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Jane Austen's *Emma* and the Marriage Market: When Marriage was a Contract

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“I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself
will much like”

-Jane Austen, *Emma*

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INTRODUCTION

For my dissertation I decided to analyze *Emma*, written by the eternal Jane Austen and published in 1815. My work will be focused on marriage market and the social and economic sides coming from the main topic. I decided to dedicate the current paper to this issue because I would like to demonstrate that Jane Austen is not only the author of love stories and happy endings, that is actually true, but she was as well an acute observer of the society: with her works gave us and still is giving precious information about the society and economic issues of 18th and 19th centuries, useful in order to understand the modern mechanisms. *Emma* has been chosen because it features the homonymous and the richest heroine of Jane Austen's novels. Consequently, she has no need to contract a marriage in order to increase her economic and social status: this makes her paradoxical among other heroines. But we will see how she is involved in marriage market as well.

In the first paragraph I will be busy in analyzing the main topic: the marriage market. Both in the first paragraph and subparagraph I will try to clarify why the author is so involved in such an issue: in my opinion, Jane Austen's biographical *scenario* affected her works somehow.

I will mainly do an explanation of the main laws that regulated couple life in 19th century (e.g. Coverture Law, Married Women Property Act, Divorce Act...). While I was reading the novel, I wondered why the city of Bath was so widely mentioned within the work: in addition to being linked to the author's life experience, the central role of Bath is due to its importance in terms of sociability and self-display. The second paragraph of the first chapter will be devoted to Emma's matchmaking activities: though this may result quite paradoxical, and I will explain why, Emma is always busy in arranging others' couple life, failing every time. This is due to some defects in self-

perception and moreover by a wrong consideration of others' social and economic status.

The second chapter is a precise analysis of two main male characters of the novel: Mr. Knightley and Mr. Woodhouse.

I will analyze Mr. Knightley explaining why he represents the perfect embodiment of the gentlemanliness of his time. To do that, I will dedicate a brief part of the paragraph to an historical *excursus* of the gentlemanliness. I define the figure of Mr. Woodhouse "ambiguous": in him, two polar tendencies meet (that of being concerned about others' wealth and that of being so self-oriented), bringing the old man to affect the education of his daughter negatively.

I needed to shift the focus on two male figures because I consider their analysis complementary to the previous and following chapter: especially in the last paragraph, talking about spinsterhood implies a discourse on female characters and female social stigmatization. So, an interlude on men seemed to me useful in order to balance the attention between male and female parts.

In the third and last paragraph, I will enhance the topic of spinsterhood. I dare say that the said paragraph is divided into two sections: the first one is a close analysis on the novel, meanwhile the second will be no longer so conformed to the plot.

I decided to start obviously from the analysis of the *de facto* spinster of the novel: Miss Bates. To stay on the topic and to avoid Miss Bates' loss of importance as Jane Austen did, the following subparagraph will be based on the relationship between Emma and the old maid that culminates during the episode at Box Hill. The point in which Emma accuses rudely Miss Bates of being dull, is considered by the critics the starting point for the heroine's moral redemption. In the second section I will contrast the perception of spinsterhood between the Victorian and Modern eras. I will try to clarify how and *if* the social stigma that affected spinsters in 19th century has changed

somehow across the years. Something is changed: the phenomenon is raising and this is obviously linked to the more positive perception that old maids enjoy today within the society, but a total acceptance seems to be still too far to gain.

All the topics taken into account have somehow a relationship with the modern world and show how Jane Austen did not write anything randomly: everything has a study and knowledge behind. If we manage to understand the importance of her dedication to social and economic issues of her time, we will better understand the mechanisms that regulate the society today.

1.COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE FROM A SOCIO-ECONOMIC POINT OF VIEW

In this chapter I am going to take into account one of the most considered topic by Jane Austen: marriage and all the implications that come with it, both in terms of society and social status and of market.

It is quite obvious that there is and has always been a strict connection between the law system and the market, and the laws in the England of 19th century had a strong influence on the marriage market, for instance with the Marriage Women Property Act (1882) and the Divorce Act (1857). Consequently, I am going to make a list of the most important laws (and their limitations) that regulated the marriage market in this period.

Furthermore, in the subparagraph 1.1.1, I am going to discuss about the importance of the city of Bath in Austen's novels. The continuous allusions to it depend on two main reasons: the first one is deeply linked to the writer's biographical scenario, since she moved there in 1801 with all family. Second, in terms of sociability, Bath played an important role in the 19th century England: attending balls and walking in Bath was an opportunity for personal display and was useful to increase your relationship net. Even if *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* are the Jane Austen's novel set in this city, even in *Emma* it is often mentioned for its importance in social life.

In the homonymous novel, Emma is busy in her activities of matchmaking, that are, in most cases, wrong. She combines union between people but she is "blind" in this sense, since she joins people together without considering their feelings but just the economic side of the partners involved in her machinations.

The centrality of marriage market topic in the novel can be explained if we consider firstly Emma's financial position: unlike other Austen's heroines

(e.g. Elisabeth Bennett or Charlotte Lucas from *Pride and Prejudice*), Emma does not need a marriage to increase her social and economic status. She is introduced as the mistress of her house, heir of £30'000¹. We can understand clearly her independent financial position at chapter 10, when she states: "Fortune, I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want; I believed a few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield"². I dare say that she is a paradoxical figure among other Jane Austen's female characters: first, because she does not need a marriage and declares she does not want a man at all, but meanwhile she is busy in arranging others' unions.

1.1 Marriage Market

On the first page of her novels *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen writes "it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife"³. This is maybe the most exemplary sentence to represent one of the central topics of Austen's pen: the marriage market. Why she was so interested in this issue, we may understand from some key-episodes of her life.

First of all, her meeting with Tom Lefroy. Tom Lefroy was maybe the only man beloved by the writer and we may consider their relationship as one of the most influential issues of her life. Lefroy and Austen were introduced at a ball and, from the letters to Cassandra, it is quite clear that they spent much time together. In one of the letters Jane wrote that he was "very gentlemanlike, good-looking, pleasant young man"⁴. She was clearly attracted by him but they both knew that the marriage would never be possible,

¹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, Wordsworth Classics, 1994, pag. 276

² Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 67

³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813, Project Gutenberg, pag.1, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1342/old/pandp12p.pdf>

⁴ Jane Austen, Letters to Cassandra, January 9th-10th 1796, letters 1-10, trad. Giuseppe Ierolli, Web <http://www.jausten.it/jalett001-010.html>

considering their economic and social status. Lefroy's family kept him away from Austen's family and they never met again.⁵

The second key-episode happened later, when, in December 2nd, Jane received the only marriage proposal of her life from Harris-Bigg-Wither, and she rashly accepted. Harris was not attractive at all but the marriage would have brought economic advantages to both parts since he was the heir of the family estates in Basingstoke: Harris' father had recently sold properties to invest in Hampshire.

They both knew (Jane and Cassandra) that at their father's death, the female part of family would have faced poverty, since clerical incomes stopped when the "earner" died. "Poverty makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public!"⁶ says Emma Woodhouse and the marriage would have brought benefits to both the families. We will never know what were Austen's thoughts during that night, but on December 2nd she suddenly realized she had made a mistake in accepting, and retracted her assent.⁷ She had made a terrible mistake in saying yes just to fulfill others' needs (that is, family's needs) without considering her own happiness: she did not love Harris and she perceived him just in the perspective of an economic wellness status. This is, maybe, the very turning point of her life and the source of her interest in marriage issues as well. In her novels she continually deals with the dichotomy marriage-for-love and marriage-for-economic purposes, as an eternal, non-resolvable fight, even if the most part of her works has an happy ending.

So, as a never-married woman and as an acute observer of the society, Jane Austen's works can be considered as a great source of historical information on pre-Victorian culture and society.⁸

⁵ Honan Park, *Jane Austen and Marriage*, on Contemporary Review, 1984, pag. 254

⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, Wordsworth Classics, 1994, pag.68

⁷ Honan Park., *Jane Austen and Marriage*, pag. 256-257

⁸ Fitz Barin Akman, *An Investigation of Socio-Economic Incentives and Implications of Matrimony on Women's Lives in Jane Austen's Novels*, in DTCF Dergisi Journal, pag.1101, 2018

Analyzing the situation from a stricter socio-economic point of view, we may start talking about the gender restrictions concerning women's position. First of all, in this period while men can improve their socio-economic status through education and consequently going into professions such as church, military and law, women are not allowed to take up a professional career. In this situation marriage is the only "profession" accepted since it is the only way to improve their economic and social status⁹. Working is not an acceptable perspective for middle-class belonging women. This is quite clear in *Pride and Prejudice* where, for the Bennett's sisters, getting a job is out of question since it is considered socially degrading and as negative as remaining single.

