

CLUELESS (1995) AND EMMA. (2020) IN DIALOGUE: THE POSTFEMINIST AND THE FOURTH-WAVE FEMINIST HEROINE IN AUSTEN ADAPTATIONS

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the pervasive influence of Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1815) and its adaptability to contemporary contexts. It examines the portrayal of Austen's protagonists in two film adaptations, Cher in *Clueless* (dir. Heckerling, 1995) and Emma in *Emma.* (dir. de Wilde, 2020). Cher epitomises the archetypal postfeminist heroine of the 1990s, with her inherent contradictions and the perpetuation of certain problematic discourses. By contrast, in spite of being set in the Regency period, the latest *Emma* showcases a more humanised character with an updated feminist attitude which resonates with the ideals of fourth-wave feminism.

KEYWORDS: postfeminism, fourth-wave feminism, Jane Austen, *Emma.*, *Clueless*

UN DIÁLOGO ENTRE *CLUELESS* (1995) Y *EMMA.* (2020): LA HEROÍNA POSFEMINISTA Y FEMINISTA DE LA CUARTA OLA EN LAS ADAPTACIONES DE AUSTEN

RESUMEN: Este artículo explora la influencia de la novela *Emma* de Jane Austen (1815) y su adaptabilidad a contextos contemporáneos, examinando la adaptación de Cher en *Clueless* (dir. Heckerling, 1995) y Emma en *Emma.* (dir. de Wilde, 2020). Cher personifica la arquetípica heroína posfeminista de los años 90, con sus contradicciones inherentes y la perpetuación de ciertos discursos problemáticos. Por el contrario, a pesar de estar ambientada en la época de la Regencia, la *Emma* más reciente presenta un personaje más humanizado con una actitud feminista más acorde con los ideales del feminismo de la cuarta ola.

PALABRAS CLAVE: posfeminismo, feminismo de la cuarta ola, Jane Austen, *Emma.*, *Clueless*

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's novels continue to be a powerful source of inspiration for adaptations in TV series and films, as evinced by the multitude filmic versions of her work from *Bridget Jones's Diary* (dir. Maguire 2001) to *Persuasion* (dir. Cracknell 2022). The ongoing popularity of Austen's work could be attributed to the adaptability of her plot and themes to contemporary contexts, with some adaptations being more «faithful» to the source novels, and others recognised as free versions or retellings. Over the last decades, Austen's *Emma* (1815) has been adapted multiple times for both television and cinema (Glenister 1972; McGrath 1996; Ojha 2010). The aim of this article is to explore two of these various adaptations of Austen's *Emma* (1815), *Clueless* (dir. Amy Heckerling, 1995) and *Emma.* (dir. Autumn de Wilde, 2020), to examine how traditional and commonly accepted notions of femininity are either reinforced or challenged in the

films. Although there are various analyses of these adaptations (Parrill, 1999; Mak Yui Yan, 2020; Erdal 2022), a joint analysis of the topic has not been previously published. In this article I focus on two main points: do these female protagonists perpetuate or question the stereotypical gender roles commonly associated with young women –such as an innate obsession with shopping and physical appearance or their expected compliance and dependence on male validation? In what ways are these stereotypes reinforced or contested?

In order to respond to both questions, I examine how *Clueless* and *Emma*. differ in their adaptation of Austen's Regency heroine. I argue that Cher (the protagonist of *Clueless*) represents a postfeminist heroine who, while making positive contributions to the reclamation of femininity as a progressive rather than an oppressive force, still reinforces patriarchal discourses which are damaging for women and feminism. On the other hand, the latest adaptation of *Emma* is set in the Regency period and transforms an iconic literary heroine into a powerful female protagonist who refuses to comply with restrictive societal expectations, and thus is clearly attuned to the vindications associated with the advent of fourth-wave feminism.

Jane Austen's novels depict female protagonists who have to individually battle with the contradictions present in the collision between their emotions and social expectations, while effectively satirising the society of her time (Gillespie, 2019). Her novels are usually led by an independent heroine who rejects marriage, quite an unusual decision in the 19th-century context, since that was almost the only way for women to gain financial and social stability. *Emma* (1815) explores this issue through 21-year-old Emma Woodhouse, a wealthy and single woman who loves matchmaking and sometimes acts selfishly and wrongly with her own friends and her closest circle because of her propensity to mingle with people's affections. Despite her skills as a matchmaker, Emma is unaware of her own romantic feelings and how others, namely Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightley, feel about her. Throughout the novel, she develops a close friendship with Harriet Smith, a young woman of lower social status, who perceives Emma as some kind of admirable and perfect guide, and who is in love with Mr. Robert Martin (Mr. Knightley's tenant farmer). Emma does not want to marry unless for love, and unlike Harriet, she does not need to marry at all because she has the privilege of her class and status. At the end, Emma marries Mr. Knightley for love without having to give up her household for him, something rather atypical at the time.

