Katie Zacharatos – True or Trite? Austen's *Emma* and Her Deconstruction of "Love is Blind"

The phrase "love is blind" has been a staple of the English language for centuries. First recorded in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the aphorism was popularized in the late fourteenth century by William Shakespeare. Since then, the phrase has endured centuries of contemplation that has spiraled outward into intense cultural debate, characterized most famously by the television show of the same name. Centuries prior to such pop culture gimmicks, Jane Austen herself put forth her own perspective on the presumptuous phrase, rejecting the wisdom of Shakespeare to argue that love is most certainly not blind. For Austen's characters, love and its acknowledgement are illumination, mental clarity, and freedom from enduring misunderstandings and miscommunications. Austen's exploration of this concept is most notable in *Emma*; distinct from her other novels, *Emma* is unique in that nearly every character it charts through the complex society of Highbury is already in love at the beginning of the story—they simply fail to acknowledge it. This lack of acknowledgement drags this eccentric cast of characters into situations ranging from tragic to downright ridiculous, altering their lives in strange and significant ways over the course of the novel. Through her exploration of the lives and relationships of Harriet Smith, Jane Fairfax, Mrs. Elton, and, of course, Emma herself, Austen highlights the clarifying powers of love and the dangers one faces when they fail to acknowledge it, rejecting this supposed wisdom and emphasizing that love is anything but blind.

While Austen's novels can easily be read as a rebuke of trite aphorisms like "love is blind" from a modern perspective, her familiarity with the contemporary literature of her own time suggests that this reading is no mere modern coincidence. Given her frequent interaction with other authors of her time in her work, including Shakespeare himself, it seems highly likely that Austen would have been deliberately responding to Shakespeare and other writers who helped popularize such concepts as "love is blind." In the first chapter of her book, *Jane Austen's*

Reading in Context, scholar Katie Halsey writes, "Austen's confrontation with the popular novels of her own time, focus[ed] on her resistance to and mockery of literary stereotypes: stock situations, stock characters, and glib morality" (Halsey 28). Halsey goes on to detail Austen's well-documented literary prowess and the particular concern she had with stereotypes of and stipulations for women's reading (Halsey 29). In doing so, Halsey all but confirms that Austen's engagement with ideas like "love is blind" present in popular culture, as well as the authors who popularized such phrases, was likely a deliberate move designed to reject social standards she disapproved of, suggesting her frequent use of visual metaphors and blindness in conjunction with love in her work, and particularly in *Emma*, was no accident. Halsey goes on to assert, "Austen's novels belong in a tradition that believed in the importance of educating women to read more selectively, more carefully, and, crucially, more intelligently" (Halsey 35). Indeed, Austen's work as a writer was no mere pastime; instead, she worked tirelessly to communicate her beliefs through her creation of fictional characters and scenarios. The use of words like "educating" and "intelligently" in this particular quote speak to Austen's reputation as a woman deeply interested in the possibility of educated, intelligent women who, rather than put aside intellectual pursuits in favor of social pressures, allow their experiences—emotional or otherwise— to enable them to "read" the world around them more effectively. This evidence of Austen's highly deliberate engagement with contemporary literature and her interest in rejecting unjust social standards through careful consideration of the culture around her takes this reading of *Emma* beyond simple coincidence; considering her clear interest in weaving such critiques of her society into her novels, her decision to frame Emma as an intensely visual yet figuratively blind heroine suggests she was all too aware of aphorisms like "love is blind" and worked deliberately to dismantle them.

