. To orchestrate their involvement, Emma sketches a portrait of Harriet, intending the exercise as a ruse to draw Mr. Elton's attention to Harriet's beauty. Instead, Mr. Elton's praise of the portrait is not meant for its subject, but for Emma's artistry, a fact that Emma discovers, to her horror, only after he reveals his passion for her during an intimate carriage ride. This scene is exactly duplicated, though modernized, in *Clueless*. Cher takes Tai's photograph and mistakes Elton's request for a copy as evidence of his attraction to her protégée. As in the novel, Elton arranges to drive Cher home alone, and shocks her with his attempt to kiss her. Significantly, both Eltons object to the protégée's class. Mr. Elton exclaims, "I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith!" (Austen 132)[86]. His cinematic counterpart asks incredulously, "Don't you know who my father is?"

Cher, like Emma, misreads the intentions of three men. The novel's Frank Churchill, the second source of Emma's errors, appears in the film version as Christian, the handsome boy who makes a sudden appearance at midterm. Emma's gossip and wordplay with Frank become games of a different sort on film. Cher sends herself flowers and love letters to attract Christian's attention. Despite her ability to manipulate images and appearances, she fails to read the images offered to her critically. Christian's clothes and fondness for the film *Spartacus* clearly signal his sexual preference, but Cher does not see it. Emma, blind to the signs of Frank Churchill's engagement to Jane Fairfax, mistakes the object of his attraction; Cher misreads the nature of the attraction itself.

The fact of Christian's gayness is, along with the film's ethnic diversity, a clear sign of its contemporaneity, not to mention Heckerling's remarkably flexible updating of the plot. In the sexually savvy 1990s,



Cher's naïveté fully reveals her cluelessness. It also points out the film's social conservatism, despite its nod to alternative sexual orientation and behaviors. Worldly appearance aside, Cher (like Emma and other respectable nineteenth-century women) remains "hymenally challenged"—a virgin. The fact that she is saving herself for Luke Perry makes her chastity a joke, but does little to diminish the essentially conservative image of relationships presented in the film. Marriage remains the goal, and father (or his substitute) knows best.

Both the film and novel stress paternal wealth as the key to the heroine's sense of self-worth and confidence. The novel's famous opening line makes this clear from the outset: "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 1). In the absence of her mother, Emma is mistress of Hartfield, secure enough in her own right to dismiss marriage as an option. Cher, too, is mistress of her father's house, possessed of all the modem trappings of excess: designer clothes, sport utility vehicle, cellular phone, and so on. To a great extent, Cher, like Emma, is a spoiled daughter, used to getting her own way and indulged in her penchant for manipulation.

The novel presents Emma as a member of the leisured and monied gentry. In the nineteenth century, the social structure was highly stratified, based on lineage and inherited wealth. Claudia Johnson has argued, however, that "*Emma* is a world apart from conservative fiction in accepting a hierarchical social structure not because it is a sacred dictate of patriarchy . . . but rather because within its parameters class can actually supersede sex" (127). Emma's wealth relieves her of the problems of being a single woman: she will never become an impoverished spinster like Miss Bates or another Jane Fairfax, who must marry to escape work as a governess. Cher's situation is similar in that she does not need to marry or to work. Though, unlike Emma, Cher, as a woman of the 1990s, is clearly afforded the option of pursuing a career, Heckerling sidesteps the issue, focusing instead on Cher's need for "direction." Like Emma, her "occupation," apart from matchmaking, is charitable: she organizes the Pismo Beach Disaster Relief.

Both women owe their economic stability to their fathers. This fact, in itself, makes the novel and its cinematic counterpart inherently conservative and traditional. In the novel, however, this is undercut to some extent by the representation of the father. Mr. Woodhouse, with his frail health and constant fussing over drafts and diet, appears more like the stereotypical "old woman" than the patriarch of the family. According to Johnson, "the intellectual, physical, and even moral frailty of this paternal figure necessitates a dependence upon female strength, activity, and good judgment" (124). Emma, not her father, rules at

Hartfield. The same can be said of Cher only to the extent that she controls her father's diet. As a successful litigator, pictured throughout the film at work on an "important case," Cher's father is clearly the patriarch. He barks orders and controls her behavior, grounding her for unpaid speeding tickets. Ironically, then, *Clueless* offers a far less "modern" image of female power than *Emma*.

