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Emma Woodhouse, Handsome, Clever, and Rich… and Bisexual?

– a study of attraction and impossible things in Jane Austen's *Emma*

Emma Woodhouse, stilig, klyftig, och rik… och bisexuell?
– En studie av attraktion och omöjliga saker i Jane Austens Emma

Natasha Jonsson

*Supervisor/*Handledare*: Jami Weinstein*
*Examiner/*Examinator*: Maria Strääf*

Linköping University
Linköpings universitet
SE-581 83 Linköping, Sweden
013-28 10 00, www.liu.se

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Introduction

"Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich" (Austen 3), and bisexual. Published in 1816, *Emma* by Jane Austen is one of her most beloved works. Since its release, there have been many discussions on the titular character's sexuality, especially because of her relationship with Harriet Smith. Most of these discussions argue that Emma is strictly homosexual, claiming that she has no attraction to men. There are others who take on a more heteronormative perspective, describing Emma's relationship with the women in Highbury as friendships rather than romantic relationships. Few, if any, see Emma's sexuality from both sides, finding her to be, as I will argue, bisexual.

The aim of this thesis is to explore Emma Woodhouse's attraction to both men *and* women, as well as to understand why most other critics have not considered the possibility that she might be bisexual. The reason for this, especially when considering a classic novel, is because bi-erasure is a very real problem – not only 100 years ago, but also today. It is not uncommon for critics to "queer" seemingly heterosexual characters from among the classics, it has even been done with Emma from *Emma*, as well as with Jane from *Jane Eyre*, among others. However, what can actually be quite unusual, is analyzing these characters from a bisexual perspective. So by shining a light on a character that I will argue is bisexual, I am hoping that future critics can analyze other characters from this perspective, taking into consideration *both* heterosexual and homosexual feelings and attractions, rather than containing the characters to either/or identity categories.

In this thesis, I will argue that Emma Woodhouse is, indeed, bisexual, as well as give reasons why many scholars have not come to the same conclusion. I will argue that those who have labeled her as either homosexual or heterosexual were neither right nor wrong, but simply overlooked the bigger picture. To do this, I will begin with a summary of the novel, followed by a brief definition of bisexuality, then explain bi-erasure and survey how bisexuality has been treated by other scholars. Next, there will be individual chapters exploring Emma's attraction towards both women and men. The last chapter of the central section will explore several reasons why Emma, even if she had wanted to, could not possibly have chosen to spend her life with a woman in the same way she was free to with a man. Lastly, I will summarize my findings and discuss how they all fit together.

A Summary of *Emma*

Emma is a novel built on misunderstandings. Misunderstandings of relationships and feelings, and, when it comes to Emma specifically, misunderstandings of what her position allows her to do. Her position is mistress of Hartfield, a position she has because her mother passed away when Emma was very young, her older sister, Isabella, is married and has already moved out, and her father is something of an introvert who does not take an interest in managing an estate or inviting people to dinner parties. Emma, however, does. She also takes an interest in matchmaking the women close to her. The novel starts with Miss Taylor, Emma and Isabella's old governess, getting married to Mr. Weston – turning her into *Mrs.* Weston – a match Emma credits to herself.

With Mrs. Weston gone to live with her new husband, Emma is left looking for a new companion to fill the void after her. She finds this new companion in Harriet Smith – a 17-year-old girl whose parentage is unknown – and it is with this relationship the misunderstandings begin. She starts by manipulating Harriet into declining a proposal from Mr. Martin, a farmer who Harriet clearly has feelings for, but according to Emma he is below her in social standing – even though this is unknown. Emma then proceeds to scheme a marriage between Harriet and Highbury's vicar, Mr. Elton, which, however, does not succeed. After the scheme falls apart, Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates's niece, arrives in Highbury after having been away for two years. Jane is the same age as Emma, and although everyone says they should get along, Emma dislikes her. This dislike diminishes throughout the novel, and by the end Emma wishes to mend their relationship.

Soon after Miss Fairfax's arrival, Mr. Weston's son, Frank Churchill, also makes a visit to Highbury. Emma takes an interest in Frank, and it seems he in her, and they proceed to spend most every day of his first visit to Highbury flirting with each other. When he eventually leaves for a time and then comes back, Emma comes to the conclusion that both of their feelings have diminished during their time apart, and she now wishes to see him and Harriet together. This also does not succeed, in part due to Frank Churchill having been secretly engaged to Jane Fairfax this whole time – an engagement that took place sometime during the years Jane was away from Highbury – and in part because Harriet was not infatuated with Frank the same way she was Mr. Elton. In fact, after the scheme with Mr. Elton failed, Harriet fell in love with Mr. Knightley, a very close friend to Emma, and a close friend Emma, upon hearing about Harriet's feelings, realizes *she* is actually in love with too. This leads to the downfall of Harriet and Emma's relationship as Mr. Knightley also has feelings for Emma. Ultimately, the novel ends with Harriet finally marrying Mr. Martin, Jane marrying Frank, and Emma marrying Mr. Knightley.

Bisexuality & Bi-erasure

According to the American Psychological Association "[t]he term 'bisexual' is used to describe a person who experiences emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to, or engages in romantic or sexual relationships with, more than one sex or gender" (2021). It is also important to note that this attraction does not have to be distributed equally among genders for the person to consider themselves bisexual. In fact, Martin S. Weinberg, Coling J. Williams, and Douglas W. Pryor noted that "[f]ew [bisexuals] were like the stereotype–equally attracted to both sexes" (7). It is, nonetheless, also important to understand not only how bisexuality is defined, but how it has been viewed by scholars.

