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ADAPTING MR. KNIGHTLEY: FROM JANE AUSTEN'S NOVEL TO THE SCREEN

Eulália de Azevedo Barros

**Supervisor
Yuri Jivago Amorim Caribé**

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ADAPTING MR. KNIGHTLEY: FROM JANE AUSTEN'S NOVEL TO THE SCREEN

Eulália de Azevedo Barros¹

ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's literary works continue to hold significant relevance in contemporaneity, both for their thematic depth and enduring cultural impact. Adaptations of her novels enable new interpretations, shedding light on overlooked or reimagined aspects of her characters. This article brings a short analysis of the creative differences behind the portrayal of the character Mr. Knightley, from the novel *Emma*, in the film adaptation *Emma* (1996a) for ITV. Elements such as physical traits, the character's stance, opinions about society and moral norms, and behavior were analyzed to provide a more accurate perception of the character, based on *A Theory of Adaptation* by Linda Hutcheon (2006), who argues for the perception of adaptations as individual works, not relying nor having to submit to the original source. The analysis revealed that the movie adaptation emphasizes a more severe and restrained version of Mr. Knightley, accentuating traits that are present in Austen's text. These stylistic choices suggest an intentional shift toward a more austere, traditionally British masculinity at that time, reflecting the adaptors' cultural and narrative priorities.

KEY WORDS: Mr. Knightley; *Emma*; Jane Austen's books; Canonical Literature Books; Jane Austen adaptations.

RESUMO

As obras literárias de Jane Austen continuam a ter uma relevância significativa na contemporaneidade, tanto pela profundidade temática como pelo impacto cultural duradouro. As adaptações dos seus romances permitem novas interpretações, trazendo à tona aspectos negligenciados ou reimaginados de suas personagens. Este artigo tem como objetivo esclarecer as diferenças criativas por trás da representação do personagem Sr. Knightley, originalmente do romance *Emma* de Austen, no filme *Emma* (1996a) da ITV. Elementos como características físicas, postura do personagem, opiniões sobre a sociedade e normas morais e comportamento foram analisados para fornecer uma percepção mais precisa do personagem. A análise foi feita com base no livro *A Theory of Adaptation* por Linda Hutcheon (2006), que defende a percepção das adaptações como obras individuais, não dependentes nem submetidas à fonte original. A análise revelou que a adaptação enfatiza uma versão mais severa e contida do Sr. Knightley, acentuando características que estão presentes no texto de Austen. Essas escolhas estilísticas sugerem uma mudança intencional em direção a uma masculinidade mais austera e tradicionalmente britânica da época, refletindo as prioridades culturais e narrativas dos adaptadores.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Sr. Knightley; *Emma*; Romances de Jane Austen; Literatura canônica; Adaptações de Jane Austen.

¹ Eulália de Azevedo Barros is an undergraduate student completing a degree in English Language Teaching at the Center for Arts and Communication from the Federal University of Pernambuco (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, UFPE, Brazil), eulalia.abarros@ufpe.br. The supervisor of this article was Professor Yuri Jivago Amorim Caribé, Professor of British and American Literature, Department of Languages and Literatures, Center for Arts and Communication from the Federal University of Pernambuco, yuri.caribe@ufpe.br.

1. Introduction

According to Italo Calvino in his book *Why Read The Classics?*, “a classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers” (2011, p. 42). Based on that definition, older literature must be examined through the lenses of new eras, due to the political views and societal norms constant renewal process throughout history. On a similar note, many books have been adapted to accommodate different perspectives, as well as forms of media throughout history. Linda Hutcheon, in her article entitled *On the Art of Adaptation*, claims that, in Western culture, this desire to transfer a narrative from one medium to another is neither new nor rare (2004, p. 108). Furthermore, new technologies have even allowed narratives to take place in multiple media outlets. With the advent of modern technologies, new ways of presenting media have emerged. One example of this is explored by Henry Jenkins’ in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2008). In the book, Jenkins delves into the concept of Transmedia Storytelling, a type of narrative that unfolds across multiple media platforms, such as books, films, and video games, with each medium contributing uniquely to a single narrative. Jenkins highlights *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) as early examples of this approach. While transmedia storytelling illustrates how narratives can evolve across platforms, the repeated processes of adapting canonical literature into movies, such as Jane Austen’s novels, demonstrate another dimension of this cultural phenomenon.