This is not to say that Emma can be taken as a fully empowered woman. Her father does not criticize her, but Knightley does, often scolding her as though she were a child. In fact, he assumes the paternal role in several instances in the novel, most notably after she has heartlessly mocked Miss Bates. He chastises her: "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible" (Austen 374)[245]. Knightley's criticism forces Emma to realize that she has been "clueless," that she has misread the motives of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, and Knightley himself. She thus capitulates on two levels: to the man and to his perceptions. Their difference in age—sixteen years—reinforces Knightley's paternal position, yet Austen pictures him more often in the role of an older brother. To pave the way for their relationship, both must agree "we are not really so much brother and sister as to make it at all improper" (331)[216].

*Clueless* sustains this family connection: Josh is Cher's step-brother. The film skates over the significant age difference of the novel, however: Josh is in college, while Cher is on the verge of sixteen. Nonetheless, Josh, true to character, is critical of Cher's behavior. He upbraids her for referring generically to the family maid as "Mexican," when, in fact, she is from El Salvador. And it is Josh who tells Cher, "use your popularity for a good cause." As in the novel, romance necessitates a denial of family ties. Bristling at his criticism, Cher objects: "Josh, you are not my brother." Still, in the film as in the novel, love arises out of the female character's recognition that she is wrong and he is right.

Again, the novel's conservatism is tempered to some extent. Generic constraints make a conservative ending inevitable: as a comedy, the novel must end with a marriage. Nonetheless, Austen tweaks the ending to give it a more feminist turn. Knightley's agreement to move into Hartfield, Emma's home, can be taken as a recognition of her power. Johnson argues, "The conclusion which seemed tamely and placidly conservative thus takes an unexpected turn, as the guarantor of order himself cedes a considerable portion of the power which custom has allowed him to expect. In moving to Hartfield, Knightley is sharing *her* home, and in placing himself within her domain, Knightley gives his blessing to her rule" (143). Both of the *Emma* adaptations replicate this scene and underscore Emma's rule. However, *Clueless* offers no



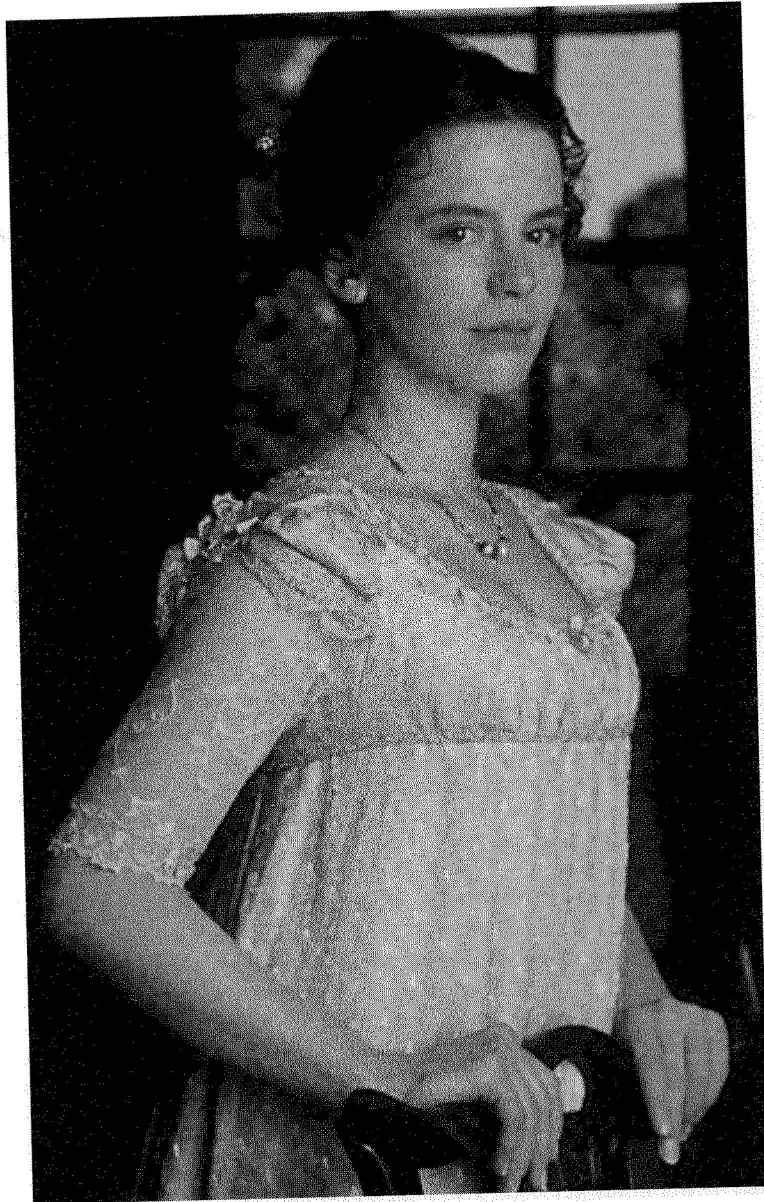
comparable scene. Instead, the film ends with 16-year-old Cher catching the bouquet at Mr. Hall and Miss Geist's wedding, anticipating her own.

