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« Totally Clueless : Heckerling and Queer Sexuality in Austen's "Emma" »

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CHAPTER 6

TOTALLY CLUELESS

HECKERLING AND QUEER SEXUALITY
IN AUSTEN'S *EMMA*

Michael Eberle-Sinatra

Remaking, rewriting, "adaptation," reworking, "appropriation," conversion, mimicking...of earlier works into other media is an important feature of the current landscape.

—Wiltshire, 2

Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.

—Austen, 122

This chapter offers a new reading of the sexual politics that are at play in Jane Austen's 1816 novel *Emma* through the exploration of film director

Amy Heckerling's retelling of Austen's original story. Heckerling's 1995 film, *Clueless*, can be understood as a free translation of *Emma* which allows an interrogation of some of the novel's received readings, especially those related to its male characters. Following Ellis Hanson and Robert Lang in their studies of films and queer theory, I use the term "queer" as it refers to "a rejection of the compulsory heterosexual code of masculine men desiring feminine women" (Hanson, 4). I intend to revisit Austen's *Emma* and its issue of homosexuality¹ by questioning the performance of Frank Churchill in *Highbury* through Heckerling's interpretation of that character.²

The title of this chapter might seem provocative, given the critical debates that have raged unabated since 2000, when Jill Heydt-Stevenson made a highly convincing case for a more sexually charged Austen. The attacks on Heydt-Stevenson seemed all the more excessive because as far back as 1975, Alice Chandler had already insisted that it was "a truth universally acknowledged" that Jane Austen's novels are "very much about sex" (88). Jan S. Fergus, too, relied on an amusing anecdote about a "tweedy Englishman" to contend that "Jane Austen and sex" were hardly "mutually exclusive" subjects (66). Film adaptations, however, have greatly helped combat the still-prevalent notion that Austen's fictions merely embody good manners and rules for proper conduct.

Released in 1995 to both critical acclaim and unusual commercial success for a small-budget film, Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* offers a stimulating reading of class and gender issues in *Highbury/Beverly Hills* and an unconventional take on Frank Churchill's sexual identity. Douglas McGrath's 1996 film and the A&E 1996 television adaptation of *Emma* directed by Diarmuid Lawrence both depict with great insistence Churchill's heterosexuality, whereas *Clueless* differs quite significantly from these adaptations by depicting him as gay.

Transposing the characters and action of Austen's novel into a film that takes place in the late twentieth century makes possible alternate readings, for the director as well as for the audience. As Linda Hutcherson asserts, "[w]hatever the motive, from the adapter's perspective, adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a

double process of interpreting and then creating something new" (20). Projecting this novel of social mores from Austen's *Highbury* to 1990s Beverly Hills allows Heckerling to explore subtexts in a way that would be difficult in a period piece.³ Heckerling is free to notice subtler social clues in *Emma* and to explore them more fully in *Clueless*. Developing a queer reading of a novel in film often consists of making explicit a homosexual or bisexual subtext that may or may not be present in the original story. Heckerling's decision to transform the apparently heterosexual character Frank Churchill into a gay character, now named Christian Stovitz, in her film adaptation of Austen's novel invites readers of Austen's *Emma* to reconsider the character of the novel's Frank Churchill, particularly in light of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of "homosocial desire."

In Jane Austen's novel, the character of Frank Churchill constantly plays with words and manipulates the society around him while concealing his secret engagement with Jane Fairfax. The film version of this character remains the object of affection for the Emma character (renamed Cher in *Clueless*), and Christian, likewise socially problematic, embodies the figure of mystery, social class, and sensuality that Austen's Churchill represents in Emma's eyes. However, Heckerling transforms "straight" Frank Churchill into "gay" Christian, which serves to underscore Cher's "cluelessness," because she fails to recognize Christian's sexual preference and falls in love with him.⁴

