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## JANE AUSTEN'S NOVEL *EMMA* ANALYZED AS A CANDIDATE FOR L'ECRITURE FEMININE

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**Abstract:** This paper represents an attempt at an examination and application of Hélène Cixous' ideas on feminine literature, which are described in her article, "The Laugh of Medusa," as applied to the text of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*. This is an endeavour to dissociate from traditional patriarchal images and apprehensions of feminine lifestyles, which adheres to Cixous' proposal that the marginalized should imprint their voices into the cannon for themselves. Cixous claimed that representation of such images in literature is required for the advancement of our partial understandings to represent typically marginalized groups in a more genuine manner.

In this paper, Austen's novel *Emma* is inspected as a historical prototype of a novel that delineates, but also challenges the ways in which the patriarchy places confines on femininity. The analysis focuses on the main female character and her relationship with other female characters, as well as parental figures, and romantic interests. What is taken into consideration is that these are all relationships in which assumptions of femininity established on patriarchal conventions are demonstrated. This shows how Austen managed to display a more refined depiction of feminine identity.

**Key words:** *l'écriture féminine, Hélène Cixous, Jane Austen, feminine writing, female authorship, phallogentric/gynocentric.*

### **Introduction**

The patriarchy-based arrangement of Western culture facilitates the saturation of authorship and narrative with a prominent male outlook. Feminist theorist Hélène Cixous emphasizes the significance of feminine writing in "The Laugh of the

Medusa,” in which she encourages women to write for themselves and for the sake of other women and notices that the quantity of female authorship “has always been ridiculously small,” (Cixous, 878). She talked about feminine writing as *l’écriture féminine*, defined by traits that challenge writing in the phallogentric tradition and the patriarchal structure of language.

Cixous argues that “it is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence” (Cixous, 881). The Western discourse is analysed as an essentially phallogentric structure comprised of binary oppositions in which one part is always dominant to the other. For example, in the binary opposition comprised of masculine and feminine, the feminine is subordinated to the masculine in a structure of ostensibly unequal power. Cixous proposes an alternative writing for women which would transcend the phallogentric limitations. It would be a reclamation of female voice, which was persistently silenced throughout history, in which the masculine was privileged whereas the feminine was subjugated.

Even though the notion of *l’écriture féminine* developed in France, it has been adopted and appropriated in Anglo-American literary and cultural contexts. There, women and second-wave feminist artists and theorists continued using the French designation in their attempts to challenge the hegemonic structures in language, literature, and culture in general. Many artists and theorists employed the strategies and approaches of *l’écriture féminine* to problematize structures of representation in which the feminine is marginalized. The aim of this paper is to apply the notions of *l’écriture féminine* on a novel written by a woman and explore the ways in which female perspective is offered and displays what it means to be bound to the signifier “woman”. It is even logical to view such a literary endeavour as a representation of a gynocentric structure, in which women’s thoughts, efforts, and stances are presented more authentically.

### **Jane Austen’s authorship as feminine writing**

Jane Austen’s entire literary work is appropriate for an analysis in terms of female writing or *l’écriture féminine* because its allure cannot be resisted by common women readers, nor by feminist critics. Austen (1775-1817) lived in a period marked by the shift not only in the British social and political context, but also in the narrative style of British fiction; it is a period in which the impact of Enlightenment was diminishing, and the impact of the Industrial Revolution was observed in the society. Whether Jane Austen’s writing displays a certain aspect of proto-feminism or not has long been debated. Even though the plots of her novels most often rely on marriage and romantic love, there are certain elements to her writing that provide for a specific feminine perspective, encompassing a rebelliousness of sorts towards the

established patriarchal order. In all her novels, Austen writes about “the process of a young girl’s maturation and the complex relationship between a woman’s desires and the imperatives of propriety” (Poovey, 21). Those issues are about the female experience in society and how it is determined by a woman’s place in society as a social construct. Thus, the consideration of Austen’s work as *l’écriture féminine* is more than logical.

