Sadist, Land Shark, and Reptile: Autumn de Wilde's *EMMA.*

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NOBODY LIKES SOMEONE WHO IS HANDSOME, CLEVER, *AND* RICH. Jane Austen knew this, reportedly saying of her 1815 novel *Emma*, that it would include "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (Austen-Leigh 204). Autumn de Wilde knows this, opening her 2020 film adaptation of Austen's novel, *EMMA.*,[1] with an early morning scene in which Emma instructs her trailing servants exactly which flower to cut: "Not that one." Critics of de Wilde's film know this, complaining that it turns Austen's heroine into a "sadist," a "land shark," and a "reptile."[2] We argue that "Emma Woodhouse, sadist, land shark, and reptile" is equivalent to the opening words of the novel duplicated on screen in the adaptation, "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich": it is simply the critics saying out loud what Austen and de Wilde have said quietly.

Emma's privilege makes her a heroine who is difficult to love, and both Austen and de Wilde revel in the opportunities this affords them, delighting in Emma's superficial delights. We propose to take the superficiality of the film's style seriously as a performance of what D. A. Miller calls "Austen style," which Devoney Looser has recently rechristened "Jane Austen camp." Premiering in 2020 just before the COVID-19 pandemic began, *EMMA.* provocatively offers its audience what Miller describes as a "utopia of those with almost no place to go" (Miller 29): our straitened, even claustrophobic, circumstances

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since March 2020 have brought us all into unexpected proximity with the restrictions of Regency life dissected by Austen in her novels and repackaged in pastel style by de Wilde. Perhaps, Austen's oppressive utopia offers us pleasures we were not ready to understand before our experience of lockdown. Pleasures for which de Wilde's film prepares us. Taking as a starting point Austen's place in recent popular culture, and particularly recent reimaginings of *Emma*, this article will consider how de Wilde's movie presents Emma as a character who falls between modernity and periodicity, unmooring her from recognizable categories, making her ridiculous. By adopting a humorous tone, which emphasizes the ridiculousness of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves, the film adaptation risks antagonizing some viewers, even as it attracts others. The same is true for its characterization of the heroine, which places the privilege that comes with her wealth and position in society in the foreground: de Wilde's Emma is colder and less likable than her predecessors, as the critics' descriptions of her as "sadistic," "land shark," and "reptile" convey. By comparing actress Anya Taylor-Joy's Emma with other privileged (anti)heroines in pop culture, such as Suranne Jones's portrayal of Anne Lister in Sally Wainwright's *Gentleman Jack* (2019), back to their unexpected antecedents in Disney villainesses such as *The Little Mermaid*'s Ursula, this article explores how de Wilde's *EMMA.* harnesses the queer pleasures of these gender nonconforming figures to chart the disorientating paths of desire in the film, between first Emma and Harriet, and then Emma, Harriet, and Mr. Knightley.

Critics of Austen in the 21st century draw on her juvenile writing of the 1790s, inspired by and responding to the revolutionary politics of that period, as well as reflecting on the overt sexiness of her pop cultural renaissance in the 1990s, to explore alternative approaches to sexuality in her novels, her biography, and in adaptations of both. Austen honed her craft in the juvenilia of the 1790s, learning how to sublimate the political turmoil of the British response to the French Revolution into her special brand of subtle social satire. Critics have traced the impact of this revolutionary decade on Austen's writing from Warren Robert's once dismissed *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (1979) through Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975), which takes a perverse delight in positioning her as an arch conservative, to Peter Knox-Shaw's *Jane Austen and the*

Enlightenment (2004), which directly rebuts Butler by tracing Austen's more liberal inheritance from philosophers including Smith, Hume, and Godwin. Popular and academic approaches to Austen emphasizing alternative sexualities combined in the 1990s, with sexed-up productions of her novels, especially Andrew Davies' TV adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), and an academic debate about her sexuality ruffling the pages of the *London Review of Books*. Titling Terry Castle's review of Deirdre le Faye's collection of Austen's letters "Was Jane Austen Gay?" the *London Review of Books* sparked a flurry of replies defending Aunt Jane's honor as well as celebrating her proto-queerness. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" continued to uncover "an alternative, passionate sexual ecology" (834) in Austen's writing, as well as arguing against a critical paradigm focusing on scenes of a girl being taught a lesson that had come to dominate normative analyses of Austen's novels. D. A. Miller paralleled Austen style with what he terms the unheterosexual, using *Sense and Sensibility* as an example of a text in which Austen creates a "utopia of those with almost no place to go" (29). De Wilde's *EMMA.* presents its audience with just such a utopia, a queer space that confronts the viewer with expressions of heterosexuality as a disorienting spectacle.

