

George Knightley: Austenian Ideal Gentleman and Husband

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Abstract

At the center of Jane Austen's entire works lie love and marriage. Emma is no exception. However, the heroine in Emma, Emma Woodhouse is different from other Austenian female protagonists, as she has large property and fortune, enjoys high social status in her community, and yet harbors no wish or need to marry. Yet similarly, Austen gets them all married at the end of each novel. Such uniform arrangement for young ladies makes some critics believe that Austen agrees with the institution of marriage. But, in no way is Austen shallowly advocating the benefits of marriage either for women, or for society. It should be noted that Austen is in fact ambivalent about marriage as she herself has once been engaged but then remains single all her life. Therefore, if we are to better understand how Austen thinks about marriage, we may as well start from reexamining the character of George Knightley who is believed to be the agent of Austen. This thesis argues that by comparing the character and manner of Mr. Knightley with those of other male characters, Austen subtly redefines the conception of "gentleman," thus indirectly expressing her imagination of an ideal husband and marriage.

Keywords

Jane Austen; Emma; Love and Marriage; Gentleman.

1. Introduction

Jane Austen's *Emma* starts with Miss Taylor's marriage to Mr. Weston, and ends with the September wedding of Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, the October wedding of Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley, and the anticipated wedding of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill in November. As the story develops, we also witness the lightning marriage of Mr. Elton and Miss Hawkins, and how Emma perceives and meddles in the romantic love and marriages, like Isabella Woodhouse's marriage with John Knightley, Harriet's congenial relationship with Martin and diverted affection for Mr. Elton and then Mr. Knightley, and her own experiences of being pursued by Mr. Elton, Frank, and then Mr. Knightley, sincerely or not. Clearly, love and marriage is one of the major themes of this novel and of Austen's oeuvre. There is unwanted love, vicarious love, and mutual love; there is mercenary marriage, hypergamy, and companionate marriage. Nevertheless, this variety gives us an impression that Austen seems to be urging all women to marry and implying that marriage is the only way for women, as the bleak prospects of the alternatives to marriage unfolded by Miss Bates and imagined by her niece Jane surely would deter many young ladies. But Austen is actually rather ambivalent about marriage, which can be seen from Emma's initial claim of not getting married, and the fact that Austen herself has once accepted a proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither but astonishingly broken the engagement the following morning. Critics like Fredric Jameson, Mary Poovey, and James Thompson view *Emma* as a "socially symbolic act" in which social contradictions are resolved aesthetically (74). So why does Austen conclude this novel by having Emma marry Mr. Knightley? What qualities does Emma find in Mr. Knightley precious enough to change her original idea of staying single? Or, to put it another way, in what aspects does Austen make her protagonist stand out in the universe of *Highbury*? In fact, in delineating a nearly perfect character Mr. Knightley to be an ideal husband, Austen is also redefining the traditional

conception of “gentleman,” though in a subtle way. I propose, Mr. Knightley is an Austenian ideal gentleman first, and an ideal husband second. Therefore, to resolve the questions mentioned above, it is a necessity to go through the signification and evolution of the word “gentleman.”

2. The Origin and Development of "Gentleman"

Adopted from Old French “gentilz hom” in the thirteenth century, the designation “gentleman” refers to a man coming from a gens or stock, which suggests its birthright system. Not until 1413 with the Statute of Additions 1413 was “gentleman” used as a description of social rank, as noted by George Sitwell (60). In other words, “gentleman” was a legal term and inheritable title according to laws. In Regency England, it was calculated that gentlemen and their families made up only 1.4% of the British population (Keymer 390). However, since the 1850s, Britain witnessed the rise of the middle class, which though not gently born, made it way into the gentry class either by money or by marriage (for sure, a family was not part of the gentry until members of the gentry accepted them as their social equals). From then on, whether a gentleman is born or made has been in fierce dispute, and the concept of gentleman has shifted and never been purely social or class. J. H. L. Christian highlights that “many men, born in the highest circles of society, never become gentleman, and many men of the lowest grades are true gentleman” (qtd. in Smythe-Palmer 204). Edwin Cady also insightfully points out that:

the class of gentry, representing an overt culture-pattern which had developed in response to social needs, must be distinguished carefully from the concept of the gentleman, a primarily covert-pattern extant as a system of ideal values long before the class came into being. (2-3)