### **Austen’s *Emma* - *l’écriture féminine***

The consideration of an Austen literary work as *l’écriture féminine* is especially applicable to her novel *Emma*, in which gendered matters are depicted with clarity and via a perspective which was new for the time in which this novel was written. Austen does not depict her female protagonists as women of sensibility, who were lauded by the romantic poets and the predominant ideological doctrine of the apportioned areas which assigned domestic roles to women. Mellor maintains: “all of Austen’s novels are novels of female education, novels in which an intelligent but ignorant girl learns to perceive the world more correctly and to understand more fully the workings of human nature and society. Emma Woodhouse must recognize her own cruelty to Miss Bates, must understand how wrongly she has perceived both Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith before she can equal the intelligence and benevolence of a Mr. Knightley (Mellor, 82).

The effort to analyse the manners in which Austen’s *Emma* is an exemplar of feminine literature also brings to light the patriarchal frame of the different societal groups within the text, as well as the attempts of separation from that frame in those little acts of subversion of the characters against the limitations of their rank within that order.

The main goal of ‘feminine literature’ would be to constitute a prospect in the future in which the meanings related to ‘otherness’ or ‘womanhood’ would not be confined as they are under the rule of patriarchy, where woman is guaranteed a voice in the literary cannon. The novel *Emma* by Jane Austen depicts the limitations imposed by feminine meaning as delineated by the patriarchal society of the period in which it was written. In true Austen fashion and tradition, parts of it revolve around the never avoidable marriage market of her time as an important feminine issue for women back then, yet once again it depicts female characters which have so much more to offer to the reader than a practical woman who is bound to marry for economic purposes. On the contrary, the novel depicts the seriousness of young women’s development in personality, societal statute, seriousness of character, and reliability of personhood, all of which enrich the impression of having women represented as well-rounded, multi-dimensional, complete people respected and valued for who they are as persons, and not for their gender alone.

The text of *Emma* can educate about the meanings connected to women in

patriarchal societies and structures, how those meanings represent boundaries for women, and how they fail femininity. An analysis of this novel in terms of female writing provides a demonstration of a development from the strictly defined, economically conditioned role that woman has historically been ascribed by the patriarchy, to a position of moderately more freedom to make her own choices. Female characters written by women are challenging to traditionally patriarchal notions of their gender. Whilst considering those challenges and the development of patriarchal limitations on female characters, woman's legitimate place in literature may be brought to light. For that to happen, we must continue to write women that, as Cixous calls for, do not listen to the voices of the Sirens (885), because we cannot let our voices be spoken for us in the falsely feminine tune of male-written characters.

Austen's depiction of women in *Emma* offers her defence of feminine dignity. Austen advocates for women and their intellectual competencies. She illustrates the conduct and thought of her female characters, especially of Emma, as well as their societal place. To attain a better understanding of the reasons why this literary work of Austen's should even be considered as *l'écriture féminine*, one must have knowledge of the societal circumstances in which it was written. For that purpose, the explanation of the arrangement of the patriarchal society in which Austen lived given by LeRoy W. Smith will be taken into consideration. In the words of Smith, patriarchy refers to "an ancient, universal and dominantly masculine society" (Smith, 9). According to this, men in eighteenth century England were the ones who had power and authority, as well as leadership over women and determined which roles would be assigned to women. In fact, the only two functions they ascribed to females were those of mothers and wives (Smith, 1983, p. 12). This constraint is connected to the patriarchal standards for male and female personalities. Women were supposed to demonstrate "passivity, submissiveness, dependence, subjectivity, intuitiveness, sensibility, irrationality" or "emotionality", whereas men evinced "aggressiveness, competitiveness, rationality, analytic ability, objectivity" or "emotional control" (Smith, 11). Women were regarded as dependent of and subservient to men, which is why they were mainly demoted to dealing with issues in the domestic areas. Women's "banishment" into the domestic area made it ordinary for them to be led by a "rationally superior husband". Their main "virtues" were "kindness, humility, gentleness" or "protectiveness" (Korsmeyer, 287). David Monaghan verifies this outlook and affirms that women were associated with home and domestic life, and always subordinated to their husbands. He asserts that the most important virtue ascribed to females was "meekness", since it entailed the "recognition of her inherent inferiority and suppression of whatever abilities she might possess" (Monaghan, 106).