Contrary to homosexuality, which has been extensively researched and understood to be a sexual identity since the late nineteenth century (Angelides 1), bisexuality was not considered to be one until the late 1960s (Angelides 6); but even since then it has continued to be a contested sexual identity. The fact that it was not named before the 1960s does not, however, mean that bisexuality did not exist before then. Steven Angelides believes the "*conceptual* possibility" of bisexuality as a sexuality "emerged at the same moment of homosexuality's invention, despite the fact that [the] ter[m] [was] not explicitly named and defined until some years later" (15-16). Perhaps because of the late appearance of the term, research on bisexuality, according to Angelides's 2001 *History of Bisexuality*, has been scarce. While Eva Cantarella wrote a "history of bisexuality in the ancient world," an account of bisexuality in the modern West can be hard to find (Angelides 12). Angelides claims that there has also been no real, extensive research on the subject of bisexuality before Marjorie Garber's *Vice Versa*, which was released in 1995 (2), and in other studies where bisexuality is mentioned, it is often as an "incidental by-product, aftereffect, or definitional outcome of the opposition of hetero/homosexuality" (7). Other times when bisexuality is mentioned, it has a tendency to be deemed as "a form of infantilism or immaturity, a transitional phase, a self-delusion or state of confusion, a personal and political cop-out, a panacea, a superficial fashion trend, a marketing tool, even a lie and a catachresis" (Angelides 1).

Angelides criticizes queer theorists and gay/lesbian historians for marginalizing and erasing bisexuality from their research, questioning how bisexuality, "hovering as the category does somewhere around the two poles of hetero/homosexuality," does not warrant a mention (7). According to Lee Edelman, it would seem one of the reasons for this marginalization and erasure is that that the "third term" bisexuality "more effectively reinforce[s] than disrupt[s]" the hetero/homo binaries (Edelman cited in Angelides 7), and thus bisexuality "is seen to offer little critical leverage

in deconstructions of the hetero/homo polarity" (Angelides 7). Angelides further argues that queer theory and gay/lesbian history simply "have not gone far enough" in their research, and that "it is around the question of bisexuality's relationship to figurations of sexual identity that both queer theory and gay/lesbian history have in some important ways fallen short" (9). Considering the ways in which homo- and heterosexuality have been defined, Angelides states that "bisexuality as an epistemological category is part of the *logical or axiomatic structure* of the hetero/homosexual dualism," that a person being able to say that they are "*either* heterosexual *or* homosexual implies the conceptual possibility of being *both* heterosexual *and* homosexual," i.e. being bisexual (15).

This, of course, is only one theorist's account, and there are certainly other studies of bisexuality apart from the one by Garber, as suggested by Angelides. For example, there is the aforementioned study by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor, published in 1995, where they try to make sense of the "riddle" that is bisexuality. Although, even they point out that, when they started their study ten years earlier, they could not find much written on bisexuality (4). In trying to figure out the "riddle," they found that "the majority of bisexuals established heterosexuality first in their lives" and that they did not label themselves as bisexual until later, when they had had their "first dual attractions." They also found that while it was easier for men to have sex with other men than to fall in love with them, women felt the opposite way, finding it easier to fall in love with other women than have sex with them (Weinberg et al. 7). It is important to note that most of the secondary sources used in this thesis were written before both Angelides' book and this study and, thus, were theorized in a similar landscape in which bisexuality, while researched, was not considered as often as homosexuality was. Of course, given that these works are at least 20 years old, there have been quite a few studies on the subject of bisexuality written since them.

What remains interesting about bisexuality is that even in newer studies, there are still discussions of the widespread problem of bi-erasure and how bisexuality still is not seen to be as valid a sexuality as homo- and heterosexuality. Lisbeth A. Berbary and Coco Guzman (2017) argue that, although "the number of bisexual individuals may be growing, many still lack community support and validation," adding that gay and lesbian organizations in North America had received funding of 487 million dollars for research from 1970 to 2010, while bisexual organizations had only received 84,000 dollars in the same period (479). What this means is that even if more people wanted to research bisexuality, they would have had a much harder time getting funded. In their article, Berbary and Guzman also highlight what bisexual erasure is and how it is reinforced. They describe it as "the active social and cultural dismissal of bisexuality by both gay and straight

discourses of sexuality." They explain that this is reinforced by "common misconceptions about bisexuality:" as being a transition from straight to gay or lesbian, as impossible given the misconception that one's sexual identity is based on "one's current partner, not on one's potential for partners," and the view that bisexuals are inherently promiscuous or unfaithful, and the list continues (478).

In short, despite the fact that bisexuality has been around for a long time, it has been marginalized and erased. And while there are several studies on bisexuality, funding can be scarce compared to those on homosexuality, meaning there is less help out there to justify bisexuality as an established sexuality. Given that there have only been a few studies on the history of bisexuality after the ancient world, it can be concluded that there were inadequate accounts during the time of *Emma*'s publication. With this in mind, let us move to the analysis of Emma Woodhouse's bisexuality, and why a majority of critics may have overlooked it.

Emma's attraction to women

Emma is attracted to at least three women in *Emma*: Harriet Smith, Jane Fairfax, and Miss Taylor/ Mrs. Weston. While the relationships are different, especially comparing that to Jane Fairfax with both Harriet and Mrs. Weston, there is no denying Emma's attraction to these women, as will be made clear in this chapter.

Harriet

At the beginning of the novel, it is made clear that Emma has been interested in Harriet Smith for a long time; though not for her brains and the possibility for insightful conversation, as she mentions that Harriet is "not clever" (19), but rather "on account of her beauty" (Austen 16). It is clear Emma's primary attraction to Harriet is physical – but it is also clear that it *is* an attraction and not a casual appreciation of beauty. Harriet's "soft blue eyes" are frequently mentioned, and Emma has a tendency to get lost in them (Austen 17). Mark Fulk strengthens the argument by stating that Emma "like a lover … loses track of time spent in Harriet's presence" (253). Clearly, it is unlikely someone would get lost in the eyes of a friend, and much less be able to tell whether they are soft or hard, unless that friendship is developing into something more. One could argue that Emma and Harriet did not even start out as friends, but as love interests, as Emma's interest in Harriet is based on her physical appearance, which seldom is a sign that the relationship is merely a friendship.