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* celebrates disorientation as a theoretical perspective on how people are positioned by sexuality and race in relation to the world. Riffing on a "queer moment" in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Ahmed uses his distinction between seeing "straight" versus "slantwise" when viewing a room through a mirror at a tilt to muse on sexual orientation:

> Of course, when Merleau-Ponty discusses queer effects he is not considering "queer" as a sexual orientation—but we can. We can turn to the etymology of the word "queer," which comes from the Indo-European term "twist." Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets turned into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a "straight line," a sexuality that is bent and crooked.
>
> (67)

Before she reaches this alignment of sexuality with spatiality, Ahmed muses on how the normative aligns with straightness, with deviation from the straight line experienced as disorienting, wonky,

or queer: "Things seem 'straight' (on the vertical axis) when they are 'in line,' which means when they are aligned with other lines. Rather than presuming the vertical line is simply given, we would see the vertical line as an effect of this process of alignment" (66). Building on Austen's own "unheterosexual" attitude, de Wilde's film revels in the disorientation caused by paying attention to this process of alignment: although the film flirts with offering us a queer Emma, with de Wilde describing her relationship with Harriet Smith as her "first love affair," *EMMA.* shows instead the strangeness of straightness, uncovering the effort that goes into coming into alignment with others.

Although this article deploys queer theory to read *EMMA.* and its engagement with both Austen and pop culture, it stops short of claiming that de Wilde offers us a *queer* Emma. Rather, the film presents something much closer to what Looser calls "Jane Austen camp." Reading Austen's juvenilia as "fully realised camp literature," finding campiness in the canonical novels (including the prospect of *Emma*'s Mrs. Elton arriving at Mr. Knightley's party on donkey-back) and in pop culture adaptations of Austen's work, Looser argues that "it is not camp that sets out to overwhelm or to deeply shock. It is a form of camp that provides harmless, mild sexual surprise" (7–8). De Wilde's film depicts Emma warming her bare backside by the fire, Mr. Knightley in deshabille, and depicting Mrs. Elton in a delightfully campy costume in vivid orange with bows. *EMMA.*'s campiness combines with its flirtations with queer desire to show the strangeness of straightness, representing the disorienting process of sexual relations coming into alignment.

EMMA. and/in Lockdown

EMMA. was the last film the authors watched in the cinema (separately) before we watched it again (together) to prepare for this article. When Andrew McInnes first watched the film, he enjoyed Anya Taylor-Joy's cool representation of Emma Woodhouse—her haughtiness, distance, even otherworldliness—and appreciated the way de Wilde found ways to puncture her punctiliousness: her screwball interactions with Mr. Knightley, shared laughter when holding a farting baby, her horrified reactions when her "imaginist" versions of

reality were confronted with the truth. He remembers being disappointed by the film's decision to "humanize" Emma by the end of the film: her continuing friendship with Harriet Smith is an alteration of the book's more class-bound rejection of her, but also the scene in which she realizes Mr. Knightley is proposing to her replaces her quick thinking with a nosebleed, stressing her physicality rather than her intellect (though we reinterpret this scene below). McInnes felt that the film had reneged on its more authentic representation of Emma as a privileged antiheroine by softening Austen's representation of her in the book as an unrepentant snob.

Like McInnes, Rita Dashwood remembers her excitement at seeing Emma represented on screen as the arrogant, spoiled, and stubborn character that Austen created. Upon first watching the movie, Dashwood gasped excitedly at Anya Taylor-Joy's gift for comedy. Taylor-Joy makes Emma's lack of concern for Miss Bates's feelings obvious both in the dismissive tone in which she delivers the lines, but—what was even more original for a depiction of Emma—in her physicality. The way in which Emma opens the carriage to Miss Bates with a single finger, walks away from her when she corners her at the haberdashers, and glances indifferently (or disappointedly) when Miss Bates concludes a story by saying that Jane Fairfax almost died but, in the end, survived, all show joy in depicting a character that is unashamedly haughty that made the film all the more entertaining. Only the film's attempt to bring all the characters together in harmony at the end seems to go against Austen's refusal to have Emma and Harriet be friends, which, like McInnes, she saw as an unnecessary partial rehabilitation of a character that had until then been so much fun to watch precisely because of her flaws.

When we watched the film again, two years after the COVID-19 pandemic had changed the way we thought about health, community, and even physical contact (all key concepts in Austen's *Emma* and de Wilde's adaptation), *EMMA.* felt both significantly different and strangely familiar. Dashwood noticed how care is choreographed in the film, for example, in the scene in which Mr. Woodhouse has the servants move various fire screens around so that Emma and Mr. Knightley may have a moment of privacy after his proposal. For any of us cohabiting under the various lockdowns, these crafty ways of finding some privacy seemed more recognizable than ever. The claustrophobia Emma hints at when she asks Mr. Knightley whether he

