

Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir  
(University of Iceland)

## “... the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself;” Jane Austen, the chick lit genre, self-help culture, and 18<sup>th</sup>-century conduct books

### Abstract

This article will focus on the impact the novelist Jane Austen has had on the modern chick lit genre more than two hundred years after her death and further raise the question of whether the characteristics of the genre can provide insights into the role of self-improvement in Austen’s work, taking *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* as an example, with a special emphasis on her flawed heroines. Austen’s heroines generally do not fit the perfect image of femininity depicted in the conduct books that were popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, just as the modern chick lit heroines do not represent the ideas of desirable femininity. Austen engages purposeful dialogue with contemporary conduct books in her novels, just like modern chick lit authors converse with glossy magazines. In addition, many heroines are devoted readers of various self-help books. It is argued that both Austen’s novels and the chick lit genre draw out the tension between private and public spheres, the stories predicting limited egress for their female heroines since the public sphere is a reality they have minimal access to. Because of that, the heroines ward off boredom through their fantastic tales or find an outlet through lies, spin-offs, and laughter to survive in a patriarchal society.

### Keywords

Jane Austen, chick lit, conduct books, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Becky Bloomwood.

This article will focus on the impact the novelist Jane Austen has had on the modern chick lit genre more than two hundred years after her death and further raise the question of whether the characteristics of the genre can provide insights into the role of self-improvement in Austen’s work, taking *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* as an example.

Austen’s emphasis on comical female characters that are flawed is a central theme of the chick lit novel and drives the plot forward, as is suggested in a letter to her niece Fanny Knight: “Pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked.” About graceful and decent Anne Elliot, Austen famously said in the same letter, “You may *perhaps* like the Heroine, as she is almost too good for

me”.<sup>1</sup> This draws attention to the fact that the perfect and reliable heroine of *Persuasion* was an unusual female protagonist for the novelist since she is without the traits that are associated with her more comical and flawed sister characters.

Chick lit novels give the effect of realism by showing defective heroines, and this results in readers perhaps finding identification with them relatively easily. As Ferriss and Young have pointed out, the heroine deploys self-deprecating humour; she can be rude, shallow, overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, or witty,<sup>2</sup> but “we love her anyway” (or maybe because of it). This opposition to perfection encourages an ironic reading of chick lit novels, their heroines follow contemporary norms, but their pursuits are also marked by desperation because the yearning for a new identity and a better life is both demanding and draining. The novels mockingly undermine their character’s interest in entertainment, consumerism, and advertisement culture. Stephanie Harzewski captures the idea well when she describes Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) as “the ironic novel of development.”<sup>3</sup>

How would the idea of reading chick lit in terms of the ironic bildungsroman relate to contemporary interests in Jane Austen’s work and her authorial image, especially the idea of self-empowerment and personal growth? Chick lit is similar to many self-help books and conduct manuals in its focus on self-improvement and manners, and in this light, it is interesting to think of the many personal empowerment books that have been produced under the guise of Austen in recent years, works such as Henderson’s *Jane Austen’s Guide to Dating* and Hannon’s *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine’s Guide to Life and Love*.<sup>4</sup> Here, Austen’s novels are rewritten in the form of self-help guides using as exemplary models various illustrative scenes from the author’s works to improve the reader’s social and love life.

This interest in Austen as an authority on social refinement is often interwoven with contemporary conservative ideas about womanhood in the Regency period as can be seen in various contemporary self-help books, such as *The Jane Austen Guide to Life: Thoughtful Lessons for the Modern Woman* by Lori Smith,<sup>5</sup>

1 See Jane Austen (March 23–25<sup>th</sup> 1817), “To Fanny Knight”, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 335.

2 Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, “Introduction”, *Chick Lit. The New Woman’s Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

3 Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 61.

4 Patrice Hannon, *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine’s Guide to Life and Love*, (New York, A Plume Book, 2005) and Lauren Henderson, *Jane Austen’s Guide to Dating*, (New York, Hyperion, 2005).

5 Lori Smith, *The Jane Austen Guide to Life: Thoughtful Lessons for the Modern Woman*, (Guilford, CT, Skirt!, 2012).

where Austen's texts become a conduct guide for bewildered women in present-day society.<sup>6</sup> Countless modern novels based on the authorial image of Austen have also been written from this reactionary viewpoint, where she acts as an instructor, a romance counsellor, and a matchmaker to the main protagonists who seem to discover themselves while searching for love under the guidance of Austen.<sup>7</sup>

As the female protagonists of chick lit are frequently presented as somewhat bewildered individuals who desire improvement, self-help culture is an integral part of the genre. Their absolute failure to live up to social norms and conventions generally leaves them desperate, indicating similarities between the sister genres chick lit and self-help books, which is also revealed through the sheer volume of works attempting to bridge the gap between the two,<sup>8</sup> e. g. when the heroines of chick lit novels make use of self-help culture in the hope of bettering themselves and their lives.<sup>9</sup>

## Women's rabid appetite: Austen and chick lit as a genre

Austen's impact on chick lit fiction can be seen from the very start, as Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a modern reimagining of *Pride and Prejudice* and is regarded as a cornerstone within the genre.<sup>10</sup> Darcy, the main male character in

---

6 Other self-help books working from this premise are Henrietta Webb, *Jane Austen's Guide to Good Manners: Compliments, Charades & Horrible Blunders* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), Rebecca Smith, *Jane Austen's Guide to Modern Life's Dilemmas* (Lewes, East Sussex, Ivy Press, 2012), Margaret C. Sullivan, *The Jane Austen Handbook: Proper Life Skills from Regency England* (Philadelphia, PA, Quirk Books, 2007), and Sinead Murphy, *The Jane Austen Rules: A Classic Guide to Modern Love* (London, Melville House, 2014).

7 See for example *Austenland* by Shannon Hale, (New York, NY, Bloomsbury, 2007) and the film adaptation from 2013 starring Keri Russell). See also novels by Beth Pattillo *Mr. Darcy Broke My Heart* (New York, Guideposts, 2010) and *Jane Austen Ruined My Life* (New York, Guideposts, 2009). Other stories portray characters who are so romantically befuddled that they travel into the past for guidance, for example, Courtney in Laurie Viera Rigler's *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict* (New York, Dutton, 2007) and Laurie Brown, *What Would Jane Austen Do?* (Naperville, Sourcebooks Casablanca, 2009). Much the same can be said of the television series *Lost in Austen*, in which Amanda Price steps into the novel *Pride and Prejudice* in search of the right man, Fitzwilliam Darcy (director: Dan Zeff; script: Guy Andrews; starring, Jemima Rooper, Elliot Cowan, Hugh Bonneville, 2008).