Similar to Fulk's argument, Susan Korba claims that Emma often speaks from a "male" perspective, *especially* when it comes to Harriet (149). For example, Emma at one point states that Harriet is "exactly the something her home required" (Austen 19), which Korba argues is "of a traditionally proprietorial male attitude and more appropriate to a successful young man deciding the time is right to acquire a wife" (149). The fact that Emma does not mention that Harriet is what her home needs to anyone but herself implies that, even though Emma lived during a time when a woman did not have the power to choose her partner (of any sex) and, thus, lacks the power to act on it, there is a clear attraction to, or desire for, Harriet. Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin notes that Emma is the most independent of Austen's heroines – that, as an unmarried woman and mistress of Hartfield, she has more power than she would if she were to marry a man (418). Perhaps the fact that she is an independent, unmarried woman is exactly what makes Emma allow herself to think these "manly" thoughts in the first place. If she is intent on not marrying a man (for the time being), why not step into the shoes of one and enjoy the power that brings?

Another point that speaks for Emma's attraction is the handshake she and Harriet share after their first meeting (Austen 18), which at the time was unusual and "only permitted after a long acquaintance" (Austen 375). This implies that Emma is ready to skip the small talk, she knows what she wants, and that is Harriet. The fact that she wants to touch Harriet as soon as possible also suggests that their relationship is more than friendship, as one often wants to touch one's lover, especially when the relationship is new. Their relationship even deepens to a point where Harriet spends more than half her time at Hartfield and eventually gets her own room (Austen 43). Even Mr. Knightley, the person who perhaps knows Emma and her ways the best, says bluntly that Emma is infatuated with Harriet. While the word "infatuation" could be used to mean intense interest, it is hard to ignore the romantic meaning of the word. Knightley adds that this infatuation, whether romantic or not, "blinds [Emma]" to things such as Harriet's social standing (Austen 47). This comment is in relation to Emma gloating about Harriet refusing Mr. Martin's proposal, which indicates the more obsessive, and maybe even toxic, elements of her attraction.

From Emma's perspective, her actions most likely come from a place of love, even if they keep Harriet from marrying a man that truly loves and appreciates her. While Emma believes keeping Harriet from the Martin family is for Harriet's own good – at one point calling Harriet's affection towards the Martins a "danger" and that if "she were not taken care of, she might be required to sink herself forever" (Austen 20) – it is clear that there is also, and most prominently, a selfish reason. First, there is Emma's reaction to Harriet's refusal of Mr. Martin's (first) proposal: Emma says she is happy about the refusal both because she would not have been able to see Harriet anymore if she were to marry Mr. Martin, given his family's social standing, and because she now is "secure of [Harriet] forever" (Austen 41). She later develops a scheme concerning a marriage between Mr. Elton (who has a much more acceptable social standing) and Harriet. However, when confronted and told by Mr. Knightley that this is a bad idea, Emma simply answers that she is *not* interested in marrying Harriet off just yet, but that "at present I only want to keep Harriet to myself" (Austen 51). This statement may be part lie and part truth, as Emma does indeed encourage Harriet to think of Mr. Elton as an eligible husband, but the aforementioned attraction and interest in Harriet speaks to Emma's wish to keep her to herself for as long as possible. Emma's encouraging of Harriet to refuse Mr. Martin especially strengthens this point, as the proposal came not long into the two women's relationship.

Soon, the relationship between Emma and Harriet grows beyond just attraction and Emma truly wishes the best for Harriet, even though she often stumbles on her way to get it. The biggest

hurdle, as it quite severely hurts Harriet's feelings, is the misunderstanding with Mr. Elton. While Emma truly believes Elton is in love with Harriet, it turns out he was interested in Emma all along, and had only been polite to Harriet in an effort to look good in Emma's eyes (Austen 101-2). As Harriet was not present during this exchange between Emma and Mr. Elton, it falls to Emma to explain the misunderstanding, which kept Emma from being "perfectly at ease" before it was done, even though she felt she had every other reason to be (Austen 108). And of course she could not feel at ease even when everything else was in perfect harmony, since the anxiety of knowing she is about to hurt a person she holds dear, and that she is in part to blame for that pain, is quite a lot to bear. When the time comes for Emma to tell Harriet of her blunder, "the sight of Harriet's tears made [Emma] think that she would never be in charity with herself again" (Austen 109). As Emma was the person who encouraged the match, she also feels responsible for the hurt it caused Harriet. The fact that she will never be in charity with *herself* again, that Emma cannot forgive *herself* for the hurt she caused Harriet, suggests that hurting Harriet is something she very much wants to avoid, that doing such a thing, to Emma, is not only a betrayal to the person she loves, but to herself. Emma even asks Harriet to please stop dwelling on the occurrence with Mr. Elton after they find out he is getting married and old wounds reopen, saying that it keeps reminding her of her mistake in their match. However, she qualifies this request, saying that her pain "is a very secondary consideration" and that she most of all wants Harriet "to save [herself] from greater pain" by constantly thinking about it (Austen 205). It is clear in the novel that Emma at times twists situations in her favor by pretending it is for someone else's good – keeping Harriet from marrying Mr. Martin, for example – but keeping Harriet from getting hurt is something Emma genuinely cares about and wants to avoid. This can be seen even after their relationship begins to collapse as a result of Emma's discovery that Harriet has feelings for Mr. Knightley, but that he has feelings for Emma and Emma for him (Austen 313 & 331). Emma's thoughts on the collapse of her relationship with Harriet reads like a classic "bad breakup":

