Fun, Fresh, and "Deliriously Pop": *Clueless* and the Parodical Austen

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Introduction

Since its release, much of the scholarly debate around *Clueless* (directed by Amy Heckerling, 1995) has centred around its unique place in the oeuvre of Austenian adaptations. Unlike more direct interpretations of Jane Austen's work, which aim for fidelity in the way of re-enactment and historical accuracy, Heckerling's script takes Emma Woodhouse—the titular heroine of *Emma*—out of the British countryside and into the halls of a modern-day Los Angeles high school. While initial promotions and subsequent press with Heckerling and Twink Caplan—her creative partner, associate producer, and the actress behind Miss Geist—openly acknowledge the director's conception of "a modern-day *Emma*" (Vincent), the film's credit sequence ultimately fails to mention its source material or the author. This apparent oversight only fuelled division among critics, who saw the "pop culture-infused" film as a loose-at-best adaptation; nevertheless, *Clueless* was a sleeper hit that "dragged America's teens out of a hangover of Nirvana-tinged grunge," and has since become an indubitable cult classic (Vincent).

Ironically, the film's widespread appeal is often attributed to how little it resembles the textual *Emma*—at least on the surface. Ironic, too, is its treatment by contemporary critics as "low entertainment" (Gibson 14), not only due to a generalized perspective of adaptations as "secondary to their source material" (Hutcheon 2), but also of the film medium as inferior to literature. Notably, the novel

form that Austen wrote within was the target of similar accusations in her time, with her vocal struggle against such perceptions seeping into her juvenilia and adult works. Furthermore, common criticism of *Clueless*'s satire as a debasement of Austen—playing into the pervasive, "misleading authorial image" of a "gentle aunt Jane," as well as the self-corrective treatment by her adapters of Austen "as somehow flawless"—inadvertently take up the prevalent attitude among scholars toward her manuscripts, which are then dismissed as shameful albeit "necessary apprentice-work" (Levy 1020; Galperin 187). However, despite claims that *Clueless* relies on a "death of the author" approach (Gibson 15), the film operates not in opposition *to* but in dialogue *with* Austen's authorial voice, particularly the early satire of her juvenilia and the extravagant absurdity of her manuscript writing.

Austen Goes to High School: Adapting *Emma*

When considering *Clueless*, Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation as "a creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging" seems uniquely fitting (8). Because the film boasts overt divergences from *Emma* in setting and cultural context, and because it makes no intratextual "announce[ment]" of itself as an adaptation (Hutcheon 7), *Clueless* exists for non-Janeites under different labels: the 90s film; the chick-flick; the rom-com; and the teen movie. Without a doubt, it freely indulges in tropes from each category, earning its place as a cultural touchstone. For readers of Austen, however, Heckerling's engagement with *Emma* is easily recognizable, as is her "ironic quotation" (Azerêdo 241) of tropes from the novel of manners and more modern categories, evidenced, for example, in her transposal of

the marriage plot into a typical romantic comedy arc. If we acknowledge *Emma* as "an already highly ironic text" (Azerêdo 240), the result of this double irony is a self-aware, satirical tone more intrinsically Austenian in nature than critics seem to recognize.

As the final novel published during Austen's lifetime, *Emma* follows the goings-on of a country village through the author's signature free indirect discourse (FID). Unsurprisingly, the thoughts and biases of our titular protagonist colour most of this narration, beginning with her boastful introduction as "handsome, clever, and rich" despite considerable evidence against the latter two claims (*Emma* 3). After all, she makes persistent errors in her opinions and matchmaking efforts, and belongs to a rentier family whose investments are endangered by economic downturns. In that sense, Cher (Alicia Silverstone) may surpass her predecessor: at the very least, her "classic" house—with columns "dat[ing] all the way back to 1972"—confirms the Horowitz's wealth, while her ability to consistently "debate" her way to better grades does show a certain cleverness (Heckerling). Concurrently, *Clueless* fosters a deeper intimacy than *Emma* between its female lead and the audience, since Cher guides us through her world in a voiceover that drips with self-delusion, much like Emma's inner monologue through FID.