8 See Caroline J. Smith's analysis in *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* (New York and London, Routledge, 2008), 12–13.

9 A good example would be *Sex and the City* where the main protagonist, Carrie Bradshaw, writes newspaper columns about relationships, fashion, and women's issues, centred on her relationship with her three close female friends. See *Sex and the City* (creator: Darren Star, based on the novel *Sex and the City* by Candace Bushnell, starring Sarah Jessica Parker, Kristin Davis, Cynthia Nix, and Kim Cattrall, 1998–2004).

10 A question which many readers, who are interested in the chick lit genre, could be asking

Fielding's story, is based on the eponymous hero of Austen's novel, a major source of the Austen-related culture that sprang up following the popular *Pride and Prejudice* BBC mini-series (Simon Langton, 1995), in which Colin Firth's Darcy became every woman's darling. It might be argued that Firth, Jennifer Ehle – in her role as Elizabeth Bennet – along with the writer Andrew Davies, directly and indirectly started a new women's genre in Western culture, a genre of comical narratives influenced by Austen, where heroines seek Mr Right, with an additional emphasis on the daily struggles of women.<sup>11</sup>

Helen Fielding “borrows” the main plot from the television series rather than from Austen's actual work<sup>12</sup> even having Bridget watch the series in the first novel.<sup>13</sup> Even though *Bridget Jones's Diary* is the best-known modern adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's world is never very far away from the general chick lit narrative, as is shown by the fact that one of the many books written about the genre, an introduction in creative writing, is named in her honour: *See Jane Write. A Girl's Guide to Writing Chick Lit*.<sup>14</sup>

Chick lit novels tell us a good deal about the many issues facing modern women and their status in society; they shed light on women's self-image, race, social class, and femininity. However, most novels within the genre have a limited perspective on the world because they usually depict women who are white, single, and straight, in their twenties and thirties, living in cities and fending for themselves. Chick lit heroines are sexual beings and usually have several sexual

---

themselves is whether chick lit is still a genre? Laura Miller asks whether chick lit is dead in her article published in 2012 claiming that “its heyday has definitely passed”. Heike Mißler quotes an editor at Kensington Publishing Corporation who says that they have “pretty much stopped publishing chick lit.” See Heike Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism, and Representation* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 12 and Laura Miller, “The death of chick lit”, *Salon* (February 23rd, 2012). [https://www.salon.com/2012/02/23/the\\_death\\_of\\_chick\\_lit/](https://www.salon.com/2012/02/23/the_death_of_chick_lit/) Accessed Nov. 2023.

- 11 Austen has also been associated with Candace Bushnell, the other major foremother of chick lit, whose most famous work, *Sex and the City*, has been described as “Jane Austen with a martini”. Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City* [1996] (London: Abacus, 2010). Text on front cover.
- 12 Helen Fielding has described how the *Pride and Prejudice* mini-series helped her formulate the story of Bridget Jones. She had written a collection of stories for her column but lacked an overall plot. At that time the series was being shown by the BBC, and it completely captivated her, so she decided to “steal the plot”. See “Bridget Jones vs Pride and Prejudice”, *BBC*, “News, Entertainment & Arts”, January 28<sup>th</sup> 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-21204956>. Accessed Nov. 2023.
- 13 Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London and New York: Viking, 1996), 215. Harzewski stresses the tragic sides of Bridget and says that despite the obvious intertextuality with Austen, “Bridget is very much her own character” and that she is “more of a humorous creation than a heroine of emulation”. See Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Charlottesville/London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), epub, loc 53.
- 14 Sarah Mlynowski and Farrin Jacobs, *See Jane Write. A Girl's Guide to Writing Chick Lit*, Philadelphia (PA: Quirk Books, 2006).

partners, as is reflected in the television show *Sex and the City*. Rochelle Mabry argues that because the women in *Sex and the City* are so candid about sex, they represent contemporary women who want to investigate the mysteries of modern sexual relationships and gender roles on their own terms,<sup>15</sup> employing techniques that make them feminine, very much like the so-called Woman's films of the 1930s and 1940s did, which were motivated by a female point of view and used devices such as voice-overs, flashbacks, and fantasy sequences to give the female protagonist a voice and to emphasize that this is her story.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary novels, films, and television shows, like romance novels and older forms of women's films, tend to present a conservative image of women and their place in society. However, the chick lit stories also point to an important shift in the way women's experiences and desires are examined. The novels give modern women a voice, and "allow them to express desires that may lie outside the "happy-ever-after" marriage to Prince Charming."<sup>17</sup>

As Juliette Wells has described, these novels focus on the same temptations that fascinated Virginia Woolf when walking the streets of London.<sup>18</sup> Although most chick lit novels lack the poetry of Woolf's description, all these shoes, gloves, and scarves described by her in *A Room of One's Own*, give an idea of feminine beauty ideals, female vanity, and "plainness", which are preoccupations of chick lit. They imply that consumption may not always bring happiness, but that happiness can hardly be found without being a consumer of beauty in the widest sense of the word.<sup>19</sup>

Wells traces the subject matter of chick lit back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Austen was one of the first female authors effectively to tackle the female experience, as Deborah Kaplan has emphasised in her essential study, *Jane Austen Among Women*, which manifests Austen's importance to eighteenth-century women's culture, the context of the author's novels within a neglected and "insignificant" female reality.<sup>20</sup> As a response to such accusations, where the male eye defines literary

---

15 A. Mabry Rochelle Mabry, "About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary 'Chick' Culture", *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 199–200.

16 Ibid, 195.

17 Ibid, 192.

18 See Juliette Wells, "Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History", *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 61–62. See also Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York/London: A Harvest Book, 1981), 90.

19 It is worth mentioning that the first scene in the film *Pride and Prejudice* from 1940 takes place in a shop that sells linen clothing. Shopping thus becomes a part of the narrative in adaptations of the novel. See *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) (director: Robert Z. Leonard; scriptwriter: Aldous Huxley; producer: Hunt Stromberg; leading roles: Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier).