Thus, to limit the definition of this word to traditional criteria of birth or rank certainly will not suffice. Thorstein Veblen lists several traits required of a gentleman: “[r]efined taste, manners, and habits of life” (49). While William Harrison proposes that a gentleman is anyone who can “live without manual labor” (7-8), John Ruskin, however, believes that “[g]entlemen have to learn that it is no part of their duty of privilege to live on other people’s toil” (80). But the fact was that many gentlemen did precisely that. In Jane Austen’s *Emma*, for example, neither Frank nor Mr. Knightley sullen their hands with toil and labor, and both of them have good taste, manners, and high social position, but Austen seems to hint at Mr. Knightley as the only genuine gentleman. So what qualities on earth does Jane Austen believe are the determinants of gentlemanliness?

3. Austenian Ideal Gentleman

Austen lived in an age of high nationalism and patriotic fervor. Lionel Trilling declares *Emma* to be “a novel that is touched—lightly but quite certainly—by national feeling” (53). For Peter Smith, “[t]he principal topic in *Emma*. is England, England’s weaknesses, and dangers inherent in those weaknesses, and the choices might still be made to secure the nation’s future” (221). Both Trilling’s and Smith’s observations point directly towards Austen’s preoccupation with England under threat. Indeed, a range of events like the Acts of Union, the French Revolution, the rise of the commercial people have caused considerable anxieties over the existing social system. Under such circumstance, Austen’s *Emma* appears as a national tale, and her Mr. Knightley as a gentlemanly ideal for others to look up to. Warren Roberts, Ward Hellstrom, and Marilyn Butler share a similar view that Jane Austen, as an anti-Jacobin, describes in her novels clashes of English and French values. Roberts comments that “[i]n *Emma*, the dichotomy

between English and French culture is seen in the contrast between John Knightley (here I believe Roberts means George Knightley) and Frank Churchill" (37). In other words, whereas Mr. Knightley represents English manners, Frank is representative of French manners. I agree with him that there does exist different patterns of manners and values and Mr. Knightley is more English and Frank more French (their names also suggest that), but differ in that I believe Mr. Knightley's gentlemanliness is a refashioned one, an Austenian one.

Being thoughtful and considerate is expected of an Austenian ideal gentleman. Whenever John Knightley becomes impatient about Mr. Woodhouse's "peculiarities and fidgettiness," George Knightley is always ready to mediate the air by changing the subject (Austen 61). When others visit the Donwell Abbey, Mr. Knightley tries his best to entertain Mr. Woodhouse and make him feel at home, by preparing in advance "[b]ooks of engravings, drawers of medals, cameos, corals, shells, and every other family collection" (237). The kindest of all is his willingness to move to Hartfield to live with Emma in order not to bring pains to Mr. Woodhouse (though most probably it is a temporary arrangement, Austen tries to be vague about it, which is sweet). Regarding this decision, Mr. Knightley actually challenges the conventional stereotypes of marriage since he renounces his own home for the sake of his lover and his father-in-law. This sacrifice is made under the circumstance that he stands in both Emma and Mr. Woodhouse's shoes to understand their separate situation and possible changes of minds resulted from the marriage. Such act of compromise elevates him to a level that all modern men can not reach. It can be said that he is precisely what John Henry Cardinal Newman depicts of a gentleman: "it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain" (209).

Mr. Knightley is such a warm and considerate gentleman that nobody else in his community is his equal. It is notable that ever since Mr. Knightley articulates his prejudgment that Frank "can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people," Frank precisely confirms that as the novel advances (Austen 97). Mr. Woodhouse accuses Frank of being "very thoughtless" and "not quite the thing" for his "opening the doors very often" and "keeping them open," disregarding others' health, especially that of the ladies, given that ladies at that time are generally weak (161). What is more, his open display of passion is another sign of the fact that he is unqualified for the gentleman address. Frank expresses his love and passion for Jane by purchasing her a pianoforte, yet in a secret way. How can not a gentleman realize that this seemingly thoughtful and generous act would cause what gossip and inconvenience to his lover. No wonder Warren Roberts states that:

Knightly was the ideal English man. His integrity, sense of responsibility and tradition, his respect for the social code, his propriety and 'amiability' made him a leading citizen of Highbury. This was where he belonged; it was not where Churchill belonged. (42)

Indeed, compared with Mr. Knightley, Frank is an outsider whose manners and character are largely influenced by French culture, and therefore falls short of the ideal of gentleman.