Turning to "story-level" overlaps, writer Genilda Azerêdo compiles a succinct list in her article, "From *Emma* to *Clueless*: Ironic Representations of Jane Austen," citing both heroines' high-class status; a dead mother and an overzealous father "with whom [they have] a sort of protective, patronizing relationship"; a love of matchmaking; a close relationship with an older, brother-like figure; a choice to

"'adopt'" and "'improve'" someone belonging to "a lower social class"; and a "process of self-discovery that includes their falling in love" (236). This string of "parallelisms" secures *Clueless*'s claim of adaptation, as Heckerling foregoes a "'step-by-step'" reproduction in favour of fixing her story on the "'widening sum'" of details that make up *Emma* (Azerêdo 237; Hutcheon 4; Galperin 190). The film thus achieves a surprising balance of fidelity and originality that begins with the ironic appropriateness of its setting: the American high school.

If *Emma*, as scholars such as Robert Miles have noted, exists distinctly as a product of its time, representing a singular moment of economic upheaval and social mobility in 19th-century England, so too does *Clueless* function as a time capsule for the dramatized woes of 90s teens in "*nouveau riche* Los Angeles" (Gibson 8). Besides modernizing Austen's Regency tale, this choice of setting prepares the viewer with certain expectations regarding the world and the characters that populate it: in this case, a diverse set of teenagers—diverse in terms of economic status, race, and sexuality—who treat their superfluous day-to-day drama with as much seriousness as the inhabitants of Highbury do theirs. Much like Emma decries the "low origin" of the Coles and attempts to separate herself from the village's "moderately genteel" population Cher asserts her own status to newcomer Tai (Brittany Murphy) by laying out the cliques of their school and systematically dismissing them as inferior to her own (*Emma* 165; Heckerling). In *Clueless*, the lowly tradespeople and farmers that Emma bemoans to Harriet are replaced with "local loadies" whom Cher insists "no respectable girl actually dates" (Heckerling); in both cases, the heroine invokes her perceived superiority to lecture her friend about maintaining class boundaries

and reaffirming one's own status. But while the irony of Emma's dismissal of the Coles's and Martins's "considerable increase of means" is subtle, relying in part on the reader's awareness of the changing economic landscape of the times and the uncertainty of the Woodhouses's income, Heckerling's script openly pokes fun of Cher's sanctimoniousness by having her claim that being older than Tai by a single month gives validity to her advice (*Emma* 167; Miles 83).

The teen movie thus offers the perfect backdrop through which to translate Austen's comedic narrative of class tension and the female-driven competition for social capital, maximizing her intended satire with intentionally over-the-top musical cues and editing—such as the use of Celine Dion's "All By Myself" atop a romantic montage to accompany Cher's disgruntled reflections upon Tai's feelings for Josh (Paul Rudd)—that make the excessiveness of the characters' reactions to their mundane troubles all the more obvious. In the novel, Austen depicts the dramatization of Emma's own epiphany with repetitive language and punctuation: "It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!…How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on!" (*Emma* 331). In Heckerling's film, the class anxieties and economic uncertainty subtly depicted throughout the novel are transposed onto the social dynamics of high school, in which the contest for popularity between characters like Cher, Tai, and Amber mirrors the competition for social capital between the ladies of Highbury. Indeed, the hyper-femininity of Cher's world is part of its lasting charm, from costume designer Mona May's

trendsetting fashion to the heroine's unique blend of "'Valspeak', the slang perfected by privileged Californian teens," with overtly intellectual verbiage, which also mirrors Emma's idiosyncrasies—for example, her emphatic use of "actually" as she rejects Mr. Elton, against the faux maturity of her general speech (Vincent; *Emma* 104). But the parodical extremeness of *Clueless* arguably goes beyond *Emma*'s gentler brand of femininity to approximate "the extreme gender-consciousness of [Austen's] teenage writings," where bad and even sexual behaviour goes scandalously unpunished: after all, "[n]o harsh punishment awaits Eliza, in the story 'Henry & Eliza' as it does Maria Bertram in Mansfield Park" (Sutherland 100). Much like the juvenilia, in *Clueless*, girls are allowed to act out—to smoke and drink at parties, to speak about and have sex, without social reprieve or narrative punishment—in ways the women of *Emma* are hyperconscious of avoiding in order to maintain their "value" and "cultural capital" (Miles 71).