In service of these intellectual goals, Austen establishes love and its acknowledgement as a central theme throughout her body of work. As her characters meet and progress toward love, they undergo parallel journeys toward social understanding and self-discovery, fundamentally linking Austen's consideration of societal standards with the experience of falling in love. The more her characters open themselves up to love, the more aware they become of the pitfalls and restrictions of the society around them, demonstrating Austen's interest in the revealing nature of love and its powers of self and social discovery. Austen scholar Patrick Fessenbecker sums this interest up as, "for Austen, the state of love consists of two formerly omnipotent teachers who have ceded to each other the power to teach, or willed each other as teachers" (Fessenbecker 760). Though Fessenbecker assigns this statement particularly to *Pride and Prejudice*—Darcy tells Elizabeth he would still "think meanly of [others] sense" if not for his love for her—of all of Austen's novels, her exploration of the pedagogical power of love seems most deliberate in *Emma*. Though Fessenbecker's argument centers primarily around the potential for power imbalances in Austen's pedagogical romances, with this statement, he affirms Austen's general interest in love as education for those who feel and acknowledge it; when her characters stop positioning themselves as omnipotent forces and allow their love for another to blossom, they cede their interest in the social rigmarole and allow their love to bring them mental clarity beyond societal standard. Despite Fessenbecker's focus on *Pride and Prejudice*, nowhere does this eventual rejection of omnipotence land as impactfully as in *Emma*. Because most of Highbury's eclectic cast of characters begin the novel in love, rather than simply end it as such, as in Austen's other novels, when they ultimately cast off this veil of omnipotence, it comes as a deliberate realization, rather than a gradual awakening. Furthermore, in establishing the continuous influence of love on these characters, Austen is able to examine the emotion's impact

against months of the trials and tribulations of daily life, rather than in isolated incidents. In doing so, she writes perhaps a truer romance novel in *Emma* than in any of her others, one that considers love and its impact on life in all its variations. In this sense, Austen's consideration of "love is blind" in *Emma* is more deliberate, more impactful, and, ironically enough, more visually clear, than anywhere else in her acclaimed body of work.

Austen's consideration of the acknowledgement of love in *Emma* begins with the earnest, sometimes ridiculous, Harriet Smith. Like most of the novel's characters, Harriet begins the novel in love. However, she hasn't yet realized it, a seemingly small detail which very quickly spirals out of control. Though she isn't yet aware of her feelings, her counterpart, Mr. Robert Martin, is, leading to a proposal of marriage that should, in theory, remove any uncertainty on Harriet's part. However, Emma and her machinations disrupt this process. Austen writes, "The young man had been the first admirer, but [Emma] trusted there was no other hold" (Austen 25). Despite Emma's skepticism, Harriet speaks of Robert Martin and her affection for him, and his for her, with more insight and clarity at this point than she does perhaps anywhere else in the novel. Her love and her tenuous acknowledgement of it allows her to make sense both of Mr. Martin and the world they exist in. When Harriet tells Emma of his proposal, though, Emma says "Harriet, do not deceive yourself." The narrator goes on to explain, "Harriet turned away confused" (Austen 42). Until this moment, Austen writes Harriet with a certain frivolity, even hilarity, but never as specifically "confused" about her life and its direction. Only after Emma influences her to reject her love for Robert Martin does she begin to fall prey to ever-growing schemes and misinterpretations such as are present in her "relationships" with Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, and even Mr. Knightley. Once she loses the guiding light of the certainty of loving and being loved, her mental clarity fractures and she becomes "blind" to the truth of the rest of the

world around her. Though she regains Robert Martin's affection by the end of the novel—if she ever truly lost it—the stain of Emma's misdeeds continues to loom over her life. Upon learning of Harriet's engagement to Mr. Martin, Emma tells Mr. Knightley she wishes them well and regrets her earlier actions. She says, "'I hope so—for at that time I was a fool'" (Austen 365). While Emma's acknowledgement of fault aligns with her greater intellectual capacity following her acknowledgement of her love for Knightley, in this case, her prior misdeeds remain demonstrative of the incredible danger of remaining blind to love. Earlier in this interaction, she says, "*Her* connexions may be worse than his. In respectability of character, there can be no doubt that they are" (Austen 363). This moment, though it perfectly highlights Austen's belief in the pitfalls of ignoring one's emotion, is also one of the novel's most tragic. Though Emma purportedly wishes her friend well, she clearly no longer feels the affection for her that she once did, a new perspective which, though perhaps more accurate to Harriet's true situation, serves also to belittle a young woman who only ever rejected her own love because of Emma's misguided input. Here, rather than expressing true, uninhibited happiness for her friend, Emma judges the changes in Harriet's character that directly stem from her own scheming, highlighting the perils, socially and intellectually, that await those who reject love. While Emma's and Harriet's changed situations make Austen's point about the hazards of blinding oneself to love quite clear, this conversation also makes evident that sometimes, just the initial rejection of love can create lasting aftershocks, even if the feelings are ultimately acknowledged and reciprocated.