In addition to that, focusing on a legal point of view, the inheritance laws of nineteenth-century England privileged the first-born children and that made marriage even more essential for women's survival. According to the English laws, even the second born male was cut off from the inheritance. Anyway, that system made a woman completely dependent on a man to survive and the social pressure was quite compelling for a woman to get married instead of being a spinster.¹⁰

The marriage market was also regulated by the Coverture law (from Norman's traditions): for a single woman, subscribing a contract under her own name, selling the estate of her own properties was possible and she could do this in free will. But, when she married, her rights were "suspended" in order to support the "marital unity", a legal fiction where husband and wife were considered as a single entity, since the wife's properties were absorbed by the husband. The man had the exclusive control on properties and he rarely had to consult her wife to make decisions about them.¹¹

⁹ Filiz Barin Akman, *An investigation of...*, pag. 1102

¹⁰ Filiz Barin Akman, *An investigation of...*, pag 1111

¹¹ The Editors of Britannic Encyclopaedia, Shweta Gupta, *Britannic Encyclopaedia*, 2007

Things partially changed in 1882, when the Married Women's Property Act was issued, according to which a woman could inherit and hold properties, inherit up to £200,00 in her own right and keep the money.¹²

But a 19th century woman had to face other limitations as well. Since marriage was considered a sacred union, it was indissoluble in accordance with church ethic. Consequently, divorce was forbidden until the emission of the Divorce Act in 1857. With this law, matrimony was considered a contract rather than a sacrament. Anyway, this law had limitations as well because it recognized only adultery as a legitimate reason to divorce and kept privileging men over women: men had to prove only infidelity, women had to prove incest, bigamy and cruelty as well.¹³

As we can clearly see in *Pride and Prejudice*, the entailment is another problem to face from a legal and economic point of view and it is essential in order to understand the connection between marriage and property.

Entailing the estate (that was the basic source of money) was necessary to prevent the division of the property from one generation to another, and keep it in the ownership of just one person of the family. The problem was that the owner had no right to sell it and the only benefit that came from it was the income. The eldest son or the closest male relative (e.g. Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*) was chosen to hold the estate, rarely it was a daughter. So, at the father's death, the eldest son was safe. But a family is not composed only by the eldest son. The widow was generally provided for by a jointure: the next person in the succession had to pay her an annual amount already fixed in the marriage settlement. For younger sons, the only ways to improve them socially and economically were the church, the army, the bar and the navy. But entering in these professions supposed a considerable outlay. Being a tradesman as well as a lawyer was considered degrading for upper and middle

¹² Christine Pickwell, *The Married Women's Property act 1882 and its relevance today*, in Ringrose Law, 2016

¹³ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian Theory of Spinsterhood*, pag. 1109

class people¹⁴. For the daughters' side, instead, they were supplied with a dowry, with the only purpose to make them suitable in the marriage market. It could be normal, at this point, wondering why the landed gentry provided the daughters with such an income. We already know that the entail and the impossibility to get a job made them unable to improve their economic status and thanks to the dowry, the static capital became circulating and brought benefits to the market.¹⁵

The third reason why marriage issues are so important for Austen is that marriage helps to maintain class-hierarchy. As we can see in Austen's novels, close relatives express judgments about the feasibility (or not) of a union in accordance with social ranks. This means that the characters are strongly class-conscious.

It is what happens, for instance, with the character of Emma Woodhouse, who is class-conscious as well as a strong class-boundaries believer. In her matchmaking activities, especially dealing with Harriet, she prevents her to marry someone who is supposed to be lower than she is. Emma thinks that Mr. Martin, a farmer, does not suit Harriet, whose origins are, actually, unknown (she is the "natural daughter of somebody"¹⁶). During a quarrel with Mr. Knightley, Emma says "Mr. Martin is a very respectable young man, but I can't admit him to be Harriet's equal"¹⁷. It is clear that, for Emma, Harriet *must* be the daughter of a rich man. On the other hand, she considers Mr. Elton, the vicar, as a man of enough fortune to marry her friend. Things change when she discovered that Harriet is in love with Mr. Knightley. In this case, Harriet turns to be the *daughter of somebody*. Emma expresses her disapproval: "Mr. Knightley and Harriet Smith! Such an elevation on her side! Such a debasement on his!"¹⁸. In this statement she echoes all the

¹⁴ J.F.G Gornall, *Marriage and Properties in Jane Austen's Novels*, on History Today, 1967, pag.806

¹⁵ J.F.G Gornall, *Marriage and Properties in...*, pag. 809

¹⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pg.16

¹⁷ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 47

¹⁸ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 332

disdain for a total unbalanced union (influenced by her feelings towards Mr. Knightley as well)¹⁹.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, with the figure of Lady Catherine de Bourgh we can analyze another example of class-conscious character. She does not accept that the middle-class belonging Elisabeth may marry his nephew, Mr. Darcy and try to prevent the union. In this case, lady de Bourgh is attempting to protect her class, the aristocracy, from the “contaminations” of a lower class, represented in this case by Elisabeth. At the end of the novel, lady De Bourgh goes to the Bennett’s to talk to Elisabeth and refers to her by the following words “a girl of inferior birth, of no importance in the word, and wholly unallied to the family!”²⁰ and to her family as well “you are the daughter of a gentlemen, but who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their condition!”²¹. These Lady De Bourgh statements are the proofs of her displeasure against the union between upper and inferior classes.

In conclusion, the interest that Jane Austen had for marriage market and marriage in general, may come from her personal sphere and the role that marriage played in the society of 19th century, from a legal, economic and social point of view.

We can say that the marriage is an institution through which the landed gentry maintained its financial and social position. It’s not just a matter of relationship between two people; it’s an alliance between two families as well as a good source of money and capitals for the market.²²

¹⁹ Filiz Barin Akman, *An Investigation of...*, pag. 1120-1121

²⁰ Cit. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, pag. 248

²¹ Cit. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, pag. 249

²² J.F.G. Gornall, *Marriage and Properties in Jane Austen’s novels*, 809

1.1.1. The Central Role of Bath

The city of Bath, located in the south-west part of England, in Somerset, is often mentioned in Jane Austen's novels. Today is still known to be a famous spa centre.

The interest Jane Austen had for Bath may comes from another issue of the writer's life. In 1801 her family decided to move there. From 1801 to 1806 Jane made Bath her home and the city was a thriving spa resort, popular with fashionable society. At her time, Bath was called "the place to be", the place where all families moved when they wanted to be someone in the upper society. She lived there in Gay Street, with her mother and sister Cassandra. In spite of this, the first visit in the city was in 1799. In this situation Jane wrote: "I like our situation very much - it is far more cheerful than Paragon, & the prospect from the Drawing room window at which I now write, is rather picturesque, as it commands a perspective view of the left side of Brock Street, broken by three Lombardy Poplars in the Garden of the last house in Queen's Parade."²³ Even if Bath was completely different from Steventon (the city where she was born and had grown), that was a rural place, Jane liked the city very much, despite the twentieth-century criticism wanted her to be deeply attached to the village life.²⁴

According to Paula Bryne, author of the article *The Unmeaning Luxury of Bath: Urban pleasure in Jane Austen's World*, the two most popular social activities in this period in Bath were the public assemblies and the walks.

Walking and dancing, in addition to be considered as exercise activities, were useful opportunities for socializing and personal display. Jane loved walking, as we know from her letters of Bath-period.²⁵ Public assemblies indeed, were a combination of dance, cards, tea and conversations.

²³ Jane Austen, *Letters to Cassandra*, May 18th 1799

²⁴ Paula Bryne, *The Unmeaning Luxury of Bath: Urban Pleasures in Jane Austen's World*, In *Persuasions*, 2004, pag. 15

²⁵ Paula Bryne , *The Unmeaning Luxury of Bath...*, pag.18

Jane Austen seemed to be well aware about the importance Bath represented in marriage market. Despite *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* are the two novels set in Bath, in *Emma* the city is often mentioned and linked both to the importance of social issue in life and for its role in health wellness.

Both the social and healthy advantages that Bath offers are underlined by Mrs. Elton during a conversation with Emma:

“[...] and as to its recommendations to you, I fancy I need not take much pains to dwell on them. The advantages of Bath to the young people are pretty well understood”²⁶ as well as “Your father's state of health must be a great drawback. Why does not he try Bath?— Indeed he should. Let me recommend Bath to you”²⁷.

So the central role of Bath in the writer's novels is due to biographical aspects, thanks to which Jane experienced the dynamics of the upper classes and how they works in a city rather than in a village like Steventon.

The sociability of Bath and the many opportunities people could find there let the city be popular with that people who wanted to increase their social position through meeting other people doing social activities and displayed themselves.

1.2. Emma's Matchmaking Machinations

One of the most important aspects of *Emma* is her being a matchmaker, that is, a kind of obsession in combining unions between people according to what

²⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 146

²⁷ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag 146

she considers right or not and based on how she interprets other people's needs; "it is the greatest amusement of the world!"²⁸ she says in the first chapter. That may result quite paradoxical if we think about the fact that she does not want to marry anyone because of her social-economic status. At the end of the chapter 5, Mr. Knightley, during a conversation with Mrs. Weston, is concerned because "she always declares she will never marry".²⁹

Anyway, from the first pages of the novel we can find examples of how Emma is involved in combining unions.