would be willing to move into Hartfield and "live constantly with my father in no house of your own" resonated with those of us having to share our personal space with others, and really brought home the privilege he was giving up. Under these circumstances, their subsequent shared laughter as they touched and kissed behind the screens became all the more daring and endearing. Dashwood also appreciated anew how various moments throughout the film emphasized the power Austen attributed to Emma within a deeply patriarchal society, more so than would seem possible under her father's roof and soon to be under a marriage contract that would see her fortune—unless protected by a trust—under the control of her husband. Even in a room full of men, it is still Emma who commands and gets the better of a situation. McInnes appreciated Taylor-Joy's trajectory over the course of the film from a lonely, alienated, and aloof young woman to someone able to laugh at herself as well as others. De Wilde's film carefully reveals the vulnerability underpinning Emma's existence, from her heartbreak over losing her governess at the start of the film to her tears after she is chastized by Mr. Knightley for mocking Miss Bates, but keeps a steady eye on her silliness too—even at the end of the film, she is shown delivering a gift of a goose to goose farmer Robert Martin.[3] If Emma shifts from a disconnected figure at the start of the film to a connected one by the end, she remains ridiculous throughout, and it is her ridiculousness which forges these connections.

"Poor Unfortunate Souls": Emma and Other Gender Nonconforming (Anti)heroines in Pop Culture

Allow us to be ridiculous now in connecting Taylor-Joy's portrayal of Emma to a range of modern pop culture heroines that range from the obvious, such as Alicia Silverstone's Cher in Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*, an update of Austen's novel set in a Beverly Hills high school, to figures who seem less clearly related, such as Disney's queer-coded villainesses like *The Little Mermaid*'s Ursula, who assures Ariel that she, much like Emma Woodhouse, just wants to help "poor unfortunate souls" find their match. De Wilde's *EMMA.* shares aesthetic preoccupations with melding together fashion consciousness and screwball comedy with Heckerling's high school update of *Emma*. If

the link to Disney films seems unlikely, de Wilde's *EMMA.* draws on a Disneyfied aesthetic to represent the Regency period as one of pastel shades and chocolate box views, as well as sharing a sublimated fascination with queer culture which gets similarly sidelined in preference for heteronormativity over the course of the film. Sally Wainwright's *Gentleman Jack* is a modern period drama that attempts a more "realistic" vision of a similar time period to *EMMA.*, at the same time, it unashamedly focuses on queer desire. *Gentleman Jack* is based on the partially encoded diaries of Anne Lister, a lesbian landowner in the early nineteenth century. Anne's privileged position as landowner and mining magnate means she shares a class background with Emma Woodhouse, while her out and explicit queerness casts shade on the flirtation with lesbian desire in *EMMA.* Suranne Jones's sophisticated performance as Anne Lister, combining power, privilege, and vulnerability, balances the viewer's sympathy for a woman presented as breathtakingly ahead of her time with a more disconcerting sense of her timeliness, especially her conservative class politics, alongside questions about her motives—does she pursue the wealthy Ann Walker for love or money? Jones's Anne and Taylor-Joy's Emma seem designed to both attract and repel viewers: we argue that their power, privilege, and vulnerability can best be understood by thinking of them through the lens of Disney villainesses, especially figures like Maleficent and Cruella who have recently been the focus of reinterpretations providing viewers with sympathetic back stories for their villainy. Sympathy for these devil women involves viewers in a consideration of both their privilege and their queerness, positioning them as curiously of and out of their own time.

Earlier adaptations of Emma opt instead to stress their heroines' relatability. Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* demonstrates Austen's adaptability and updatability by swapping Regency England for Hollywood. In *Clueless*, Alicia Silverstone plays Cher/Emma, a spoiled and self-absorbed teenager who is nevertheless utterly compelling and likable. In contrast to a high school bully like Regina George from *Mean Girls*, Cher has no interest in terrorizing her fellow high schoolers, but instead, as she herself puts it, "[uses] her popularity for a good cause" by befriending the underdog "Harriet Smith" character, Tai. The irony in Austen's narration finds a worthy substitute in Cher's lack of awareness of her privilege, as she declares, "But seriously, I actually have a real normal life for a teenage girl," as she

picks out her clothes using a computer program, soundtracked by David Bowie's "Fashion," a song comparing the conformism of fashionable trends with neo-fascism and providing an ironizing counterpoint to Cher's naivete. As Maureen Turim affirms, "[t]he music, which may be mistakenly heard as pop teenage anthems, figures in the film as relatively brief inserts of longer pieces from a wide range of contemporary groups, many of which express in their punk, funk, or rap an edgy critique of the very culture Cher represents" (43). Alternatively, we suggest that Heckerling's musical irony functions as Austen style does in the novels: their edgy critique of contemporary culture brackets off their heroines from blame, provoking sympathy for both Cher and Emma instead of ridicule.

