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Return Them to Their Places: Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley as Socially Regressive Forces in Jane Austen's *Emma*

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley function as socially regressive forces in their village of Highbury in Jane Austen's Emma. It suggests that the typical social hierarchy that one would expect to find in an English village in the countryside of the time has gone awry, and Emma Woodhouse is seeking to restore the hierarchy to a more conventional one. To demonstrate so, the paper contains a discussion of how status and rank typically functioned in the Regency England in contrast with how it functions in Emma. Furthermore, Frances Burney's Camilla is used as a comparative text to show a more typical romance novel of the time. Mr. Knightley is examined from a feminist lens, one particularly informed by the work of Kate Manne (specifically her book Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny). Her ameliorative definition of the term "misogyny" is helpful in analysing Mr. Knightley's behaviour in the novel, especially his interactions with Emma and other women.

Keywords: Jane Austen, feminism, misogyny, rank, status, class.

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In Jane Austen's *Emma*, it seems that the two principal characters of the story, Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley, arguably act as socially regressive forces in Highbury. Emma, throughout much of the novel is concerned with re-establishing the typical social hierarchy of Regency-era Britain, while Knightley engages in behaviour that one could assert is misogynistic (depending on what our conception of 'misogyny' is). This is interesting as it is at odds with our general conception of Austen's work as being somewhat progressive for the time in which she wrote. This paper compares the social order of the time with that depicted in *Emma* to explain the titular character's actions and relationships and how they aim to restore social order that one would expect to see in a village such as Highbury. To do so, it takes inspiration from Ian Mortimer's *A Time Traveller's Guide to Regency Britain* and Handler and Segal's 'Hierarchies of Choice: The Social Construction of Rank in Jane Austen'. A brief comparison with Frances Burney's *Camilla* is also included to show the extent of the difference between the treatment of rank in Austen and Burney's texts, where the latter is suggested to be more representative of the era. Looking at Knightley's behaviour through a feminist lens, it is suggested that Kate Mann's conception of misogyny in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* is particularly suitable to explain the actions of the character. The paper is divided into two parts: the first dealing with issues of rank in the novel, and the second dealing with Knightley's misogyny.

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Part I

In *A Time Traveller's Guide to Regency Britain*, Ian Mortimer points out that status was of much greater importance to the social order than wealth was. There was a rigid social hierarchy with the monarchy at the zenith, followed by the aristocracy, the landed gentry, the squires, industrialists, the professions, the shopkeepers, the rural middle and working classes, and finally, the destitute. Mortimer provides the example of the politician Thomas Creevey, who was welcome in the highest social circles even though his income was similar to that of a rural farmer. According to Mortimer, the Regency was an era so obsessed with ancestry that everything from the ability to rent a house to where one would be seated in a church was a matter of rank. (Mortimer 67)

This, of course, had serious implications about what kind of relations people of the era were allowed or expected to have with each other. The landed gentry would scarcely interact with or entertain the nouveau riche, except for the odd instance where a historically high-ranking family might invite a marriage with a nouveau riche bride to avoid falling into destitution. Furthermore, as one would imagine, there was a strict social divide between the landed gentry who had a steady income due to the land that they owned and those who worked for a living, i.e., the professionals and working classes. It is also important to mention that how long one had owned the land was a matter of great importance. An industrialist who gained enough wealth to buy land in the countryside would not be considered on par with a member of a family that had been landowners for many generations (76).

As pointed out in 'Hierarchies of Choice: The Social Construction of Rank in Jane Austen', there is a clear connection between independence and rank in Austen's worldview (Handler and Segal 692). This connection is readily apparent in the relations between the Bingleys and Darcys with the Bennetts in *Pride and Prejudice*. In *Emma* itself, Knightley lumps together 'servants and furniture' in comparison with 'gentlemen and ladies' (*Emma* 355). However, it seems that the social order is not functioning as one would expect it to in *Emma*.

Something has gone awry in Highbury

If one were to take a step back and examine the social relations present in Highbury, the fictional village where most of the action in the novel occurs, we do not see the rigid social order that Mortimer presents us with. We see the Bateses, who are of high descent but have experienced a dip in their wealth, openly engaging with Mrs. Perry, the wife of a doctor—the novel even mentions Mr. Woodhouse being shocked by a rumour that the children of the Perrys were seen with slices of Mrs. Weston's wedding cake (22). Similarly, one would not expect Mrs. Goddard, who is simply a mistress at a boarding school, to have the sort of free entry to Hartfield and Mr. Woodhouse's company that she has (24). Likewise, the relationship between Knightley and Robert Smith is much closer than it ought to be, with Smith even considering Knightley 'as one of his best friends' (64). The most radical digression from the social expectations of the time is the ease with which Jane Fairfax is allowed into the high social circles of Hartfield and Randalls when she is neither of high birth nor does her family have any significant income.

Examining a text written in the same era such as Frances Burney's *Camilla* which concerns itself with the relationships of a group of young gentlemen and ladies, all coming from families

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that are part of the landed gentry. In *Camilla*, all the characters stay in their expected social circles and their romantic interests all come from similar backgrounds. This kind of social hierarchy is much more comprehensible from a Regency-era standpoint than the almost anarchic organisation of relations one sees in *Emma.*

It is only in Emma Woodhouse's relationships with others do we see a great regard for rank and status as appropriate of the time. She is blatantly classist in her remarks towards Robert Smith, exhibiting great surprise at his ability to write a decent letter (55). She even comments on how if Harriet were to marry him, she would no longer be able to engage in high society as she has been doing so for the preceding months at Hartfield as Emma's friend.