> Emma grieved that she could not be more openly just to one important service which [Knightley's] better sense would have rendered her, to the advice which would have saved her from the worst of all her womanly follies – her willful intimacy with Harriet Smith – but it was too tender a subject. She could not enter on it. This, on his side, might merely proceed from her not being thought of, but Emma was rather inclined to attribute it to delicacy, and a suspicion, from some appearances, that their friendship were declining. She was aware herself that, parting under any other circumstances, they certainly should have corresponded more, and that her intelligence would not have rested, as it now almost wholly did, on Isabella's letters. He might observe that it was so. The pain of being obliged to

practice concealment towards him was very little inferior to the pain of having made Harriet unhappy. (Austen 356-7)

Considering the last sentence of the quote, it is apparent that, as mentioned above, hurting Harriet is one of the worst things imaginable to Emma. This is clear, as lying (or concealing something) from her future husband is not as painful to Emma as having hurt Harriet, a person whose presence is slowly slipping away from her life. Despite this, Emma still wishes to make the split as pain free as possible, especially for Harriet. Perhaps this is because Emma's feelings have not completely faded, perhaps it is because, even though she loves Knightley, she still loves and respects Harriet enough to not want to hurt her. Regarding the ways in which this can be read as a "bad breakup:" first, Emma calls her intimacy with Harriet "the worst of all her womanly follies" which one would not say if one simply had a falling out with a close friend. Essentially, wishing one had never met the person one had a relationship with is evidence that the relationship was romantic, not simply friendship. Second, Emma calls the subject of Harriet "too tender" to be discussed, a result of her belief that their friendship is collapsing. Of course, this could also be seen as her not wanting to speak of it because it is not only the friendship but also their romantic relationship that is in decline. Discussing it with Mr. Knightley is akin to discussing one's ex-partner with one's new significant other, which is generally not something one happily does.

Another reason Harriet and Emma's declining relationship reads more like a romantic breakup than one between friends, can be found a little earlier when Emma regrets not "having sought a closer acquaintance with [Jane Fairfax]," arriving at the conclusion that if she "had found a friend [in Jane Fairfax] instead of in Harriet Smith," as Mr. Knightley wished and suggested, Emma "must, in all probability, have been spared from every pain which pressed on her now" (Austen 323-4). Mr. Knightley always told Emma that she should not pursue Harriet instead of Jane, but since Emma was intrigued by Harriet's appearance and, perhaps later, her submissive manner, she ignored him. Ultimately, Emma realizes too late that Mr. Knightley was right, wishing she had pursued the person who was clearly much better for her but perhaps did not awaken as much curiosity; in other words, she did not make the safer choice, but the most exciting one.

Mrs. Weston

Another significant relationship for Emma is that with Mrs. Weston. Quite like she later tries to do with Harriet, Emma is responsible for making the match between then Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. However, unlike her relationship with Harriet, Emma and Mrs. Weston's relationship is one more intellectual than of the physical. Mrs. Weston's beauty is seldom mentioned, instead the focus is their deep understanding of one another. There is "not anyone to whom [Emma] related with such conviction of being listened to and understood" than Mrs. Weston (Austen 91), and "Mrs Weston would speak to her with a degree of unreserve which she would not hazard with Isabella" (95). This speaks not only to how close Emma feels to Mrs. Weston, but also to the ways in which the feeling is mutual. Except for their mutual closeness, it is also clear that, even after having shifted her attention to Harriet, Emma still feels a great comfort around Mrs. Weston, a comfort that could only be felt by a person one loves: "the very sight of Mrs Weston, her smile, her touch, her voice was grateful to Emma" (Austen 91).

Therefore, the sadness Emma feels at losing Mrs. Weston to marriage is no surprise. Even though Emma had "always wished and promoted the match … [t]he want for Miss Taylor would be felt every hour of every day" (Austen 4). A friend getting married would not be missed "every hour of every day" – but a lover from a relationship as long and intimate as that between Miss Taylor and Emma certainly would. Emma even wears black on Miss Taylor's wedding day, signifying a sort of mourning or loss, in addition to sighing over "impossible things" (Austen 5), a phrase, according to Fulk "that suggests both the loss of companionship and the impossibility of articulating female-female desire" (252). What else could the "impossible things" be than that Emma wishes she were the one in *Mr*. Weston's place at the wedding? Keeping Mrs. Weston as Miss Taylor would not have been impossible – she simply did not have to introduce Mr. Weston to her – but turning Miss Taylor into Mrs. Woodhouse indeed would be.

Jane Fairfax

Lastly, among the women in the novel, it is important to consider the complicated relationship between Emma and Jane Fairfax. While Emma clearly feels an attraction towards Jane, she does not hold her in the same regard as Harriet or Mrs. Weston for a large portion of the novel. In fact, what Emma feels towards Jane at the beginning of the novel can best be described as dislike. When visiting Miss Bates with Harriet one morning, Emma feigns interest in a letter from Jane that Miss Bates will not stop talking about, making the proper polite remarks but to herself referring to them

as “silly compliment[s]” (Austen 119-20). When she and Harriet leave Miss Bates, Emma rejoices in the fact that “though she had in fact heard the whole substance of Jane Fairfax’s letter, she had been able to escape the letter itself” (123), demonstrating Emma’s dislike of Jane. Further, dislike of Jane is later stated more explicitly, and it is added that the reason “she did not like Jane Fairfax might be a difficult question to answer” (126).