Just like Harriet, Jane Fairfax is also in love for the duration of the novel, though she also doubts its strength and veracity, leading to misunderstandings and general misery. Upon Jane's arrival to Highbury, Emma finds her insufferably reserved. The narrator reveals, "There was no getting at [Jane's] real opinion … she seemed determined to hazard nothing" (Austen 129).

Before Frank's arrival in Highbury, Jane is confident in his love for her. Despite her determination to avoid offering any information on him, Austen makes clear that her reticence stems not from a lack of knowledge—that is, from "blindness"—but from an unwillingness to engage in social gossip she deems beneath the notice of someone as assured and clear in her love and in her life as she is. As the novel progresses and Frank pays increasingly more attention to Emma, though, Jane's certainty wavers. Her misery comes to a head in her sudden departure from Donwell. Austen writes, "her parting words … seemed to burst from an overcharged heart, and to describe … the continual endurance … even towards some of those who loved her best" (Austen 279). Though both readers and Emma herself are unaware of Jane's liaison with Frank at this point in the novel, in hindsight, Austen offers a wry insight into Jane's emotions and the torment she feels when her relationship with Frank seems in jeopardy. While Emma assumes her distress stems from exhaustion with Mrs. Elton's machinations and Miss Bates's endless prattle, Jane's "endurance" is tested because of her relationship with Frank, whose excess flirtation with Emma makes Jane doubt his love and fractures her confidence in herself and the world around her. Where once she was confident and assured in her engagement with Frank, now she feels torn between placing her faith in his love for her and making a rational decision about her future and her potential career as a governess. Had Frank been clearer in his love and allowed her to retain the mental clarity she obviously felt during her first encounter with Emma, Jane may have avoided the misery of the novel's final chapters. Though she is ultimately saved by Mrs. Churchill's death and Frank's subsequent declaration of their engagement, for much of the novel, her faith is shaken, creating a shell of a character who is a far cry from the confident, self-assured young woman Austen first introduces readers to.

To yet further emphasize the importance of love in understanding the world, Austen also portrays those notably in want of it. Mrs. Elton, newly married yet lacking true love or social insight, is one of the novel's most ridiculous characters, especially in comparison with Highbury's only other significant married woman, Mrs. Weston. Early in the novel, Mr. Knightley—by far the novel's most self-assured, mentally evolved character—seeks Mrs. Weston's opinion on Emma's intimacy with Harriet, positioning her, by virtue of his regard, as an intelligent, thoughtful woman aware of the truth of the world around her (Austen 28). This depiction of the knowledge and insight of Mrs. Weston, who is clearly in love with her husband, reaffirms Austen's belief in the clarity available to those who experience and allow the force of love into their lives. Mr. Knightley is no exception, despite his current lack of a romantic partner; though Emma is as yet unaware of his love for her and hers for him, he is very aware of his own feelings, a circumstance which suggests Austen felt that just acknowledging and feeling love can bring a person greater mental clarity, even if the feelings aren't yet returned. The certainty of Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston is notably contrasted by Mrs. Elton, though she is married and theoretically should be "in love." Instead, she remains blind to social conventions and understanding throughout the novel, culminating in her literal blindness to the events of Emma's wedding. Austen writes, "Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all … inferior to her own" (Austen 372). Mrs. Elton, thoughtless and socially blind for most, if not all, of her brief but memorable time in the novel, is physically shut out of the novel's final moments, dooming her to a continued lack of true insight or mental clarity. The moment becomes especially ironic considering the particulars of the moment are described to her by her husband, the one who should love her most. Austen's decision to end the novel with an interaction between the Elton's, rather than Emma and Knightley, is a major rhetorical decision.

