Sine Qua Non:
Feminine Sublimation and Deconstruction in Emma

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A superficial reading of Jane Austen’s novel Emma might conclude that it is a bildungsroman with a subversive slant. While this designation is fitting to a degree, I contend that the novel operates on a more profound level as a textual brocade of deconstruction and feminist poststructural thought that serves a performative function as commentary on social and literary conventions. I am interested in areas of the novel where the text deconstructs itself: at times, the text develops an element within the plot (a character or power dynamic, for example) only to later throw into doubt its own established foundations. I think that the text fractures itself and the reader’s understanding through a multifaceted operation involving satire, subversion, and textual ambiguity that challenges traditional Western binaries of thought, such as truth/deception, presence/absence, male/female, and speech/writing. By subverting these binaries, the text upends metaphysical assumptions of reality founded upon Western philosophy’s proclivity for a phallogocentric habit of thought.¹

Some poststructural theorists have argued that literature operates on the opposition of privileged and unprivileged elements. But Austen’s novel de-centers such thinking and, in the process, constructs a scriptible text, that is, one in which the reader plays an integral role in

processing the meaning of the text rather than merely consuming the text for pleasure. A text that is scriptible demands the active participation of the reader to delineate between truths, half-truths, and untruths. Accordingly, I locate areas where *Emma* subverts the binary of truth/deception in order to show how the subversion of binaries makes manifold the text’s interpretational facets, and enriches our further understanding and appreciation of *Emma* and Austen.

One poststructural element that provides the reader with a method of sifting through elements of truth and deception to further understand textual events is the Derridean concept *différance*. One of my aims is to analyze how the novel’s deconstruction of itself through internal contradictions calls attention to the binary oppositions at work within patriarchal society. As a result, the work of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Devoney Looser, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak becomes important, because they provide an apparatus of discussion for *Emma* and Austen and a lens through which an appropriate counterpoint to patriarchal thought becomes visible. Irigaray’s conception of *jouissance* as a hieroglyph of Austen’s femininity becomes especially important as a perpetual reference to Austen’s indeterminate textual elusivity.

Irigaray contends that woman’s pleasure is not outwardly referential like male pleasure. Man “needs an instrument” to locate his pleasure or produce upon, whereas woman “touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation,” her action and inaction

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3 Ibid.
Moreover, female desire "would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s." I believe this pleasurable multiplicity is inevitably inscribed upon the white slate of the feminine creative act. In this way, the fractured, fractious, and elusive nature of Austen’s novel is representative of the de-centered sexuality of the female vis à vis its textual mirror. The reflection of the text in the author, or the author in the text, limits neither, but instead encourages a more demonstratively diverse interpretation. Acknowledgment of the unique feminine language provides readers with a way of grasping the textual contradictions that collide and pull at one another in Emma. For this reason, an interpretation of Emma does not quickly reveal a single meaning. Because the text operates on several levels, meaning must be carefully parsed from the text in layers, though its ultimate raison d’être remains undecidable.

Indeed, truth in feminine literature is not a linear act of “unveiling” as it has been designated in the past. Rather, feminine truth more closely resembles Emma's elusive handle on the truth, which is itself representative of l’écriture féminine and its distinctive fluidity. Feminine works of literature can then be said to flow from the fountainhead of woman’s diffusive and empathetic nature. Addressing women’s connection to writing in her seminal essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous discusses how the feminine text reflects this empathetic quality: l’écriture féminine does not "contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 25.
possible." Cixous also acknowledges the need for women to develop their own textual language as proper contrast to the phallogocentric tradition. She states that woman has in the past only "functioned 'within' the discourse of man” as a representative "signifier" that merely references its "opposite signifier [man] which annihilates" the power of women and "stifles [her] very different sounds.”

Cixous' line of thought, apropos of women's position in literature, stands starkly arrayed against the male-dominated literary tradition which states, "I am a unified, coherent being, and what is significant in the world reflects my male image." This "male image" establishes identity "as a solely masculine sameness" that subjugates woman as "his opposite . . . the negative of the positive" rather than recognizing her own inchoate importance as "different, other, otherness itself." By installing man as the all-important presence, woman becomes the supplemental sheath whose void-like absence must be inseminated with the presence of man to provide purpose, meaning, coherence, and relevance in order to "secure property" and transform "woman into a[n] . . . instrument of . . . production and passage." Using Cixous' essay as an intertextual lens, we can see that Emma's fractured self—containing both feminine compassion and the masculine need to dominate—is emblematic of the female character in

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9 Ibid., 343.
12 Spivak,"Displacement and Discourse," 60.
literature. Both Emma as character and *Emma* as text operate within the confines of an art form where textual importance is determined by the degree to which any given text conforms to the phallogocentric pattern of production. However, feminist poststructuralism is not motivated to institute a new form of domination, but only to offer an oppositional locus of comparison for the phallogocentric structure, which could lead to a more diverse understanding of women’s authorial and textual position.