Nicholas Preus suggests that Emma’s dislike of Jane stems from her jealousy at Jane being “a more sexually aware and experienced woman” than she (205). In his article, he discusses Emma living out her sexual fantasies through other women, specifically when she attempts to set Harriet up with both Mr. Elton and Mr. Frank Churchill (200). As stated, however, it is clear that Emma’s actions towards Harriet are based on her attraction to Harriet rather than Emma being uncomfortable in her own sexuality. Conversely, there may also be another explanation for Emma’s dislike of Jane. In the same article, Preus mentions how Jan S. Fergus argues for an “implicit sexuality behind flirtation, infatuation, and *antagonism* in the relationships of characters in the novels [of Jane Austen]” (204, italics added). With this in mind, the antagonism between Jane Fairfax and Emma could be seen as something closer to sexual tension rather than jealousy of the former’s sexual experience. Korba even suggests that their relationship is “the principal erotic relationship within the novel” (142). While it is unclear whether their relationship is the *principal* one – perhaps that spot should be reserved for Harriet – there is no denying that it is an attraction that Emma feels towards Jane Fairfax, one that makes Emma forget her dislike for Jane when she sees her again after two years. Jane is described through Emma’s eyes as “remarkably elegant,” with a “pretty height,” and she notes that there “was more beauty in them [Jane’s features] altogether than she had remembered.” Thus, Emma determines that “she would dislike [Jane] no longer,” given that in consideration of Jane’s “history, … situation, *as well as her beauty* … it seemed impossible to feel anything but compassion and respect” (127, italics added). Emma, blinded by Jane’s beauty, forgets that she dislikes her and is even ready to *excuse* her problems with Jane on account of her beauty. Might this not be because her attraction *to* Jane makes Emma want to keep her in her life? After an evening at Hartfield, however, when the shock of her beauty has subsided, “Jane’s offense rose again” and Emma promptly returns to disliking her for most of her stay in Highbury.

By the end of the novel, Emma has completely changed her stance on Jane, going back to and even exceeding the admiration she felt on their first meeting. When going to see Jane after learning of her and Frank Churchill’s engagement “Emma had never seen [Jane] look so well, so

lovely, so engaging," and when seeing her blush at something Emma said, she found that look on her "infinitely more becoming of her than all the elegance of her usual composure" (348). Perhaps the blush on Jane's cheeks was infinitely more becoming because Emma was the one who put it there. Regarding Jane's engagement to Frank, Korba mentions Emma's bewilderment at learning of it, and states that "[s]ince we know that Emma has no real feelings for Frank, her response would be distinctly out of proportion, unless we assume that it is the thought of Jane's attachment that so upsets her" (156). While Emma's feelings about Frank will be discussed below, it is entirely possible that Emma would feel the surprise she did upon learning of the engagement, since, at this point of the novel, she has turned her dislike towards Jane to adoration again. To learn that Jane is no longer available at the moment that she is ready to have some kind of relationship with her – perhaps similar to the ones she had with Mrs. Weston and Harriet – Emma is no longer able to choose when to lose her (this will be unpacked below) but has lost her already. Learning this would certainly warrant a response of bewilderment.

Why arrange marriages?

One may ask, that if Emma is so in love or attracted to these women – why does she arrange marriages for two of them? Fulk describes Emma's arrangement of marriages as a way to dominate both Harriet and Mrs. Weston, explaining that Emma choosing "the spouse for her woman" is her taking "the sole path of control open to her, the arranging of the marital and sexual lives of other women in Highbury" (Fulk 253). Korba builds on this point, saying that Emma takes an "erotic sort of pleasure in exercising mastery, without transgressing the sexual norms of her society or acknowledging the possibility of such desire" (146). While both analyses are valid, one can also see Emma's matchmaking not as a form of sexual domination, but simply as a way to show her love. After the blunder with Harriet and Mr. Elton, Emma vows to stop matchmaking (something she does *not* do), and instead proclaims that "[h]er second duty now, inferior only to her father's claims, was to promote Harriet's comfort and endeavor to prove her own affection in some better method than by matchmaking" (Austen 110). This demonstrates that before this moment, Emma saw matchmaking as her way of proving *affection* to the women she loves, rather than as a source of sexual pleasure. Of course she arranges marriages for the women in her life, as she cannot possibly be a partner to either of them, which speaks to her doing this as a way of making it possible for her, under social rules, to continue seeing them. Emma wholly rejects Mr. Martin for Harriet because

she would not have been able to see her as often given Mr. Martin's social standing — but Mr. Elton or Mr. Frank Churchill are fine candidates, as they are both of acceptable status.

Emma's attraction to men

Korba argues that Emma's "relationships with the male characters in the novel–Mr. Knightley, Frank Churchill, and even Mr. Elton–serve to demonstrate Emma's marked sexual indifference to men" (141). While it is clear that there is no attraction to be found towards Mr. Elton, the same cannot be said for the other two.

Mr. Frank Churchill

Korba claims that "Emma seems to be impervious to the idea of being attractive/attracted to members of the opposite sex" (150), considering her surprise at Mr. Elton's proposal and the fact that he did not have feelings for Harriet. To Korba, this is evidence that Emma is lesbian. However, Korba seems to ignore other evidence that demonstrates Emma's ability to believe Frank Churchill is attracted to, and even is in love with, her. Of course, this is before she decides that she is no longer in love with him and, as her plan with Mr. Elton failed, wants to see him match with Harriet.

There are several examples that show that Emma believes Frank has feelings for her. The most clear instance occurs right before Frank leaves Highbury after his first visit, where Emma believes he is about to declare his love for her after two weeks of flirting: "He stopped again, rose again, and seemed quite embarrassed. He was more in love with her than Emma had supposed – and who can say how it might have ended, if his father had not made his appearance?" (200). What the reader later learns *would have* happened if Mr. Weston had not appeared, is that Frank would have admitted to his secret engagement with Jane Fairfax (337), although Emma misread the situation as the moment where Frank Churchill would declare his love to her (201). Emma *believing* that he would declare his love certainly counters Korba's claim that Emma could not perceive someone of the opposite sex being attracted to, or having feelings for, her.