It has been suggested that Mr. Knightley's name is adapted from Jane Austen's brother who was named Knight after he inherited a landed estate from a Knight family. His allegorical name also reminds us of St. George, England's patron saint. By this, Austen infuses her ideal of English gentlemanliness with a chivalric tint. By chivalry's standard, truthfulness is perhaps of the paramount importance. The Knight, wrote Gilbert Stuart, "professed the most scrupulous adherence to truth and to justice. To utter a falsehood, was an offense of which the infamy was never to be effaced" (67). Almost at the very beginning of *Emma*, Austen introduces Mr. Knightley as "one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them" (Austen 5). Mr. Knightley is a magistrate possessed of honesty, moral responsibility and integrity, never bothering to tell truth (in the proper way, of course).

Whenever he believes Emma's behavior degrades herself and her family or disrupts the social order, he will scold her without any hesitance, irrespective of the fact that it may affect their relationship. A case in point is Mr. Knightley's criticism of Emma for her rude, cruel, and unfeeling mockery of Miss. Bates's excessive volubility during the Box Hill excursion.

In contrast, Frank Churchill's amiable manner is somewhat reflective of what the English believed to be French depravity and insincerity. The bitter irony is that this nationality-of-character is signaled in his name. To be more specific, Austen gives us a wordplay that Frank is unFrank and French-like in his deception of Emma and the world of Highbury. "Frank's conversation," marked Roger Sales, "is sprinkled with French words and phrases" (146). After he appears in Highbury, he compliments his stepmother as "a pretty young woman" (Austen 124). Such overpraise makes Emma doubt his purpose: either "marks of acquiesce, or proofs of defiance" (Austen 124). Mr. Knightley also points out to Emma that "your amiable young man can be amiable only in French, not in English" (97). What is more, his showing great interests in Hartfield, Highbury and then his father's old house blinds Emma and makes her believe that Mr. Knightley does not do him justice as he considers Frank a combination of weakness and indulgence. However, his affectation of interest in English villages constitutes a stark contrast with his complaint, his open declaration of his feeling of sickness of England later in the novel. If his French mannerism and inconsistency do not suffice to make him less of a gentleman as some may regard it as innocuous, then he undoubtedly fails to meet the chivalric codes of truthfulness and honesty required of a gentleman as he deceives or at least misleads everyone around him by flirting with Emma and yet keeping a secret engagement with Jane, in order to secure his inheritance from the Churchills. The corollary of his sham is Emma's attack: "[s]o unlike what a man should be!—None of that upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle" (261). Amiability, or French mannerism in *Emma*, as Austen exposes, is vulnerable to the charge of hypocrisy, insincerity and duplicity, thus excluded from necessary qualities demanded of a gentleman.

The transformation of the duty on the part of a chivalric gentleman is worth noticing. Frank's mock-heroic rescue of Harriet is put under the spotlight against Mr. Knightley's heroic rescue of her at the Ball. Harriet's strong preference for Mr. Knightley, rather than Frank is exceedingly striking. Her choice somewhat reflects Austen's burlesque of knight in sentimental literature. It was a duty of an English knight to swear fealty to the King, and protect for him the subjects and territory. But a chivalric Austenian gentleman is required to bear on his shoulders duties of maintaining order, be they social or class, in public or in private life. Hence, Frank's heroic deed is dwarfed by Mr. Knightley's under which teetered social order is restored. In a conversation about Frank's repeated breach of promises of visiting his father, Mr. Knightley holds that it is Frank's obligation to pay attention to his father. Frank, however, shuns his responsibility by the excuse of his aunt's invalidism. Not only family duty does Frank fail to perform, but his duty to his intended. He does not take into consideration Jane's situation as a single woman in want of inheritance and property, making her constantly insecure of their relationship. Just imagine under what circumstance does Jane accept Mrs. Weston's offer as a governess! Mr. Knightley, in comparison, attaches great importance to duty as he says, "[t]here is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do if he chooses, and that is his duty" (95). Knightley himself is a responsible magistrate, a leader in Highbury, a guardian of English values and social order. He manages his society well, always taking good care of his neighbors in a proper manner, particularly protective of ladies. He gives a whole barrel of apples to Miss Bates, inconveniences himself to use a carriage for the sake of Jane, and takes charge of Jane and Miss. Bates during the Box Hill trip. The unpretentious kindness and charity of Mr. Knightley demonstrates considerable English delicacy which Frank precisely lacks.