Looking beyond this parallel to consider the manuscript writings as a whole, what makes Heckerling's film uniquely compelling as an adaptation is that it not only parodies the novel of manners and class dynamics intrinsic to *Emma*, but also recalls Austen at her "most satiric, parodic, and uninhibited" (Levy 1019). At the same time as *Clueless* behaves as a satirical adaptation of *Emma*, modernizing the classic tale with all the makings of a teen comedy and using "absurdity" to "expos[e] convention" within both mediums, it reflects Austen's ability to do the same (Sutherland 102-3)—a penchant most readily observed in her private manuscripts.

Clueless, Parody, and the Manuscripts

Throughout the long history of critical writing on Austen, perspectives around her writing from manuscript to print have varied greatly. R.W. Chapman, one of her first editors, "regarded the juvenilia as something of an embarrassment;" scholar Margaret Doody, on the other hand, describes the restraint of her novel writing as the result of "intolerable sacrifices" (Levy 1018). Tracking Austen's career in parallel with the supposed triumph of print over manuscript culture in the 1800s, Michelle Levy comes forward with a more nuanced perspective on the continued importance of manuscripts to the author, arguing that, in walking the line between private and public writing, Austen carried her scriptural practices, "including the risqué elements of the juvenilia," into her novel authorship (1021). Although she does not altogether agree with Levy on the ambiguity of the novels' conformity, Kathryn Sutherland posits *Emma* as an "experiment in absurdity" (106), paving the way for a critical reading of *Clueless* as more than a straight parody, and rather an expansion on that "absurdity" that, in consequence, brings the film closer to the scriptural Austen. Representations of *Clueless* as a "'dumbing down' of Austen" (Gibson 15) carry a self-reflexive sort of criticism: by dismissing the film's parodical intelligence, one mirrors similar denunciations of the uninhibited satire of Austen's manuscripts. In the case of her juvenilia, many judged it as the product of a lack of skill subsequently remedied by her mature works; in the case of *Sanditon*, her final manuscript, Austen's return to "'manic'" satire is blamed on her deteriorating health (Gentile). In other words, parody is bemoaned as inferior writing rather than

praised as a deliberate and educated "re-description" (Azerêdo 243) of the texts it satirizes—for Austen, pedagogical and domestic texts; for Heckerling, *Emma*.

While Austen might have subdued her "lifelong [instinct]" to "ironize" (Sutherland 107) in her novels, leading to greater subtlety in comparison to the unabashedness of the manuscript works, her use of satire remained a purposeful aspect of her writing, as is evident in *Sanditon*. Surveying the unfinished novel, Kathy Justice Gentile's "Sublime Laughter in Jane Austen's *Sanditon*" identifies its "outlandish" and "exuberan[t]" cast of characters as the primary source of comedy, arguing that "in their attempts to elevate themselves above others…[they] inadvertently create the inverse of their desired effect, that is, the false or comic sublime." In this sense, *Sanditon* reclaims the "'blatancy'" of Austen's early writings, indulging in character eccentricities without "the sturdy and sensible foils that are usually present" to balance or altogether diminish them (Levy 1025-6). Certainly, *Emma* has its share of eccentric figures, from the hypochondriac Mr. Woodhouse to the deferential, talkative Miss Bates; but, as in other novels, their ridiculous qualities are countered by the presence of more sensible characters (such as Mr. Knightley) or, in the case of Miss Bates, by a sobering dose of self-awareness.