More recently, the BBC returned Emma to the Regency period with Romola Garai in the title role in the series *Emma* (2009). In this adaptation, Emma's comparative privilege is emphasized, as is her tendency to regard people as objects she can manipulate at her wish. An image of a young Emma sitting under a table, playing with her dolls, as she eavesdrops on the conversations taking place between the adults, is referenced in a subsequent episode in which Mr. Knightley chastises her for her attempts at preventing a marriage between Harriet and Robert Martin: "They are not your playthings, your dolls. They are people!" However, Emma's petulance and immaturity are emphasized, her matchmaking presented more as a trivial occupation to fill the hours in which she is evidently bored due to the absence of any intellectual equal aside from Mr. Knightley, rather than a tyrannical exertion of her social privilege. Most recent of all, Bernie Su's *Emma Approved* (2013) YouTube series places emphasis on Emma's perfectionism. Once again, Su's adaptation situates the narrative in the contemporary USA, this time reimagining Emma as a lifestyle coach who runs the Matchmaking Style Division of the Developing Highbury Partners Lifestyle Group (which she communicates at the speed of light in the first episode). Emma's self-centeredness is made immediately clear through her declaration that she is making these videos as a way of documenting her work (or her "greatness," as she puts it) for when she receives the Lifestyle Achievement Award in Lifestyle Excellence, which she regards as the inevitable recognition she will receive for becoming "like Oprah, but better." The company was, naturally, established with her father's money, and Mr. Knightley is a partner and responsible for business development and

bookkeeping (or "the boring stuff," according to Emma), while Harriet is a recently-hired assistant who, as Emma puts it, "listens to everything I say and does everything I tell her. I mean, what else could you ask for?" Transposed into a different context and period, the portrayal of Emma's self-centeredness and arrogance as a result of the protected life of privilege and adulation she has always received nevertheless makes this YouTube series strikingly true to Austen's original. Although Emma's privilege is evident, so is her desperate need to show her skills in matchmaking by earning a perfect client success record. Emma's vulnerability comes through as she fears that she may not be able to achieve this, the apparently impending failure of her most recent match threatening her business and everything she has worked for. While de Wilde's adaptation also immediately begins by exposing the vulnerability that hides behind the veneer of the heroine's confidence by showing her sadness in parting from her governess, Emma's privilege remains intact. This is not so for the introduction of Emma in *Emma Approved*, which starts by emphasizing the fragile state of the business Emma cares so much about, immediately making her sympathetic and non-threatening to her audience.

Pop culture adaptations of Emma from *Clueless* to *Emma Approved* diverge from Austen's original by striving to make Emma likable from the start. Austen's Emma, unlike the precariously positioned Austen heroines who came before and after her like Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, cast out from the family home after their father's death, or Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters, threatened with a similar expulsion, is not just the possessor of a stupendous fortune, but also the future co-inheritor of an estate. In fact, Emma holds far less in common with her fellow heroines than she does with a very different kind of Austen character: her villainous wealthy woman. Mrs. Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Lady Denham in the unfinished *Sanditon* (1817) all share common characteristics: they are deficient in accomplishments, obsessed with their status in society, and keen on exerting control over other people's lives. Despite having access to many more opportunities than the other women in Austen's novels, these women are not interested in becoming the accomplished, charity-giving, charming hostesses that any society's great lady would have been expected to be. Instead, they relish any opportunity to remind others of their superior standing in

society and entertain themselves by forming matches between them. For anyone who has read *Emma*, this might sound strikingly familiar. With Emma, Austen was setting herself an interesting challenge: how do you make a character who is self-centered, egotistical, and tyrannical compelling?

We argue that de Wilde and Taylor-Joy may have taken a hint from the popularity of gender-nonconforming villainesses in Disney films, from the animated originals to more recent live–action reimaginings of its classic animated films, which aim to rehabilitate the villainess figure by the end of the films, presenting them as fully moral people. Taylor-Joy's Emma shares a key characteristic with Disney villains: a queerness that both attracts and repels viewers. Elizabeth Bell and Laura Sells explore the representation of queer characters and their nonconformity to cultural norms of gender in Disney films, arguing that gender-nonconforming characters became increasingly associated with evil, with a contrast being established between them and the moral, openly heterosexual heroes/heroines (although Sells also suggests that their destabilization of gender offers viewers ways to critique gender norms). Both critics cite Ursula, the villain of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), as, in Sells' terms, "a composite of so many drag queens and camp icons - Joan Collins, Tallulah Barhead, Norma Desmond, Divine" (182). Ursula's recognizably queer characteristics include her flamboyance as well as her cynicism toward heterosexual relationships. Despite or perhaps because of this, however, Disney fans who identify as queer have a long history of reappropriating Disney, and the villains have become such firm favorites among its fanbase that Disney has started paying attention, as indicated by the increasing number of villain-themed celebrations at its theme parks as well as the reimaginings of villains such as Maleficent and Cruella in recent live–action movies.