In the century in which *Emma* was written, women lived in a patriarchal society in which men were considered to be their superiors. Men had the authority to delineate women and their situation in society, most often denoting them to the domestic area and confining their efforts in the realm of the household. In this society,

the virtues that were advocated for women, by which they were acknowledged as good women, were the characteristics which made them obedient and inferior to men. Women were offered education which ascertained that they stayed in the shadow of men. As Gary Kelly (2005) explains, the education in the eighteenth century was “designed to fit the individual for a range of related roles in life, according to sex and rank” (p. 252). Education for women encompassed “basic schooling, household management and religious instruction” (Kelly, 2005, p. 256), while men were taught more advanced skills correspondingly with their rank. Women were also prepared in terms of “accomplishments” by governesses, which is mentioned by Austen in *Emma* on more than one occasion. According to Kelly (2005), these accomplishments covered capabilities such as dancing, singing and playing music (all suitable for the purpose of attracting a suitor); drawing, painting, modern languages and needlework (marking their cultural distinction); and letter-writing or knowledge of the “belles-lettres” (p. 257). Therefore, it can be deduced that the education that was accessible was crucial in the continuance and endurance of the governing patriarchal ideas.

Cileli asserts that Jane Austen was most likely aware that Emma would not be the same as the commonly obedient female characters of her other novels when she wrote to a friend, “I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like” (Çileli, 245). Austen’s heroine Emma is different from her other female characters because she has the benefit of the best circumstances to live a full life independently in her world: “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence.” Emma is “the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father” and has “in consequence of her sister’s marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period” (Justice, 5) Her power as a household leader is shown when Emma easily manages to alter the seating at a dining table, even though her father was against it, a table that “none but Emma could have had power to place there and persuade her father to use” (Justice, 239).

Emma is viewed by many as an exceptionally powerful female character in literature, a testament to which is Marilyn Butler’s claim that Austen’s heroine “is the real ruler of the household at Hartfield” (p. 385). However, this is not entirely accurate. Emma has a particular power, which one might argue it is the power of convincing joint with intellect, however she does not have economic power herself. Her father holds economic power, he simply chooses to assign it to her, but only in the confines of the household. Despite the realities of the societal limitations she experiences in theory, it is visible that in practice Emma’s power in her household translates into her community, and it is noticeable. For instance, she gets advantages from others and her opinion is sought after by others, as is the case with Mr. and Mrs. Weston, who invite her first to the Crown “for the purpose of taking her opinion as to the propriety and comfort of the rooms before any other persons came” (Justice, 2012, p. 219). This is why she holds such high opinion of herself and is convinced

that she is the centre of her community, even though she is being asked to share her views on basically domestic issues which are generally linked with women. Emma behaves as an independent woman with personal sovereignty and opportunity to shape her future, but she also expects that she can shape the future of others in her surrounding as well. Nonetheless, she is not complacent and begins a transformation in which she eventually obtains actual awareness of the world and her real situation.

In terms of *l'écriture féminine*, it is not only important to explore the main female character, but also the way in which the male protagonist was written by the female writer. Mr. George Knightley, according to Waldron, could be seen as "Austen's model for wisdom" which is "carrying the moral authority of the novel" (Waldron, 114), a sentiment which is often expressed in the novel:

Mr Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them: and though this was not particularly agreeable to Emma herself, she knew it would be so much less so to her father, that she would not have him really suspect such a circumstance as her not being thought perfect by everybody (*Emma*, p.5).

Despite the disagreements between the two characters, there are elements of the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley which can easily be established as an endorsement of female autonomy, especially when having in mind Mr. Knightley's authority. This can be seen in Mr. Knightley's opinion on Jane Fairfax:

Jane Fairfax has feeling," said Mr. Knightley—"I do not accuse her of want of feeling. Her sensibilities, I suspect, are strong—and her temper excellent in its power of forbearance, patience, self-control; but it wants openness. She is reserved, more reserved, I think, than she used to be—And I love an open temper. No—till Cole alluded to my supposed attachment, it had never entered my head. I saw Jane Fairfax and conversed with her, with admiration and pleasure always—but with no thought beyond. (*Emma*, p.207).

Waldron analyses Knightley's judgement, which could be seen as a judgement of the quality of having "open temper", as being more inclined to "a stormy relationship with someone he can trust" rather than "a calm one with someone whose thoughts may be hidden from him". (Waldron, 127). By preferring Emma's open temper, Mr. Knightley indicates that he will no longer enforce his dominance to defy her and it announces a significant modification in "the self-confident paternal/ fraternal guardian and pedagogue" character of Mr. Knightley along the course of the novel: "Gradually his position is undermined, for in the long run experience teaches him that his attitudes are too rigid, that Emma's intuitions are sometimes better than his 'reasonable' assumptions and that love has little to do with rules of conduct." (Waldron, 132).