In addition, Austenian gentlemanly ideal is aware of social levels, but never bears an inflated sense of his own importance or a sense of exclusivity. Unlike John Knightley's refusal to chime

in with Dr. Perry or Emma's snobbish attitudes towards Mrs. Cole's invitation, Mr. Knightley treats them mildly, without showing an iota of rudeness or superiority. His acceptance of the invitation from the Coles is emblematic of his acceptance of the rising middle class, which, together with the Westons', directly moderates Emma's hauteur towards the emerging class. Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* highlights the importance of the gentleman in the maintenance of peace, order and stability: "[t]he two sacred principles on which our civilization has depended are. the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of a religion" (173). Unlike Burke's gentleman who ought to help maintain social hierarchy, Austen's Knightley operates as a mediating force in his community, alleviating the incompatibility between the two classes.

Austen, after witnessing the Napoleonic Wars, is rather prudent in instilling her ideology. That is why so many critics call her conservative. Indeed, she is patriotic, but not blind to some problematic social phenomena, like the gentleman issue and the institution of marriage. Subtly and expediently, she presents the panorama of the lives and manners of the gentlemen, and refashions English gentlemanliness in hopes of inventing "a type, a model, an exemplar of what the perfect member of that society ought to be" and to whom other members should look up (Nicholson 1). Under her pen, a new gentleman rises, which also shows her progressive mind. She denounces Frenchified gentlemanliness, and instead, creates a new type of English gentlemanliness. This ideal gentleman exists as a social binding force between traditional landed values and middle-class values. He is one thoughtful, truthful, and dutiful, with proper English manners. Yet, it should be noted that gentlemanliness, even though stripped of its class connotations, is too ambiguous and elusive a concept to pin down. But, it is certain that Austen adds to "gentleman" moral component.

4. Austenian Ideal Marriage

Mr. Knightley undoubtedly is a doyen of English manners, and an Austenian gentleman. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean that he is perfect without any weaknesses. With regard to the character of Knightley, critics fall into two opposing camps. The likes of Bernard Paris and Ward Hellstrom praise him as the impeccable exemplar of Englishness from whom Emma must learn to change her evils. Claudia Johnson, Mary Waldron, and Margaret Kirkham, on the other hand, see Mr. Knightley as less than perfect. Johnson, for instance, believes that "Knightley is not above imaginistic readings. [he] is just as apt [as Emma] to misconstrue where his interest is at stake" (140). Even Mr. Knightley himself acknowledges: "I am changed also" (Austen 312). There does exist some respects that Mr. Knightley needs to learn from Emma and his own experience in order to get closer to perfection, to ideal. Elaine Bander also notes, "[t]he problem with perfection is that it is static, impervious to growth or change" (70). Austen surely understands this; it is thus a must to reassess the character of Knightley so as to fully understand Austen's insights in such design.

Just like Emma's education, Mr. Knightley's growth is an example of growth through suffering. At first, Knightley is entirely a self-confident paternal guardian, directly pointing out Emma's problems even in the presence of the doting Mr. Woodhouse. Gradually his confidence and authority is undercut by Emma's intuition and perspicacity. Yet his vulnerability, helplessness and jealousy allow us to better understand his transition from a father-mentor-friend figure to a lover figure, and to which Austen attaches great importance in marriages.

From the beginning to the end, Mr. Knightley is conscious of the importance of birth, class and wealth in a marriage. The difference lies in what aspect he regards as the top consideration in matrimony. *Emma* opens with Mr. Woodhouse and Emma thinking about the marriage of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Mr. Woodhouse whines about it, for he is no friend to matrimony, which is "the origin of change" (Austen 3). Although she knows that the marriage has "every promise