Jane Austen wanted to create «a heroine whom no one but [herself would] much like» (Austen-Leigh, 2002: 119); yet, to make this 19th-century character relatable and likeable to modern-day women, both adaptations have portrayed independent and confident protagonists who behave according to the different context they belong to. Revisionism is thus integral to both film adaptations which incorporate significant innovations in relation to the classical novel, with the aim of making the story more appealing and appropriate for contemporary audiences. Emma and Cher may seem stubborn and selfish at times –traits which are often stigmatized as detrimental for women in patriarchal societies which conform to traditional gender roles–, yet as the story progresses, these characters evolve into more self-aware and sympathetic individuals who do not need to fit into society's idealised image of a «perfect» woman. Both films have a light-hearted tone and a hint of comedy which are central in order to «examin[e] the transgressive power of female unruliness, which in romantic comedy confronts and challenges the ways the institution of (hetero)sexuality maintains unequal social power» (Karlyn, 2011: 9). However, the two film adaptations rework Austen's plot differently.

Clueless and *Emma*. offer distinct interpretations of Austen's protagonist, portraying her within a similar narrative framework, but casting her in divergent

perspectives. The Regency era «has been rediscovered through commercial cinema [...] as a moment of both stability and change, which lends itself to the articulation of modernity» (Aragay, 2005: 277), exactly what both films accomplish. *Clueless* (1995), a teen romantic comedy set in Beverly Hills in the 1990s, shows the life of 16-year-old Cher (Alicia Silverstone) and her relationships with her father (Dan Hedaya), friends and high school classmates and teachers. This version loosely employs the basic plot lines of Austen's novel. For instance, Cher establishes a strong friendship with the new student in her high school, Tai (Brittany Murphy), a new version of Harriet, on whom Cher exerts a strong influence, particularly in what concerns the transformation of her physical appearance. Cher is also oblivious that her classmate Elton (Jeremy Sisto) is in love with her and remains unaware of her own romantic feelings for Josh (Paul Rudd), the equivalent of Mr. Knightley. Still, the film updates Austen's plot by exhibiting numerous characteristics commonly found within the chick-lit genre (Glasburgh, 2006: 90), including the humorous tone and the focus on the self-growth of the young female protagonist, obsessed with shopping and with her physical appearance, and who confronts several relationship challenges, while ultimately relying on her female friends.

Emma. (2020) accurately follows Austen's plotline and setting but refreshes the story by making the characters more human and imperfect and by giving as much importance to Emma and Harriet's friendship as to Emma's self-growth and her love story. In this rendition of *Emma*, the film culminates with her being happily in love with Mr. Knightley (Johnny Flynn), but the primary focus lies in her personal evolution and the shifts in her relationships with those in her social circle. In an interview conducted by Stefan Pape, Autumn de Wilde commented that the «unlikability of Emma» and her «flawed» nature makes her more approachable and realistic to a contemporary audience who might identify with her dilemmas, her stubbornness and her cluelessness (de Wilde, 2020a: 3:41-4:47). Using a pun, De Wilde (2020b: 0:00-0:27) defines *Emma*. as a «period film», literally referring to its Regency setting and the «period piece» nature of the film through the use of the final period in the title, while contrasting its contemporary interpretation with a critical approach to the inherent sexism of the Regency Era. As Belén Vidal asserts, «the classic adaptation has been often dismissed as conservative», as opposed to films which «inflect well-known literary intertexts from the angle of postfeminist popular culture» (2005: 263). Nonetheless, this article will expose how a period drama adaptation of a 19th-century novel can be considered progressive. Indeed, *Emma*. is an example of what Vidal explains as a «reconstruction of feminine identity through disruptive gestures that rewrite a literary past in accordance with contemporary views and aspirations» (2005: 266).

The next section will consist in a comprehensive analysis of the various ways in which Cher embodies the archetypal postfeminist heroine in *Clueless*. It will also explore how patriarchal messages are perpetuated in the film despite attempts to promote a positive and empowered view of femininity. After this, I will delve into how *Emma*. effectively updates Austen's novel while maintaining the main aspects of her light-hearted period piece in the times of fourth-wave feminism.

CLUELESS: THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF THE POSTFEMINIST HEROINE

«Postfeminism» is a contested term which can be variously understood as a «theoretical position, a type of feminism after the Second Wave, or a regressive political stance» (Gill, 2007: 148) with the general implication that feminism is perceived as no longer relevant since its objectives are seen as already accomplished. Gill defines postfeminism as a «sensibility» (148) intrinsically linked to media culture, and which is

characterised by an «entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them» (149). According to Tasker and Negra's definition of postfeminism, it «broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the "pastness" of feminism» (2007: 1). As McRobbie argues, it is focused on the concepts of «empowerment» and «choice» but in an individualistic way (2009: 1), and «the field of popular culture [acts] as a privileged terrain for the implementation of these new forms of gender power» (28).