20 Deborah Kaplan, *Jane Austen Among Women* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 85.

merit, one must keep in mind that Austen herself wrote within a “meaningless” female sphere where women’s voices were seldom heard, and their everyday lives and feelings were overlooked. This is an old saying that has been repeated throughout the reception history of women’s writing and is clearly illustrated through the reception history of Jane Austen’s novels in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She was criticized for depicting the mundane, everyday life of the landed gentry during one of the most eventful periods of European history: the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>21</sup>

Austen’s focus on the daily lives of women has given her the reputation of being deeply absorbed in domestic and material detail. Wells emphasizes though that scenes of shopping are relatively few in Austen’s novels (characters sometimes purchase ribbons and gloves) and that she usually describes clothing or jewellery only for satirical purposes.<sup>22</sup> Cathy Yardley’s textbook for aspiring chick lit novelists, *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel*,<sup>23</sup> playfully captures this characteristic fashion-consciousness of the genre, which is often ironic and depicted in a humorous light. The chick lit heroine is dominated by an obsession with her looks and appearance, and publishers sometimes exploit this obsession by using purses and shopping bags as their imprint logo.<sup>24</sup> The genre is closely related to commercialism and consumerism, and Harzewski has pointed out notable parallels between the genre’s reception history and the censure surrounding early English novels at a time when reading romance novels was considered pathological and associated with women’s rabid appetite for new fashions.<sup>25</sup>

This emphasis on consumption in contemporary fiction is possibly most obvious in Kinsella’s *Shopaholic* series and plays a big role in the ways these novels were marketed. The heroine’s self-image is shaped almost exclusively by her purchases, financial status, and love life, the genre distinctively combining

---

21 See a thorough chapter on the reception history of Jane Austen in Emily Auerbach, *Searching for Jane Austen* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 27–36. See here especially Auerbach’s discussion on the uneventful life of Jane Austen. A survey from 1912 “listed Austen as a “good looking, sociable maiden aunt” utterly removed from current events: “For her there existed no French Revolution, no public abuses, no history.”” See Auerbach, 27. See also Oliver Elton, *Survey of Literature, 1780–1830:1* (London: Edward Arnold, 1912), 191–92.

22 Juliette Wells, “Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History”, 62–63.

23 Cathy Yardley, *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books), 2006.

24 The Harlequin Red Dress Ink operated between 2004 and 2014, suggesting that the publishing house has since moved on to other labels in their marketing of women’s fiction. See further discussion on the marketing of chick lit, Stephanie Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners”, *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 35. See also Harzewski’s book *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, epub, loc 31.

25 Stephanie Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners”, 35.

consumption with romance in the mind of the reader,<sup>26</sup> although it can be argued that the ironic style and various plot twists create anti-capitalist messages without rejecting the heroine. Austen's novels, however, are as preoccupied with behaviour, manners, and demeanour as chick lit novels whose heroines read glossy magazines and self-help books, the purpose being in both cases to guide women in their everyday lives, as well as create a comical atmosphere. Only time will judge the literary merit of chick lit, but it is obvious that the genre plays an important role in the history of women's writing.<sup>27</sup>

## **"I never saw such a woman." Austen's heroines, education, and feminine virtues**

Mary Poovey focuses on the ideology that dictated female behaviour in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in her book *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*. The Proper Lady was supposed to have a comforting, restorative presence and to subordinate her needs to the will of her master, who was either her husband or her father. A good wife should not have an image of her own but must be like a mirror that reflects the face that looks into it, her needs and desires were defined by her husband.<sup>28</sup> This concept of female desire was not formulated solely by men, as some women even maintained that desire did not originate in a woman's emotions, imagination, or body. According to this ideology, the Proper Lady was governed by modesty. She did not love before marriage, but after she was married to her husband, she loved him for the rest of her life.<sup>29</sup>

Such was the fear of female sexuality by the late eighteenth century that women were advised not to allow or admit to themselves appetites of any kind that suggested enthusiasm.<sup>30</sup> They were encouraged to display no vanity, no pas-

---

26 Jessica Van Slooten, "Fashionably Indebted: Conspicuous Consumption, Fashion and Romance in Sophie Kinsella's Shopaholic Trilogy", *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 237.

27 In 2019, BBC named the stories about Harry Potter and Bridget Jones as "two of the most important English language novels, sitting alongside classics such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch*." See Laura Hampson, "Harry Potter and Bridget Jones named as 'most important' English novels", *The Standard* (Nov. 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019). <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/books/bbc-100-most-important-english-language-novels-a4279466.html>. Accessed Nov. 2023.

28 Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

29 *Ibid.*, 4.

30 *Ibid.*, 5. Although conduct books greatly emphasized sexual chastity in women, sexual promiscuity was rife in high society during the Regency period. Venetia Murray writes that noblemen often had multiple mistresses who were respected in society. George III had sons who served as prototypes: the princes had wealthy mistresses who were often given respectable

sion, and no indication that they could conclude on their own. Women were thus urged to avoid all behaviour that would bring attention to themselves. One of the greatest compliments a woman could receive was not being talked about. Modesty was one of the most highly regarded feminine virtues because it gave a clear indication that a woman could control her sexual appetite and ensured protection against male importunity.<sup>31</sup> Modesty was also a sign of purity: it promised fidelity in a wife and reflected the husband's power over her. A bold woman made a show of herself while a woman who was modest called attention to her husband by reflecting his gaze back at him. It was not considered appropriate for women to initiate conversations at social gatherings: they were expected to use facial expressions to convey their opinions.<sup>32</sup> The man sees his reflection in the void that is the woman and realizes the power he has over her: "The woman as desiring subject is "blackness", a cultural void, a negative that comes into view only when it interferes with the ideal woman, who cannot be seen at all."<sup>33</sup> The paradox of this ideology is that modesty and innocence were simultaneously meant to make a woman attractive and desirable as a partner; the innocence shown in her behaviour was thus a sign of her hidden sexuality's potential. She could therefore never be truly innocent for she would always unintentionally betray the sexuality that her virtue exists to protect.<sup>34</sup>

Austen's heroines generally do not fit the perfect image of femininity depicted in contemporary conduct books, just as the chick lit heroines do not represent the values seen by modern femininity as desirable. Emily Auerbach points out that in Elizabeth Bennet, Austen presented a female character who was dramatically different from any other female character that had previously appeared in English fiction.<sup>35</sup> Austen herself claimed that there had never been a heroine like Elizabeth, calling her "as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print" and

---

titles. Some even had more significant roles in their lives than the wives. Royal bastards had a status of their own and the sons were even given titles. see Venetia Murray, *High Society in the Regency Period 1788–1830* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 134–135. Roy Porter also points out that although affairs were usually kept secret, they were considered acceptable by high society. Noblewomen were sexually active, and many had sexual partners outside of marriage. Many women felt better off being kept as mistresses than being servants or wives of poor men. Famous mistresses such as Grace Dalrymple Elliott and Fanny Murray enjoyed respect and fame. Men in public life were commonly seen out and about with their mistresses and sometimes even married them. Although there was still a stigma around illegitimate children, high society often overlooked it, and bastards were sometimes raised alongside legitimate children. See Roy Porter, *English Society in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 261–263).