The recent *Cruella* (2021), which tells the story of the eponymous villain from the animated 1961 classic *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, based on the novel of the same name by Dodie Smith, is an excellent example of this. The 1961 animated Cruella, much like the original from Smith's novel, is introduced through the loud sound of a motor horn. She is the perfect parody of a decadent English aristocracy that regards the world as their playground and that looks on everyone else as property they can use to their liking. This sense of entitlement and toxicity that privilege and extreme inequality are

likely to breed are thus taken to the extreme in Cruella, a character so inexplicably evil that she is willing to murder the tenderest of animals—puppies—in order to make herself a coat. Contrast that with the new Cruella, who receives an Oliver Twist makeover: she is tragically orphaned, and, unaware of her aristocratic origins, is forced to steal with her troupe of friendly bandits in order to survive in the mean streets of London. She does not find out that she is the lawful heiress of her large estate until the end of the movie, so the concept of privilege is never tackled. "Call me Cruella," the movie's title song by Florence + The Machine, may contain an invitation to embrace one's darkness, but paradoxically this Cruella has none of the darkness of her animated counterpart. Instead, in the end, she is fully rehabilitated: from a wannabe dog killer in the 1961 adaptation, she becomes a dog lover and a matchmaker, who presents Roger and Anita with the dalmatian puppies that will bring them together.

This rehabilitation of the previously villainous woman in Disney films like *Cruella* contrasts with Austen's aims in *Emma* to explore the limits of readerly sympathy for a heroine she suspects no one but herself will much like, but reflects upon de Wilde's directorial choices, encouraging the audience's critical distance from Emma at the start of the film before shifting to a more sympathetic representation by the film's close. Still, by the end of *Emma* and *EMMA.*, the heroine has it all—the man, the house, the money, and the social privilege—and she is wholly unapologetic about it. Emma may feel guilt at her treatment of Harriet in the novel, but what prevails at the close of the novel is a feeling of joy, with Emma's laughter more easily comparable to that of a *Sleeping Beauty* leaving Aurora's baptism after cursing her than Aurora's own quiet happiness at having found her prince: "She must laugh at such a close! Such an end of the doleful disappointment of 5 weeks back! Such a heart – such a Harriet!" (373–74). Disney turns a villain into the heroine of her story; Austen turns a heroine into the villain; de Wilde challenges her audience to find the heroine in the villain.

In doing so, de Wilde is building on a tradition to present a deeply flawed and morally dubious protagonist as a simultaneously magnetic and compelling character that also extends to other recent period dramas. In *Gentleman Jack* (2019), the audience is first introduced to Suranne Jones' Anne Lister by witnessing her driving a carriage as fast as it will go through the streets of Halifax, despite the

outcries of both the passersby and her fellow travelers in the carriage. This act immediately contributes to the characterization of Anne as someone who is independent in spirit and pursues her own goals and desires even when they go against societal and gendered expectations. On one hand, viewers take delight in witnessing the power that Anne's social privilege and financial independence grant her. With her full-hearted acceptance of her sexuality and the confidence which comes from this self-acceptance, Anne becomes a charismatic character who would appear to fit seamlessly into the modern period. On the other hand, we are also introduced to the less-attractive aspects of Anne's personality, namely, and like Emma, her social conservatism and her consequent snobbishness and disdain for others. This extends to members of the working classes, but also more broadly to all of Shibden, her estate, including her own family, as she despondently reflects on how she has "flown too close to the sun" and has now "crashed back to earth, to shabby little Shibden and my shabby little family," sharing a resigned look with the camera that invites the viewer's sympathy. This perhaps *Fleabag*-inspired direct address of the viewer successfully draws the viewer in by making them complicit with Anne. By sharing Anne's secret plans and ambitions, the viewer cannot help but root for her, even when her actions can be described as manipulative. Having decided to pursue the wealthy heiress Ann Walker with the intention of making her wife, Anne purposely monopolizes Ann's time with the intention of having her fall in love with her. "Good Lord," exclaims Anne as the clock suddenly chimes, indicating that several hours have passed, "I have been here for hours. How did that happen?" She says this apparently genuinely, but immediately afterward she bites her lip as she stares at the camera, her intentions clear to the viewer, if to no one else. Like Emma, Anne is obviously lonely, lacking her intellectual equal in Shibden, which attracts the viewer's sympathy. The quality of appearing to be simultaneously very much of their time and also ahead of it makes these characters both familiar and unfamiliar, their villainous haughtiness and manipulative tendencies inevitably attractive to some viewers and repellent to others.

"Dark, Twisty, Powerful": Emma and Queer Desire

De Wilde's queer-coding of Emma resembles the gender nonconforming traits of gender nonconforming Disney villainesses, although it falls short of the open celebration of lesbian desire in *Gentleman Jack*. Despite this, Emma Woodhouse and Anne Lister do share a charismatic power rooted in their class privilege. When asked in a recent interview with the LGBTQIA-interest magazine *The Advocate* about the timeless themes in *Emma*, particularly that of preordained marriage, something her interviewer Tracy E. Gilchrist affirms all queer people have to face, de Wilde explains: "I think that the relationship between Emma and Harriet is the first love story. Until she realized how much she loved Harriet and how she couldn't live without her, then she was able to love Mr. Knightley properly." De Wilde adds that "by the time you get to the end [of the film], through the central character, you realize that the right place to put value is in good people who take care of each other despite social standings and preconceived notions set there by society. It's about people being kind to one another." This is certainly a fair description of de Wilde's intentions in bringing the relationship between Emma and Harriet to the foreground of her film, as exemplified by such scenes as the marriage proposal, in which Emma reacts to Mr. Knightley with an initial refusal: "I . . . I cannot. Harriet . . . she's in love with you!" followed by "I cannot break her heart again." Here, Emma's concern for Harriet's well-being prevents her from immediately accepting Mr. Knightley's offer, her love for Harriet momentarily taking prominence over her love for her prospective husband. Before this, Emma's love for Harriet had already been put forward as the reason behind her opposition to a marriage between her and Robert Martin, with Emma closing her argument with Mr. Knightley with: "I am done with matchmaking for the present. I only want to keep Harriet for myself."