Here, one might question why Harriet Smith has not been included as one of those occupying a place in high society that does not seem to correspond with her station as a boarder at Mrs. Goddard's school with unknown parentage. Along the same lines, one might question why Emma chooses to take her under her wing when matters of class and rank seem to be of much importance to Emma.

The Harriet Question

Centring around Mrs. Goddard, Mrs. Nash, Mrs. Perry, and the Bateses, gossip is a fundamental part of the action in *Emma*. This is seen throughout the novel as it is this information that drives many of the decisions the characters make. The parentage of Harriet Smith is known only to Mrs. Goddard and it is a piece of information she chooses to withhold from the rest of the village ladies. One can look at this as a sort of game or puzzle that others in the village are also engaging with. Most assume she is of low birth and, therefore, of little significance to their lives. However, it is this mystery around Harriet that exhibits Emma's knowledge of how status is meant to function and is the means to which she tries to gain some control in a setting that fails to conform to her—and the generic Regency-era member's—expectations.

Emma establishes a strong friendship with Harriet and trains her to think of herself as being a natural part of high society and deserving of the honour of not just visiting Hartfield but even of the privilege of spending many a night in a room assigned to her. Here, one might question what drives Emma to engage in such a friendship if status is of such importance to her. What Emma realises—which displays the intelligence that is frequently attributed to her by other characters in the novel—is that, from all of her boarding students, Mrs. Goddard only ever brings Harriet to the parties at Hartfield. From this piece of evidence, Emma concludes, correctly so as is revealed at the end of the novel, that Harriet does come from money and is of higher station than others believe her to be. So, by taking her under her wing and training her to behave as if she belongs with the Woodhouses, Knightleys, Eltons, and Westons of the village, she tries to restore the hierarchy in the small way that she can.

Part II

Sally Haslanger suggests three ways of approaching a 'What is "X"?' questions; one of which she refers to as an 'ameliorative' or 'analytic' project where one attempts to 'formulate a concept that best suits the point of having such a term' (Mann 42-43). Kate Mann, in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, tries to carry out an ameliorative project with the term

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'misogyny'. She argues that, instead of looking at 'misogyny' as the hatred of women, it can be better understood as 'the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance' (33). This paper suggests that Mr. Knightley's behaviour and comments about women in *Emma* may be better understood using this framework where he is in essence trying to 'put women in their place' and secure the gender hierarchy of the village.

Some of Mr. Knightley's actions that align with this redefinition of misogyny include a comment he makes to Mrs. Weston, 'You are better placed *here*; very fit for a wife…' (*Emma* 41). Later on, in regards to the potential marriage of Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, he asserts that 'in good hands she will turn out to be a valuable woman' (63). However, the passage of the book that most effectively showcases Mr. Knightley's misogyny is the dispute between Emma and him regarding Harriet's refusal of Robert Martin's proposal and the part Emma played in it that occurs in the eighth chapter of the novel.

The eighth chapter of *Emma* begins with Mr. Knightley complimenting Harriet Smith, as well as Emma's role in improving Hariet's 'disposition'. He then, unaware of the fact that the proposal has already been rejected as was revealed to the reader in the previous chapter, shares with Emma that Robert Martin plans on marrying Harriet. When Emma divulges to him that Harriet has not accepted Martin's offer, Knightley flies into a rage. He calls the young woman he had just been praising, 'a greater simpleton than [he] ever believed her.' He later claims that she has 'little wit' and that 'she may be a parlour-boarder at Mrs. Goddard's all the rest of her life' because, 'Men of sense, whatever you may chuse [sic] to say, do not want silly wives'. He also blames Emma for Harriet's decision and chastises her asserting that Emma 'will puff [Harriet] up with such ideas of her own beauty and of what she has claim to' that she will never get married to a man worth anything. (64-9)

Here, we see the appropriateness of Mann's ameliorative redefinition. Mr. Knightley expects Harriet to stay in her place and marry a man he believes is of similar status. He wants to police her behaviour and accept a man's proposal because that is the patriarchal expectation of the time. Her transgression of what he sees as the norm must be quashed and it must be ensured she follows feminine standards of the time. He also thinks that Emma has ventured outside the place allotted to her as a woman in trying to improve her friend's station, believing that it is up to men to gauge what is acceptable for women. The rage with which he makes these statements is also relevant as often it is hard for women to engage with, though Emma manages to do so while retaining her composure which is quite admirable.

Conclusion

This paper has hopefully demonstrated how Emma and Mr. Knightley, in their own ways, act as socially regressive forces in the novel. It has established how the village of Highbury has deviated from the notions of rank prevalent in Regency-era Britain. Emma is concerned with restoring a more proper social hierarchy that benefits people of her status, and that dictates what the appropriate roles for the other people of Highbury are. Mr. Knightley exhibits misogynistic behaviour that is well explained by Mann's ideas in *Down Girl*. He believes that women have a place as women and she not tread outside it and, if they do so, they deserve

censure. Hopefully, this paper contributes to a better understanding of *Emma* and the work of Jane Austen in general and encourages further research along these lines.

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