31 Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, 21.

32 Ibid, 24.

33 Ibid, 22.

34 Ibid, 26.

35 Emily Auerbach, *Searching for Jane Austen*, 129.

doubting whether she could tolerate anyone who did not like her.<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth speaks in a lively manner, she likes making puns, twisting words, and debating with people. At the same time, she develops throughout the story as she proceeds from disliking the hero to falling in love with him. It is not her appearance that initially attracts Darcy to Elizabeth, nor is it a display of any of the traditional contemporary feminine virtues such as those detailed by Poovey: virtues such as modesty, humility, or submissiveness. It soon becomes clear to the reader that Elizabeth is anything but dispassionate, opinionless, or unconscious of her sexuality.

Austen nonetheless engages in purposeful dialogue with contemporary conduct books in her novels, though she uses them as a source of humour as well as giving them serious treatment. This is evident when Mr. Collins is proposing to Elizabeth. In this scene, Austen is intentionally playing with contemporary archetypes of modesty and mocking them. When Elizabeth makes it clear that she does not wish to speak privately with Mr. Collins, he interprets this as modesty and natural delicacy on her part, and adds: “you would have been less amiable in my eyes had there *not* been this little unwillingness.”<sup>37</sup> When Elizabeth repeatedly rejects his proposal, he takes it as a sign of outward modesty and believes that she is flirting with him: “... and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character.”<sup>38</sup> Mr. Collins purposely attributes her response to a “wish of increasing [his] love by suspense.”<sup>39</sup>

*Pride and Prejudice* can be read as a story about manners and social behaviour. These two subjects shed light on the class system of Austen’s times and can in some cases be an important key to her characters. This is especially apparent in her description of the pretentious, extremely courteous, and arrogant Mr. Collins who it seems has pored over conduct books since childhood. Judging by Mr. Collins, one might assume that the reading of such books is not meaningful in itself, because the reader must possess the ability to evaluate their moral message if they are to be useful. Mr. Collins’ manner is characterized by a strange mixture of “pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility.”<sup>40</sup> Penelope Joan Fritzer points out that in her rendering of Mr. Collins, Austen is

---

36 *Jane Austen’s Letters*, “To Cassandra Austen”, January 29<sup>th</sup> 1813, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 201: “how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least, I do not know.”

37 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 88–89: “Believe me, my dear Miss Elizabeth, that your modesty, so far from doing you any disservice, rather adds to your other perfections. You would have been less amiable in my eyes had there *not* been this little unwillingness [...]”

38 *Ibid.*, 91.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 61.

making fun of the style recommended by conduct books.<sup>41</sup> He bows and scrapes to people in higher positions than his own but has no natural sense of what is appropriate behaviour. He is a flatterer, and in him “there is a mixture of servility and self-importance [...]. His air was grave and stately, and his manners were very formal.”<sup>42</sup> It is tempting to interpret the rendering of Mr. Collins as a parody of conduct books, as Austen is making fun of desirable characteristics such as politeness, respect, humility, and modesty by showing largely negative and shallow representations of them, as well as emphasising that her heroine has determination.

The Austen heroines’ drive is a quality they share with chick lit heroines who, despite everything, are also kind-hearted and proud, and good and reliable friends, with qualities that cannot be learned online or in glossy magazines. The heroine is often compared with another woman, and the comparison sheds light on her positive qualities. Thus, Elizabeth differs from her more desirable sister character, Jane, in more than just words and gestures. Her behaviour is in many ways different from what contemporary conduct books recommend for young women. Elizabeth is cheerful and dynamic: and she talks back, making her the opposite of the ideal woman who does not show too much personality. Elizabeth is very physically active in the novel, and this signals her vitality: she is often depicted running through the countryside with ruddy cheeks and wearing a dirty dress and dirty shoes. Her physical activity is a major topic of discussion in an interview with Andrew Davies, the scriptwriter of the 1995 BBC series *Pride and Prejudice*, about the script and characters. Davies thinks that Elizabeth’s ease of manner indirectly suggests sexual energy, which is what attracts Darcy to her: “[S]he is a very active, lively girl, not just mentally but also physically [...]. I almost think that this is a coded way of Jane Austen telling us she’s got lots of sexual energy. This is probably what appeals to Darcy, unconsciously at any rate, who is used to some very artificial females.”<sup>43</sup> This famous television series describes a woman who is not afraid to show it off. Elizabeth is thus physically expressing herself in a way that is at odds with exemplary female behaviour of the time.

It is important to mention that there were differences in emphasis among contemporary conduct books, as Penelope Fritzer points out in *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books*. Some works focused on good character rather than knowledge, others advised against education, and still others advocated breadth of learning.<sup>44</sup> Fritzer mentions *The Lady’s Preceptor* and *The*

41 Penelope Joan Fritzer, *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books* (London and Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 70.

42 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 56 and 57.

43 Sue Birtwistle and Susie Conklin, *The Making of Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 4.

44 Penelope Joan Fritzer, *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books*, 9.

*Whole Duty of Woman* as two examples of conduct books that advised against the education of young women. She quotes the following from *The Whole Duty of Woman*: “for happier is she who but knoweth a little, than she who is acquainted with too much.”<sup>45</sup> This, however, was not always the case. Some eighteenth-century conduct books encouraged the education of young women; Lady Sarah Pennington, for example, gives the following advice in her book *An Unfortunate Mother’s Advice to Her Absent Daughters: In a Letter to Miss Pennington*

study your own language thoroughly, that you may speak correctly, and write grammatically ... French you ought to be as well acquainted with as English; and Italian might, without much difficulty, be added. Acquire a good knowledge of History – that of your own country first, then of the other European nations ... Learn so much of Geography, as to form a just idea of the situation of places.<sup>46</sup>