Postfeminism began to develop in the 1980s, but it truly gained strength during the 1990s, a decade associated with the popular terms of «Girl Culture» and «Girl Power» (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 8). Popular culture back then was becoming more and more «youthful and [it was moving onto a] female direction» (Karlyn, 2011: 5), partly due to the increase of female viewers as a target audience. Contradictorily, this period was also characterised by «a strong turn toward conservatism» (8) which contradicted the political, financial and social advances accomplished by the feminist movement. Women in postfeminist media culture, theoretically, have shifted from passive objects to active subjects who are empowered to act based on their free choice. However, this discourse is filled with the paradoxical mix of «feminist and anti-feminist discourses», as Gill (2007: 163) explains.

The apparent contradictions which are present in Austen's novels worked perfectly in the postfeminist context because of «Austen's interest in the tension between female desire and a conservative social order» and her comic perspective which «eventually reconcile[s] individual and social desire through marriage» (Karlyn, 2011: 79). Similarly, *Clueless* is replete with clashes which contribute to its paradoxical essence: a female protagonist who believes to be independent in her decision-making yet modifies her appearance in order to be looked at; someone who is surrounded by individuals who reduce her identity to a mere fragment, while maintaining her desire for a love story of her own. Some of the stereotypes which have been intrinsically associated with women in mainstream cinema (along with their reclamation in postfeminist media products, such as *Clueless*) are discussed in Angela McRobbie's book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009). McRobbie states that young women in postfeminist times want «to reclaim their femininity, [...] to be girlish and enjoy all sorts of traditional feminine pleasures», including the so-called «fantasies of romance and marriage» (2009: 21). These revolve around the fact that women must find a suitable match in order to get married, have a family and experience the «happily ever after» that they have seen illustrated in so many stories and films directed to young girls and women. Postfeminism is indeed full of contradictions, and so is Cher's world, a world in which she reclaims a traditional femininity which has been deemed as worthless and ridicule.

The prototypical postfeminist heroine is described by Tasker and Negra as a «vital, youthful, and playful» character who embodies an «idealized, essentialized femininity» (2007: 9), a description which correlates with Cher, the protagonist of *Clueless*. Cher is a 16-year-old upper class teenager from a well-off family who is initially presented as a superficial and selfish «brat» (in Josh's words) who embodies many prototypical postfeminist traits. The romantic comedy or teen-pic targeted specifically at young female teenagers is well-suited for the ironic and parodic tone found in postfeminist products (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 6), and at the same time, this genre relates to Austen's use of irony and subtle satirical humour. Irony and parody are key in this sense, as they can help filmmakers convey specific messages that might question (or not) cultural assumptions.

Cher embraces her traditional femininity and is theoretically displayed as a powerful individual who makes her own decisions, yet her portrayal is riddled with contradictions which make her significantly different from de Wilde's Emma (Any

Taylor-Joy). *Emma*. opens up with a black screen with the first words of Austen's novel describing the protagonist, presenting her as «clever» from the very beginning. Conversely, Heckerling depicts a character who is innocent –clueless, as the title indicates– and may come across as «dumb» initially to the audience, hence reinforcing the trope of the «dumb blonde» in media and popular culture, which is permeated with sexism. Nonetheless, the film shows Cher's wit particularly in her interactions with other characters, and her self-development. As Karlyn (2011: 77) states, «Cher's universe is filtered entirely through popular culture», so often her witty remarks are based on popular references. For instance, during the scene in the car with Josh and his then girlfriend Heather (Susan Mohun), Heather confidently quotes one popular phrase said by Hamlet, and Cher corrects her that it was not Hamlet who said it, but rather «that Polonius guy» (Heckerling, 1995: 44:20); she explains that she is certain about this because she «remember[s] Mel Gibson accurately, and he didn't say that» (44:15). Cher's confident statement proves that in a postfeminist context «popular culture is a natural site of identity formation and empowerment» (Karlyn, 2011: 33).

Cher, as well as being the addressee of many anti-feminist messages from other characters of the film, perpetuates detrimental stereotypical commentaries or attitudes towards women, including herself. The everyday struggles that women faced in the 1990s (and some still face nowadays) are displayed in the film, being both directed to the protagonist but also initiated by her, even if unconsciously, because of internalised misogyny and patriarchal discourses, thus adding to the paradoxical nature of the heroine. For instance, when Cher and Christian (Justin Walker) meet up for the first time, Josh asks Cher's father if he is «letting her go out like that» (Heckerling, 1995: 52:28), referring to the short dress that she is wearing. Women have certainly achieved significant advances regarding their sexual liberation, but they are still expected to be careful with what they wear, because it could be perceived as «provocative». Cher's contribution to the damaging stereotyping in the film is evident when she is talking about her new classmate Christian, who has caught her interest, and she remarks that «he does dress better than [she does]», so «what would [she] bring to the relationship?» (1:05:15).