Heckerling encourages the audience to smile at Cher's insensitivity to Christian's sexual orientation from the moment they first meet and he comments admiringly on her shoes. Heckerling then bombards the audience with one gay stereotype after another to exaggerate Cher's self-absorption and naiveté: Christian is reading William Burroughs's fictional memoir *Junky*, he is a great dancer, he dresses well, he knows and appreciates modern art, and, to quote Cher, "he had a thing for Tony Curtis." He is also shown dancing with another man briefly and chatting up a male bartender at a party, but Cher mistakes his obvious lack of interest in other girls as proof of his romantic attachment to her. One of the funniest scenes in *Clueless* occurs at Cher's house when she tries

to charm Christian. After he has admired Cher's father's art collection (showing again his knowledge of, and his sensitivity to, modern art) and declined her invitation for a late-night swim, Christian suggests that they watch one of the films he brought with him—*Some Like it Hot* and *Spartacus*. The next scene shows Cher and Christian lying on Cher's bed in front on a television set. While Tony Curtis as a slave in *Spartacus* speaks about "the children of my master to whom I taught the classics," Cher attempts unsuccessfully to seduce Christian. The irony of this scene is obviously lost on Cher, but most likely not on the audience, who recognizes the iconic status of *Spartacus* as a gay film, as well as Heckerling's own tongue-in-cheek nod to Austen's *Emma* in this reference to "the classics."

The following scene takes place the next day when Cher tells her friend about the evening with Christian and tries to find reasons to explain why nothing happened between them. Overhearing the conversation between Cher and Dionne, Tyron rather bluntly tells Cher that Christian is "a Cake Boy, a disco dancer, Oscar Wilde reader, Streisand ticket holder, friend of Dorothy, you know what I'm saying?" In case there was any room left for doubt (and Cher certainly wants to remain doubtful at first), Dionne clinches the argument by commenting that "[Christian] does like to shop, and the boy can dress." Although Heckerling includes an apparent alternative to the heterosexual norm with the character of Christian, he remains on some level the token gay man, who has artistic taste and a sense of fashion and who is allowed to shop happily with Cher but not to have a sexual relationship himself, although all of the other characters do. Ultimately, Christian's homosexuality is only one element of Heckerling's modernization of *Emma*, yet many viewers see it as the most radical departure from Austen's novel. Is it, in fact, really such a departure?

Heckerling's film invites readers of *Emma* to think more carefully about Frank Churchill's sexuality, the mystery and secrecy surrounding this character, and the relationship that exists between Knightley and Churchill in Austen's original novel. True to her source, Heckerling retains the spark of jealousy that triggers Josh, her Knightley character, to reconsider his feelings for Cher, just as Knightley recognizes his

sentimental attachment to Emma through his jealousy of Churchill. Tom Hoberg suggests, however, that "Christian is neutralized as Josh's romantic rival for Cher's affection because he is gay" (123). I would argue that through the character of Christian and his open homosexuality, Heckerling provides an alternative interpretation of Churchill's secrecy and his apparently trivial and even effeminate traits, such as insisting on going to London in order to get his hair cut⁵ and his musical abilities as a singer and dancer in a society where artistic inclinations are considered effeminate.⁶

Several critics have discussed Emma's attachment, and even attraction, to other female characters in the novel, including Mrs. Weston, then Harriet Smith, and finally Jane Fairfax. Some good articles have in fact been written about Emma's potential lesbianism and her unusual position of power as a wealthy, independent, single person who does not need to worry about money, unlike all of the other female characters in the novel.⁷ It is thus fair to state that Emma's position of power was commonly associated with men in her society at that time, and this is the first clue for a reconsideration of the gender politics in Austen's novel.

If one were to borrow René Girard's model of the erotic triangle, as described in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Emma would be positioned at the apex as the apparent object of desire for both Knightley and Churchill. Girard's insistence that the bond that links two rivals is as potent as the one linking the rivals to the beloved opens many directions for discussions of male relationships. Sedgwick has amply demonstrated this in her influential study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, where she expands on this triangular relationship to consider homosocial bonding that may verge on homosexual attraction but is rendered safe because of the presence of a woman in this configuration. The Girardian triangle is, however, slightly more complex than two heterosexual men lusting after a woman. Indeed, Knightley and Emma behave more like the men in this triangle in terms of their positions of authority and independence within their world and their interest in other women. Emma's slightly unusual social status is underscored when, for example, Knightley's brother, John, remarks, "You and I, Emma, will

venture to take the part of the poor husband. I, being a husband, and you not being a wife" (Austen, 62). As for Churchill, he chooses to conform to his aunt's wishes and thus, according to Knightley, does not behave like a man, because he shirks his other social duties in so sacrificing his independence of movement. It is thus tempting to reconfigure this Girardian triangle with Churchill as the feminine apex, or more precisely, to read the triangle no longer in terms of Knightley and Churchill gravitating toward Emma, but rather with Knightley gravitating toward Emma, Emma toward Churchill, and Churchill toward Knightley.

