

Some Thoughts on *Emma* by Claire F. Martin

Something that struck me this read through is the “like me” section in the Frank monologue - who does Emma allow to be like her, and who does she pretend is not like her? She sees everyone else only in comparison to herself.

Elton is just so wrong about Emma from the start. Is Elton projecting a character as much onto Emma as Emma is projecting a character onto Harriet? What happens when people don't behave the way we want them to? Emma and Elton might be more “like” one another than she'd ever like to admit. Expectation vs. reality as a key thread in this adaptation.

I like this line about “fancy”, and I also like that Knightley hits back - I believe him when he says it's not about her gender but about the literal circumstances. It would have been easy to end the conversation on her “expected better of you” but you did not make the easy choice!

Which conversations are best situated in the dream world and which conversations are best situated in the real world? How much can we trust the dream world Knightley?

If dream world Knightley is real (vs. being a fragment of Emma's conscience or a theatrical conceit) why does he choose to engage with her in the dream world or aside world at all? What does he get out of joining her there? Closeness to her? Freedom from societal rules to critique her? Is he vying for the role of narrator? What are his goals in the dream world vs. his goals in the real world?

I think I know why Emma needs the dream world, both in a meta sense and in a “I need everyone to see things the way I see them” sense. What does she get from choosing to let Knightley into the dream world? (Once again assuming he is “real” in that the real world Knightley is aware of having been to the dream world and the things that they say there have consequences in the real world.)

Is Emma a reliable narrator? Of the world? Of her own experiences? Do you want the audience to see Emma as a reliable narrator, regardless of whether she is or not?

What about Knightley encourages Emma's vulnerability? What about Emma encourages Knightley's vulnerability?

How far is too far with these two? Unlike Lizzy/Darcy, who are getting to know each other for the first time and learning each other's limits (insulting family, off limits; defending Wickham, off limits), Emma and Knightley know each other intimately. What are the points in their past where someone's gone too far, if any? How do they know when the banter and critiquing goes too far? Do they know? Have they ever hit that point, or do we see it happen for the first time in this play? When does it stop being fun, on each side? Is it the same point, or do they have different limits?

Who is Mrs. Goddard when she is at home? Why is she not invited to the wedding? (On a non-meta level.) What is her social status, compared to Miss Bates? Compared to Anne Taylor (specifically before she was Mrs. Weston)? Compared to her own pupils?

In your world of the play, who are the students at the school? Is it mostly a place for the “natural daughters” of gentry, is it mostly charity students from lower income families, is it “working class” girls - daughters of lawyers, clergymen, drapers, what have you? Is it surprising that a girl from this school would be welcomed into Emma’s inner circle?

How much does Harriet know about Emma before their meeting?

Emma and sexuality – “I don’t bite unless provoked”, describing Frank as “tantalizing”, “in bed with cholera sooner than a husband” - what is her relationship with her own sexuality and desire? Once again—sorry to do a P&P comparison, but it’s almost always clear that Lizzy and Darcy are very aware that as well as being nemeses, they also are absolutely into each other in spite of themselves. Does Emma harbor desire for Knightley from the start, or does that develop only with her feelings, because her desire is aimed at her idea of Frank (much safer to desire an ideal that isn’t here than the man standing right next to you). Does Knightley know he desires Emma? Does he know he loves her, or is that a discovery for him along the way as much as it is for her?

Emma speaking about Harriet’s unknown parentage like she’s talking about not remembering where she bought the chintz for her curtains is sending me. How does Harriet feel about this? Is it a sore spot? How much does Harriet know about her own past?

Missing “I “ in “I had the great honor” bottom of page 9.

Love the mistaken Martins!

From where does Emma’s classism stem? Is this learned from her father and sister? From other people of similar class in her life? Knightley, of equal status to Emma, seems to regard Robert Martin if not as an equal, then still as a person of consequence and dignity. What was different about their upbringings to yield these two different takes on status?

In the necessary framework of maintaining some continuity with the novel, Harriet and Martin marry within their station (not always Austen’s move - see Lizzy, see Fanny, see Marianne) how does Emma answer for her classism, if at all? I’m not at all saying she needs consequences, but kind of like say *Twelfth Night*, which seems very queer and then ends up with everyone heterosexually ever after, there are not out-of-class matches in this story that is so so clearly about class. What do we make of that? How, if at all, would you like to tackle that? How are you hoping directors will consider class and race in casting this adaptation?