The flip side of both Emma's loneliness as expressed in her desire "to keep Harriet for myself" and de Wilde's emphasis on "being kind to one another" is the film's more perverse interest in the grotesque, including a farting baby, Emma's nosebleed discussed below, and the over-stretched smiles of the oleaginous Mr. Elton and the awkward Miss Smith. Indeed, Mia Goth leans into the grotesque in her

characterization of Harriet: her voice is a high caricature of girlishness and she always awkwardly inhabits the spaces she finds herself within, all angularity and nerves. Emma is directly confronted with Harriet's grotesque side when she visits her friend in the girls' school, arriving just as Harriet rises, covered in sugar, from a game to win a penny. De Wilde's camera emphasizes Emma's poise versus Harriet's nerves by framing them as separated by a gulf of social expectations. Alternatively, as befitting de Wilde's emphasis on Emma and Harriet's friendship as "the first love story," Harriet's role in the film is expanded, emphasizing Emma's attraction to her new girlfriend, and including intimate scenes between them in both women's bedrooms as well as around and about Highbury. The film deliberately diverges from the novel's ending by allowing Emma and Harriet to remain friends, with de Wilde arguing that she and screenwriter Eleanor Catton "felt that we needed Harriet to have her moment to feel like Harriet hadn't compromised her life and that Emma got everything, but that Harriet really ended up with the person she loved the most, which I do feel like she did" (Erbland). We argue that the film balances this more sugary conclusion with a more sophisticated take on female friendship, evidenced by de Wilde also arguing: "I want to see more movies where women's dark, twisty, powerful relationships with each other are central... These stories time travel. The world might be burning, it might be 1820 or 2020, but your best friend letting you down is totally stunting" (Cafolla). Emma and Harriet's "dark, twisty, powerful" relationship in the film grapples with the grotesque and the queer in a way which uncovers emotional resonances available in the original Austen novel but often left unexplored in earlier adaptations. De Wilde's collapsing of the distinctions between 1820 and 2020, prefaced by "The world might be burning," also speaks to the queer utopia offered by Austen style and reproduced in *EMMA*. De Wilde uses the queer dynamics of Emma and Harriet's relationship to illuminate the process of heteronormative alignment in Emma's redirected desire toward Mr. Knightley at the film's conclusion. The film director argues that Emma's love for Harriet allows Emma "to love Mr. Knightley *properly*."

Loving Properly: Mr. Knightley and Orientation

To love someone "properly" might suggest abiding by the patriarchal standard outlined in, for example, Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984), in which the proper functions as a kind of straitjacket on women's agency. Neither Austen nor de Wilde, we suggest, are interested in such propriety. The film gestures toward the scene of a girl being taught a lesson when Mr. Knightley chastises Emma for humiliating Miss Bates. The scene lacks impact in part because the film has diminished the role of Frank Churchill and his teasing flirtation with Emma but also, we suggest because *EMMA* is not interested in teaching Emma a lesson. More emphasis is placed on a scene not in Austen's novel in which Emma, feeling suitably chastened, arrives home and shares a silent moment with Bill Nighy's surprisingly spry Mr. Woodhouse. Finding his daughter in tears on a window seat, Nighy's patriarch silently leans in to comfort his daughter. This quiet scene speaks volumes more than the frippery at Box Hill: de Wilde diverges from the novel's emphasis on how others care for Mr. Woodhouse to explore the old gentleman's inarticulate and sometimes absurd attempts to care for others. This culminates in the film's final scene in which Mr. Woodhouse orders the reordering of a series of screens to protect what both the novel and film suggest are imaginary draughts. The film suggests that Mr. Woodhouse shares this understanding and choreographs the room's furniture to afford Emma and Mr. Knightley some privacy. Loving "properly" for de Wilde allows for the expression of love to take alternative forms: whether that be "dark, twisty, powerful" or quietly absurd.