Perhaps because Austen's novels primarily focus on female characters rather than on male ones, the majority of criticism written about male characters reads them in relation to the females or in comparison with other males. But what about the relationships between male characters? Frank Churchill is important for Knightley because it is the latter's growing jealousy that motivates him to examine his feelings for Emma. Until the arrival of Churchill, Knightley's relationship to Emma was either paternalistic, given his seniority of sixteen years, or fraternal, given his connections through his brother's marriage to Emma's sister Isabella. Emma and Knightley are also aunt and uncle to five nieces and nephews. Overall, these familial relations, introduced early in the novel, heavily color the characters' and the readers' perceptions of their relationship. Yet, many critics have argued that the ultimate romantic relationship between Emma and Knightley appears to be inevitable because of the fact that their social class would not really allow them to marry anyone else in Highbury.

There has been a rather large amount of scholarship devoted to Austen's novels, including *Emma*, over the last fifty years. But no one, to my knowledge, has explored the underworld of Austen's novels, the diurnal and nocturnal activities that were quite current in England at that time for young men such as Frank Churchill. John Cleland's novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure; or Fanny Hill*—"that most licentious and inflaming book" as Boswell puts it (qtd. in Wimsatt, 81)—famously contains an exploration of the world of prostitution, but it also condemns what Fanny considers "unnatural practices," including sodomy and male

homosexuality.⁸ Scholars have debated the fluid gender identity of Austen's female characters, but what about her male characters? Do the overtly masculine, heterosexual male characters in her novels really think about nothing apart from their businesses, their social standing, and upholding the values of the heterosexual society they inhabit by marrying by the end of the story? How can one qualify their relationships to other male characters? As Robert K. Martin's work on Melville and nineteenth-century American male friendship shows, one must not always assume that male or female friendship "means" homosexuality, although one must not assume either that "friendship and sexuality are opposite ends of a pole" (126). I would argue that more work needs to be done on male friendships, or the apparent absence of such friendships, and male homosocial relationships in Jane Austen's novels.

Returning to Frank Churchill, I would suggest that the fact that he ends up marrying Jane Fairfax is not in itself a conclusive argument for his heterosexuality because pressures to conform to heterosexual norms were extremely high at the time. Austen's society frowned upon single men as well as marriages between people of different classes, as is illustrated in *Emma* by Churchill's reluctance to tell his wealthy aunt about his engagement to Jane Fairfax, who is poor and thus otherwise destined to become a governess. Though it was difficult to marry outside of one's given class, one's sexual preference remained in any case a nonissue. In late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, pressures from one's family and society meant that many young men who frequented "molly houses," the taverns and socializing places for men who were interested in other men throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, at one point or another in their lives had no choice but to marry.⁹ Thus, Churchill's marriage to Jane Fairfax could very well be an instance of a marriage of convenience that would rescue Fairfax from her life as governess and provide her with a wealth that is implied by Churchill's purchase of one of the most expensive pianofortes available at that time. That marriage would also allow Churchill to pursue his chosen homosexual lifestyle. In any case, the topic would never be discussed, and the absence of public recognition or even the vocabulary to describe

such behavior contributed to a silence that lasted famously until Oscar Wilde's trial, where the "love that dare not speak its name" became a topic of public knowledge and discussion. In fact, as Jeffrey Weeks's work on male prostitution demonstrates, there was a noticeable absence of judicial vocabulary and a misperception of the number of male prostitutes in England until the later half of the nineteenth century.

Discussing what remains unspoken in Austen's novel brings to mind Michel Foucault's comment that

there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things.... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (27)

Austen may have been a conservative, heterosexual woman, but she never married. Thus, she did not share the lifestyle she apparently promoted in her novels, but rather lived out her years dependant on her relatives. She was also well versed in Gothic literature, as her parody *Northanger Abbey* demonstrates, and the Gothic, as Sedgwick has convincingly argued,

was the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality, at a time when styles of homosexuality, and even its visibility and distinctness, were markers of division and tension between classes as much as between genders. (91)