*Emma* then presents an intriguing conflict. Colliding with the phallogocentric culture surrounding the novel, the author’s inherent *jouissance* struggles to assert itself, and in the process becomes entangled with the male hegemony. Within this mixture of sexual power dynamics, Austen presents the character Emma, who asserts her female individuality by dominating other women. When her designs inevitably go awry, one sees the harmful effect she has on those around her. Early in the novel, Mr. Knightley points out that Emma has compromised Harriet’s chance at happiness with Mr. Martin. She has injected vanity into “a weak head,” which Mr. Knightley believes will only lead to trouble and “mischief.” Ostensibly, her intentions seem altruistic; she wants Harriet to challenge the community’s idea of who she can and cannot marry. And yet (as is often the case) Emma’s benevolence is hopelessly intertwined with her own vanity. She would rather be the conduit to a compromised happiness than have others find happiness themselves. In this way, her femininity becomes a new viral

14 Ibid., 68.
strain of the repressive and malignant paternal antecedent. A concerted and subversive effort is made by Austen, wherein her characterization of Emma slyly critiques man’s role in influencing the behavior of women. Men create a template in their subjugation of women that women themselves then use to consolidate what little power they have, without realizing that their power is predicated upon a tyranny of the self, by the self. In much the same way some men view women, Emma sees others as lacking and believes that she alone knows what is best for them even though her purpose is antithetical to what that person (whether it be Harriet, Jane Fairfax, or Frank Churchill) actually deserves or desires. Truly, she is "no friend to Harriet," because she would rather dictate Harriet’s happiness than observe its organic progression.

As detrimental as it is to other characters, Emma does not understand how her domination, evinced in meddling, can be damaging. But by the end of the novel, we are meant to assume that she has seen the error of her ways. In fact, she does not fully reform, but only learns to conceal her true nature from Mr. Knightley. A descending refraction can be inferred from this series of events: Austen qua female writer inserts a sort of female/quasi-male hybrid (Emma) into the patriarchy in order to critique its structure from within. One could claim Austen purposefully uses a female character who exhibits masculine tendencies in order to critique the patriarchy without being criticized for an overt attack. However, one drawback to this approach is that casual readers might see only the faults of the female character, completely oblivious to the masculine mode of repression she embodies.

15 Ibid., 67.
A failure in reader recognition is understandable: *Emma* is an effusive text which is divisive and undecidable. The text extends not from one source of domination or attenuation as male writing does—stemming from its singular feature, the phallic representation of power—but from *l’écriture féminine* which "derives pleasure from . . . alterability" in its "spacious, singing flesh . . . alive [in] transformation."\(^{17}\) Readers anticipating a unified romance may lose themselves in the twisting ambiguities of a novel that does not strive for singular meaning. This feminine embrace of the infinite over that which is finite consequently challenges typical Western thought that "centralizes the world through the authority of its [man’s] self-presence and subordinates . . . other cognizable elements."\(^ {18}\) Forced to choose between partial assimilation and utter domination, Emma chooses to assimilate and retain a limited simulacrum of masculine power. For this reason, Emma might be viewed as a blazon for the corruption of female otherness that occurs within a repressive, male-dominated society.

One indicator of this corruption is the amount of deception that takes place in *Emma,* deception which often camouflages a character’s intentions from society and the individual in order to preserve personal integrity and subjectivity.\(^ {19}\) Emma herself frequently manipulates other characters like pieces on a chessboard, and her conceptions of reality and truth are tinged with the specter of deception for reasons that (like absolute truth) sometimes remain elusive. The reader is introduced to characters and provided with new information by the inhabitants of

\(^{17}\) Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 345.
Hartfield, who in turn have received bits of gossip from an assembly line of subjective viewpoints. Because people and truth are inherently changeable, and understanding is determined by the type of knowledge one is exposed to, the veracity of the reader’s and the character’s understanding can frequently be called into question.\textsuperscript{20}

Austen attempts to alleviate the reader’s concerns about Emma’s biases by filtering her view through a narrator who is complicit in the deception. When first encountering a text, one may believe that the narrator remains outside the story to the extent that they have no motive of their own. However, when an unreliable narrator serves as courier for various deceits, motivations are not always easily ascertained, and the possibility for a central truth must be further doubted. As Tara Ghoshal Wallace has pointed out, Austen purposefully employs such "strategies . . . to block access to the 'whole truth' in [her] narrative[s].”\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, Austen’s subterfuge complicates her work and leads to an "indeterminacy that subverts textual” unity.\textsuperscript{22}