In her novels, Austen levels criticism at her society but she does not provide a route of escape or splitting form it and its established norms. At the end of the novel, Emma is not completely independent. However, it must be pointed out that



many opportunities of female independence are examined in the character of Emma. Austen establishes Emma as a character with sharp intellect: Mr Woodhouse “could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful” (Justice, 6). But it can be observed that regardless of her intellect, Emma does not always behave rationally. The reader can see Emma’s arrival at maturity when she abandons the illusion that she can control other people’s lives and decisions. Emma finally starts behaving accordingly and she becomes a rational, level-headed woman, and to depict such a trait in a female character was revolutionary at the time the novel was written. It is important to note that Emma follows the rules of reason and not those of the patriarchy. This is of utter importance in terms of considering the text as *l’écriture féminine*, because by favouring the rules of reason, Austen demonstrates a female character who is as ethical, virtuous, and autonomous as men are. Even at the end, Emma manages to hold on to a significant amount of power, if not complete.

Certain feminist literary critics direct criticism towards Jane Austen’s choice of romantic themes for her novels, often viewed as bolstering the marriage customs of her time. However, it has been convincingly argued by others that Austen is a historical precedent of a novelist who is amongst the first to reach toward the feminine literature that Cixous suggests – by writing, focusing on and disseminating the female perspective. Many of her novels are about capable, tenacious, determined, and bright female central figures whose ideas about marriage were considered atypical for their time. A more detailed inspection at the components of Austen’s work discloses the fundamental ways in which her work opposes the principles of patriarchy.

In *Emma*, a young woman’s future is highly influenced by the marriage market, however, the eponymous character is a woman who does not have an appetite for marriage, especially not for economic purposes. In that way she is able to gracefully triumph against the marriage market’s possible effect by finding an agreement in marriage which is beneficial to both of the joined parties. Regardless of the romance of the “happy” ending of *Emma*, in which the marriage of Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley tie up the plot, the development of their romance uncovers Austen’s methods of disproving of patriarchal notions.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, marriage was women’s resource for obtaining economic safety and social position, even though it also brought about a certain level of subjection of women and their submission to their husbands. Emma is unique as an Austen heroine, because marriage is altogether needless for her. Emma’s struggle for a subject position in a patriarchal discourse is immensely personal and it relies on her privileged socioeconomic position in society (Çileli, 248). She is well aware of her own power and revels in her independence. Emma is aware of her privileged position.

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 (*Emma*, p.60).

Emma wants to evade a situation in which she would be confined in marriage. Even though she will later abandon this position, the notion that marriage is in its actuality forswearing of independence is clearly represented in the text. The intricacies of marriage and its complex influence on women's lives is well illustrated in *Emma*. Emma renounces marriage for herself, but she defends it in the case of Harriet Smith. Because Harriet does not have social position and economic stability, Emma wants her to marry Mr. Elton (Justice, 26), because he can provide her with a home and economic safety. By means of this exposition of thought on marriage which depends on the very particular situation of the woman, Austen herself expresses her own outlooks on this ancient institution. Emma is answerable to conventions like the rest. And the solution which is proposed by Austen in this novel is not the existence of an independent woman, but that of an ideal marriage. Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley is distinctive and important in its own way. It is so extraordinary, that it cannot be stated that the female protagonist, who considered herself capable of avoiding marriage, ends up surrendering to conventions.