However, Emma believing someone of the opposite sex is attracted to and has feelings for her is not enough to prove that she feels the same way towards *them*. What *does* illustrate this, is that after this meeting with Frank, Emma comes to the conclusion that "she *must* be a little in love with him" (201). That Emma explicitly thinks that she must be in love with Frank speaks for itself, but it is the feelings she gets at Frank's departure that makes the statement believable: "[Frank] was gone, and Emma felt so sorry to part, and foresaw so great a loss to their little society from his absence as to begin to be afraid of being too sorry, and feeling it too much" (200). First, she is sorry they should part, speaking to her enjoying spending time with him and wanting to do so more – even though she has spent every day with him since his arrival in Highbury. Second, Frank's

leaving is seen to Emma as not just a loss to herself, but to the entire Highbury community, which speaks to her keeping him in quite high regard at the time of his departure, as apparently it would affect everyone, not just herself. Her feelings dwindle after being apart from Frank for a while and she eventually comes to the conclusion that he, too, was less in love with her as a result of the distance. However, "caution … would be necessary" as she "did not mean to have her own affections entangled *again*" (241, italics added). To have to be *cautious* as to not fall in love with someone again, is testament that Emma is indeed not lesbian, as a lesbian woman would not be in danger of falling in love with a man. Moreover, she finds Frank to be "a *very* handsome man" (145), where the italicized "very" does hint at an attraction and not merely an appreciation of his appearance. Using the word "very" without italics, Austen could be seen to have been reflecting Emma's more objective judgement of Frank's appearance, while using italics, "*very"* implies quite a bit more.

Later in the novel, when Emma starts to understand her feelings for Mr. Knightley, she concludes that "she had never really cared for Frank Churchill at all," but had only deluded herself that she did, being "totally ignorant of her own heart" (317). Referenced in Korba's article, D. A. Miller argues this is something of a "self-revision" where she "block[s] out any previous erotic attachment" in favor of the attachment that will see her married. Korba, of course, argues that the self-revision is that of her erotic relationship with Jane, and not at all that with Frank (157). As mentioned, it is clear that Emma had feelings for Frank, thus, Miller's version of the self-revision related to her feelings towards Frank, not only those related to Jane, are also true of Emma. In fact, as this thesis aims to argue, such a self-revision both of her feelings towards Jane and Frank, can be true of Emma given that this thesis argues in favor of Emma as bisexual, not lesbian or heterosexual.

Mr. Knightley

Regarding Mr. Knightley, Korba claims that Emma only marries him because Jane Fairfax is not available: "Jane's ultimate … inaccessibility … leads Emma back to Mr. Knightley" (142). She justifies this by pointing out that Emma's realization that she must marry no one but Knightley "directly follows the scene in which she is informed of Jane's elopement with Frank" (157). However, there is much more that leads Emma to Mr. Knightley than the fact that Jane Fairfax is no longer available.

When wondering when her affection for Mr. Knightley began, Emma realizes that "there never had been a time when she did not consider Mr Knightley as infinitely superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear" (317). One could see this as part of the "self-revision" mentioned earlier, where Emma realizes Knightley is the one she is going to marry so *of course* he was *always* the one she held in highest regard. What speaks for her realization not being a self-revision is the fact that there is proof that Knightley has indeed always been kept in Emma's highest regard. When Mr. Knightley lends his carriage to Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax for the Coles's dinner, Emma says to Mrs. Weston that "I know no man more likely than Mr Knightley to do the sort of thing – to do anything really good-natured, useful, considerate or benevolent" (171). Additionally, when speaking of Mr. Knightley to Harriet early on in the novel Emma describes him as "remarkably good" telling her that she "might not see one in a hundred, with *gentleman* so plainly written as in Mr Knightley" (24-5). During the same conversation, she tries to put Mr. Elton on a pedestal for Harriet to become more interested in him than Mr. Martin, who would take Harriet away from her. In doing this, she compares Mr. Elton's manner with Mr. Knightley's, and makes a compliment even of what she describes as a flaw in Knightley, saying that his "downright, decided, commanding sort of manner – though it suits *him* very well …" would not be "sufferable" if "any young man were to set about copying him" (25-6). Here, Emma forgives Mr. Knightley for what she admits would be insufferable behavior in anyone else, most likely *because* of the regard she has for him. In other words, to Emma, Mr. Knightley's good qualities outweigh his bad ones, perhaps even adding to his likability.

Furthermore, Emma's feelings for Mr. Knightley shine through in her jealousy at the thought of any other woman taking him for herself, even before she realizes that *she* is the one that wants him. One example of this is at the Coles's dinner, where Mrs. Weston tells Emma she believes she has found a match between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Knightley, to which Emma replies that he cannot marry Jane "of all women" and how "she could not at all endure the idea of Jane Fairfax at Donwell Abbey" (172 & 174-5). The thought of Jane as mistress of Mr. Knightley's estate also fills Emma with an "alarm" for her nephew's interests in the property, as it would no longer go to him after Mr. Knightley's death if he were to marry Jane (171) – a worry that conveniently goes away once Emma herself has secured Knightley as her husband (346). One could argue that this jealousy stems from Emma wanting *Jane* and not Knightley, which would be valid were it not for Emma's reaction to learning Harriet *also* had an interest in Mr. Knightley. First, there is the "great terror" Emma felt at even the *prospect* of Harriet telling her the person she is in love

with is Knightley (311), which develops into hurt when it became clear it was true, and that the "evil … dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of return" (313). For the first time, Emma started to think that Harriet was vain for not understanding her inferior position in relation to Mr. Knightley (while also admitting to herself that she was somewhat to blame, as she had encouraged Harriet to marry above her station) (318). Additionally, it is the first time Emma hopes Harriet will be left disappointed and not get the man (320). All of this indicates that, while Emma's feelings for Harriet were strong, those for Knightley were stronger; and while Emma wants the best for those she loves, what they want evidently cannot compete with what it is *she* wants.