It serves as a final reminder, as humorous as it is disturbing, that those who feel and acknowledge love achieve an intellectual level entirely unavailable to those who do not, no matter how closely they attempt to live by social strictures. Even among comedic side characters such as Mrs. Elton, Austen highlights the illuminating nature of love and the dangers that befall those who exist without its guiding force.

Austen's exploration of love and its mentally illuminating qualities culminates in the relationship between Mr. Knightley and Emma herself. Throughout the novel, Emma is veritably plagued by misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Despite various events that should perhaps have opened her eyes to the nature of her misjudgments, Emma only fully realizes the extent of her mental "blindness" upon realizing her love for Mr. Knightley. She thinks, "With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings … She was proved to have been universally mistaken" (Austen 317). Emma's realization of her social errors directly coincides with her awareness of her love for Knightley, calling back to Fessenbecker's argument and the pedagogical nature of Austen's romantic relationships. Prior to this moment, she believes herself "omnipotent" to the happenings of Highbury and acts accordingly, laying schemes that ultimately lead to greater misunderstandings and general unhappiness. Once she allows herself to feel her love for Knightley, though, she sets down this omnipotent mantle and acknowledges the true extent of her misconduct. Similarly to Knightley's own feelings, it only takes realizing her love for him, *not* knowing his for her, for Emma to gain a greater understanding of the world around her. This further supports Austen's clear belief that simply feeling and acknowledging one's love for another is enough to remove, or at least assuage, any arrogant feelings of omnipotence and open one's eyes to the society around them, though the effect is certainly heightened if both parties feel such emotion. Indeed, Emma herself admits she "seem[s] to have

been doomed to blindness," highlighting her newfound clarity and emphasizing Austen's deliberate engagement with the intersection between love and blindness (Austen 327). This recognition of blindness, mental though it may be, becomes especially impactful when considering Emma as a hypervisual character. Scholar Wendy S. Jones explains Emma as a visual, rather than literary, thinker, highlighting Austen's intentional use of visual and artistic metaphors to explain the way Emma uses sight to perceive the world around her. She argues, "If *Emma* is about perception … it is also about the assertion that there are proper and improper ways of seeing and understanding" (Jones 322). Here and throughout her article, Jones positions Emma as a staunchly visual character, suggesting that Austen deliberately places emphasis on the action of seeing and its relationship to social perception. Indeed, during Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston's conversation about Emma, they agree that they are "done expecting any course of steady reading from Emma," though her lists of books are always "very well chosen and very neatly arranged" (Austen 29). This conversation pairs with Jones's argument to clarify Emma as an exceptionally visual character, incapable of steady reading but entirely able to create "very neatly arranged" lists, suggesting an emphasis on the artistic—that is, the visual—aspects of her mind and perception, rather than her capacity for literary understanding. This particular depiction of Emma persists throughout the novel; in nearly every situation, she processes information based on what she sees in front of her, often and perilously ignoring other sensory insights that may have given her a more complete view of a situation. Though Austen's intent does not seem to be to suggest that a visual learning style is entirely undesirable, it does suggest an intense focus on the link between vision and perception, foreshadowing her ultimate consideration of "love is blind."