How did Harriet meet the Martins? How far did things go between Harriet and Robert, emotionally speaking? Are they always blushing and stammering? Have they had any moments of true connection, or is this a reasonable historically plausible marriage where two people of equal status and seemingly equal dispositions decide to get married on this basis of “we are similar” rather than the deep love and long-held or hard-won compatibility of Emma and Knightley or Lizzy and Darcy?

Elton is cringe; 10/10.

I am not confused by this at all because I know your style, but I do want to flag that the transition from trio scene to the Knightley/Anne scene might be a jolt for a reader or audience member. I had a flicker of a thought that they were in the brain/aside world, observing, as opposed to being in a real parlor or garden or whatever somewhere talking about the events of the previous scene that they have heard about vs. commenting on action they have observed in a meta place. Which was your intention? Is there a way you can qualify this a little more firmly for future readers, directors, and actors?

Knightley, arguably the person with the most status in this play, has no qualms about a sincere and equal friendship with someone who is definitely his societal lesser, Mrs. Weston. She was employed. He is a gentleman who engages in more work than most gentlemen.

I love the implication that Knightley and Anne Weston have previously had disputes about the handling of Emma. That tracks to me completely.

What is Mrs. Weston's relation to class status? Does she also feel that she was never truly Emma's friend because they were not equal? Or is it that Harriet is not as quick as Emma that makes Mrs. Weston feel there's an inequality?

In which ways other than perhaps having kindness as a slightly higher priority does Harriet exceed Emma? How can we share those traits or give her a "Rosemary moment" somewhere in the play? How would it feel for Emma to realize that Harriet exceeds her in some way?

Are all Emma's friendships predicated on inequality, except Knightley? Does she purposefully seek out friendships with people who are Less Than, whether in wit, money, status, charm, talent? How does Jane Fairfax play into this paradigm? Jane is Less Than in status, but More Than in other things.

What does Mrs. Weston know about Emma that Knightley doesn't? Vice versa? They clearly have two very different pictures of this woman. How does Emma behave differently when alone with Weston than she does when alone with Knightley? Have she and Knightley ever been truly alone together, not in the aside world?

How old is Anne Weston, in your world? How does her being a little older than the "kids" like Emma Knightley Frank Jane Harriet but younger than the "adults" Miss Bates Mr. Woodhouse her own husband play into her relationships?

"Miss Bates is not universally despised - nobody is afraid of her." Is this a face moment? Emma is not quite universally despised but she's going to be for a least a minute later on. Lots of people are afraid of her. How does Emma really feel, deep down and in private, about Miss Bates? Take class out of it. Suppose Miss Bates was rich and nothing else altered. How do you really feel Emma?

How will Harriet's perception of Jane be colored by this interrupted moment?

Why is Harriet's second question about his plainness? Has she already secretly begun to doubt his worthiness, or is she trying to hide the fact that she thinks he's the most gorgeous thing she's ever seen? Trying to be cool with her cool friend.

Emma revels in being a little bit of a villain. “A more treacherous acquaintance”. What’s the chicken and egg here? Does she know she’s a little caustic and embraces it? Or is she afraid of being called a villain so she gets there first? Is she creating this caustic persona because it’s better than being vulnerable, and after so much time she has become the mask?

It seems clearer and clearer to me with each new scene that our central dramatic question here is “Who is Emma, really?” Emma has to discover this for herself, and decide if who she is is who she wants to be. What will her character defining moment and action be? This is different than *P&P*, in which one might say the central dramatic question is “Will I change?” Lizzy and Darcy know who they are; they need to decide if they can grow and learn while still holding on to their sense of self.

How does Emma feel about religion? Does she believe in anything? How does that impact her relationship with Elton?

Love this portrait transition. I might even dare to suggest you can just have her snap, make her comment, and snap into the next scene without needing to preface it with “along to the sitting?”. I absolutely see why you did what you did, but I think stage magic will make it very clear that we’ve changed time and place.

Elton starts to show how insufferable he is here and it’s the perfect time for it.

Where are we in this scene? How does Robert know to find Knightly there unless we’re at Donwell? Would Robert Martin dare show up at Highbury? I totally see the dramaturgy of this moment from the outside, but I’d love some clarity on the internal logic.

This is a bad moment for Emma. We get to see her real villainy, not just her fun villainy. Like with Elton before, it’s the right time. Emma’s showing her face and doesn’t realize it. That’s an exciting moment in any play.

This transition is super clear and clean - excellently done, Emma!

Knightly comes down hard on Harriet. How well does he actually know her? Is this his villain moment? Is he projecting a character onto Harriet just like Emma does? Who is Harriet, really?