While the humour in *Clueless* may be interpreted as a way of underscoring the absurdity of certain commentaries and stereotypes, the parodic tone paradoxically reinforces some patriarchal ideas. The condescendence that many people had and still have in the present day towards young girls is showcased in Josh and other masculine figures' comments towards Cher. This can be seen in the scene where one of the lawyers who work with Cher's father (Joshua Lozoff) is reviewing some files with the help of Josh and Cher. He becomes irritated with Cher when he sees her engaging in playful banter with Josh, dismissively instructing her to «just go back to the mall» (1:27:43). Also, in one of Josh's incessant lectures about her superficiality and lack of empathy, he tells Cher to «go out and have fun. Go shopping» (1:29:10); Cher then discredits Josh and asks him if he thinks that is all she does (1:29:14). This could be seen as a question aimed at the audience, as a call for attention to those who, like Josh, reduce her self-worth to her enjoyment of fashion. In the same way, Cher's father questions her daughter's sense of «direction» in life, comparing it with Josh's, who seems to have his career figured out; Josh responds that Cher's direction is «towards the mall», mocking again her taste for shopping (9:25-9:30).

Cher justifies her unwillingness to date any high school boys (which corresponds to Emma's resistance to marrying) as a «personal choice every woman has got to make for herself» (23:22), thus highlighting her power as an individual. However, she still wants to be looked at and desired by men, particularly after Tai's makeover, when Cher states that she is remarkably impressed and proud of «how boys are responding» (29:02).

Additionally, after Cher meets Christian, she sends herself «love letters and flowers and candy, just so he'd see how desired [she] was» (50:11). She also says that it is important to «draw attention to your mouth» and «sometimes [...] show a little skin» (50:32-50:43) in order to attract a man's attention. The contradiction in this lies in this portrayal of women as «active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner» because they deliberately want to do so (Gill, 2007: 151). What is more, right before the ending of the film in which Cher and Josh confess that they love one another, Josh playfully mocks Cher because of her braided hairstyle comparing her to Pippi Longstocking, and she immediately changes it after his commentary (1:26:53-1:27:12), thus exemplifying how she modifies her own appearance for the «male gaze» (Mulvey, 1975). This reinforces the idea that women are considered objects to be desired and admired, something which is pondered as paradoxical with the postfeminist mantra of «girl empowerment». Indeed, Cher keeps perpetuating this objectification of women unconsciously because of her upbringing in a patriarchal society where engrained gender stereotypes have traditionally presented women as passive agents. Cher, thus, is a victim who suffers from patriarchal ideology while contributing to its reinforcement, since she is constantly concerned about her physical appearance and her clothing.

One way in which Cher contributes to the commodification of beauty and the reinforcements of beauty canons which have historically conditioned women's appearance is through the process of the makeover, which allows her to control physical appearance. Cher feels fulfilled in her project to change Tai's appearance, which consists in making her «well-dressed and popular» (Heckerling, 1995: 28:35), two things which Cher believes will improve Tai's life. In postfeminist culture, the makeover is a «recurrent trope» with a lot of significance (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 10). As Gill (2007: 149) states, postfeminism in the media is inextricably linked with an «obsessive preoccupation with the body», something which requires «remodelling (and consumer spending)» so as to get closer to the female beauty canon. Makeovers «enact [...] a particular form of temporality in which youth is fetishized and change accelerated or even presented as instantaneous. This accelerated temporality is characteristic of postmodern culture more broadly, as is the presentation of consumption itself as both therapeutic and transformative», and in this case, «female consumption [is aligned] with freedom» (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 10). Postfeminist culture emphasises individualism and places consumption as a central aspect, and according to Tasker and Negra, it «works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer» (2). Inherently, postfeminist culture is «anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self» (2), thus the trope of the makeover is key in the conception of *Clueless* and Cher as postfeminist products.