There are certain critics who do not view Emma's decision to marry as an act of yielding to conventions at all. Although Emma succumbs to social conventions and marries, her marriage is anything but conventional. Even though his estate Donwell is grander than the Woodhouse household, Hartfield, Mr. Knightley easily agrees to live in Emma's house with her father instead of taking Emma to his house, as was the convention. There are authors who argue that Knightley is surrendering power in their relationship, because he agrees to share Emma's home and be in her domain (Johnson, 427). Nonetheless, this is not an issue of power and who holds in the relationship, because that would imply that the relationship dynamic is imbalanced. What Austen does is revolutionary, because she completely eschews the conversation about marital power by presenting a new model for marriage in which mutual respect is highlighted. As Smith emphasizes, "The marriage of Emma and Knightley is based on the spirit of equality and mutual respect" (155). Mr. Knightley's move to Hartfield is a confirmation of the fact that he views Emma as an equal, not as a lesser or a subordinate, and that he respects her and her living conditions, which is showcased in the text. Emma and George Knightley's marriage is not established on the patriarchal principles of male dominance and female submission, for it "holds the fullest promise of life, one in which the female is openly admired and shares decisions and in which there is mutual trust and a healthy sense of companionship" (Smith, 154-155). Thus Austen, a female writer, manages to present a female perspective on what could be considered as a marriage of equals. Therefore, the female outlook and the meaning of femininity are depicted comprehensively as opposed to the patriarchal stereotypes which are ordinarily attributed to femininity. The dismissal of the unbalanced outlook within the literary cannon can be considered as the most valuable feature of Austen's *Emma*.



Another aspect of this novel which is of interest in regard to *l'écriture féminine* is not only the treatment of marriage, but also Emma's relations with other characters, especially female characters. One such relationship of interest is Emma's and Harriet's friendship, with a focus on Emma's endeavours to find a suitable marital partner for her friend. Emma is "patronising and condescending" and acts as a "male mentor" with Harriet (Smith, 135). When she decides to govern Harriet in her quest for a marital partner, Emma manipulates her friend; manipulation is traditionally viewed as a feminine activity, the means of governing and managing used by people without substantial power. In the attempt to manage other people's choices, Emma allows for arrogance to be her guide to the extent of believing that she is superior.

An important instance of Emma's relationship with other female members of her community is her behaviour towards Miss Bates, whom she insults during their picnic at Box Hill. Emma ridicules Miss Bates to secure her position of power and make clear that the rest of the people are inferior to her (Smith, 134). Austen herself does not approbate such vile behaviour, which is why she expresses her opinion via the words of the most noble character in the novel, Mr. Knightley. Emma finally becomes aware of how wrong she was in treating Miss Bates so badly. She takes moral responsibility for her actions and reaches moral enlightenment (Butler, 385). It is from this moment on that Emma starts gradually deserting her imagination and vanity and begins acting in accordance with reason, thus behaving as a morally independent woman. The fact that Emma has acquired moral seriousness and independence is obviously of great importance to Austen, who as a female writer offers a totally new perspective on the ambitions of a strapping young female member of society. In a society that regarded women as inferior, irrational beings, Emma commands the respect of others, which provides her with true power.

In *Emma*, Austen succeeds to dismiss the patriarchal idea that women are not rational or morally independent creatures. She presents the reader with a considerable anomaly in a patriarchal society: an ambitious, independent, and powerful (within her immediate circle, at least) young woman whose aspirations and appetites in life are not at all what the patriarchy prescribes. With *Emma*, Austen succeeds to inspire, but also to provide a profound insight into the female experience of youth, enthusiasm, initiative, and ambition which could only be understood and felt by those who belong in the category of the "other" gender in society. Austen has long been lauded for her wittiness, sarcasm, and comedic genius, yet the richness her literary works abound in lies in her exquisite feminine perspective, which reinforces the importance of having the ordeal of being a woman explained by a woman.

## Conclusion

Western civilization's structure, which is rooted in patriarchy, has imbued the language we use. Words are signifiers fixed to things and they are linked with the constructs assigned to them by culture. In the case of signifiers linked with femininity,

these constructs may consist of marriage for economic benefit, social appropriateness, a daughter's, a sister's, or a mother's responsibility. Hélène Cixous calls on women to write so that they partake in the meaning that the signifiers to which they are linked acquire. Establishing Cixous' notions as a basis, it can be argued that literature must depict the general agreement regarding the meaning connected with the word "woman," and then permit that its disintegration. This process, as we have seen, can be found in Jane Austen's *Emma*, in which the system that marginalizes women is brought to light and then confronted in numerous ways as characters withstand motion toward a phallic centre.

Austen's *Emma* presents the female perspective written by the female hand; the meaning of femininity is exposed as much broader than the correlated stereotypes which the patriarchy customarily attributes to femininity. That is probably the most significant aspect of feminine writing in the process of rejection and displacement of the unbalanced perspective within literature.

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