Thus some eighteenth-century conduct books also emphasized language learning, writing, history, and reading. They all agreed that some basic education skills were necessary.<sup>47</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, middle-class women were expected to know about playing the piano, drawing, French, grammar, geography, arithmetic, reading books, and needlework.<sup>48</sup> Fritzer writes that Austen’s young female characters generally exhibit traits idealized by the authors of conduct books. Her foolish and witless female characters are talentless and lazy while the female characters that we admire are naturally talented. Austen holds housework in high regard and her good female characters (and some of her bad ones) are all hard-working.<sup>49</sup> This thesis conflicts with the view that all of Austen’s female characters are hard-working or talented, since Austen herself emphasises through her novels that some were lazy rather than industrious, most notably Emma Woodhouse, Catherine Morland, and Elizabeth Bennet. However, Elizabeth possesses a wisdom that distinguishes her from her sister-characters. It cannot be said of any of her heroines that they are held in high regard for their industriousness, and none of Austen’s heroines are so accomplished that they stand out among their peers.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen mocks these highly idealized expectations of accomplished ladies: a knowledge of several languages, a talent for drawing, the playing of musical instruments, great conversation skills, and so forth. In the scene where Mr Bingley, Mrs Bingley, and Mr Darcy are discussing the education of women, Darcy claims that he “cannot boast of knowing more than half-a-

---

45 Ibid, 10.

46 Quoted in Penelope Joan Fritzer, *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books*, 10.

47 Ibid, 12.

48 Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 289–290.

49 Penelope Joan Fritzer, *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books*, 22–23.

dozen [women], in the whole of [his] acquaintance, that are really accomplished.” Mrs. Bingley agrees with him and adds:

no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved.<sup>50</sup>

To this, Darcy replies: “All this she must possess [...] and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.” Elizabeth’s response makes it clear that no woman can meet such demands: “I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*. [...] I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united.”<sup>51</sup> Their conversation emphasizes that Austen was not trying to describe an ideal eighteenth- or nineteenth-century woman but rather a real woman who, despite her flaws, has special traits and something unique to offer.

Fritzer points out that Elizabeth received a liberal education advised by some contemporary conduct books, such as *Universal Mentor*. Through her education and her intelligent father, she is taught to view men as they are. It is for this reason that she can see right through Mr. Collins and eventually recognize the real Mr. Darcy hiding behind the cold mask.<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth, however, has a strong independent spirit and the reader will not accept that her personality was wholly shaped by her father. He undoubtedly had a positive influence on her, but the novel implies that he was distant during her childhood and imposed few restraints on his children, particularly on his youngest daughter, the reckless Lydia. Austen thus deviates from contemporary conduct books, both those that advised little education and those that recommended a broad education. Education is certainly important for her female characters, but it does not occupy all their time, and they do not excel in desirable subjects such as drawing, singing, reading, playing music, or learning languages.

Similarly, Emma Woodhouse is unwilling to undergo the disciplinary process designed to prepare young women of high society for life, for she wishes neither to ennoble herself by practising art nor to receive an education. Despite this, she takes the orphan Harriet Smith under her wing and is resolved to introduce her to good society and to find her a husband of noble birth. She overestimates her matchmaking abilities, however, and leaves Harriet with unrealistic expectations and little hope of marrying the man who loves her. Emma has a comprehensive

50 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 35.

51 *Ibid.*, 35–36.

52 Penelope Joan Fritzer, *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books*, 11.

knowledge of social customs, just like contemporary chick lit heroines who pore over glossy magazines and self-help books in search of make-up tips, the latest fashion, or guidance for their daily life.<sup>53</sup> Society at large demands that women behave in a certain manner, and, just like the heroines of chick lit, Emma has difficulties abiding by these rules and customs. Emma is a good example of an Austen character who does not meet the socially accepted definition of an ideal nineteenth-century woman, despite being “handsome, clever and rich.”<sup>54</sup> She is also the most flawed Austen protagonist in the moral sense of the word, and the only one who finds it hard to differentiate between right and wrong. Her behaviour is excused with the explanation that she has had no restraints imposed upon her: she always does just what she likes and, in most cases, follows her own judgment.<sup>55</sup>

Emma is frequently compared to Jane Fairfax in such a way as to bring out her flaws, partly to highlight the superiority of the latter. Jane is an orphan and the niece of Miss Bates. She is provided with an excellent education by her benefactors, Colonel Campbell and his wife (the element “fair” in her name is no coincidence). Emma is intelligent and she likes to draw, play the piano and sing, but she has neither practised as hard as Jane nor received the same education. This is most likely because Emma had to raise herself: “the real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way.”<sup>56</sup> She grew up with a father who never saw any wrong in her so that few restraints were imposed upon her: “I do not know any body who draws so well as you do,”<sup>57</sup> says Mr Woodhouse to Emma, and adds “there is nobody half so attentive and civil as you are.”<sup>58</sup> Mr Knightley is the only one who sees any faults in Emma giving him

53 Caroline J. Smith talks about how the producers of women’s magazines rely on consumer culture. Even if the magazines encourage women to improve and better themselves they don’t count on them succeeding or else “the consumer market for such publication would be in jeopardy”. See *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* (New York/London, Routledge, 2008), 21.

54 Jane Austen, *Emma* (London/New York: Penguin Books), 1996, 7.

55 *Ibid.*, 7. Malcolm Bradbury says that the “artistic problem of the book” is to let us care for Emma and about her fate but without subduing our own “moral feelings about her faults”. See his article “Jane Austen’s Emma” in *Jane Austen: Emma*, ed. David Lodge (London: McMillan, 1968), 166. The writer Andrew Davies has voiced an interesting opinion on Emma which comes through in his adaptation from 1996 (starring Kate Beckinsale), where Emma’s faults become apparent, the character lacking the warmth and softness which is also a part of her personality in the novel. “Emma Woodhouse is arrogant, ignorant, snobbish, a control freak, and a bully, who treats other people as if they were mechanical toys. She has little insight into others and almost no self-knowledge. [...] In *Emma* the heroine is the Rich Bitch.” See Andrew Davies: “Emma 3. Austen’s horrible heroine.” *Emma Adaptations*. <https://www.strangegirl.com/emma/daviestel.php> accessed Nov. 2023.

56 Jane Austen, *Emma*, 7.

57 *Ibid.*, 42.