The trope of the makeover is not only present in terms of physical appearance and clothing in the film, but also regarding one's personality. Indeed, as Gill (2007: 155) claims, there is a «focus upon the psychological» in postfeminist media culture which requires women «to transform oneself and remodel one's interior life». The postfeminist proclivity to «celebrat[e] female agency» (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 4) is embodied in Cher's awareness of her powerful influence on people, which is a reason of pride for her. Cher offers guidance to Tai regarding her interest in Travis (the equivalent of Mr. Robert Martin), justifying that she is concerned about Tai's self-respect as a girl (Heckerling, 1995: 25:42). Indeed, feeling «impotent and out of control» is something Cher despises (10:37), and two ways of coping with this are through shopping and makeovers. As Cher's best friend, Dionne (Stacey Dash), notes, «Cher's main thrill in life is a makeover. [...] It gives her a sense of control in a world full of chaos» (25:58). The protagonist moves from «giving makeovers to her teachers and friends to giving one to her "soul", and from

faulting others for their cluelessness to recognizing and overcoming her own» (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 82). As Cher herself puts it, she «decided [she] needed a complete makeover, except this time, [she]’d makeover [her] soul» (Heckerling, 1995: 1:21:41). As Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young claim, this growth in terms of the protagonist’s «not perfect but flawed» behaviour and attitude are typical in chick-lit novels and films, as Bridget Jones in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), Jenna in *13 Going on 30* (2004), or Andrea in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), in order to create a feeling of both «compassion and identification» (2013: 3) in the readers. At the end, Cher becomes more conscious of the goodness in those around her, and wants to be helpful in a selfless way, without negating her true self.

Cher’s focus on beauty and appearance can then be read in a more positive light, as the «reclamation of aspects of traditional femininity» (Karlyn, 2011: 32), a key preoccupation for postfeminism. Reclaiming prototypical activities or discourses which have traditionally been associated with women and with femininity is important, since these have had a negative connotation linked with reductive ideas of what women are and how they behave. This postfeminist interest regarding the «embrace of girliness» is portrayed in the film (34). Cher’s obsession for «fashion, beauty culture, and shopping» (77) is treated humorously in the film because it is satirised, making it obvious that her character is an ironic depiction of the stereotypical reality of a very reduced and privileged group of upper-class teen girls, but by reclaiming these and giving them a positive connotation, the director is emphasising how these forms of self-expression are valid. As Karlyn claims, Cher’s «girliness does not mean a surrender of power» (87), but quite the contrary. This portrayal of character in Heckerling’s version «show[s] that girls can rule and still embrace pleasurable aspects of femininity that went underground, at least for many feminists, with the Second Wave» (84).

Following Cher’s «awakening» as the film unfolds, marked by her increased empathy as she acknowledges her shortcomings and becomes more attuned to the needs of others, she still finds pleasure in fashion and shopping. Towards the end of *Clueless*, Cher feels bad about her cluelessness regarding her own feelings and about Tai liking Josh, but a trivial material thing like a dress from a shop window draws her attention and gives her a temporal escape away from her worries. Accordingly, the initial portrayal of Cher’s naïve innocence persists, practically, throughout the entirety of the film, in a way that emphasises that, even after her transformation into a more empathetic individual, she still retains a light-hearted tendency to exhibit a superficial and self-centred behaviour at times, further contributing to the intrinsic paradoxical portrayal of Cher. Cher has undoubtedly grown since the start of the film and has gained awareness of how her actions impact others, yet she still places value on her personal enjoyment for its own sake, without feeling guilty for not placing others’ preoccupations before hers.

Overall, Cher’s enjoyment of beauty and fashion, shopping, and her occasional cluelessness and emotional self do not diminish her strength as a heroine; rather, they enhance it. Nevertheless, these more positive aspects of her personality are in constant contradiction with the anti-feminist messages present in the film, including those voiced by Cher’s father and Josh, and those perpetuated by Cher herself through her obsession with a normative beauty canon and her subjection to a «male gaze». In embodying these contradictions, the film clearly demonstrates how the Austenian heroine has been adapted to embody the paradoxical nature of the postfeminist heroine.

EMMA: THE AUSTENIAN HEROINE AS A FOURTH-WAVE FEMINIST ICON

The latest adaptation of *Emma* portrays a more positively feminist message without falling into gender stereotypes. The tenets of postfeminist discourse have been critically contested in contemporary media culture, especially with the advent of fourth-wave feminism. The so-called fourth-wave feminism emerged approximately during the 2010s with the development of a «new consciousness of inequality» (Frankel, 2020: 9) and «characterised by its diversity of purpose» (Munro, 2013: 22). The majority of fourth-wave feminist books and articles discuss its origins in relation to movements such as #MeToo (Gnedash, 2022) or connected to the development of the Internet and social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, all of which have served in the past few years «as a forum for discussion and as a route for [feminist] activism» (Munro, 2013: 24). This new wave of feminism has challenged postfeminist ideals by critically questioning the beauty industry and the prototypical beauty canon which has been and still is particularly detrimental to women. As Deborah L. Rhode (2016: 697) argues, the strict and all-encompassing beauty standards might even result as «a threat to [the] physical and psychological well-being» of women.