Austen's rejection of "love is blind" is fully realized in the novel's closing chapters, when Mr. Knightley and Emma admit their love for each other and enter into a romantic relationship as mental equals. When Mr. Knightley confesses his love to Emma, he allows her not only to understand her own blindness, as she has already done, but to comprehend a new way forward guided by the love that exists between them. At the end of his confession, Austen confirms via the narrator, "Seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised … but where, as in this case, though conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not" (Austen 331). This statement makes incredibly clear, if it wasn't already, Austen's belief in the truth of emotions beneath the blinding effect of social expectations. Though social "conduct" can quite easily result in mistakes, "feelings" are true to those who feel them. The best relationships, though, center around both positive conduct and positive feelings. Jones's article discusses such concurrence. She writes, "Perhaps the most gratifying instance of such pleasures inheres in a particular interaction, in seeing Austen's heroines discover a kind of love that engages them fully, satisfying both intellect and emotions" (Jones 333). A large portion of Jones's article discusses the concepts of "limbic resonance" and "limbic regulation," which describe the process of attuning to someone's emotions and acting in accordance with them (Jones 333). These neurological concepts, contemporary as they are, can be applied to the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley. Though their individual love for each other brings them more mental clarity, after they confess their feelings, they reach a heightened state of mental attunement, thus giving them yet greater insight into themselves, each other, and the world around them. Though Austen herself would have been unaware of exactly such terms, her description of the relationship between Knightley and Emma suggests an overall agreement with the concepts. She writes, "'My Emma, does not every thing serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings

with each other?'" (Austen 343). This advice, given from Knightley to Emma, sums up the importance of truth and clarity in bringing about emotional attunement, as well as seemingly echoes Austen's own perspective; this sentiment from Knightley, who is situated as the novel's most intelligent, insightful character, can be expanded to encompass Austen's own beliefs, making her feelings on the subject of social blindness and the clarifying effect of love quite clear. In advocating for "truth and sincerity in all our dealings," Austen alludes to more than just Emma and Knightley's budding relationship. "All our dealings" can easily be expanded to suggest the entirety of society's rigid and antiquated social rules and regulations, especially considering Knightley is referring to Frank Churchill's letter and the carnage he has wrought, both on Jane Fairfax's heart and Highbury at large. In this way, ever-clever Austen expects readers to think beyond the given context of Knightley's statement to the larger "dealings" frequent in her contemporary society. In doing so, she critiques the social strictures which demand emotional opacity and suggests a new form of social interaction based around "truth and sincerity," which would alleviate the social blindness so prevalent in society and allow for intellect and love to flourish uninhibited.

While Jane Austen is famous for a multitude of reasons, perhaps most impactful is her engagement with the social regulations of her society. In *Emma*, she achieves a thorough deconstruction of the phrase "love is blind" and depicts a society that functions not in spite of love, but because of it. Through her exploration of the lives and loves of Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, Mr. and Mrs. Weston, Emma and Mr. Knightley, and even Mr. and Mrs. Elton, Austen establishes the importance of openness and honesty not only in matters of the heart, but in every social situation. In Austen's clear and studied opinion, the acknowledgement and confession of love leads to greater mental clarity,

both singularly and in romantic partnerships. The true genius of Austen's deconstruction of "love is blind" lies in this distinction; rather than suggesting romantic relationships and the certainty of love for another as a cure for social strife—though this is the ultimate goal—Austen makes clear that allowing oneself to feel and acknowledge love for another is enough to provide new levels of mental clarity, even if these feelings are dubiously reciprocated. In doing so, she expands her analysis of society's rules and regulations beyond simply acknowledging that being in a relationship is likely advisable. Instead, she emphasizes that simply allowing oneself to feel love is enough to stimulate higher neural function. As highlighted in Jones's article, emotions do not merely augment the social landscape, they lead to greater mental stimulation and more open and intellectual dialogue, both within friendships and among romantic partners. Though Austen would have been unaware of such scientific contexts, she obviously came to be of a similar opinion through her own observations of and interactions within her ever-reticent society. The progression of Highbury's society and its eclectic cast of characters over the course of *Emma* highlights Austen's enduring belief in the importance of emotional honesty, both with oneself and with others, and thoroughly rejects these ever-unclear social structures and the idea that "love is blind." For Austen, love is not blind, but the opposite, serving as a powerful source of mental and emotional clarity in a world marked by social confusion and uncertainty.

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