of happiness for her friend,” Emma cannot help regretting her loss of companionship (5). In contrast, Mr. Knightley deems this marriage to the advantage of Miss Taylor, revealing “how important to her to be secure of a comfortable provision” (5). Mr. Knightley’s view makes sense in that Miss Taylor, who is not young, with no inheritance or property, is rather fortunate to marry a man who can provide her with financial security. Thus, Knightley’s economical concern is reasonable and thus arouses no criticism. But as the novel advances, it becomes clear that Mr. Knightley ignores the role that emotional element plays in love and marriage. In Harriet’s rejection of Martin’s proposal, Mr. Knightley is right that Emma is manipulating and being “no friend to Harriet Smith” (40). However, if we take a closer look at the dialogue between Emma and Mr. Knightley, it is not difficult to find a slight flaw on the part of Mr. Knightley. From the outset, Mr. Knightley seems rather smug that Harriet definitely will accept Martin’s proposal. Emma’s response, on the one side shows that she does feel in her mentor’s words an outmoded arranged-marriage stereotype, and on the other side reflects the equal complacency: “[h]e is very obliging . . . but is he sure that Harriet means to marry him” (37). Both of them are more concerned with their own ideas about marriage than Harriet’s and Martin’s feelings, which further implies that they simultaneously overlook the importance of love in a marriage. They equally turn a blind eye to the fact that Martin and Harriet suit each other, clinging to their own opinion about what marriage is appropriate. They are both prejudiced due to their respective preconceived idea, therefore we see the intense argument, which further exposes the flaws of both parties.

Mr. Knightley also reveals himself to be emotional and easily irritated as he immediately becomes “red with surprise and displeasure. in tall indignation” after being informed by Emma of Harriet’s rejection of Martin’s proposal, and reconstructs his previous account of Harriet: “[t]hen she is a greater simpleton than I ever believed her. What is a foolish girl about” (38). All of a sudden, Harriet who has been previously praised as a “fair lady,” is now seen as little better than a good-for-nothing idiot; Martin, who has been “very well judging,” becomes a man whose reason is entirely overcome by love (37). Emma here gives a very rational and persuasive argument: “it is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her” (38). Emma perceives in her mentor’s words a trace of conduct book in which women are taught to be passive and subservient, and can only accept rather than refuse a proposal. Albeit his straightforward denial, Mr. Knightley has done that exactly. The following dialogue infuriates Mr. Knightley so much that he spits out a lengthy harangue, disparaging Harriet:

No, he is not her equal indeed, for he is as much her superior in sense as in situation . . . What are Harriet Smith’s claims, either of birth, nature or education, to any connection higher than Robert Martin? She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations. She is known only as a parlor-boarder at a common school. She is not a sensible girl, nor a girl of any information. She has been taught nothing useful, and is too young and too simple to have acquired anything herself. At her age she can have no experience, and with her little wit, is not very likely ever to have any that can avail her. She is pretty, and she is good tempered, and that is all. (38-39)

Ostensibly, Mr. Knightley just objectively lists Harriet’s disadvantages. As a matter of fact, he only judges Harriet on the outside: appearance, birth, status, wealth and education, and her virtue is neglected or considered unimportant (since his acquaintance with her is rather limited). It is apparent that Mr. Knightley is no less class-conscious and prejudiced than Emma. Emma, with her remarkable discernment, tells the truth that even though Harriet has nothing to recommend, her beauty and good temper, and the degree that she possess these two qualities,

are highly recommendable. Concerning the argument about the proposal and the refusal, both Mr. Knightley and Emma apply double standards unconsciously. Mr. Knightley has a high opinion of Martin, attaching more importance to his virtue and ability than to his status. But in the case of Harriet, he can not give a comprehensive evaluation, ignoring her inner goodness. And Emma, in the same way, lifts Harriet up but puts Martin down.

The worst of all is that they barely know love yet guide others on marriage. Mr. Knightley is just as ignorant as Emma of his own feelings. Neither Emma nor Knightley understands genuine love until they learn it from one another. For Emma, her being in love with Frank is merely a game to satisfy her fancy. Speaking of her choices of husband for Harriet, Emma sneezes at the emotions and mutual affection, only caring about social status and manners. She is so naive as to believe that she can change Harriet's affection. Harriet might be foolish and simple, but she grows faster than Emma emotionally, as she first has a crush on Mr. Knightley and then follows her heart to marry Martin. In contrast, Emma herself is unaware of her emotions until the moment she is startled by Harriet's crush on Mr. Knightley into knowledge of her own attachment to him. Likewise, Mr. Knightley does not realize how much he loves Emma and how long he has found Emma more attractive than any other lady until he feels insecure in front of Emma and Frank's increasing closeness.