The first problem that she has to face is the marriage between Mr. Weston and her beloved governess, Miss Taylor. Even though in Woodhouse's home now the sadness reigns because of the governess' departure, Emma is satisfied of her match. She herself admits it proudly in the first chapter, when, talking to Mr. Knightley and her father, states: "And you have forgotten one matter of joy to me, and a very considerable one – that I made the match myself", but soon clarifies to her father "I promise you to make none for myself, papa; but I must, indeed, for other people."³⁰ Even if it is a marriage based on love and loyalty, Emma is convinced that she has the merits for this union, overestimating herself wrongly.

The problem turns out when she makes this type of machinations taking into account a wrong socio-economic parameter. She is certain to know what is the best for others but in the most of the cases she fails in considering the matchmaking from an economic and class- belonging point of view. Consequently, when it comes to arranging the union between Harriet and Mr. Elton just because he is the vicar of the village and has a considerable portion of money and goods, she does not succeed in her purpose: when Emma learns of a budding romance between Harriet, an orphan with no family connections, "the natural daughter of somebody"³¹ and Robert Martin, a simple farmer of

²⁸ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.6

²⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.30

³⁰ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.6

³¹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.16

modest income and no social distinction, Emma fixes on matching Harriet with Mr. Elton.³² Furthermore, she persuades Harriet to end her relationship with Mr. Martin, “a very respectable young man, but I cannot admit him to be Harriet’s equal”³³; this is Emma’s thought on him.

The real problem to face, for her, is Harriet’s social rank, since she wants her to rise in the society by any means. She does not focus on the richness, but on the rank, (even though Harriet’s one remains unknown until the end of the novel): “Mr. Martin may be the richest of the two, but he is undoubtedly her inferior as to rank in society”³⁴.

As Mitchell Kalpagian argues in his article *Matchmaking and Imagined Sentiments: Jane Austen’s Emma*, matchmaking does not consider feelings or needs but just *imagines* them. In doing this, Emma put herself in contrast with Mr. Knightley who has a completely different idea about Harriet and Mr. Martin’s union. This put them in a dialectic position that explodes during an argument, in chapter 8: according to Knightley, Martin’s proposal honors and compliments a woman of Harriet’s obscure origins: “What are Harriet’s claims either of birth, nature, or education, to any connection higher than Robert Martin?”³⁵. As it is quite clear from his speeches, he has a great estimation of Robert Martin, the tenant of his property at Donwell Abbey, “I never hear a better sense from anyone than Robert Martin. He always speaks to the purpose; open, straightforward, and very well judging”³⁶, he states. Consequently, he considers Harriet a “foolish girl”³⁷, for refusing the proposal, since she is the real beneficiary in such a match, as nobody knows her origins nor her family background. Quite the opposite, I dare say that Emma has a more feminist point of view and insists that a woman is not

³²Mitchell Kalpagian, *Matchmaking and Imagined Sentiments: Jane Austen’s Emma*, on The Imaginative Conservative, 2013, Web <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2013/01/jane-austen-emma-matchmaking-and-imagined-sentiments.html>

³³ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.47

³⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 48

³⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.47

³⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.46

³⁷ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.47

obliged to accept the first marriage proposal, “Harriet may pick and choose”³⁸ she argues. According to Emma, her friend has the proper qualities to be suitable in order to find and choose the man she likes the most among many. But the proof of Emma’s blindness comes out in her statement “that she [Harriet] is a gentleman’s daughter is indubitable to me”, a belief that we will discover to be wrong.

She seems to have learned nothing from this experience and keep combining the union between Harriet and Frank Churchill, again based on a total misunderstanding of their respective natures and desires.³⁹ Harriet reveals clearly her feelings about Mr. Churchill in chapter 47: “it was not Frank Churchill that I meant. No!”.⁴⁰

Emma’s fantasies about love do not stop there and she makes machinations even upon herself. For a brief part of the novel, she imagines herself in love with Frank Churchill.⁴¹ Even if she has never met him, she falls in love with the *idea* of him, “[...] there was something in the name, in the idea, of Mr. Frank Churchill, which always interested her”⁴². After all, the social rank does not constitute an obstacle in their union as he belongs to her social class. But in this case as well Emma’s previsions are done wrongly: Churchill pretends to court Emma to stir the jealousy of his fiancée, Jane Fairfax, who probably has changed her mind about their marriage (since Frank’s always courts Emma). Churchill’s ambiguity, tendency to postpone his obligations, and spoiled self-indulgence do not inspire Emma’s respect or admiration.

The moral dimension of marriage requires that man and woman assent to the same moral standards to govern their lives so that the two become one.⁴³ Busy in her matchmaking activities, Emma is the proof of how this preconception can influence an interpretation. And in spite of the author’s consideration of

³⁸ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.49

³⁹ Eugene Goodheart, *Emma: Jane Austen errant heroine*, on *The Sewanee review*, 2008, pag.590

⁴⁰ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 327

⁴¹ Mitchell Kalpagian, *Matchmaking and Imagined Sentiments: Jane Austen’s Emma*, 2013

⁴² Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 95

⁴³ Mitchell Kalpagian, *Matchmaking and Imagined Sentiments:...*; pag.1

her, in this case Emma does not seem to be so brilliant nor intelligent, superficially guided by her mis-interpretations of the reality.⁴⁴

It is no coincidence that Emma acknowledges her feeling only when she stops matchmaking and imagining situations that do not exist. Kalpagian argues that she and Knightley fall in love naturally, without any stretch, once they realize about their social and intellectual equality. Their falling in love comes as a surprise, not as the result of a scheme. This is may be acceptable, if we do not consider Harriet's revelation to be in love with Mr. Knightley, at chapter 47. In my opinion, this episode could be considered as an input for Emma in order to have a clearer view of her feelings, a turning point without which she would not have discovered the reality. As the author let us know, "a few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. [...] she saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed before."⁴⁵ So, the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley has not come out so naturally as Kalpagian states.

Emma is willful, manipulative, an arranger or rather a 'misarranger' of other people's lives,⁴⁶ as Eugene Goodheart argues in her article *Emma: Jane Austen's errant heroine*.

Even Mr. Woodhouse warned her daughter about her machinations, at the beginning of the novel : "But, my dear, pray do not make any more matches; they are silly thing, and break up one's family circle grievously".⁴⁷

So Emma is guided by a sort of "lens", represented by the preconceptions that she has on the others' status. This lens let her see the world around her incorrectly. Once she analyses herself inside as well as her feelings and achieves a good level of self-knowledge, she manages to realize her mistakes in doing matchmakings without considering others' needs.

⁴⁴ Eugene Goodheart, *Emma: Jane Austen's errant heroine*, pag. 590

⁴⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 338-329

⁴⁶ Eugene Goodheart, *Emma: Jane Austen errant heroine*, pag. 589

⁴⁷ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag.8

2. EMMA AND HER MEN

In this chapter I will compare and contrast two male figures from the novel *Emma*.

The first paragraph will be devoted to Mr. Knightley, starting from how the concept of gentlemanliness has changed from an historical point of view, and what it meant in the 19th century. The idea of gentlemanliness has changed across the centuries, and Mr. Knightley seems to fulfill properly all that was required from a 19th century gentleman. Within the novel, to let his gentlemanliness come out, he is constantly compared to other characters,⁴⁸ not only to men (e.g. Frank Churchill) but to Emma as well.

The second paragraph will focus on the figure of Mr. Woodhouse. I dare to define him “ambiguous” because he is the embodiment of two polar tendencies: being concerned about the other people and being, at the same time, self-focused, which brings him to refuse any type of change. The point is, that he projects his way of being on Emma’s education, sometimes with disastrous consequences. The theory developed by Joel C. Weinsheimer compares Mr. Woodhouse to Frank Churchill⁴⁹, since Frank embodies dynamism. On the contrary, the old Mr. Woodhouse personifies the static nature of a man who refuses any type of variation (e.g. marriage) because, according to a strange equation, change is synonymous with the passing of time⁵⁰.

2.1 Mr. Knightley and his coherence

We already know that Emma’s microcosm is regulated by economic determinism: consequently, money is at the basis of each plot. The

⁴⁸ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, Fano, Solfanelli 2013, 137

⁴⁹ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse: Duty and Desires in Emma*, in *Journal Hosting*, vol.6 n.1, 1975, 90

⁵⁰ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse: Duty and Desires in Emma*, 88-89

representation of the marriage market is linked, as well, to the new classes' social rise (due to the industrial revolution) and to the consequent renegotiation of the idea of being a gentleman.⁵¹ If in Austen's novels the idea of gentlemanliness is deeply related to the men belonging to the middle-class, *Emma* overturns these schemes, introducing a variety of models and anti-models, such as Frank Churchill. The perfect embodiment/model of gentlemanliness, indeed, is Mr. Knightley⁵², who is the possessor of the internal virtues that a 19th century man had to have. *Emma* registers the relocation of the idea of the gentleman, according to the 19th century standards.