And love Mr. Knightley Emma does, the two coming together at the end of De Wilde's movie, though not without *EMMA.* once again making the conscious choice to diverge from the original novel. Emma's concern for Harriet's welfare towards the end of the film contrasts with her reaction to Mr. Knightley's proposal in the novel: "While he spoke, Emma's mind was most busy, and, with all the wonderful velocity of thought, had been able … to catch and comprehend the exact truth of the whole; to see that Harriet's hopes had been entirely groundless, a mistake, a delusion, as complete a delusion as any of her own—that Harriet was nothing; that she was every

thing herself" (338). Neither does Emma take Harriet's feelings for Mr. Knightley seriously, with her cynically reflecting that Harriet is not likely to forget about Mr. Knightley soon simply because "it really was too much to hope even of Harriet, that she could be in love with more than *three* men in 1 year" (354). De Wilde's reimagining of the relationship between Emma and Harriet means that she has to distance herself from her source material. The novel certainly does not close with the heroine realizing that one must be kind to everyone regardless of social standing, as de Wilde affirms. Precisely the opposite is true: the original Emma is an even more hard-headed and cold-hearted character than Taylor-Joy's and does not go through anything resembling a process of personal development. At the end of the novel, Emma is just as elitist as she ever was. After being told by Harriet that she has decided to refuse Robert Martin's marriage offer, Emma declares that "it would have been the loss of a friend to me," as "I could not have visited Mrs Robert Martin, of Abbey-Mill Farm" (43). In de Wilde's adaptation, Emma softens her prejudices at least as far as Harriet is concerned, reacting to the revelation that her father is a Bristol tradesman who makes galoshes, with: "Then I hope you will bring him to Hartfield." Emma's prejudices against people she considers to be her social inferiors in Austen's novel, however, remain unmoved at the end of the narrative. Austen does not allow the two women to remain friends, and in free indirect speech, which combines the narratorial voice with Emma's own views, states: "The intimacy between Emma and Harriet must sink; their friendship must change into a calmer sort of good-will; and, fortunately, what ought to be, and must be, seemed already beginning, and in the most gradual, natural manner" (379). The description of separation between Emma and Harriet as something "natural" and "what ought to be, and must be," is a clear indication that these are Emma's thoughts. Where one would expect to find a reformed heroine, one finds instead an unapologetic snob who, much like Austen's tyrannical older woman, does not regret her pride in her high social position.

Emma's queer-coded, charismatic villainy in *EMMA.* might seem to clash with the straightforward, good-natured charm of Johnny Flynn's Mr. Knightley; however, the two characters are connected by a kind of screwball chemistry as well as their shared privilege. In his first scene, he is getting undressed and dressed, not by himself, but

with the help of a servant. De Wilde draws on her music video producer sensibilities to add a spellbinding theatricality to the well-rehearsed choreography that was the etiquette of a Regency estate. This act of undressing and dressing Mr. Knightley shows much about him: his clothes are impractical, which means that any manual labor that takes place at his estate is not done by him. This Mr. Knightley is no patriarch sent out by Austen to reform Emma and force her into submission. Johnny Flynn combines the charisma of a rock star with Mr. Knightley's passion for correcting Emma, revealing the vulnerability of a man in love and uncertain of a return as the film progresses.

Like in the original, Emma and Mr. Knightley are equals, both socially and intellectually. When they argue, they argue in front of a dining table bursting with expensive silverware, another mark of their privilege. The passionate argument comically displays the chemistry between the two characters and the actors that play them. Mr. Knightley's comment that Harriet is "pretty and she is good-tempered, but that is all" receives Emma's retort that "these are not trivial recommendations, Mr. Knightley. Until men do fall in love with well-informed minds instead of handsome faces, a girl with such loveliness as Harriet has the certainty of being admired and sought after wherever she goes," a clear challenge to Mr. Knightley to accept her and love her precisely for her intellectual abilities and her refusal to submit to his authority. And if we cringe at Emma's unthinking humiliation of Miss Bates during the picnic scene—brilliantly played by both Taylor-Joy and Miranda Hart, with an emphasis on the regret of the first as she realizes what she has said, and the hurt of the latter—we also laugh at the haughtiness with which Emma opens the door to the carriage Miss Bates has been excitedly knocking on with a single finger. Emma does not behave like a heroine—she is more of a Disney villain than a Disney princess—which makes her more complex, certainly less likable, but in the end, much more enjoyable to watch.

Emma's reaction to Mr. Knightley's later much more welcome proposal represents the culmination of the film's interest in choreography with more authentic comic outbursts. The misunderstanding this time hinges on Emma's ridiculous apprehension that Mr. Knightley might be in love with Harriet. In Austen's novel, the realization that Mr. Knightley loves her and not Harriet strikes Emma

with "with all the wonderful velocity of thought" (338). The speed of thought in Austen's novel is transposed into a more bodily response in de Wilde's film: Emma gets a nosebleed. This "comic outburst," works on several levels. Primarily, it represents the stress Emma finds herself under she fears she has drawn her childhood mentor into an inappropriate relationship with her lower-class protegee, at exactly the moment in which she realizes she is in love with Mr. Knightley herself. More figuratively, the nosebleed is an emission embodying Emma's speed of thought on screen: her swift calculations about the damage she may have done to Mr. Knightley, Harriet, and her own hopes of happiness combined with her relief as she understands the drift of Knightley's stilted and stuttering proposal, dissected over a paragraph of Austen's prose, is represented on screen through this bloody release.