An interpretative exploration of the kind I offer in this chapter is inconclusive by nature. Rather than draw a firm conclusion on the presence or absence of homosexuality in Austen's work, I want to suggest that the assumptions with which readers approach the sexuality of Austen's characters in her novels should be examined more carefully. Austen's *Emma* contains a number of social clues about its characters that could be read in quite a different light than the majority of criticism published so far would suggest, even including the queer-oriented readings that

are currently available. For instance, is Austen perhaps hinting at more than one possible reason for Churchill's use of Emma as a blind for his secret life? What about his insincerity and his callous public behavior toward Jane Fairfax? Is there any truth to his apparent disdainful and manipulative attitude toward women or in the fact that Knightley finds Churchill's behavior offensive because it is "unmanly"? Toward the end of volume 2, Mr. Woodhouse refers negatively to Churchill by saying "he is not quite the thing" (205), and later on he asks, "[C]ould he be queer?" (207). Mr. Woodhouse's description is more accurate than he realizes, both for a nineteenth-century reader who understands "queer" as meaning "fake"—thus reinforcing my discussion of Churchill's performance as a heterosexual man—and for a modern reader who interprets "queer" for its sexual connotations.

If Hollywood and its set of cultural values imposes a restrictive viewpoint of the sexuality of Austen's characters, Amy Heckerling's film, *Clueless*, suggests a number of possible avenues of inquiry encouraging more challenging approaches to *Emma*. Austen's novel is replete with sexual innuendos, as scholars have discussed with regard to the well-known "Kitty" charade and the lesbian undertones that are present in Emma's relationship to other women. Various critics have convincingly argued for Austen's awareness of the exchange of sexual favors for promotion in the army and the issue of sodomy in the navy. I hope that this chapter will contribute further to a discussion of the sexuality of Austen's male characters, particularly when they do not adhere exclusively to the heterosexual norm.

I also hope that this chapter has proven that, contrary to Virginia Woolf's distrust of the adaptation process, the alliance between cinema and literature is not always "unnatural" or "disastrous" to both forms (42). In fact, the symbiotic relationship that exists at present between film and literature, especially in the hearts and minds of twenty-first-century viewers and readers, deserves further exploration for new readings of canonical texts.

ENDNOTES

I want to thank Cara Lane for her useful comment on an earlier version of this chapter, as well as Jason Camlot and Alan Bewell for inviting me to Concordia University and the University of Toronto, respectively, to discuss my views of Austen and *Clueless* with their students and colleagues.

1. Throughout this chapter, I use the words "heterosexual," "gay," and "homosexual" for the sake of clarity, but I am of course aware of the apparent historical fallacy of using terms that were not in existence until the end of the nineteenth century, when, as Michel Foucault famously declared, the homosexual emerged as a "species" (43).
2. As Penny Gay suggests, Churchill "is never, in Emma's imagination or experience, divorced from his theatricality" (135). Gay discusses the theatricality of Emma's world at length in her study. She also notes that "[i]n so far as they are actors, Frank Churchill and Mr. Elton are effeminate, rather than admirable men" (129), thus reinforcing my reading of the possible undertone of Churchill's sexual politics in light of his anti-male behavior that remains a performance throughout the novel.
3. The Beverly Hills 90210 setting anticipates other teen-oriented shows and films such as *Sabrina* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Though Heckerling plays fast and loose with Christian's sexuality, she has a rather conservative take on 1990s girls' sexuality. Furthermore, even though Heckerling includes several black and Hispanic characters, the culture she depicts is dominantly white and upper class.
4. Roz Kaveney suggests as well that "Christian's sexuality is Heckerling's way of demonstrating that Cher is not seriously pursuing love so much as the social status of having a boyfriend, partly because, as we realize before she does, her heart is already taken by Josh" (118).
5. Readers find out eventually that Churchill actually went to London to purchase a pianoforte, but the true reason is not known for a while and thus allows for a reading of that character along the lines I suggest.
6. See, for instance, the scene in which Churchill sings a duet, first with Emma and then with Jane Fairfax, thus performing, in the words of Penny Gay, "an unmanly display of elegant accomplishment rather than action" (138).
7. See, among others, Heydt-Stevenson, Hudson, and Tuite.

8. The two-paragraph description of a homosexual encounter witnessed by Fanny was in fact removed from most eighteenth-century editions of Cleland's novel.
9. For a detailed discussion of "molly houses," see Bray, 102–103.