An early example of the conflict between opposing versions of the truth occurs when Emma tries to justify her habit of matchmaking.\textsuperscript{23} She explains to her father and Mr. Knightley that she has proved successful in the past and proclaims that she was personally responsible for the marriage of Miss Taylor. But the sobering voice of Mr. Knightley—initially the voice of truth in the novel—underscores this revisionist history by claiming that Emma merely "made a lucky

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 377.
\textsuperscript{23} Austen, Emma, 28-29.
guess” in thinking that “it would be a very good thing for Miss Taylor if Mr. Weston were to marry her.”24 This exchange serves several purposes: it establishes a male figure as the moral compass, undercuts the female support apparatus, and illuminates the patriarchal power structure. Mr. Knightley's word choice should also be noted, for he implies that marriage is something men do to women—again, woman is only a means to man's end. Moreover, this conversation exposes Emma's propensity for self-aggrandizement and outlines for the reader the tenuous positions of truth and deception in the text.

To make sense of the complicated relationship between intent and purpose, the application of the Derridean concept différence, which posits that "meaning and knowledge are . . . based on differences,"25 is important. Lacking ultimate truth, the reader must continually engage in a process of comparison between characters and their disparate opinions to form their own truth. Therefore, a character's intention cannot be understood without the proper context provided by other characters and the intuition of the reader. Derrida identifies the binary of speech/writing as particularly problematic because it diminishes the force of the written word, and serves as an ancillary for the binary of presence/absence. When presence is valorized through this binary, an ultimate signified becomes implicit, which presupposes an elemental connection between a word or concept (signifier) and that which it denotes/connotes. In Emma the binaries of presence/absence and speech/writing undergo erasure—a Derridean concept that eliminates the polarity between binary pairs.26 Using différence to contrast critical pairs

24 Ibid., 29.
25 Bressler, Literary Criticism, 126.
embedded in *Emma* complicates our interpretation and further justifies the novel’s designation as a *scriptible* text.

One element that readers must discern from *Emma* is the influence of male thought on female characters. Indeed, Emma cannot fully extricate herself from the compromised female position in her community. Her ultimate victory is not, as the narrator would lead us to believe, in finally marrying Mr. Knightley. Rather, her victory lies in maintaining a modicum of individuality through the nondisclosure of her complicity in the harm that befalls Harriet. Emma’s deception of Mr. Knightley indicates the novel’s lack of adherence to simple truth; she does in fact solidify the repressive power dynamic between Knightley’s superior male "sameness" and her supplementary female "otherness,” but she does so even as she retains her feminine individuality in an act that defies complete submission and contrition before the masculine representation of power. She deceives him by withholding: "Emma dared not attempt any immediate reply. To speak, she was sure would be to betray" her happiness over the engagement of Harriet.27 Harriet’s engagement releases Emma from the feelings of guilt she held after leading Harriet astray, but she chooses not to reveal her complicity to Mr. Knightley. Her choice of silence implies that the act of speech would be a betrayal of her individuality.

This moment illustrates the novel’s subversion of the binary of speech/writing it has previously established. Vocal deception characterizes how the novel undermines the foundational assumption that speech contains more truth than writing. Emma does not speak

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26 Ibid., 123.
because to do so would be an act of unveiling, not the deception to which the reader has become accustomed. So once again, the text unsettles itself in an act of rebellion against the invocation of "universals" and the "world of [simplistic] forms" that diminishes "the hopes of an involved [readerly] intelligence."28 Indeed, Austen's novel "cannot fail to be more than subversive,"29 for its textual body reflects Austen, whose "body [is] without end . . . [a] whole composed of parts that are wholes [that revolve in] a limitless changing ensemble."30

The concept of truth is also limitlessly changing in Austen's novel, supposedly only revealing itself in spoken word—characterized in the novel as gossip. The text would have us play the role of Mr. Woodhouse: easily manipulated, resistant to change, lacking comprehension, another of Emma's pawns to be moved about by innuendo and disinformation. Events set in motion by Emma and the narrator must be unraveled so that one may view textual events unencumbered by their repressive version of the truth. In this way, Austen has created a satirical novel whose main character is to some extent an agent of deception and a tool of the patriarchy. Because she is part of the patriarchy, Emma is allowed to dictate—to some degree—the direction of the text and affect other members of the community. The power of Emma's influence is made evident when she changes Harriet's mind about accepting Robert Martin's proposal, even though Harriet initially seems pleased by the idea. In this sense, female figures in the novel are not pushed completely outside the sphere of influence.