In the past, since the middle ages, gentlemanliness was linked exclusively to the noble birth and other qualities, which had to be developed by training.⁵³ Between the 17th and 18th centuries, it was a concept based on good manners and erudition⁵⁴: men of letters and of fashion met in salons amused themselves by dancing and arguing about the standards of good taste.⁵⁵ In the 19th century being a gentleman is deeply related to the concept of self-made-man: the devaluation of the plots of land as a result of the industrial revolution compelled impoverished aristocracy to seek new money resources, by marrying the "new rich". This led both to a social permeability and class-belonging confusion.⁵⁶

Mr. Knightley's exemplary profile of a gentleman is revealed gradually by putting him in a contrasting relationship with other figures, such as Frank Churchill or even Emma.

Why, in the title, do I define Mr. Knightley "coherent"? He seems to celebrate the perfect agreement between the inner and the outer side, between the

⁵¹ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 133

⁵² Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 134

⁵³ Emel Deymeli, *Mr. Knightley and Jane Austen's concept of gentleman ideal*, ed. GRIN Verlag, 2, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=r_NWtRX9gHIC&hl=it&pg=GBS.PA5

⁵⁴ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 136

⁵⁵ Emel Deymeli, *Mr. Knightley and...*, 3

⁵⁶ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 135

appearance and the essence.⁵⁷ He is well aware of the distinction between the external and internal qualities, as he points out during a conversation with Mrs. Weston about Emma's good looks: "Oh, you would rather talk of her person than her mind, would you?"⁵⁸.

First of all, Raffaella Antinucci, in her book *COME LEGGERE: Emma* deduces two linchpins of the gentlemanliness code: the duty of integrity (that is, the union between honesty and frankness), and the duty to be polite towards the others, avoiding to offend or hurt other people.⁵⁹

If we consider these two main points, Mr. Knightley is in antithesis with Frank Churchill, and they establish a dialectic relationship throughout the entire novel. Mr. Knightley is always introduced as the one who embodies perfectly the model of the gentlemanliness; on the contrary, Mr. Churchill is the anti-model, because he acts constantly by breaking the said fundamental principles.

In the matter of integrity, Frank, is considered the antagonistic part of Mr. Knightley since his arrival at Highbury: the real reason of his visit is unknown and no one knows that he is secretly engaged with Jane Fairfax. Doing this, he acts disrespectfully towards both his father and the Highbury community as well, that, on the contrary, had approved him affectionately.⁶⁰

Moreover, when it comes to investigate around the anonymous benefactor who gave the piano as a present to Jane Fairfax, Mr. Knightley comes up as a possible giver. In light of this, Emma clarifies promptly that "Mr. Knightley does nothing mysteriously"⁶¹, observing properly the said duty of honesty and clearness.

From Knightley's point of view, Churchill plays the role of the villain since his first appearance. Frank's arrival to Highbury is preceded by two months of

⁵⁷ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 154

⁵⁸ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 29

⁵⁹ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 145-146

⁶⁰ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 145

⁶¹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 179

delay and a letter of excuses to his stepmother, Mrs. Weston. In Knightley's opinion, Churchill betrays his own words⁶². The following words are pronounced by him against Churchill: "If Frank Churchill had wanted to see his father, he would have contrived it between September and January. A man with this age – what is he? – three or four and twenty – cannot be without the means of doing as much as that. It is impossible"⁶³ and later "It is Frank Churchill's duty to pay this attention to his father. He knows it to be so, by his promises and messages. But if he wished to do it, it might be done"⁶⁴. The duty which Knightley is referring to is that, since Mr. Weston has a new wife, Frank had to call on his stepmother.⁶⁵

With regard to the second point, Churchill is twice guilty : firstly, towards Jane, because, according to Knightley "he had induced her to place herself, for his sake, in a situation of extreme difficulty and uneasiness, and it should have been his first object to prevent her from suffering unnecessarily".⁶⁶ Moreover, he pretends to court Emma, provoking more pain to Jane and without being concerned about the consequences, since Emma could fall in love with him as well.⁶⁷

Apropos the second duty, Emma is in contrast with Mr. Knightley too, especially during the episode at Box Hill.⁶⁸ In this circumstance, Emma's behavior is offensive towards Miss Bates, as she accuses the woman of being too dull. Mr. Knightley's reproach is not long in coming: "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, situation?"⁶⁹. From the remonstrance Knightley shows to Emma, is quite clear that the measure of gentlemanliness comes out

⁶² Emel Deyneli, *Mr. Knightley and Jane Austen's concept of gentleman ideal*, ed. GRIN Verlag 2003, 12, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=r_NWtRX9gHIC&hl=it&pg=GBS.PA2

⁶³ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 116

⁶⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 117

⁶⁵ Emel Deyneli, *Mr. Knightley and Jane Austen's concept of...*, 12

⁶⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 358

⁶⁷ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 146

⁶⁸ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 142

⁶⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 302

especially when it comes to the interactions with the subordinates and, more in general, with those who are considered “inferior” or weaker.⁷⁰ As he explains to her, Emma’s sarcasm would have been acceptable if referred to a woman of an economic situation as wealthy as the Woodhouse’s: “Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance; [...] Were she your equal in situation, - but, Emma, consider how far it is from being the situation. She is poor. [...] her situation should secure your compassion”⁷¹.

All the qualities Mr. Knightley owns seem to be fixed in his residence, Donwell Abbey. The said theory is shared both by Raffaella Antinucci and Emel Deyneli, as they compare the building to his owner. The description of Donwell Abbey, with its Englishness (expressed in the following passage: “English verdure, English culture, English comfort”⁷²) is the maximum celebration of Mr. Knightley’s coherent personality:

“[...] the respectable size and style of the building, its suitable, becoming, characteristic situation, low and sheltered; its ample gardens stretching down to meadows washed by a stream, of which the abbey, with all the old neglect of prospect, had scarcely a sight – and its abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up. [...] It was just what it ought to be, and it looked what it was; and Emma felt an increasing respect for it, as the residence of a family of such a gentility, untainted in blood and understanding”⁷³.

⁷⁰ Raffaella Antinucci, *COME LEGGERE: Emma*, 142-143

⁷¹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 303

⁷² Jane Austen, *Emma*, 291

⁷³ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 289

2.2 Mr. Woodhouse: an ambiguous figure

The first time the reader comes in contact with Mr. Woodhouse, he is voiceless and he is introduced by a brief description given by the author:

“The evil of the actual disparity in their ages (and Mr. Woodhouse had not married early) was much increased by his constitution and habits; for having been a valetudinarian all his life, without activity of mind or body, he was much older man in ways than in years; and though everywhere beloved for the friendliness of his heart and his amiable temper, his talents could not have recommended him at any time”⁷⁴.

Later in the paragraph, Mr. Woodhouse is allowed to pronounce the sentence that he is going to repeat during the entire novel: “Poor Miss Taylor!”⁷⁵. Here we already have two dialectic aspects of Mr. Woodhouse: his tendency to project himself on others (“poor Miss Taylor”) and the selfishness, (“his habits of gentle selfishness”⁷⁶), his being concerned obsessively about his wealth.⁷⁷ This double way of being has repercussions on Emma’s education: his indulgence and blind affection for his daughter provokes her some lack in moral attitudes. Since the first chapter, it is clear that Emma’s few misfortunes are caused by a lack in self-command due to a negligence of the parental authority in her life in empowering moral discipline.⁷⁸ Consequently, Emma is not accustomed to recognize her faults on her own, and Mr. Knightley seems to be the only one who warned the girl in case of failure and the one that let her notice them. The contrasting influences on Emma’s

⁷⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 2

⁷⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma* 3

⁷⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 3

⁷⁷ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse: duty and desires in Emma*, in *Journal Hosting*, vol.6 n.1, 1975, 3

⁷⁸ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse...*, 83

education are quite clear in the following lines, at the beginning of the novel, after the first appearance of Knightley “Mr. Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them; and though this was not particularly agreeable to Emma herself, she knew it would be so much less so to her father, that she would not have him really suspect such a circumstance as her not being though perfect by everybody”⁷⁹.

It’s not by chance that in the first pages of the novel the words “evil” and “danger” occur linked to the relationship between Emma and her father.⁸⁰ For instance, the word “evil” is mentioned in the first sentence in which Mr. Woodhouse is described (I have already reported it at the very beginning of the paragraph). Furthermore, few lines earlier, there is another passage in which the word “danger” is used for this purpose: “[...] she was now in great *danger* of suffering from intellectual solitude. She dearly loved her father but he was no companion for her”⁸¹.