58 *Ibid.*, 142.

status as both authority and at the same time a mentor or someone who simply encourages her to take on a more serious understanding of her role in society.<sup>59</sup> Jane Fairfax by comparison excels in many socially desirable qualities, which is the likeliest explanation of why Emma dislikes her: at one point she exclaims that “one is sick of the very name of Jane Fairfax.”<sup>60</sup> This, at least, is the explanation given by Mr. Knightley who is certain that Emma is jealous of Jane because “she saw in her the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself.”<sup>61</sup>

Austen uses certain words to describe Jane Fairfax that highlight her talents: sensitive features, a delicate nature, and tenderness; these were all considered highly desirable feminine traits during the Regency period. Jane is “accomplished and superior”; she has been “given an excellent education”, and is superior to Mrs. Campbell “both in beauty and acquirements”, she has “higher powers of mind”, and is “elegant, remarkably elegant, graceful”, an “elegant creature”, and has “softness and delicacy in her skin which gave peculiar elegance to the character of her face.”<sup>62</sup> Jane also has her flaws, however. She is characterized by “coldness and reserve”, she is “so cold, so cautious” and “so very reserved”,<sup>63</sup> and in comparing her with Emma the reader can see how warm, open, lively, and fun Emma is, despite lacking some of the characteristics idealized as perfect feminine virtues.

When Jane Fairfax sits down at the piano and starts singing, Emma admits that “both [her] vocal and instruments [...] [are] infinitely superior to her own.” She regrets the inferiority of her own? playing and blames it on her undisciplined childhood. She decides to turn things around: “She did most heartily grieve over the idleness of her childhood – and sat down and practised vigorously an hour and a half.” When Harriet praises them both for their musical abilities, Emma says to her: “Don’t class us together, Harriet. My playing is no more like her’s than a lamp is like sunshine.”<sup>64</sup> Emma is fully aware that Jane Fairfax is superior to her in almost every desirable way, at least as a singer and piano player.

The basic irony of *Emma* is possibly to be found in the heroine herself. Emma has difficulties behaving according to ideal feminine expectations, yet she takes Harriet as protégée and tries to give her the much-needed sophistication that she has disregarded. Emma wants to teach Harriet good manners, improve her knowledge, and teach her how to form correct opinions: “*she* would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad ac-

---

59 Ibid, 12.

60 Ibid, 74.

61 Ibid, 138.

62 Ibid, 88, 137, 139, 143, 165.

63 Ibid, 139, 140, 166.

64 Ibid, 188, 191.

quaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners.”<sup>65</sup> This does not go as planned, however, as Emma often cannot be bothered to teach Harriet or actively improve her knowledge, as with the reading of books:

Her views of improving her little friend’s mind, by a great deal of reading and conversation, had never yet led to more than a few first chapters, and the intention of going on to-morrow. It was much easier to chat than to study; much pleasanter to let her imagination range and work at Harriet’s fortune, than to be labouring to enlarge her comprehension or exercise it on sober facts.<sup>66</sup>

Emma would rather let her mind wander and imagine that Harriet has aristocratic ancestry and that she will find her a worthy husband: “...that she is a gentleman’s daughter, is indubitable to me”,<sup>67</sup> says Emma, during an argument with Mr. Knightley after she has decided to prevent Harriet from marrying the farmer Robert Martin. She thus decides to focus on Harriet’s possible blue blood and nobility instead of taking on the more difficult task of a complete makeover. Emma is governed primarily by her imagination and her attempts at matchmaking largely resemble the fantasies of Don Quixote in the eponymous novel by Miguel de Cervantes. She is deeply preoccupied with bending the reality of Highbury to make it follow the narrative principles of romance novels and is accustomed to having things her own way. Miss Taylor, her governess, never disciplined her and was more like a sister or a friend to her, as opposed to a teacher.<sup>68</sup>

As mentioned above, Austen’s heroines do not comply with contemporary conduct books; they express opinions that are too strong, they are too independent and determined, or they have overactive imaginations that repeatedly get them into trouble. It is also often the case in chick lit novels that the heroines do not follow the unwritten rules of society when it comes to appropriate behaviour and often get themselves into situations they cannot easily handle.

---

65 Ibid, 22.

66 Ibid, 60.

67 Ibid, 54.

68 Ibid, 7. “[T]hey had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgement, but directed chiefly by her own”.

## “Like ‘creative accounting’”. Emma Woodhouse and Rebecca Bloomwood

The novel *Emma* is the only novel by Austen that bears the name of the protagonist, which is fitting, since the heroine is extremely self-centred. Emily Auerbach points out that Emma Woodhouse comes closest of Austen’s heroines to exhibiting artistic powers, and that the authoress coined the word “imaginationist” solely to describe her.<sup>69</sup> Like an author fired up by her task of creating characters and plots, Emma “goes to work [...] on the people around her, finding an escape from boredom.”<sup>70</sup> She is governed by her imagination which often gets her into trouble and humorously describes herself as a “fanciful, troublesome creature!” with a “mind delighted with its own ideas.”<sup>71</sup>

Emma sees Harriet as a blank slate: she is like an author shaping characters at her convenience and creating situations to suit her narrative thread. When Harriet first dines at Hartfield she immediately becomes obsessed with her and believes her to be the perfect subject for an exciting new project.<sup>72</sup> Harriet and her potential love affairs are arguably the main focal point of the stories that Emma likes to create. Still, her imagination takes off when she hears how Mr Dixon, Colonel Campbell’s son-in-law, saved Jane Fairfax when she fell overboard on a boating trip off Weymouth. Emma particularly likes to create love stories: “One might guess twenty things without guessing exactly the right”, she says when describing the imaginary love affair between Jane Fairfax and Mr Dixon to Frank Churchill: “And then, he saved her life. Did you ever hear of that? – A Waterparty; and by some accident she was falling overboard. He caught her.”<sup>73</sup> Emma is delighted that Mr. Knightley allows himself to let his imagination wander when he points out to her that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are possibly in a relationship. She does not take him seriously and instead takes it as a sign that Mr Knightley has also started spinning stories: “She was in gay spirits and would have prolonged the conversation, wanting to hear the particulars of his suspicions, every look described, and all the wheres and hows of a circumstance which highly entertained her: but his gaiety did not meet hers.”<sup>74</sup>

Emma’s imagination runs especially wild when Churchill saves Harriet from the gypsies and brings her back to Hartfield. She quickly spins an adventurous and romantic narrative out of the situation, as seen in one of her more notable reflections:

69 Emily Auerbach, *Searching for Jane Austen*, 202.

70 Ibid, 202.

71 Jane Austen, *Emma*, 11, 22.

72 Ibid, see 22.

73 Ibid, 180.

74 Ibid, 290.

Could a linguist, could a grammarian, could even a mathematician have seen what she did, have witnessed their appearance together, and heard their history of it, without feeling that circumstances had been at work to make them peculiarly interesting to each other? How much must an imaginalist, like herself, be on fire with speculation and foresight! – especially with such a ground-work of anticipation as her mind had already made.<sup>75</sup>