Clueless, on the other hand, has as rich a comic cast as *Sanditon*, merging pre-existing characters and creating new ones—the most notable additions being Dionne (Stacey Dash) and Murray (Donald Faison)—seemingly with the express purpose of expanding upon the satirical qualities of their textual counterparts. As Gentile notes, "much of Austen's comedy seems to stem from *clueless* characters whose obtuseness about their own abilities and motivations clashes startlingly with

the contextual evidence provided by the narrative" (Gentile, emphasis mine). What Heckerling creates, then, are caricatures upon caricatures, a parodical practice from which even her heroine is not excluded. Like Emma, Cher arrives at her climatic moment of self-realization, which makes her suddenly "acquainted with her own heart," with a newfound awareness of the many blunders and "deplorable mistakes" that have brought her to that point (*Emma* 331), comically and self-referentially exclaiming: "It all boiled down to one inevitable conclusion—I was just totally clueless" (Heckerling). Throughout both the film and novel, Heckerling and Austen create irony at the expense of their heroines, with the former increasing Cher's deluded sense of grandiosity and intelligence, in part, through her first-person narration.

Whereas Emma's own moments of foolishness are framed by an objective third-person narrator, *Clueless* retains the sense of an FID with the occasional asides in Cher's narration—but those serve only to further her unaware self-irony: "Unfortunately, there was a major babe drought at my school. The evil trolls from the Math Department were actually married. [Camera moves away, then quickly back] *Oh*, Snickers" (Heckerling). In that way, Cher's sometimes disordered narrative resembles the chaotic quality of Austen's manuscripts, like the needlessly fragmented "adventures" of "The beautifull Cassandra" and the frequent food-related tangents of "Lesley Castle": "when any intervals of tolerable Composure in Eloisa would allow us, we joined in heartfelt lamentations on the dreadful Waste in our provisions which the event must occasion" (*Jane Austen's Manuscript Works* 130). Even the film's opening montage—a blur of wealth displays, mall hopping, and

partying through frantic camera movements and the non-diegetic sound of Kim Wilde's "Kids in America"—instantly immerses the viewer in that same wild energy that characterizes Austen's parodical manuscripts. Think of the frenetic pace of *Love and Freindship*, in which marriages, sudden deaths, and the discovery of unknown relatives occur in such rapid succession that they seem at once absurd and mundane. As such, Heckerling makes *Clueless* a highly ironic movie that, by exaggerating the dramatics of *Emma*, makes obvious the subtle self-parody of Emma Woodhouse in Alicia Silvertone's Cher Horowitz, as well as its eccentric cast of characters, whose extreme personas "revitaliz[e]…the absurdist comedy of the juvenilia" (Gentile).

Conclusion

As a modern adaptation, Heckerling's film appears at first glance utterly unattached to the material it supposedly adapts—even more so when compared to self-evident and self-acknowledged Austenian films. In the same year (1995), for example, *Sense and Sensibility* provided a direct translation of Austen's text by the same name, bringing with it a level of "serious" acclaim that the comedic and outrageously ironic *Clueless* could never gain. And yet, while the former has certainly enamoured its own share of viewers, it is *Clueless*, which boasts a shocking proximity to Austen's novel despite making it larger than life, that comes out on top in the battle for cultural relevance. As Levy indicates, there is renewed interest in Austen's manuscripts by recent scholarship. Perhaps, then, these scriptural writings may

soon see a positive shift in the space of public opinion, earning new recognition for their satirical flair.

Returning to Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, *Clueless*'s ultimate success is that "[it] is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing" (9). With its lovingly satirical, somewhat "plotless" (Sutherland 108) narration of a young heroine's journey toward love and self-recognition, *Clueless* captures the traits of Austen's novel writing that make her particularly adaptable and enduring—the recognizable plots of class struggle and misunderstanding, the romantic misadventures that end in happy notes, and the focus on family dynamics, to name a few. However, unlike other Austenian adaptations, it also embraces, maybe unknowingly, even the eccentric characters and "trashy tropes" (Sutherland 104) of her less decorated manuscript writings. There is no evidence that Heckerling read Austen's manuscripts in addition to *Emma*; neither is the purpose of this paper to prove that. Far more interesting, indeed, is to consider that her approach to adapting *Emma* proves a far less dormant presence of Austen's parodical voice, both within the novel's structure and in the contemporary debate around the author's image, which has greatly evolved since her heirs first publicized her identity.

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