As Mary Oakley argues in her article, Emma plays the role of the *damsel in distress*: it seems like Mr. Woodhouse is his daughter’s jailor⁸² and the Highbury society the prison, since it has a close and culturally sterile environment that brings Emma to feel a sensation of constriction and imprisonment⁸³, as it is expressed in the following lines: “their being fixed, so absolutely fixed, in the same place, was bad for each. [...] Not one of them had the power of removal, or of effecting any material change of society. They must encounter each other, and make the best of it”⁸⁴.

⁷⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 5

⁸⁰ Mary Oakley Strasser, “*Real Evils*”: *Mr. Woodhouse’s creation of damsel in distress*
<http://www.jasnaeastpa.org/essay%202007.pdf>, 2007, 2

⁸¹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 2

⁸² Mary Oakley Strasser, “*Real Evils*”: *Mr. Woodhouse’s creation...*

⁸³ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse...*, 87

⁸⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 114

The character who seems to embody best the stativity of Highbury society is Mr. Woodhouse, who is concerned exclusively with his safety and who is against change, since variations are always symptoms of danger. Matrimony, for instance, is a danger, since it “as the origin of changes, was always disagreeable”⁸⁵. According to Samuel Johnson, this fear of changes may depend on the consciousness for an imminent end: changes and variations mean that time flows without human being could control it.⁸⁶ So, Mr. Woodhouse is attempting to stigmatize the awareness of his age by rejecting variations and changes that occur within of life. Acting in the above-mentioned way, he prevents the vitality that could alleviate Emma’s diseases: as a consequence, she tries to fill up the vacuity of her mind and fulfill her voracious imagination by creating illusions, and her matchmakings activity is likely to be a result of this.⁸⁷

Frank Churchill indeed, seems to be at Mr. Woodhouse’s very polar point: he embodies dynamism, even though he is attempting to escape from himself. Frank is always moving, coming or going. His movements imply independence, a freedom in which Emma herself sees a way to escape from the static nature of her father.⁸⁸

But the tendency to be always dynamic, is Frank’s natural disposition or rather a form of agitation? According to Joel C. Weinsheimer, it can be better considered as a sort of restlessness and uneasiness⁸⁹, as Emma herself realizes when Frank is back in Highbury in volume III:

“and he was not without agitation. It was not in his calmness that she read his comparative difference. He was not calm; his spirits

⁸⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 3

⁸⁶ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse...*, 88-89

⁸⁷ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse...*, 89

⁸⁸ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse...*, 90

⁸⁹ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse...*,90

were evidently fluttered; there was restlessness about him. Lively as he was, it seemed a liveliness that did not satisfy himself;”⁹⁰

But Frank is well aware of his problems and realizes on his own what he needs in order to feel better: “I feel a strong persuasion this morning, that I shall soon be abroad. I ought to travel. I am tired of doing nothing. I want a change. [...] I am sick of England- and I would leave it to-morrow, if I could”.⁹¹

Anyway, the dynamism, the changes, the movements we are talking about are not the right ways to escape from Highbury, neither for Emma nor for Frank. The problem they have to face is not the environment that surrounds them, it is rather something that deals with the inner part of the characters: escaping physically from Highbury is not the best cure, since it cannot supply the defects of the self.⁹²

At the end of the comparison between Frank and Mr. Woodhouse I dare say that the characters are in a dialectic relationship since they seem to be each other’s mirror image: Mr. Woodhouse is the thesis, personifying the refusal of all variations life can have. Frank is the antithesis: as naturally among youths, he embodies the vitality and the inclination to seek always something new. The synthesis is that both the points of view turn out to be disastrous.⁹³

If compared to her father, even Emma is supposed to embody the polar value to his static nature, since we talked about her need to escape from the exaggerating calmness of Highbury.

Mr. Woodhouse’s double and contrasting way of being is a tool used by the author to control our disdain against him because of all the negative aspects analyzed above (refuse of changes, negligence in Emma’s education,

⁹⁰ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 253

⁹¹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 294

⁹² Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse...*, 91

⁹³ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *In Praise of Mr. Woodhouse...*, 91

selfishness): Austen balances them with his benevolence and predisposition towards the others. In this way, the reader is not allowed to perceive Mr. Woodhouse just as an idiot, indulgent and egoist.

3. “THESE OLD MAIDS”: AN OVERLOOK ON SPINSTERHOOD

In the current chapter, I will take into account the theme of spinsterhood, shifting the focus firstly on the novel, and on the Victorian and modern eras then, pointing out how the perception towards these figures has changed across the centuries.

Starting from the character of Miss Bates, I will argue how Jane Austen gave her a functional role, within the plot and within the society as well. Speaking of Miss Bates, the Box Hill episode deserves a mention, since the attention is on her and on Emma, too: the social and economic gap between the characters and the influence the place has on Emma, are two issues both determinant to the moral development of the scenario.

The last two paragraphs will be less devoted to the novel.

The paragraph 2.2 will be focused on the perception of old maids by the Victorians. In the said paragraph I decided to consider both the negative and positive positions.

Meanwhile, in the last one I will try to make a comparison between the said period and modern era, from 1850 onward. Moreover, I will dedicate some parts to the leftover negative tendencies from the 19th century and, at the same time I will focus as well on how the more positive perception of spinsterhood and the raising of the phenomenon are linked today.

3.1. Miss Bates: analysis of a spinster

“She was a great talker upon little matters”⁹⁴

-Jane Austen, *Emma*

In the novel, since their first descriptions, Miss Bates, the spinster *par excellence*, and Emma are in contrast. We already know that Emma is introduced as “handsome clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition”⁹⁵, while Miss Bates’ description goes in the opposite direction, for she is “neither young, handsome, rich, nor married. [...] she had never boasted either beauty or cleverness”⁹⁶. Miss Bates’ survival depends on her mother’s modest income and on charity. This contrast seems to be sustained by the analysis of the spinsterhood elaborated by William Hayley in 1793. In his work *A Philosophical, Historical and Moral Essay on Old Maids* (the spinsters were also called so), he tried to place these women in a respectable position within the society, but the result was somewhat different. As Katharine Kittredge states, Hayley’s maximum defense was actually an offense, since he considered ingenuity, patience and charity unwed women’s three best qualities. So, according to Hayley, a spinster must be orientated towards self-negation in order to be accepted by the community standards. Moreover, he stressed as well some of unwed women’s failings: the credulity, as the tendency to misunderstand any masculine attention as sexual advance, and the envious ill-nature, directed especially towards the women who succeed in attracting men’s admiration.⁹⁷

But, in spite of the above-mentioned Hayley’s theory, Austen’s portrait of spinsterhood and spinster-like characters gives them a central role within the society, without denigrating them. Consequently, in the novel *Emma*, Miss Bates does not fully comply with the stereotypes mentioned above, and

⁹⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 15

⁹⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 1

⁹⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 15

⁹⁷ Katherine Kittredge, *That Excellent Miss Bates*, in *Persuasions* no.17, 1995, 26

moreover is allowed to have a functional role within the Highbury community, as argued by Corrie L. Jacobs in her article *The Great Talker: Spinsters Stereotypes in Emma*. Starting from Miss Bates' peculiar aspect, that is, that of being chatty, Jacobs develops a theory according to which the old maid should not be underestimated, since her speeches provide news both for Highbury society and the reader, too⁹⁸. So she states that she has a great social authority.

At this point, a short comparison with Mrs. Elton deserved to be explained. These two female figures have quite nothing in common but their being too loquacious. However, Mrs. Elton's speeches are always narcissistic and therefore unbearable. Since her first arrival at Highbury, all that she does is point out that Hartfield is "extremely like Maple Grove!"⁹⁹ All that she says is always self-orientated and brings the reader to perceive her talkativeness as irrational.¹⁰⁰ Unlike Mrs. Elton, who speaks *ad nauseam* solely in order to have her voice heard, Miss Bates' speeches have a selfless purpose and keep the community interconnected. This is the real function of Miss Bates' character, serving as an interconnection within the Highbury social net. This point comes out in the three-long pages speech pronounced by Miss Bates, located at the chapter XXVII, when Emma and Harriet meet her in the shop across the way from Miss Bates' home.¹⁰¹ In this dialogue, Miss Bates is able to mentioned sixteen neighbors, ranging from the high-ranking Mr. Knightley down to some common villagers, such as John Sanders (who otherwise would have never been mentioned). Regardless of *who* is mentioned in her discourse, we should rather focus on the *quantity* of people taken into account. Corrie L. Jacobs argues that if we traced a map of all the

⁹⁸ Corrie L. Jacobs, *The Great Talker: Spinsters Stereotypes in Emma*, in JASNA, 2015 essay contest, 1

⁹⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, pag. 218

¹⁰⁰ Corrie L. Jacobs, *The Great Talker...*, 1

¹⁰¹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ch.27

interconnections existing between these people, we would find out Miss Bates as the central node.¹⁰²

As she herself is in a mid-position in terms of class-belonging, she keeps Highbury community's members connected by breaking social boundaries: her father was the vicar of the village, so she once belonged to the upper society. Since the ecclesiastic incomes disappear when the earner died, Miss Bates' survival depends now on a modest income and that relegates her to the inferior part of the social pyramid.¹⁰³

Anyway, thanks to her linguistic skills, although too rambling, Miss Bates is capable to go against spinsters stereotypes which want them to be voiceless: exploiting her voice to keep people interconnected within the same social net, she acquires a fundamental role for the plot.