Emma is convinced that everybody, even linguists and mathematicians, must see and feel that it is impossible for this young man and this lovely woman not to fall deeply in love under circumstances such as these. It also cannot be denied that Emma resembles Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf in her immense talent for spinning the fates of her friends, as Emily Auerbach has pointed out. Emma is a gifted woman trapped in a stifling society. She is an intelligent, strong, and artistic woman living in an environment that has no incentive and no outlet for women to express their creative nature.<sup>76</sup>

Many chick lit novels focus on women living in modern consumer societies, but perhaps none so much as Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series, which now numbers ten novels,<sup>77</sup> and Emma Woodhouse resembles the heroine Rebecca Bloomwood, insofar as they are both governed by their imagination which repeatedly gets them into trouble. In a modern society, where women have more freedom than their predecessors could have dreamt of having, however, they must overcome obstacles different from those facing Austen's heroines. In the first novel, *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*, Becky is living in a flat in London with her wealthy best friend and works as a financial journalist for the magazine *Successful Savings*. There is a very subtle irony in these novels, and Kinsella uses humour to describe her heroine's addiction to clothes and shopping: Becky lives well beyond her means and owes the bank six thousand pounds. The biggest irony is that Becky works as a financial adviser and by the end of the first novel gets a job working as one on a television show and is finally able to pay all her debts with her new salary. Becky sees no point in "listening at press conferences",<sup>78</sup> just as Emma does not see the point of practising on the piano or reading or engaging in any activity that requires self-discipline. She

---

75 Ibid, 277.

76 Emily Auerbach, *Searching for Jane Austen*, 207. Virginia Woolf imagines in *A Room of One's Own* that Shakespeare had a sister and then tells her tragic story." See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 113. See also Tony Tanner's analyses of Emma's isolation, intelligence, and boredom, living in the claustrophobic environment of Highbury. Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 176–182.

77 The *Shopaholic* series are: *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* (2000), *Shopaholic Abroad* (2001), *Shopaholic Ties the Knot* (2002), *Shopaholic and Sister* (2004), *Shopaholic and Baby* (2007), *Mini Shopaholic* (2010), *Shopaholic to the Stars* (2015), *Shopaholic on Honeymoon* (2014), *Shopaholic to the Rescue* (2016) and *Christmas Shopaholic* (2019).

78 Sophie Kinsella, *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (London: Black Swan 2009 [2000]), 27.

hardly ever follows the news and barely takes notes when she needs to. She “can’t relax”<sup>79</sup> because she is distracted by thoughts of shopping. Emma and Becky both live in their fantasy worlds: Becky’s existence is governed by vanity and consumer addiction while Emma’s existence is governed by fantasies about love.

Becky can think on her feet and there is a good example of this at the beginning of the first novel when she gets herself into trouble over a scarf. She spots a sale sign for an expensive scarf in a shop window and asks the attendant to reserve it for her because she has forgotten her credit card at work. She can withdraw one hundred pounds from her debit card but is still twenty pounds short. Luke Brandon (whom she does not really know) offers to lend her the twenty pounds after she makes up a story about needing the money so that she can buy the scarf as a present for her aunt who is in hospital. Brandon is the head of the largest PR firm in London, he has a very high IQ, and on top of everything else can “read minds.”<sup>80</sup>

Becky and various other chick lit heroines thus resemble Emma Woodhouse, who repeatedly gets herself into trouble over her made-up stories. Emma lies to Harriet, for example, when she says that she does not have a plaster for Mr Elton when he cuts his finger, forcing Harriet to give him a piece of hers. Emma looks shamefaced when Harriet recalls this moment and admits that she had plenty in her pocket: “My dearest Harriet!”, cried Emma, putting her hand before her face, and jumping up, “you make me more ashamed of myself than I can bear. [...] One of my senseless tricks! – I deserve to be under a continual blush all the rest of my life.”<sup>81</sup>

Rebecca Bloomwood also repeatedly makes up lies to get herself out of trouble. At the beginning of the novel this is revealed in the letters that Becky has received from the bank: “I am sorry to hear that you have broken your leg” and “I am sorry to hear that you have glandular fever”, writes the bank manager Derek Smeath, and adds in his third letter, “I am sorry to hear you are still suffering from acute agoraphobia.”<sup>82</sup> Her lies about her aunt in a hospital immediately come back to haunt her when she bumps into Luke as she leaves the shop with her new scarf in a bag. Luke teasingly asks her about the present for her aunt. He admires Becky’s generosity, says that her aunt must be a “stylish lady”, and finally asks her name. Becky, meanwhile, becomes increasingly embarrassed: her cheeks “flame red”, she repeatedly clears her throat, and she feels “paralyzed.” She says that her aunt’s name is “Ermintrude”, and Luke sends her aunt his best

---

79 Ibid, 28.

80 Ibid, 25.

81 Jane Austen, *Emma*, 280.

82 Sophie Kinsella, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, 10, 11, 320.

wishes.<sup>83</sup> Becky is caught in the lie again when she meets Luke at a restaurant wearing the scarf, where she is dining with her friends, as he is with his parents and makes up a quick story about how her aunt had died in a hospital when the doctors amputated her septic leg.<sup>84</sup>

Becky thus repeatedly creates an atmosphere with her lies that is simultaneously uncomfortable for her and comical for the reader; pretending to be accomplished, she lies that she is “fluent in Finnish”<sup>85</sup>, in a job interview which gets her into serious trouble when she is scheduled for a meeting with the recruitment director of the Bank of Helsinki and is expected to speak Finnish. She also lies that Derek Smeath, the manager of Endwich Bank, is stalking her so that she will not have to answer his calls.<sup>86</sup> Becky’s character flaws also work to her advantage as it is they which charm Luke Brandon who praises her for her “imagination.”<sup>87</sup> Her response shows this other side of her having an overactive imagination: “That’s good, isn’t it? That’s quite flattering [...]. Hang on. It’s not some polite way of saying I’m stupid, is it? Or a liar? Like ‘creative accounting.’”<sup>88</sup> The lies that Becky tells to hide her consumer addiction repeatedly come back to haunt her, they create funny, embarrassing moments and sometimes, as a result, undermine her self-esteem.