30 Ibid.
Austen’s use of subversion is paralleled in the novel by her textual mirror, Emma. As a female author, Austen is allowed only so much room to operate within the confines of a restrictive culture, so she resorts to subterfuge to undermine male hegemony. Emma operates in the same capacity, as a figure that continually shifts between the role of opposition and of ancillary to male power. Austen establishes this conflict between Emma’s role within the patriarchy and her retention of self-identity as a way to critique social roles and designate the burden of responsibility that falls on women in a hostile society.

In her essay, "'The Duty of Woman by Woman': Reforming Feminism in Emma," Devoney Looser hones in on this element of the novel when she portrays Emma as unsupportive of other female characters. For example, Emma mentors Harriet, but rather than this relationship being mutually beneficial, it only alleviates Emma’s boredom and enables her selfish behavior (much to Harriet’s misfortune). Looser even contends that Emma may ultimately become like the novel’s bête noire, Mrs. Elton, if she is unable to change.31 I would argue that Emma and Mrs. Elton are already similar, at least in one respect. Both women play the role of benefactor (Emma with Harriet and Mrs. Elton with Jane Fairfax) poorly. There is only a slim difference between the way in which Emma manipulates Harriet and the way in which Mrs. Elton seeks to control Jane. Though Emma operates under the guise of benevolence, her relationship with Harriet still resembles Mrs. Elton’s inept handling of Jane.

Much like Emma and Mrs. Elton, Mr. Knightley is not entirely beyond corruptibility. Even though Mr. Knightley is ostensibly upheld throughout the novel as the proper moral compass, he too is fallible—tainted by his jealousy of Frank Churchill, whom the narrator and Emma subtly emasculate in another distinctive act of erasure aimed at the male/female binary. Mr. Knightley’s jealousy of Frank extends from what Peggy Kamuf labels as “a masculine determinant,” that is, a jealousy embodied in men. She contrasts the “historically conditioned feminine resentment of masculine privilege” against the “essential masculine jealousy” that stems from the inability “to possess . . . feminine difference.” Mr. Knightley’s jealousy of Frank is indicative of this phenomenon. Believing that Emma is in love with Frank, Mr. Knightley cannot possess Emma’s feminine “otherness.” Furthermore, Frank’s ill-advised haircut emasculates him and shakes Emma’s “good opinion” of him, that is, her ability to apprehend him as a true male. This emasculation embeds a duality in Frank, allowing him to operate as both a manifestation of femininity and a perceived barrier standing between Mr. Knightley and ultimate possession of Emma.

The characterization of Frank following his haircut is also important to note. The narrator, discussing Emma’s new opinion of Frank, offers some features that capture Emma as much as they do Frank. Qualities that are ascribed to Frank—his “vanity . . . love of change . . . indifference as to how [one’s] conduct might” be perceived—seamlessly mesh with the reader’s

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33 Ibid.
34 Austen, Emma, 171.
perception of Emma. The passage then shifts from what could be a moment of recognition of the failure of the self into a projection of Emma’s faults onto another. This reversal is significant because it maligns the "otherness" Frank represents as a man who is more feminine than masculine. He is denigrated as a fop, "a trifling, silly fellow," more concerned with feminine worries, such as his appearance and petty gossip, than the "pleasure of his father." Or rather, he does not reinforce the embedded masculine archetype. This textual act parallels Emma’s lack of support for other women that Looser discusses at length. Only a careful reader can parse through the sly concealments (such as Frank’s emasculation) of the narrator and Emma, to determine that identity—or the male/female binary—in a patriarchal society is a corruptible and shifting element.

Furthermore, the speech/writing binary that is prevalent in traditional Western thought also fluctuates, subverted when the reader gains an insight into the nature of Mr. Martin by way of his letter to Harriet. Mr. Martin’s "direct proposal of marriage" provides Emma and the reader with a clear link to his qualities. His writing speaks in a "language . . . strong and unaffected [that] conveyed very much to the credit of the writer. It was short, but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling." Mr. Martin’s missive (though never actually "shown" to the reader) is a meta-fictional device that provides proper contrast to the greater text of the novel. The contrast of his honesty and plain dealing

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 172; Ibid., 171.
37 Ibid., 57.
38 Ibid., 58.
stands out like a torch against the opacity of the general text, and on a more micro level, implicitly critiques Emma's manipulative and deceptive sentiments. He does not seek to manipulate or deceive, only confer his honest feelings and directly ask for Harriet's hand in marriage.