If Emma had been a living character, she would have disagreed. In her opinion, Miss Bates' speeches do not communicate anything useful. Apropos of this, she states "you will get nothing to the purpose from Miss Bates [...] she will tell you nothing. She will not even listen to your questions"¹⁰⁴. The author seems to agree with her, as shown in the following sentences "after a pretty long speech of Miss Bates, which few persons listed to"¹⁰⁵ or "Miss Bates, who had been trying in vain to be heard..."¹⁰⁶

With regard to this, would be useful to clarify Emma's position about spinsterhood and Miss Bates' socio-economic condition as well. If we focus on Emma's reflections on spinsterhood, we will discover the contrast that exists between her and Miss Bates. In chapter X, Emma and Harriet are discussing about Emma's convincement of avoiding matrimony. As Harriet states that "But then, to be an old maid at last, like miss Bates!"¹⁰⁷, the heroine's response is not long in coming: "only poverty makes celibacy

¹⁰² Corrie L. Jacobs, *The Great Talker...*, 1

¹⁰³ Breanna Neubauer, *These Old Maid: Jane Austen and Her Spinsters*, in *The Midwest Quarterly*, 135

¹⁰⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 203

¹⁰⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 277

¹⁰⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 278

¹⁰⁷ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 67

contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! The proper sport of boys and girls, but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable.”¹⁰⁸ Later she adds: “Those who can barely live [...] may well be illiberal and cross” but she immediately absolves Miss Bates from the imputation of her statement: “This does not apply, however, to Miss Bates; she is only too good-natured and too silly to suit me. But, in general, she is very much to the taste of everybody, though single, and though poor. Poverty certainly has not contracted her mind.”¹⁰⁹ So, it is clear that Emma acknowledges the social and economic difficulties that a spinster without fortunes had to face.¹¹⁰ But, indeed, she cannot manage to understand the connection between Miss Bates personality and her economic situation¹¹¹ (why a spinster or, more in general, a poor should be necessarily bad-tempered?).

Moreover, a 1632 work, named *The Lawes Resolution of Women’s Rights; or, the Laws Provisions for Women* (written by a certain T.E.) assumed that women had been created solely in terms of procreation. It is quite obvious that spinsters cannot fulfill this “natural” role.¹¹² Miss Bates can, indeed, if we not consider just the biological factor. She is able to take in other maternal roles: she is a family caretaker, and it should not be forgotten that Miss Bates is one of the three surrogate mothers of Jane Fairfax. A spinster can look after her community even more than a married woman, for she has more time to spend for this role.¹¹³

At the end, I dare say that the figure of Miss Bates goes against the stereotypes promulgated by Hayley. She depicts the subversion of the schemes: for her being talkative instead of being voiceless, for the power she acquires within a society instead of being emarginated, for her being good-

¹⁰⁸ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 68

¹⁰⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 68

¹¹⁰ Katharine Kittredge, *That Excellent Miss Bates*, 28

¹¹¹ Katharine Kittredge, *That Excellent Miss Bates*, 29

¹¹² Breanna Neubauer, *This Old Maid*, 126

¹¹³ Corrie L. Jacobs, *The Great Talker*, 1

tempered instead of being envious and ill-natured, for her being a *social* rather than a *sexual* figure. And we have to thank Jane Austen for giving power to a character that otherwise would have been powerless and voiceless.

3.2.1 Miss Bates vs. Emma: Box Hill as a turning point

Miss Bates' role as a symbol for Emma's redemption come to pass during the episode at Box Hill. At chapter XLIII we are told that the Eltons, the Bates, the Westons and the Woodhouses spend a day in Box Hill, located in Surrey, for an exploring party arranged by Mrs. Elton. In order to divert Emma, Frank Churchill suggests that each of the seven members have to say her "two things moderately clever or three thing very dull indeed"¹¹⁴, to which Miss Bates replies in a way that I dare define auto-ironic "I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as I open my mouth"¹¹⁵. At this point, we are told that Emma "could not resist", as something negative is bound to happen. Actually, Emma promptly states "Ah! Ma'am but there could be a difficulty. Parton me – but you will be limited as to number – only three at once!"¹¹⁶ With this statement, Emma affirms her bully status and shows how her education is lacking of some moral teachings, but this does not offer any excuse for her deliberate and personal attack to Miss Bates. How we can explain Emma's conduct toward Miss Bates?

William Galperin, author of *The Historical Austen*, states that the irritation Emma feels at Miss Bates' derives from Emma's fear that her fortunes could not save her from Miss Bates' fate.¹¹⁷ John E. Rogers' analysis would be more useful in order to explain Emma's behavior. In his article *Emma Woodhouse:*

¹¹⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 299

¹¹⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 299

¹¹⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, 299

¹¹⁷ Breanna Neubauer, *This Old Maid...*, 136

betrayed by place, he assumes that Emma's attack is partially justified if we consider the external force that the place exerts on her: Box Hill is the place where she is probably further away from Highbury and within the novel, we are not actually informed that Emma has ever traveled beyond her village.¹¹⁸ Box Hill is the apogee of her movements, both from a mental and physical point of view.

Jane Austen does not provide the reader with a lot of information about Box Hill, except that it is seven miles away from Highbury, is laced with footpaths, and is famous for its beautiful views of Surrey.¹¹⁹

The wildness of the place may bring Emma to feel lost in a place where she has never been before. Since she is not familiar with the environment, Box Hill serves as an opportunity for her to look deeply inside her and analyze her personality. Since Mrs. Weston is at home and the other members do not divert her, at Box Hill Emma is alone like never before. What Emma does not acknowledge is that, being away from home does not mean automatically the abandoning of social and moral values. Rather indeed, moving beyond the security of Hartfield, one should be even more mindful of others.¹²⁰ After Mr. Knightley's reproach, Emma is able to redeem herself and the following morning appears penitent at Miss Bates'.

We widely know that Bates' situation depends on charity, and Emma's wealthy condition compels her (and others such as Mr. Knightley) to support the old women (Miss Bates and her mother) materially.¹²¹

But Emma seems to enjoy the image of herself as a dispenser of charity rather than having a real preoccupation towards the Bates' economic status.

According to Mary-Elisabeth Fawkes Tobin, writer of the essay *Aiding Impoverished gentlewomen: Power Class in Emma*, the episode at Box Hill deserves an analysis from a social and economic perspective: the relationships

¹¹⁸ John E. Rogers, *Emma Woodhouse: betrayed by place*, in *Persuasions*, no.21, 164

¹¹⁹ John E. Rogers, *Emma Woodhouse: betrayed by place*, 165

¹²⁰ John E. Rogers, *Emma Woodhouse...*, 170

¹²¹ Breanna Neubauer, *This Old Maid...*, 136

that surface during the episode are the results of the material and consequent social status that determines Emma's power and Miss Bates' powerlessness.¹²² She argues that Box Hill is the apogee of Emma's abuse of power and in assuming an aristocratic position, Emma threatens to alienate the middle-class members from the gentry. With her snobbish way of being, she risks to destroy the illusion according to which the landed gentry and the middle class share a common goal, that of maintaining their political and economic power. The problem is that without the support of the middle classes, landed gentry could not maintain the hegemony.¹²³

With regard to the social issue, the heroine neglects the duty that a wealthy woman like her has on impoverished women like Miss Bates. Emma's heartfelt reform will not be concluded until she acknowledges the social and moral duties that Miss Bates imposes on her.¹²⁴ Apropos of this, Goodheart states that "tact is a mark of social intelligence, and again Emma fails the test"¹²⁵. As Fowkes Tobin assumes, by the neglecting of these duties, Emma clearly threatens a delicate and intricate society's structure. After Mr. Knightley's reproach, Emma experiences a great deal of pain and loss of self-esteem, acknowledging the justness of the remark. She heartily repents on her insensitivity and tries to emulate Mr. Knightley's charity activity by making visits to the Bates', offering them her carriage, food and medicine for Jane's illness. Emma learns the proper conduct to use towards impoverished women whose situation is due to economic system forces.¹²⁶

So, Austen always leaves the door open for the audience to respond to Emma with favor: Emma's redemption allows us to forgive her. Fowkes Tobin does not agree with the author's choice. In the last part of her article, she assumes that Austen subverts the seriousness of Miss Bates' situation by providing

¹²² Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin, *Aiding Impoverished Gentlewomen: Power Class in Emma*, in *Criticism*, vol.30, no.4, 1988, 413

¹²³ Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin, *Aiding Impoverished gentlewomen...*, 422

¹²⁴ Breanna Neubauer, *This Old Maids*, 136

¹²⁵ Eugene Goodheart, *Emma: Jane Austen's errant heroine*, 590

¹²⁶ Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin, *Aiding impoverished gentlewomen...*, 423

solutions to her problems. With Emma's redemption and understanding of her charitable duties as a member of the privileged gentry-class, the delicacy of themes, such as impoverished gentlewomen's situation or the proper moral conduct to follow, dissolve in what today the audience would call "fan service"¹²⁷. Austen mitigates the picture of a middle-class impoverished woman (Miss Bates) by focusing on the individual's power (Emma's) to change and to control her life. In this circumstance, it seems that the condition as victims of economic system is translated into Emma's personal problem, into her capability to recognize her proper role of benefactress of those who are not as fortunate as she is.¹²⁸

So, according to Fowkes Tobin, Box Hill is just a shortcut used by Austen to reduce the importance of delicate themes (rightly raised) into personal questions.