Both Becky’s and Emma’s actions, due to their lively imagination, lies, spins, and fantasies, have serious consequences for many, themselves as well as other characters. Harriet rejects a proposal from a man to whom she is attracted because Emma actively convinces her that she should instead marry a man from a noble background but this intervention could have had dire consequences for Harriet’s life. Becky becomes a fraud as a financial advisor when her spending is revealed publicly in *Shopaholic Abroad*. Both Emma and Becky are searching for a deeper meaning, living a life perhaps devoid of profound purpose, in a society that doesn’t meet their rich need for creativity.

In Emma’s case, her lack of formal education and a proper career partly explains her need to play with people as if they were living puppets with strings she can pull in whatever direction that pleases her. Both women find an outlet for their boredom and alienation through their imagination and by making up stories which become their shield from the aggression they experience from a patriarchal society. Neither woman has a chance to develop her intellectual powers because of deeper forces in the community that have invisible control over their lives and identities, thus creating a destructive outlet for themselves as well as for

---

83 Ibid, 35.

84 Ibid, 90–91.

85 Ibid, 155.

86 Ibid, 224.

87 Sophie Kinsella, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, 161.

88 Ibid.

their friends and family. Emma lives in a confined area of the romance, but instead of writing stories, she makes them real by playing with people in her surroundings. Becky equally lives in a world that controls women by convincing them that they are never enough, they need to be prettier, thinner, smarter, richer, younger, sexier, and have a brilliant career as well as a fulfilling dating life.

Chick lit heroines suffer because they fail to fulfil the unrealistic expectations that govern modern society, and they are sometimes lacking in social skills, either because they have put themselves in uncomfortable situations as a result of a misunderstanding or awkwardness, or simply because they have gatecrashed the world of the rich and exclusive. Austen's heroines are more independent and determined individuals with a stronger sense of their self-worth than the chick lit heroines. As a result, they choose their husbands wisely, selecting individuals who either possess moral excellence or surpass others in intelligence and constancy.

Chick lit narratives tend to dwell on the heroines' insecurities, damaged self-esteem, and feelings of failure, the heroines find it difficult to handle the social norms surrounding their conduct, behaviour, consumption, career choices, or motherhood. The stories describe women's botched attempts to conform to the demands imposed upon them by a society governed by unrealistic standards, just as Austen's heroines were confined to a narrow female sphere with limited possibilities for developing their skills and talents.

## Conclusion

Austen's novels address manners, behaviour, and speculations on appearance just like chick lit novels, although the story settings and the scenes are very different. Austen's heroines show their independence by rejecting the conduct manuals of their times despite being at the same time influenced by them. In this, they differ from the heroines of chick lit who become more bewildered, confused, and alienated as they consume more of the self-help books that shape the modern female self, moulding their identity and relationships. In this, these contemporary characters are in sharp contrast to their much older counterparts who rest more easily in their faults, despite living in a society devoid of social rights for women.

Jimenez and Rice's influential study on self-help books from the eighties is interesting from this perspective, since these works transformed the culture that chick lit rose from. It reveals a reality that doubtless has influenced modern women's relationships with men. Their article "Popular Advice to Women: A Feminist Perspective", examines how feminist achievements are being eroded in the popular culture through self-help books for women. They emphasise that the

main purpose of guidebooks aimed at them, whether or not they have a scientific basis, is to make women accept their place in the private sphere. This is accomplished by placing love on a pedestal and deeply linked with the expansion of the marketplace or public sphere, the governing principles of which are competition, individualism, and egocentrism.<sup>89</sup> Jimenez and Rice consider that the ballooning of self-help books in the eighties turned this particular literary genre into an important factor in the cultural excommunication of women. The main responsibilities of domesticity were once again placed in their hands, and they had to adapt their lives to altered circumstances, taking on the commitments of marriage and childbearing in addition to fanning the flame of the relationship.<sup>90</sup>

It is possible to argue that both Austen's novels and the chick lit genre are engaged in drawing out the tension between the private and public sphere, that Jimenez and Rice analyse, and Poovey and Fritzer describe in their books. The stories predict limited egress for their female heroines, the public sphere is still a reality they have minimal access to. The overriding cynicism that governs the works of chick lit authors such as Fielding and Kinsella, suggests that their heroines have not bettered themselves despite finding love and a man. Neither are they in a better relationship with themselves or their society.<sup>91</sup> This could also be said of some of Austen's novels, especially *Emma* and *Northanger Abbey*, where the heroines ward off boredom through their fantastic tales. Emma takes on a more sensible role as a leader of her society at the end of the novel but ironically, she must then end her relationship with Harriet, emphasising the firm hierarchy in the social structure, suggesting perhaps that Emma has to give up her vivid imagination, even her voice, to become a proper and respectful wife in Highbury.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, Austen undermines the happy ending for her heroine, since she will at the end of the novel walk straight into the claustrophobic and sterile world that

---

89 E. g. *Being a Woman: Fulfilling Your Femininity and Finding Love* (Toni Grant, 1988), *How to Make a Man Fall in Love with You* (Tracy Cabot, 1984), and *How to Keep a Man in Love with You Forever* (Tracy Cabot, 1986). See Mary Ann Jimenez and Susan Rice, "Popular Advice to Women: A Feminist Perspective", *Affilia* (5.3 1990), 23–24.

90 A prime example is *Being a Woman: Fulfilling Your Femininity and Finding Love* (1988) by Toni Grant. See Jimenez and Rice, "Popular Advice to Women: A Feminist Perspective", 20–21.

91 Rochelle Mabry points out that contemporary chick lit novels are as conservative as women's films, since the heroine is often silenced towards the end of the novel or film, as is seen in the final scene of the film adaptation of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), when Mark Darcy gives Bridget a new diary and she disowns her earlier writing. See A. Rochelle Mabry, "About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary 'Chick' Culture", 205.

92 See *Emma*, 395: "Harriet, necessarily drawn away by her engagements with the Martins, was less and less at Hartfield; which was not to be regretted. – The intimacy between her and Emma must sink; their friendship must change into a calmer sort of goodwill; and fortunately what ought to be, and must be, seemed already beginning, and in the most gradual, natural manner."

she has for so long resisted. The discerning reader's only hope is that the heroine may find solace in the arms of a perfect gentleman who will support her in her newfound role. But that reality lies outside the realm of the story. Perhaps Austen is suggesting that the woman's voice is being suppressed from the moment she accepts her man's proposal, as is revealed in the proposal scene where the eloquent heroine of the novel loses her voice altogether. "What did she say? – Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does."<sup>93</sup>

---

93 Jane Austen, *Emma*, 354.