Mr. Martin's act is quite different from Emma's use of subtlety and deception. Indeed, her method is exemplified in the passage where she leads Harriet to the conclusion that she should reject Mr. Martin's proposal. Emma states that she would not "for the world . . . advise [her] either way." But when Harriet conveys that she has "almost made up [her] mind" and asks Emma if this is the best choice, Emma immediately recants and commends Harriet for making the right decision in turning him down, even though Harriet's decision has not yet truly been made.

The passage concerning Mr. Martin's letter also serves as an intersection for the text and feminist poststructural theory. Emma at first tries to convince herself that "one of his sisters must have helped him [write it]." But she concludes that the language is "too strong and concise . . . not diffuse enough for a woman." His words are "vigorous, decided," not effusive in the female tradition. Here we see evidence of Austen's recognition and depiction of the defining multiplicity of the feminine voice, or what would later be labeled jouissance by Irigaray, and l'écriture féminine by Cixous. Though Austen's work might not typify the kind of textual act

39 Ibid., 59.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 58.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
Cixous references, applying Cixous’ to *Emma* is not a retroactive misappropriation, but a linking of female creators whose textual bodies defy categorization through a process of elaboration and transformation revolving around the nexus of becoming rather than the solidification of a patriarchal state of being.

One final contradictory element of the novel that I wish to acknowledge is Emma’s purpose. Her motivations and allegiance, and her level of adherence to male hegemony, operate in a bifurcated fashion, thus complicating one’s *visible* (readerly) perception of intent. Because the narrative of *Emma* progresses in part by way of Emma’s need for control, one could apprehend in her dominating personality a reference to the ruling gender’s repressive and autocratic purpose. This assumption would undercut some critical arguments that say Austen is an apologist for the patriarchy. And yet, characters such as Harriet also flout Emma’s designs and succeed in spite of her intentions; Harriet ends up with Robert Martin, even after Emma leads her astray. The fact that Emma does not have complete influence indicates Austen’s satirical position on the illogical designation of women’s limited role in society. Emma’s designs are ultimately ineffectual because she is representative of the female denying her gender, becoming in the process a pseudo-male figure so that she may wield the scepter of masculine power.

I think the text’s undecidability allows for and denies many possibilities, creating a hall
of mirrors where the role of women is fractured and de-centered. This de-centering refracts women’s role into a multiplicity that denies simple categorization. "Woman," then, is not on her back waiting to receive what patriarchal society chooses to bestow, but exists rather in an unending and limitless process of becoming. ""She [Austen/Emma] is infinitely other in herself," so the contradictory status of Emma is "always in the process of weaving itself," and thus confounds a male-dominated discourse habituated to the anticipation of coherence. 44 Therefore, it is both counterproductive and "useless to trap [Austen] in the exact definition of what" she means, because at the moment of conception she is already "elsewhere . . . in the discursive machinery," having returned within the feminine multitude. 45

As I have stated earlier, I think that truth in the novel often stems from the reader's apprehension of numerous deceits that Emma perpetrates. Consequently, Susan Morgan has noted regarding Austen's work that, "truth, or the reality we wish to understand, is uncertain [and] changes because people change."46 She also argues that "without a fixed truth . . . our perceptions must be active and changing, and continuously so."47 Because "Austen's subject is perception,"48 Emma's shifting concepts of truth and her use of deceit bleed into the reader's interpretation, and in doing so, requires us to establish knowledge by framing Emma's "truth" against our own. For this reason, deceit and subterfuge in Austen's novel often contain as much truth as "truth."

45 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
Austen’s femininity and the embedded binaries of *Emma* create a *scriptible* text that challenges readers with the elusivity and inherent multiplicity of *l’écriture féminine*. The gender plurality evident in Frank and Emma coincides with Cixous’ argument for a self composed of both feminine and masculine possibility. This bisexual presence further complicates the extended dénouement of *Emma* that resists superficial engagements. The text also rebels against the *lisible* assumption that a novel need wind itself into a hierarchy-gratifying, tightly bundled “happy ending.” Readers with preconceived notions about Austen’s oeuvre—who expect a text that is ready-made for convenient consumption—will be forgiven the compulsion to gape, awestruck by the dense complexity of a novel where “not much happens.” On the contrary, much is happening, though it often occurs behind textual partitions, unrestricted by the phallogocentric limits of Western literature that seeks solidity on the terra firma of patriarchal hegemony. Pregnant with multiple meanings, the novel revels in textual ambivalence that challenges, affirms, and reasserts the inherent complexities of woman as creator.