3.2 Spinsterhood: a social stigma

The word "spinster" was coined in the 14th century to define a woman who spins wool for the fabric. Originally, it was not in itself a term of abuse, as it referred to a woman who earned her money by working. Its pejorative connotation derived from a custom of the Industrial Revolution according to which women had to work the woolly yarn in a certain way before being considered suitable for marriage.¹²⁹ Today, at the voice *spinster* the Merriam-Webster gives us the following definition: "unmarried woman and especially one past the common age for marrying."¹³⁰ This definition is *partially* neutral (or not at all), since today it is widely used in order to marginalize and

¹²⁷ Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin, *Aiding Impoverished Gentlewomen...*, 425

¹²⁸ Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin, *Aiding...*, 426

¹²⁹ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian Theory of Spinsterhood*, in University of Wollongong Historical Journal, vol.2, 1976, 57

¹³⁰Merriam-Webster, "Spinster.", def. 2b.

stigmatize women who remain single and even if the word does not carry the negative sense, his usage is colored with prejudices.¹³¹

During the Victorian period, there was a surplus of women upon men: a third of women aged 25 or more were single. And people knew this, despite the fact that Victorian society preferred married women upon unmarried ones.¹³² They found the proof of this stance in the supposed laws of nature: marriage and motherhood were supposed to be the primary purposes for women, the natural roles which they have been created for. The Victorians misunderstood the adjective “natural” since they matched it with the concept of civilization: according to them, their society was the most civilized one, and they were neither the firsts nor the lasts to think that their arrangements were the standards which all the other societies must be measured to. In this view, marriage appeared not only the most natural but also the most civilized moral and social order.¹³³

As said for Miss Bates’, being a spinster does not automatically imply the neglecting of motherhood: when a women did not succeed in creating a family, society expected her to play out her femininity and supply her female duties within the community by dedicating herself to charity or helping aging parents or relatives.¹³⁴ In this regard, the quotation from *The Girls Manual* used by Zsusa Berend in her essay named “*The Best or None!*”, is suitable: “single ladies are a blessing to aging parents[...] the single women, therefore, is as important an element of social and private happiness as the married ones. The utilities of each are different, but both are necessary”¹³⁵.

After all, If we consider that a *single* woman of Victorian England could hold and control properties (if she had any), the question rises quite naturally:

¹³¹ Erin Blakemore, *Original Spin: on the History of the Spinster*, in Jstore DAILY, Apr. 24, 2015 Web <https://daily.jstor.org/original-spin-history-spinster/>

¹³² Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian...*, 39

¹³³ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian...*, 53

¹³⁴ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian...*, 45

¹³⁵ Zsusa Berend, “*The Best or None!*”, in *Journal of Social History*, vol.33, no.4, 2000, 942 - cit. *The Girls Manual*, New York 1836

“why then were women so eager to marry?” the answer is, that social functions mattered more than legal status.¹³⁶

Due to these pressures, in the 19th century, the stereotypes of spinsters were reinforced as failure within the society.

In spite of this, the spinsters’ social stigma was quite a question of class-belonging, since it affected especially the middle-class.¹³⁷

A spinster who belonged to the inferior ranks, to the working class, had no problem in redeeming her spinsterhood by taking in a job, (though of modest income) in order to support her family.¹³⁸ The said employment was generally in the cottage industry, in farms, factory or in domestic service. Unmarried women from upper classes, indeed, usually survived thanks to the aristocratic immunity (the epithet of “old maid” was actually never referred to their rank).¹³⁹ The problem persisted within middle-classes spinsters. I have to point out that working to live was considered degrading both for the women of this class and for aristocracy, too¹⁴⁰: this beliefs derived from the fact that middle-class was a new phenomenon born by the Industrial Revolution, with no traditions to follow. Men were actually both driven by the desire to profit but, at the same time they wanted to demonstrate they could support their women by following an aristocratic lifestyle.¹⁴¹ On one hand this actually contributed to their avoidance of spinsterhood. But, on the other hand, the remaining unmarried could not improve their financial status neither by marriage nor by a job.

However, a spinster with a wide or modest income was out of this purview, and the contrast single women’s two situations, one with fortunes and the other not, further consolidated marriage as an economic shelter¹⁴².

¹³⁶ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian Theory of Spinsterhood*, 42

¹³⁷ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian...*, 36

¹³⁸ *Spinsterhood in the Victorian Era*, Web <http://victorian-era.org/spinsterhood-spinster.html>

¹³⁹ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian...*, 56

¹⁴⁰ Filiz Barin Akman, *An Investigation of...*, 1112

¹⁴¹ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian...*, 56

¹⁴² Filiz Barin Akman, *An Investigation of...*, 1116

Spinsters were allowed to show their feelings to whoever courted them regardless of how reputation could be affected by this. In this way, they were used by men just as entertainments.¹⁴³ As Rosemary Auchmuty explains us throughout her essay *The Victorian theory of Spinsterhood*, for the sexual freedom the spinsters had, they were shunned vehemently by both men and women. By the first, because they were perceived as independent from the traditional male domination and control; by the second because of personal jealousy and rivalry engendered by the conventions of their upbringing.¹⁴⁴

But singles' life status has always had protectors, too. An adequate defense for them has its stem in Christian's doctrine.

In a certain way, Christian theory states that single life is part of God's design as marriage is. So, if a woman does not succeed in marrying is not her fault, since it was God that appointed it. After all, unmarried status implied virginity and virginity is still considered one of the highest virtues by the Christians. Moreover, we do not have to forget that only the unmarried can devote themselves to the religious functions that are the most honorable functions of all. It was thought that unmarried women would have dedicated their lives to the Lord's business in body as in spirits rather than be devoted to a husband.¹⁴⁵ Augustine even declared that the blessing of having a child is incomparable to the blessing of celibacy and although married people could win the eternal life, they would never occupy the places closest to God.¹⁴⁶

In her essay "*The Best or None!*", Zsusa Berend also regards the Christian doctrine as an useful support for spinsters lives, starting from the assumption that love had a weight in the decisions of a spinster in the 19th century. She assumes that, in opposition to the modern trend that wants the women unmarried because of the dismissal of traditional marriage values, in the 19th century women decided to avoid matrimony because they strongly adhered to

¹⁴³ *Spinsterhood in the Victorian Era*, Web <http://victorian-era.org/spinsterhood-spinster.html>

¹⁴⁴ Rosemary Auchmutin, *The Victorian...*, 46-47

¹⁴⁵ Rosemary Auchmutin, *The Victorian...*, 49

¹⁴⁶ Rosemary Auchmutin, *The Victorian...*, 49

ideals about traditional marriage for love. The roots of this assumption are to be found both in Christian culture, (as I argued above) and more specific in Evangelical Protestantism.¹⁴⁷ This last doctrine associates human love to the highest form of faith since the spontaneity of feelings is regarded as a sign of Providence. A solid union should be based on love first, followed by understanding and esteem. These noble feelings prevented a woman to marry unless she could give all her heart to the right one. The author also declares that the spinsters on whom she based her study, were trying to find their place in the world. It was not a mere question of self-realization or self-fulfillment. Rather indeed, they were trying to appear responsible to God. They were convinced that their lives served a higher purpose and the fact they were involved in activities of usefulness and service allowed them to live a life in accordance with God's purposes.¹⁴⁸

Even literature betrayed spinsterhood. If we think about it, a spinster is never the heroine of a novel. And If Emma elevates herself as a paladin of celibacy, as she states continually within the novel, she ends up marrying as well. Almost all the novels close with a marriage scene or with death. Zsusa Berend assumes as well that the most part of literature emphasizes the restrictions of spinsters' sphere, even if she prefers to focus on the possibilities they have within the community.¹⁴⁹

In this light, in spite of all her efforts in giving Miss Bates a social function, even Austen turns to be a betrayer of unmarried women. View in these terms, (even if in my opinion is a too apocalyptic scenario) according to Auchmuty, literature could become a dangerous medium through which spinster stereotypes are propagated.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Zsusa Berend, "*The Best or None!*", 936