Ironically, the more "faithful" cinematic adaptations of the novel may offer a more modern Emma than the "modern" *Clueless*. Austen purists objected to Gwyneth Paltrow's Emma as vociferously as they rejected the sexualized Darcy in the 1995 BBC/A&E adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. In Douglas McGrath's version, Emma was pictured engaging in target archery and driving her own carriage, actions that have no source in the novel. Such actions do, however, capture Emma's daring and reflect the emerging feminism of the era. McGrath has done his homework. Archery, for instance, was a newly popular sport among the upper classes, with women competing directly against the men (Troost 11). The image of Emma engaging simultaneously in athletic and verbal competition with Knightley has a particular resonance for contemporary women, who are regularly exhorted to "Just Do It" like their male counterparts. McGrath's version thus offers an active, competitive heroine, whose physical daring mirrors her outspokenness and verbal self-confidence. In the film, Emma accuses men of "preferring superficial qualities," such as physical beauty, a charge that clearly invokes contemporary feminist objections to the over-emphasis on the female body characteristic of consumer culture.

Contemporary social commentary is more muted but equally evident in the most recent *Emma*. Lawrence's directing and Davies's screenplay highlight class differences, stressing Emma's class biases in particular. Scenes of sumptuous dinners contrast jarringly with images of servants carrying furniture and supplies for picnics on the lawn.[2] The juxtaposition serves as a visual critique of monied excess. The film's ending offers a telling contrast to *Clueless* in its democratic leveling. Overtones of late eighteenth-century revolutionary tendencies can be glimpsed in the invented final scene of a harvest feast at Donwell Abbey. In a speech to his workers, Knightley emphasizes stability and continuity at the abbey but admits that he personally will change. Emma is shown breaking the class barrier by directly approaching the farmer, Mr. Martin, and his new wife, Harriet, to invite them to Hartfield.

Davies's script also daringly flirts with incest in its repetition of the "we are not really so much brother and sister" line. Knightley's attraction to Emma first becomes evident to viewers as he looks lovingly on her as she holds her sister's and his brother's young son. In a marked departure from Austen's text, Knightley reminds Emma that he held her at a similar age. As Knightley recognizes Emma, with babe in arms,

2. Maaja Stewart has noted that Austen's novels represent the increasing poverty of the underclass and women resulting from British imperialism and industrialization. Emma particularly identifies poverty with women, as in the cases of Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax.