Emma's narrative arc over the course of the film takes her from the cold, aloof, queer figure we are confronted with at the beginning of the film to someone who seems warmer, more human(e), and finally straighter at the film's conclusion. Critical descriptors of Anna Taylor-Joy's Emma Woodhouse as a sadistic and reptilian "land shark" speak to her deliberately strange, even queer, and alienating characterization at the start of de Wilde's film. She is represented as cold and aloof toward her servants—her warmer relationship with her governess Miss Taylor a notable exception—and her coldness extends to members of the Highbury community she thinks of as below her notice, which turns out to be just about everyone. Especially at the start of the film, Taylor-Joy's movements are precisely calibrated to reinforce these hierarchies between her high status and the lowness of others. She might be directing servants to select just the right flower for Miss Taylor's farewell bouquet or opening the window to her carriage with the flick of a dismissive finger to speak to the tedious Miss Bates, but her movements remain calm, collected, and contained. Over the course of the film, however, the choreography of Emma's movements is disturbed by the motion of the plot and the motives of other characters, which turn out to be often very different from Emma's expectations. In these moments, Taylor-Joy switches from careful choreography to a comic mode incorporating caricature, slapstick, and screwball comedy. For example, when Mr. Elton proposes to her rather than her friend Harriet Smith, Emma's panic, realization, and revulsion are captured in a close-up of her face, her eyes

ping-ponging through the horrible ramifications of her misunderstanding.

Ultimately, Emma's arc over the course of *EMMA.* takes her from the potentially queer figure at the start of the film to the straighter figure of the film's conclusion, although she continues to defy heteronormative expectations by persuading Mr. Knightley to live with her, as in Austen's original slyly progressive ending. We argue that Emma's developing humanity resides in her ridiculousness. If she learns anything from the Box Hill episode, it is to avoid the ridicule of others. However, this does not lead to po-faced seriousness; instead, Emma and *EMMA.* embrace the potential of the ridiculous as an aesthetic that accepts human frailty and silliness. For example, Emma's attempts to make good on her various misadventures include gifting a goose to Robert Martin, a goose farmer. More thoughtfully for such an intelligent heroine, the film emphasizes the shared sense of humor between Emma and Mr. Knightley, himself depicted as ridiculous, for example, when he first attempts to admit his love to Emma at the same time as Harriet and Frank arrive from Harriet's unpleasant experience with a band of "gypsy" children. There is a telling pause in all the bluster in which Frank asks Knightley, "What are you doing here?" which functions as a metatextual nod to the film's divergence from the source novel and a subtle commentary on the strangeness of Mr. Knightley's straight desire. Rather than celebrating the ambiguous "perfection" of the union between Emma and Knightley, as in Austen's original ironic representation, the film chooses to celebrate their ridiculousness.

In all but one aspect—Emma's relationship with Harriet at the end of the film—de Wilde's and Taylor-Joy's Emma is true to Austen's original depiction of unchecked female power. This Emma is certainly colder and less likable than her predecessors, but this is simply a consequence of de Wilde's decision to remain close to her source material, Austen's deeply transgressive novel about an authoritative, compelling, and ultimately unchanging heroine. Emma, as she says so herself, does not need to get married, and loses none of her power when she does. As a married woman, she remains the center of her universe, as the postproposal scene between Emma and Mr. Knightley in the drawing room at Hartfield so brilliantly demonstrates. After Emma expresses her reluctance at leaving her father behind, who would never be compelled to leave Hartfield, Mr. Knightley answers:

"Then I shall come here." Taylor-Joy's triumphant expression in this scene perfectly shows that this is exactly what Emma wanted to hear. "You would quit the Abbey" she asks him, "Sacrifice your independence?" Emma herself loses nothing and sacrifices nothing. Handsome, clever, and rich, she gets to wield the power that was seen as a man's prerogative, and this will remain the case even after she is married. It is the perfect happy ending.[4]

Endnotes

[1] For the purposes of this article, *Emma* refers to the 1815 novel and *EMMA.* (complete with the affected period) refers to the 2020 film. When referring to other adaptations of the novel without the zany punctuation, other Emmas are distinguished by their release year, for example, *Emma* (2009).

[2] See reviews by Bradshaw, Greenblatt, and Zacharek.

[3] Thanks to Amy Wilcockson for pointing this out to us in a Twitter conversation about the film.

[4] The epithet "perfect" echoes ironically through Jane Austen's *Emma* and we use "perfect" here, already ironized by the addition of a footnote after it, to register lingering questions about the nature of Emma and Mr Knightley's relationship, including the power balance between them, in the fallen world of the novel, its film adaptations, and our own imperfect perspectives.

[5] Advertised on the front cover under the title "Was Jane Austen Gay?"

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