¹⁴⁸ Zsusa Berend, "*The Best or None!*", 942

¹⁴⁹ Zsusa Berend, "*The Best or None!*",

¹⁵⁰ Rosemary Auchmuty, *The Victorian...*, 59

3.2.1. A comparison between yesterday and nowadays: what has changed for unmarried women?

As I argued in the previous paragraph, Merriam-Webster says that a spinster is a single woman who is over the suitable age of marrying. Yet another term has been coined today to replace it in order to indicate single women over 26: she is no longer a spinster, she is now a *thornback*. The necessity of labeling a single woman according to her age is may be a symptom of how things have not been changed so much, and the new term equally carries prejudices as the old one did. Ironically, Faima Bakar states that the male equivalent is called *bachelor* and if he starts to grey a little bit, he turns to be a *silver fox*. In spite of irony, the term marks indirectly that a woman should be married by the age of 26.¹⁵¹

According to some surveys, from the post-war era to the 90s', the percentage of women over 45 who have never married fell down to 5%, and the number of childless women between 40s and 50s declined as well. Maybe, the number of men died in the war, may have affected this share somehow. In the recent decades, these trends are reversed. The share of unmarried women over 45 went up to 9% and the childless women of 40 rose from 10.2% of 80s up to 18.8% in 2010. From the last census reported by the article, it has been estimated that in 2014 they are statically 18.5%. To be sure, we should not interpret these numbers as an exactly science, since today a woman can be married and childless or she can have a baby without being married.¹⁵²

One can consider these data both alarming or not, but regardless the personal opinion, we cannot deny, impartially speaking, a rising in spinsterhood. The trend could be explained by a shift of perspectives within men and women's

¹⁵¹ Faima Baker, *If you are an unmarried woman over 26, you're not a spinster, you're a thornback*, in METRO News, 2019, Web <https://metro.co.uk/2019/03/14/if-youre-an-unmarried-woman-over-the-age-of-26-youre-not-a-spinster-youre-a-thornback-8902030/>

¹⁵² Neil Howe, *The Return of The Spinster*, in Forbes, Sep. 30 2015

lives. As some researches show, women have gained on or even surpassed men in spheres such as education and employment: if we analyze the number of graduate women and men, we will discover that, in 2010, for instance, they were respectively 55% to 45%. Moreover, the 51.4% of women were employed in professional careers. So according to the current trend, modern men tend to be less educated and less successful than their female pairs.¹⁵³

Jackie M. Blount wrote an essay about gender matters within school employments between 1850 and 1990. She starts from the assumption that school environment is strongly gender-identified, since women have always occupied lower position such as educators or teachers; meanwhile men have gained administrative positions. From the end of the 19th century and for one hundred years on, single women or spinsters conducted the most part of teaching jobs. And the tendency was so strong that a male teacher could be even labeled as effeminate.¹⁵⁴

The said women were expected to fulfill a female attitude by teaching as a preparation for motherhood and they were widely accepted as educators. In this way, they experienced independence and freedom, socially and economically speaking. Most of them choose to remain single and live celibate, a choice in itself that challenged the gender stereotypes to which the school environment was so attached.¹⁵⁵ In spite of this, the school system actually preferred to hire old maids and single women for a specific reason: as a spinster, a woman would have never faced the problem to work with another male employee.¹⁵⁶

As the number of spinsters teachers increased, they were even supported by social institutions that provided them an accommodation: in the cities started

¹⁵³ Breanna Neubauer, *This Old Maid..*, 124

¹⁵⁴ Jackie M. Blount, *Spinsters, Bachelors and Other Gender Transgressors in School Employment 1850-1990*, in *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 70, no.1, Spring 2000, 83

¹⁵⁵ Jackie M. Blount, *Spinsters, Bachelors and Other...*, 85

¹⁵⁶ Jackie M. Blount, *Spinsters, Bachelors and Other...*, 87

the proliferation of houses, apartments, flats, sold to modest prices, suitable for a teacher's income and socially acceptable.¹⁵⁷

In the early 1900s' was registered a change in direction, since single teacher's proliferation began to constitute a threat within the society standards. Theodore Roosevelt said that the tendency was quite a suicide of the white middle-class.¹⁵⁸ Spinster teachers began to be regarded as deviant, too mental unbalanced to stay near children. And the fact that they often shared the apartments, inevitably turned into the charge of lesbianism, the unspeakable social transgression. In regard of this, in 1934, David Peters in his study *The Status of the Married Women Teacher* dared say that children who were taught by married teachers had better profits than the ones in contact with single teachers.¹⁵⁹

According to Neil Howe, indeed, things have known a development and spinsters today enjoy a wider social acceptance. He assumes that the positive perception of spinsterhood today is due, in addition to the new professional possibilities argued above, to the raising of the social networks and new technologies that have expanded the choices available to women.¹⁶⁰ He states that these raising prospects have to do with the generational currents that have facilitated women independence. Let's consider, for example, the Boomers women, that is, the generation born between 1944 and 1964 that today have a strong impact on the economy and with a strong tendency to the profit (due probably to the widespread optimism after World War II).¹⁶¹ Consequently, and not by chance, a lot of women among this group decided to remain unmarried or childless, because they are (or better, they *were*, since the most part is retired today) more oriented toward the professional opportunities. Moreover, the women who belong to the Generation X, born between 1965

¹⁵⁷ Jackie M. Blount, *Spinsters, Bachelors and Others...*, 87

¹⁵⁸ Jackie M. Blount, *Spinsters, Bachelors and Others...*, 88

¹⁵⁹ Jackie M. Blount, *Spinsters, Bachelors and Others...*, 90

¹⁶⁰ Neil Howe, *The Return of...*, 1

¹⁶¹ Jim Chappelow, *Baby Boomer*, in Inestopedia, 2019, Web https://www.inestopedia.com/terms/b/baby_boomer.asp

and 1979, (also called the Xers), believe that before being married or mother, one should be prepared to live life on her own terms. They are, in fact, more flexible about work but equally ambitious and self-sufficient.¹⁶² These waves are helping, in a certain way, to mitigate the stereotypes that have long been associated to spinsterhood and fight against the social rejection, even if there is a long way to go.

According to Neubauer, for instance, the mere fact that journalists and media keep being concerned about the statistics and repercussions of single ladies lifestyle (e.g. the decline of marriage and motherhood) is symptomatic: is an echo of the above-mentioned 19th century beliefs about spinsterhood.¹⁶³

Claudia Connell wrote an article on *The Guardian* titled *Don't Call me a Spinster!*, in which she proudly declares to be unmarried and discusses about her status within the current society. She affirms that in spite of her sense of humor, some questions or statements still bother and hurt her. The social pressure brings her to believe that if she is not married yet, at the age of 47, there must be something wrong with her. Across the years, she has been accused of being too fussy, too independent, too smart, as these were lacks within a possible relationship. For, when someone asks why she is not married she simply replies that “the same as my answer to why I've never visited Canada, ridden a horse or broken my arm: I don't know, it just didn't happen.”¹⁶⁴

In the article *Why aren't spinsters eligible?* Sophie Tanner calls the attention on the new born self-marriage movement, to which she adheres, since at the age of 36 she married herself. “It was the happiest day of my life”¹⁶⁵, she declares. Her goal is to fight against stereotypes that wanted women married by a certain age range. She accuses the society to be only apparently liberated,

¹⁶² Kasasa, *Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z Explained*, 2019, Web
<https://www.kasasa.com/articles/generations/gen-x-gen-y-gen-z>

¹⁶³ Breanna Neubauer, *This Old Maid*, 124

¹⁶⁴ Claudia Connell, *Don't call me a Spinster!*, in *The Guardian*, Sat. 31 may 2014

¹⁶⁵ Sophie Tanner, *Why aren't Spinsters Eligible?*, in *Huffpost, The Blog*, 2016 ,
https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/sophie-tanner/why-arent-spinsters-eligible_b_9550088.html

since the women still suffer from being alone after their sell-by date, and they are terrified to remain alone or turn “into old cat ladies”. She fights in order to demonstrate that there is no more need to apologize for a life spent without a husband.¹⁶⁶

What if Emma herself would have been a living character?

She probably would have written a blog as well, in which she would have explained her positions about spinsterhood. She would have assumed that spinsterhood turns to be a problem only if a woman is neither wealthy (economically speaking), nor suitable within the modern society. Since few progress have been done across centuries, someone today could have disagreed with her.

But, on the other side, Emma would have explained her status of spinster, due firstly to her economic position: as I repeated many times within this dissertation, Emma has no need to increase her economic status since she is the owner of £30,000 per year. A situation quite abnormal for a woman in the 19th century. Her choice would have been widely shared today. And this demonstrates how Emma remains a modern character regardless of the historical period.

So, as many women states today, she would have married only if she had met the right one. Otherwise, remaining unmarried would not have been a problem for her.

¹⁶⁶ Sophie Tanner, *Why Aren't Spinsters Eligible?*

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