Fourth-wave feminism, as argued by Parry (2018: 3), is an «everyday feminism» based on «public discourse» which is accessible to a broader public than ever before. It «take[s] up the micropolitics of the third wave while situating [women's] individual lived experiences within broader global discourses» (1), in order to fight against inequalities all around the world. Central to this era of feminism are social activists who actively denounce injustices and use the media's reach to amplify their voices in the ongoing quest for gender equality. With key tenets revolving around inclusivity and freedom across all spheres, fourth-wave feminism carries forward the ideals advocated by third-wave feminists, emphasising the persistent relevance of these matters within the social, political, and economic domains of a new decade. Fourth-wave feminism, thus, is a continuation of the previous waves that highlights the relevance of a contemporary feminism which «cuts across racial, ethnic, and national divides» (Kaplan, in Parry, 2018: 5). With a strong emphasis on inclusivity and a recognition of the interrelation between feminism and other societal movements like the fight against racism and classism, many texts are being revisited in recent decades through this intersectional feminist lens. In this way, in audiovisual media, female characters are now created with a deliberate «reflection on aspects such as power, class, or the representation of gender» (Silvestre, López and Royo, 2021: 416), factors which are inextricably linked and must be considered in order to craft a positive female representation in the media.

The female protagonists of this fourth-wave feminist period, such as de Wilde's Emma, are hence self-determined individuals who value their own independence and support other female characters. They are not portrayed as innocent, sexualised and charming at all times, but rather as complex humans who show moments of vulnerability without losing their power. Fourth-wave feminist media products also target regressive gender roles so that the compliant and passive female characters of the past have been substituted by women who speak up, have their own space and are not presented as a mere object to be desired. The context of *Emma*. is thus one completely different to that of *Clueless* when it comes to feminist thinking and the representation of women in media culture. Certainly, twenty-five years have passed since Heckerling's adaptation of Austen's novel, and although there have been many advances in terms of equality and empowerment, feminism cannot be overlooked as something of the past which is no longer necessary. The fundamental idea that «women and girls' value lies in themselves, in their capabilities, in their thoughts, in their health, and in their strength» (in Frankel,

2020: 10) is made explicit in de Wilde's protagonist, who might be read as clearly representing fourth-wave feminist values.

De Wilde's adaptation of *Emma* differs strongly from Heckerling's version primarily due to its rejection of women's objectification in cinema, a concern that has garnered increased attention in the 2010s. The «to-be-looked-at-ness» (Mulvey, 1975: 809) found in *Clueless* which contributes to the objectification of Cher as a passive subject is not present in *Emma*. During the scene where Mr. Knightley and Emma discuss Frank Churchill's character (played by Callum Turner), Mr. Knightley says that he cannot think of any «merits» but him being «well-grown and good-looking» (de Wilde, 2020: 36:19). Going back to their previous conversation about women's virtues (which Knightley condenses in beauty and ease of character), Emma responds that if those are his only merits, then «he shall be a treasure at Highbury» (36:22), since Emma and other women in her town «do not often look upon fine young men» (36:25). Emma's words turn around the discourse of the «male gaze», with women being in the active position of the gazing subject. Cher and de Wilde's Emma also differ in their character: Cher acts with much more «innocence and charm» (Karlyn, 2011: 80) than Emma, who is not that worried about how charming she appears to others. Cher's femininity is indeed «defined around girlish pleasures» (82), but the most recent Emma is not concerned about such pleasures, thus showing the different preoccupations that postfeminists and fourth-wave feminists had regarding how girls were to be perceived or how they should act.

Moreover, Emma sees beyond the prototypical role of women as wives and mothers who must obey their fathers or tutors, and then their husbands once married. During the argument between Mr. Knightley and Emma when he finds out that Harriet (Mia Goth) has refused the proposal made by Mr. Martin (Connor Swindells), Knightley situates Harriet's value in her «birth, nature, [and] education» and he only sees her as valuable because «she is pretty, and [...] good-tempered, and that is all» (de Wilde, 2020: 28:17). Emma's reply to this is satirical; she criticises her society, particularly men who only show interest and admiration for women because of their «handsome faces» and not because of their «well-informed minds» (28:24). She includes Mr. Knightley in her critique when saying that men «find these qualities the highest claims a woman could possess» (28:32). This goes back to the ideas defended by Austen herself and the feminist ideology of Austen's times, particularly illustrated in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), where she criticised the association of female virtue with docility and beauty, rather than with intelligence or intellectual capabilities, as it was the case for men.