It turns out that Austen makes her hero and heroine do more than suffer for love, as they are set ignorant of love. In terms of Emma, Austen gives us readers a warning in advance that she has many "evils" (Austen 1) and that nobody but her would like Emma. The process of evil-revising is also the process of love-enlightening. As regards Mr. Knightley, he must humble himself before Emma. He must learn to credit Emma's virtues. He must acknowledge that Emma's instincts are sometimes better than his reasonable assumptions and that true love has little to do with things outside the person. Thus, we observe his abrupt departure to London, which tells of his utter vulnerability and helplessness brought about by his thought of Emma's infatuation with Frank. We see the humility in his confession in which he denies that he does any good to Emma. We realize that his feeling of undeserving of Emma is reflective of his knowledge of how precious are Emma's advantages like candor, wit and "open temper which a man would wish for in a wife" (187). Such exposing of the weaknesses on both side is but Austen's trick, or test, or just being realistic as no one is perfect. Through investigating Austen's subtle handling of the love-sprouting process between her hero and heroine, it is crystal clear that Austen advocates a companionate relationship in which two parties communicate, discuss with, and learn from each other. Without Knightley's advice, Emma could not integrate herself with her community since she treats the relationship with other residents in Highbury as the one between superiors and subordinates. She takes Harriet under her wing to kill time; she makes matches not entirely out of pure motives; she visits the poor partly to satisfy her vanity. But, under Mr. Knightley's guidance, Emma finally does not evade her social responsibility and begins to take her proper role in her community, that of a gentlewoman. Likewise, without Emma's candid defense, Mr. Knightley could not recognize his being partial and biased towards Harriet, his preaching tendency, and his deprecating attitudes towards the importance of emotion that plays in love and marriage. It is worth noticing that companionate marriage is also a social phenomenon in Austen's time. As Lawrence Stone observed, the eighteenth century saw that the rise of companionate marriage based on love and affection (normally occurred in middle and upper class) increasingly replaced arranged marriage based on wealth and social status. But surely, it does not mean that wealth or class is not important as none of Austen's heroines marry someone below them; it is just not that important, when compared to love.

Nobody knows what Austen would choose, love or money. By making all the heroes and heroines under her pen finally have love as well as money, Austen is withholding her answer, and trying to be vague. As mentioned before, she lives in a time when society was challenged by wars and revolutions fighting for freedom and independence. Governments, as well as the

nobility were afraid of individuality and change. Though the companionate marriage gets popular, Austen still can not openly advocate it, especially under the strict censorship. Mary Poovey has demonstrated, “[the] period between 1775 and 1817, the years in Austen’s life, was punctuated by challenges to the traditional hierarchy of English class society and, as a consequence, to conventional social roles and responsibilities” (83). In such an era of change, Austen has to make imperceptible the changes that she wants to happen, and to make ambiguous her real attitudes. Therefore, an ideal husband for Emma must be a genuine gentleman who is of high birth, and enough fortune. All in all, it is axiomatic that Mr. Knightley is the fittest for Emma as he unites almost all good qualities required of an Austenian gentleman apart from money and social standing (it does not mean that Austen denies the physical importance). And the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley can be said almost ideal for a marriage.

5. Conclusion

Michael Giffin believes, “[m]ost families are dedicated to furthering their advantage according to the codes of the implied social contract, and marriage is the fulcrum of this process” (152). Indeed, most of the characters in *Emma* decide to marry because it is appropriate and advantageous; their paramount consideration is marrying for social standing and wealth, rather than for romantic attachment. But as the novel shows, the marriage between Emma and Mr. Knightley is founded upon mutual respect, affection, understanding and love for each other, and mercenary motivation is never their primary concern. What is more, as a female writer, Austen writes in her works her imagination of an ideal husband. She infuses her male protagonist with all the good qualities she believes to be crucial to a gentleman, which, as a result, demonstrates her insights into the gentleman culture.

Some believe that Austen resorts to an aesthetic resolution of conflicts. From my perspective, the ending marriage functions as a literary convention which symbolizes a reward for the growth and maturation of the hero and heroine after all their experiences. Just as James Kissane comments, Mr. Knightley and Emma are “the characters who most deserve to enjoy and are best able to appreciate one another’s qualities, qualities which include their differences” (182). They represent Austenian ideal gentleman and gentlewoman, as well as ideal husband and wife. It is no doubt a happy ending, but Austen does not present marriage as a guarantee of happiness either. Austen knows that no one can really meet all the standards of being a gentleman in a world of reality, that there are no perfect people, and that there are no perfect marriages either. The union of Emma and Mr. Knightley is simply Austen’s tribute to the couple’s companionate relationship, and an ideal that she hopes to fulfill.

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