Lastly it is important to note that Emma and Mr. Knightley in many respects see each other as equals, and that this ultimately is (one of) the reasons they end up together – another, of course, being that Emma could not possibly have ended up with a woman even if she had wanted to, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Eugene Goodheart puts it best when he states that Emma and Mr. Knightley's marriage is "founded on friendship and mutual respect" (592), which is key given that no other relationship in her life is truly is like this one – especially if the theory is that she wanted to dominate Harriet and Mrs. Weston rather than be their equals. The first example in the novel that demonstrates Emma and Mr. Knightley's mutual respect occurs when it is stated that Mr. Knightley "in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse" (7). It speaks to a kind of intimacy and respect to be able to see the flaws in a person and yet still enjoy their company. This is exactly what Mr. Knightley does and, as mentioned, Emma also sees the flaws in Knightley yet continues to hold him in high regard.

Another important aspect of their relationship is that Knightley is the only person to truly criticize Emma – and not only is he the only person she *allows to*, she also listens to him when he does. The best example of this is when Emma is at Box Hill with a party from Highbury and she cannot resist making a snarky comment about Miss Bates talking too much without having anything interesting to say (284). This, of course, lowers the mood of the party, and Knightley talks to Emma privately – yet another sign of respect, as he could have easily criticized Emma in front of the entire party – saying that he "must once more speak to [her] as [he] ha[s] been used to," explaining how badly she has behaved in treating Miss Bates like she did. While Emma tries to brush it off and counters that she did not, in fact, say anything that was not true (288), Knightley's words do resonate with her, leading to self-reflection where she comes to understand the severity of her actions, and deciding to go to the Bates's the next morning to atone for her bad behavior (289-90).

Whether conscious or not, Mr. Knightley has made Emma want to be a better person, a common trait in people one holds dear.

Mr. Knightley criticizing Emma at Box Hill is not the first time he has spoken to Emma in such a manner, as he makes sure to point out. For example, early in the novel, he voices his disagreement about Emma's intimacy with Harriet, making her slightly uncomfortable, as she has a "habitual respect for his judgement" and very much wishes they would be in agreement instead (50). While she does not always listen to his criticism, in this case she continues as she always has, she accepts the criticism and tries to make peace afterwards (Austen 76). Compare this to Emma letting her relationship with Harriet fade out because they are both in love with Mr. Knightley. Perhaps Emma always tries to repair her relationship with Knightley, even after their many disagreements, because of the aforementioned mutual respect and the fact that they see each other as equals.

Why Emma could not choose a woman even if she wanted to

While Ruth Perry reads *Emma* with a heteronormative lens and speaks about the *friendship* rather than *love* or *attraction* between Emma and her female counterparts, her argument that the marriage plot prohibits female friendships (or relationships of any kind, if analyzed with a wider lens) is relevant for explaining why Emma could not have ended up in a romantic relationship with Harriet, Mrs. Weston, or Jane Fairfax. The marriage plot is essentially the need for the women in romance novels to get married by the end, to justify "a woman's submission to the authority of a *husband*" (Perry 190, italics added). Perry plainly writes that "[b]oth Emma … and Austen herself are restricted by the novel's standard romantic script" (192), meaning that Emma was always destined to get married, and to a man, because the marriage plot is, by definition, heteronormative.

There is another reason Emma and Knightley were seemingly destined to end up together: their social status. Michael Eberle-Sinatra states that "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" (128). Mark Parker further argues that Austen, while noticing and commenting on "the relational structure of class," also "fully accept[s] it" (346). While she pushes the boundaries of the prescribed class structure to some degree with Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, as they are from different social classes, it would have been wholly different to have the main character take such a bold step. Fowls Tobin discusses how Emma threatens "her society's structure … by adopting Harriet Smith as her friend… and trying to marry Harriet off to Mr. Elton and then to Frank Churchill" (422). Therefore, if Emma and Frank have nearly the same social standing, and if a relationship between Harriet and these men above her station would be inappropriate, so would a relationship between Emma and Harriet – or Mrs. Weston, or Jane Fairfax – since all these women are below Emma in social class.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there is the issue of sexuality and what was and was not permitted in the 1800s. It is perhaps this issue primarily that keeps Emma from spending her life with any one of the women she cherishes. Lisa Moore discusses "romantic friendships" between women and how some claim that "romantic friendships were widely approved of and idealized and therefore were never conceived of as sexual, even by romantic friends themselves." Moore disagrees, stating that such views of romantic friendships "draw very partially on the evidence of how these relationships were viewed by contemporaries" and how it "obscure[s] the wariness and even *prohibition* that sometimes surrounded women's friendships" (501, italics added). She cites as evidence for this claim the 1811 case of Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods, who were on trial for

“indecent and criminal practices” after a student caught them in bed together. While the case was decided in favor of the accused women “by the margin of one vote”, it was not because lesbian relationships were legal and considered “decent,” rather it was because they did not have enough evidence to prove that Miss Woods and Pirie’s affections for each other exceeded that of “ordinary female friendship.” The court also had a hard time conceiving of the possibility that women could perform sexual acts without the presence of a man (513-14). In addition to this case, Moore also discusses Anne Lister, a lesbian woman who lived in the 1800’s and wrote detailed journals, in code, about her sexual encounters with women (511). This presents the possibility that Austen, alive during the same era, also wrote about Emma’s relationship with the women in her life in code so as to not be scandalized. Thus, to use Fulk’s words “Could it have been possible to write in the 1810s an openly lesbian [or bisexual] novel? … The answer is apparently no” (251).