During the first half of the film, Emma acts selfishly, oblivious to the repercussions that her actions have on those around her. However, as the film unfolds, she gradually becomes more aware of the harm she has inflicted upon her circle and recognises that her self-centredness is a barrier to her own happiness, which does not revolve exclusively around her love story with Mr. Knightley. When Harriet receives Mr. Martin's letter asking for her hand, she resorts to Emma for advice; Emma voices her desire for independence, demonstrating her powerful influence on other characters, yet the focus of de Wilde's film differs from that of Austen. The newest Emma, instead of being direct to Harriet about the limited prospects of a marriage to a man like Robert Martin, tells her that «if a woman doubts whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him» (de Wilde, 2020: 26:32). In this way, Emma instils ideas of not conforming nor accepting the first marriage proposal from a man –although, of course, this is said with Emma's underlying intention for Harriet to potentially marry Mr. Elton (Josh O'Connor) due to his better social and financial situation–. In the end, Emma assumes accountability for having influenced Harriet to decline Robert Martin's proposal

after realising that the decision has brought unhappiness to her friend. Instead of relying on Mr. Knightley to intervene and convince Mr. Martin to propose to Harriet again or leaving it to fate, she decides that she is the one who must talk to him. She does so with the aim of helping Harriet find her long-awaited happiness after the series of disappointments and mismatches she is responsible for. This gesture reflects Emma's commitment to ensure that Harriet gets her happy ending before Emma can finally pursue her own, which is partly derived from the satisfaction she experiences after reconciling with Harriet, Miss Bates (Miranda Hart) and even Jane Fairfax (Amber Anderson).

Emma's privileged social and financial position plays a pivotal role in her lack of urgency to secure a husband, yet throughout the film she makes clear her advocacy for independence and the relevance of her own feelings. She knows that women must marry in her society in order to enjoy a stable life, but she is not interested in marrying unless for love. She conveys this sentiment early in the film when speaking to Harriet, by saying that she has «none of the usual inducements of women to marry» (de Wilde, 2020: 15:39), and reiterates this thought also during the carriage ride that Mr. Elton and Emma share. Mr. Elton finally confesses that he loves her, not Miss Smith as Emma mistakenly believed, and she responds to him in a very straightforward manner, telling him that she has «no thoughts of matrimony at present» (42:02). This will then change once she realises that her affection for Mr. Knightley is mutual and does not jeopardise her friendship with Harriet.

In de Wilde's adaptation, then, the relevance of Harriet's feelings and her friendship with Emma gain more importance than in the novel and in earlier adaptations, such as *Clueless*. In fact, while Mr. Knightley is confessing her love for Emma, she unselfishly keeps thinking of her friend who has recently admitted her feelings for Mr. Knightley to her. Emma also loves him, but instead of being instantly happy that her love is corresponded, her primary concern is Harriet's well-being. This is made obvious with her attitude during the confession, her rapid mention of Harriet after Mr. Knightley's speech, and the comical physical symbol of Emma's nose bleeding (1:41:27-1:44:45). All of these serve as physical manifestations of her stress and preoccupation for her friend, which can be read as accentuating the protagonist's inherent humanity, which adds to her flawed nature and approaches her to the viewers (Carr, 2020).

Another relevant difference between the novel and both films is that the 16-year-old age gap between Mr. Knightley and Emma in Austen's book is not mentioned in *Emma*. nor in *Clueless* (where Josh is only two years older than Cher). This difference in age is omitted for a modern audience, who might be more aware than 19th-century readers of unequal power relations operating in such a couple. Their relationship in the source text has an «unequal power dynamic, exemplified by Knightley's gentle admonishments of Emma's behaviour», which reveals that in Austen's times there were often «disparities of age and power» in many married or prospective couples (Bruner, 2020). By omitting or altering this fact, both film adaptations are contributing to the idea of equality between the protagonist and her love interest.

The way in which *Emma*. updates the feminist politics of the original novel is most evident in how gender roles are rejected, thus questioning the discourse of a traditional femininity associated with gentleness and obedience in relation to a dominant hegemonic masculinity. The protagonist sometimes displays character traits which have been traditionally associated with men, such as her firm willingness to voice her needs and her self-sufficient attitude. Emma is a strong woman who fearlessly voices her opinions, even to male characters who would have been authoritative figures in the hierarchical power dynamics of their society. Emma is an active character who argues with Mr. Knightley, raises her voice, and strongly disagrees with him several times throughout the film,

notably when they quarrel about Harriet's refusal of Mr. Martin's marriage proposal (de Wilde, 2020: 27:28-30:04). Emma's initial attitude as well as her first spoken contribution comes off as snob and picky; she is not friendly or warm towards her addressees nor the audience. This serves as a way of rejecting the idea that women should be cordial and warm-hearted at all times or else, they will be seen as unlikeable and rude, a portrayal which contrasts with previous TV and film adaptations of the novel (cf. McGrath, 1996; Lawrence, 1996), which depicted a more amiable and welcoming protagonist. As Dashwood and McInnes (2023: 2) argue:

de Wilde's Emma is colder and less likeable than her predecessors [...]. However, the result is a characterisation that emphasises the most radical aspects of Austen's portrayal of a woman who, precisely due to her wealth and social position, holds many of the privileges that would have been considered as the prerogative of men. *Emma*. brings to the fore the progressive and transgressive aspects of a novel that is centred around an authoritative, compelling, and ultimately unchanging heroine.