*Emma* (Meridian/A&E). Kate Beckinsale poses as the "handsome, clever, and rich" title character in the British adaptation of *Emma*. Andrew Davies's screenplay underscores Emma Woodhouse's "imaginist" tendencies by interpolating several fantasy sequences. This British production also plays up the class system of Austen's world by showing the large number of servants the gentry required to maintain their lives of leisure. Photo: Neil Genower. Credit: Photofest.



as a potential wife and mother, he highlights their quasi-incestuous relationship. Throughout the film, he is pictured alternately as brotherly in his affections and patriarchal in his disapproval. Emma's later dream reinforces these incestuous overtones. Emma's fears that Knightley's affections lie elsewhere are unconsciously revealed in a dream about his marriage to Jane Fairfax. Standing at the door of the church, Emma, with her nephew in tow, asks, "But what about little Henry?" In her distraught appearance, she appears more like a spurned single mother than a concerned aunt. Davies has unearthed the titillating associations generally evaded in Austen's works. As Glenda A. Hudson has argued, "Austen's novels present incestuous alliances that preserve order and reestablish domestic harmony" (105). Davies, by contrast, shows Emma's visions, at least, as disturbing.

In fact, Davies's adaptation exploits cinematic innovations to probe Emma's psyche in typical twentieth-century psychoanalytic style, and Lawrence's directing employs contemporary cinematic techniques to stress the heroine's inner states and longing. Emma identifies Harriet Smith as a possible mate for Mr. Elton when a beam of light "miraculously" illuminates her. A similar "miracle" of cinema occurs as Emma gazes dreamily on a portrait of Frank Churchill. The painted image morphs into the real man, who leans forward to kiss her gloved hand. Emma's imaginist tendencies are presented more as unconscious processes than as willed creations.

Ultimately, however, the cinematic versions capture the same contradictions of the novel. The outspoken, intelligent heroine is revealed to be "clueless" about herself. The stalwart pseudo-brother is the agent of her re-education, revealing this most "liberated" of Austen's heroines to be, in fact, dependent on a masculine figure. By perpetuating this ambiguity, the films suggest that contemporary women are no more independent or empowered than women of the early nineteenth century. If Cher, as the most "modern" of all the cinematic Emmas, is any indication, contemporary consumer culture has sold women a distorted image of feminine achievement.

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# Jane Austen: A Chronology

| | |
|---|---|
| 1775 | Jane Austen born, December 16, at Steventon, Hampshire, the seventh of eight children of the Rev. George Austen. George III is on the throne of England. |
| 1784 | Formal education ends at age 9, at school in Reading. |
| 1789–91 | Between the ages of 14 and 16, she writes a novel called "Love and Freindship," a "History of England," and stories called "Lesley Castle" and "A Collection of Letters." |
| 1793–96 | Writes "Lady Susan" and "Elinor and Marianne," the earliest version of *Sense and Sensibility.* |
| 1797 | Writes "First Impressions," the earliest version of *Pride and Prejudice.* |
| 1797–98 | Rewrites "Elinor and Marianne" as *Sense and Sensibility* (which remains unpublished until 1811). |
| 1798–99 | Writes *Susan,* an early version of *Northanger Abbey* (published posthumously in 1818). |
| 1801 | Austen family moves to Bath. |
| 1804–5 | Writes "The Watsons," possibly an early version of *Emma.* |
| 1805 | Her father dies, and the following year the family moves to Southampton. |
| 1809 | They move to Chawton, in Hampshire, where after an interval of several years her major works were composed. |
| 1810–11 | Rewrites "First Impressions" as *Pride and Prejudice* and revises *Sense and Sensibility* for publication. |
| 1811–20 | The Regency: George, Prince of Wales, takes over the powers of George III, who lives on until 1820. |
| 1811 | *Sense and Sensibility* published at last, anonymously—like all her other works; writes *Mansfield Park.* |
| 1813 | *Pride and Prejudice* published. |
| 1814 | Writes *Emma* and publishes *Mansfield Park.* |
| 1815 | Writes *Persuasion.* |
| 1816 | *Emma* published, dedicated to the Prince Regent. |