Conclusion

In this thesis I set out to show that it would be more interesting to interpret Emma Woodhouse as bisexual, and to find an explanation for why so few critics have interpreted her that way, choosing instead to put her into the box of either heterosexual or homosexual. The reasons other scholars fail to read Emma as bisexual depends on several factors. The first is that bisexuality has not been an acknowledged sexuality for very long; it was recognized as a sexual identity in the 1960s, which in context makes it quite recent. The second is that bisexuality has not been researched to the same extent as homosexuality, which is partly due to research funding being unevenly distributed. Historical research on bisexuality around the time *Emma* was published is also lacking, although, as mentioned, bisexuality not having a name before the 1960's does not mean it did not exist before then. Another reason, perhaps, that bisexuality has not been as thoroughly researched as it should, is that scholars have not seen bisexuality as a legitimate sexuality in its own right, calling it a transition from heterosexual to homosexual, amongst other things. This is a form of bi-erasure, which was and still is a problem in 2021.

So is it possible that Emma could be interpreted as bisexual? In this thesis, I have argued that not only can she be, but also that she must be in order that we understand her character fully. In short, bisexuality is described as feeling attraction towards two or more genders. As I have shown, there is ample evidence of Emma's attraction to both men and women. While it is easy to demonstrate her attraction to women, it is her attraction to men that is most often disputed by theorists writing from a queer perspective. It is not clear why, since the attraction she feels towards women is the same as she expresses for men. There are two parts of Emma's attraction towards people: that based on appearance and that expressing a deeper connection. With Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill (and Harriet Smith, at least at first), the attraction has mostly to do with their appearance, whereas a deeper connection can be found between Emma and Mrs. Weston, and later Harriet, in addition to Mr. Knightley, who she ultimately marries.

The physical attractions are easy to spot. There was the fact that Emma first and foremost was interested in Harriet Smith because of her beauty, and nothing else, and that she often would get lost in her "soft blue eyes" and thus lose track of time (Austen 17), which is not typical of friendship. With Jane Fairfax, the attraction would lapse Emma's judgement, making her question her dislike for Jane when encountering her beauty again after several years. Her dislike comes back after spending some time with Jane, but the fact that she questions it simply because she finds Jane attractive gives the impression that there is something more behind her willingness to, even for a

moment, look past her dislike for a chance to have Jane Fairfax in her life. Emma's attraction to Frank Churchill is clear when she describes him as a "*very* handsome man," the italicized *very*, as mentioned, indicates an attraction and not just an objective appreciation. Furthermore, she also found herself to be in love with him at one point, and when the feelings dimmed she was still actively cautious of them flaring up again, which would be unnecessary if she felt no attraction, physical or romantic, towards men whatsoever. There is the counterargument that Emma is not attracted to men because she does not feel any attraction towards Mr. Elton, and cannot fathom his attraction to her. And while it is true she does not find Mr. Elton attractive, she is also not attracted to Miss Bates, who is a woman, which clearly demonstrates that not being attracted to *individuals* of either sex is not an indication of one's sexuality.

Additionally, Emma clearly demonstrates that she possesses deeper feelings for Mrs. Weston, Harriet Smith, and Mr. Knightley. With Mrs. Weston, there is the feeling of always being listened to, in addition to the comfort her simple presence provides. Further, there is the deep loss Emma feels when Mrs. Weston gets married, for whose wedding she dresses in black – the color of mourning – and sighs over "impossible things" (Austen 5), like the impossibility of her having a relationship with Mrs. Weston. Her feelings towards Harriet are more protective than anything else, at least from Emma's perspective. She keeps Harriet from marrying Mr. Martin, she says, to keep Harriet from falling down the social ladder, but of course there was also the selfish component where Emma simply wants to keep Harriet in her life for as long as she can. In doing this, she tries to set Harriet up with Mr. Elton, a man of acceptable social class. However, when it turns out he did not harbor any affection for Harriet, Emma feels deeply hurt – not because she failed with the match that would keep Harriet close, but because she hurt Harriet so severely, which she is unsure she can forgive herself for. Perhaps Emma's relationship with Harriet is not entirely healthy, given that she kept Harriet from marrying Mr. Martin and was blind to her social class in setting her up with men above her station, all in an effort not to lose her. But that does not mean that Emma did not have real, deep feelings for her. It simply means Emma could not express them in the ways she might have wanted to do.

Even though Emma, in fact, could not end up with a woman because of the time the novel was written and published – that does not mean her match with a man had to be forced. As this thesis has made clear, while Emma does not realize her love for Mr. Knightley until the end of the novel where, by the marriage-plot script, she has to get married to a man, there are several examples of Emma's attraction and regard for Mr. Knightley, making the match much more believable. For

example, there are the numerous times she calls him a gentleman, as well as excusing his "downright, decided, commanding" manner (Austen 25), which she would find insufferable in anyone other than him. Emma and Mr. Knightley's relationship is also, as mentioned, the most equal relationship in the novel – seen in the way they can speak openly to each other about everything – and the one based on the most mutual respect, making them in every way the perfect pair; a match that had to happen, but not a forced match.

Considering when the novel was released – when the marriage plot ruled the romance novel, where a woman was expected to marry a man and only a man, and when homosexuality was considered a felony – it is obvious why *Emma* would be read in a heteronormative way: why would anyone write about either Emma's homosexuality, or further, bisexuality in such a context? But as mentioned, it is very possible that Austen, like Anne Lister, wrote about female romance in code in order to not get in trouble, but still have it clearly there for anyone who has the ability to read between the lines. Nevertheless, many do read *Emma* with a queer lens, although only one that makes her homosexual. To widen this lens, and to avoid bi-erasure, we must stop thinking in terms of either/or. Emma has an infatuation with Harriet so she is homosexual. She ends up with a man so she is straight. *Or*, she has an infatuation with Harriet, but ends up marrying a man, so she may be bisexual. In this thesis, I hope to have provided a somewhat new perspective on this classic novel, and can hopefully inspire future interpretations of this and other classics from a queer perspective that does not resort to "either or," but instead, like the bisexual kings Tulio and Miguel from *The Road to El Dorado*, fosters an approach of: "Both? Both? Both. Both is good." (2000)

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