Both Josh and Mr. Knightley perceive Cher and Emma's actions to root from selfishness and self-interest, and both express their opinion about their behaviour. The two female protagonists' growth into more selfless and considerate individuals comes from within, but the shift in attitude in Emma. is depicted more overtly, emphasising that her change is not a result of the external influence of Mr. Knightley. Cher's ironic comment «Thank you, Josh. I so need lessons from you on how to be cool» (Heckerling, 1995: 8:50) replicates Emma's satirical reply to Mr. Knightley regarding his thoughts on her behaviour. Emma's independence in terms of her decisions and development is seen during the fiery argument she has with Mr. Knightley, when he gives his judgement on the topic of Harriet not marrying Robert Martin, and Emma ironically declares that she is «very much obliged to [him] for opening [her] eyes» (de Wilde, 2020: 29:43). Indeed, she will not change her mind just because of Mr. Knightley's advice and tutoring. By contrast, Cher succumbs to male validation in different scenes, and she is severely distressed about Josh's remarks when approaching the climax of the film. Cher's father even asks Josh if «this is [his] influence» (Heckerling, 1995: 1:23:18) hence assuming that an external male force must have led her to her evolution during the final part of the film. In *Emma.*, the protagonist's preoccupation towards the end regarding her love interest is altered; in fact, Emma is mainly concerned about making sure that Harriet is still her friend and that she also has a chance at her happy ending.

In *Emma.*, thus, the emphasis is on how the protagonist realises her own faults without needing an external male influence who lectures her or guides her towards the good path, as the scene where she is sarcastically rude to Miss Bates in front of everyone at Box Hill demonstrates (de Wilde, 2020: 1:25:26-1:31:34). In this scene, Frank Churchill prompts the company (comprising Mr. Knightley, Mr. Elton and Jane Fairfax, among others) to say something entertaining during the picnic. Miss Bates facetiously alludes to the perceived mundanity of her contributions saying that she is most likely to say «three things very dull indeed as soon as [she] open[s her] mouth». To this light-hearted self-mockery, Emma wittily responds that Miss Bates's true challenge lies in her stopping only at three. Emma instantly realises her incivility towards her before anyone says anything or even before Miss Bates's reaction. After this, Emma is not pleased at the conundrum posed by Mr. Weston (Rupert Graves) which claims that «M» and «A» (hinting at Emma's name) are «two letters of the alphabet [...] that express perfection», since indeed, she is aware that she is not perfect. After her humiliating commentary to Miss Bates, Emma's attitude changes; she gains awareness of her faults after this

encounter, recognising to her father that she has been «unpardonably vain, and insufferably arrogant. [...] inconsiderate, and indelicate and irrational and unfeeling» (1:31:50-1:32:09), and she must do something to find redemption for herself. The audience connects with her during her journey of self-growth, one in which she needs no male influence to guide her and where she learns to be more empathetic with those around her. De Wilde's *Emma* is a flawed human who learns from her mistakes and values friendship as much as –or even more than– romantic love, although she also has her own love story, one based on principles which agree with current fourth-wave feminist ideas.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the protagonists of *Clueless* and *Emma*. demonstrates that Jane Austen's novels and characters continue to be effectively updated to new contexts and audiences while preserving the essence of her comedic and satirical commentary on society. The analysis of both films reveals that *Clueless* is a prototypical postfeminist product, with its characteristic postfeminist heroine, full of contradictions as corresponding to the postfeminist sensibility that dominated popular media at the time of the movie's release. *Emma*., by contrast, aligns more closely to the tenets of fourth-wave feminism, in what can be read as a feminist retelling of the original plot adapted to a contemporary audience. The differences between both films are evident in that de Wilde's version offers a more complex characterisation of Emma in terms of her attitude and her process of self-growth; the film also gives more weight to her relationship with other female characters (principally, with Harriet, but also with Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax) as well as presenting a healthier and more equal relationship with Mr. Knightley. Other ways in which *Emma*. has transcended previous adaptations is the way Harriet is characterised as her own person, not so dependent on Emma, or how male characters are portrayed as vulnerable and sensitive, rather than repressing their emotions. De Wilde's version then differs from previous film adaptations of the novel in its presentation of a feminist heroine who is more attuned to the expectations of a 21st century audience.

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Recibido: 21/09/2023

Aceptado: 25/10/2023