Jane Austen’s books are a substantial example of narratives that have been repeatedly adapted over the years. Her novels have been transformed into various media formats, including stage productions, films, television series, and even web-based adaptations. Among the most well-known books that have been adapted are *Pride and Prejudice* (originally published in 1813), *Sense and Sensibility* (originally published in 1811) and *Emma* (originally published in 1815). The one to be analyzed in this present work is the novel *Emma* (2010), which was compared to the 1996 homonym movie adaptation² initially designed for the BBC channel, but finally released by ITV for television with a script by Andrew Davies and direction by Diarmuid Lawrence (Emma, 1996a). The present discussion is based on the concept of adaptation by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of*

² The production received critical recognition with three nominations and four awards. These include Best Fiction Mini-Series at the Barcelona International Television Festival; Outstanding Art Direction for a Miniseries or Special at the Primetime Emmy Awards; Outstanding Costume Design for a Miniseries or Special, also from the Primetime Emmy Awards; and Best Costume Design in a Motion Picture or Miniseries from the Online Film & Television Association.

Adaptation (2006), which argues for perceiving adaptations not simply as derivative texts but as creative reinterpretations shaped by the affordances and constraints of their respective media. Although rooted in Austen's original conception of a principled, older gentleman, the portrayal of the character Mr. Knightley from the novel *Emma* varies significantly across adaptations, reflecting changing societal norms and directorial priorities. So, the purpose of this article is to compare the role of Mr. Knightley in the 1996 movie adaptation and what is evoked by it; in what it meant to be similar to the original work, and what it meant to be different from it, and how that difference matters both to the time and period in story and how it might be perceived situated in different times. With the analysis of adaptations, many reflections can arise, such as what thematic or emotional resonance does the 1996 ITV version evoke? Moreover, what might be the rationale behind the omission of certain elements from the original?

The novel presents a young woman, Emma Woodhouse, on a coming-of-age journey navigating the complexities of social life and personal development. Throughout the narrative, she frequently attempts to control possible outcomes for various situations, often acting according to her desires and judgments. Living a comfortable life surrounded by people who support her, she faces little to no external criticism, except for Mr. Knightley, who acts as a moral compass. Her misguided efforts include attempting to create a romantic match between her friend, Miss Harriet Smith, and Mr. Elton. A plan that ultimately fails. Later, she realizes that she has true affection for Mr. Knightley.

Although *Emma* has been a much-researched topic due to its status as a British literary canon and the long time since its publication, there is a lack of research focused on the character of Mr. Knightley in the context of Adaptation Studies. The article by Mette Hildeman Sjölin entitled "Television Adaptations of Jane Austen's *Emma*, 1972-2009" (2022), published in the *Lund Journal of English Studies*, discusses several aspects of adaptation theory and practice. However, it does not offer an in-depth analysis of the character Mr. Knightley. Additionally, a book edited by Tammy Powley and April Van Camp entitled *Retelling Jane Austen: Essays on Recent Adaptations and Derivative Works* (2024) contains an essay called "A quick, colorful, romantic comedy for the twenty-first century: de Wilde's *Emma* (2020)". The author, Tara Moore, briefly discusses decisions made in adapting Mr. Knightley's character by analyzing the 2020 film version, particularly its comedic intent, and comparing it to the 1996 adaptations. For example, comments such as "the pacing here is entirely in line with modern expectations" (p. 199) reflect her opinion

on the adaptation's style, acknowledging the modern characteristic brought by the latest adaptation of the narrative.

Nevertheless, some scholars have examined Mr. Knightley's character from Austen's novel in depth. Two key critics to be mentioned in that regard are Charles Knight and James R. Bennett. Knight emphasizes the character's importance by referring to him as "the embodiment of the novel's highest values" (1970, p. 185). He agrees with the popular opinion that the character is the "perfect eighteenth-century gentleman". Following Knight, in 1973, James R. Bennett further contributed to the analysis on the subject in his chapter for the *Studies in the Novel* book, "Doating on You, faults and all: Mr. George Knightley". Bennett identifies in *Emma* what he refers to as irrational behavior, similar to Emma, defeating the male protagonist's main purposes in the novel as a wise, mature figure. Additionally, in the article "Men of sense and their silly wives: the confusions of Mr. Knightley", Mary Waldron (1996) recognizes Mr. Knightley's role as the moral character but also takes a cautious stance and advises others to do so quoting J. F. Burrows (1968): "it is a matter of heeding his [Mr. Knightley] words, not bowing to them" (p. 141). Adding to the study of his personality, Charles Knight claims that there is a distinctive characteristic found in Mr. Knightley: his kindness. This trait seems to put him above society itself, as when he shows fondness for Harriet Smith, someone of a lower class, equating her to his status.

In the narrative, Emma, the protagonist, is a privileged, self-assured woman. Described earlier in the novel as "handsome, clever and rich" and as someone who "seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence" (1815/2010, p. 3). She is the youngest daughter in a well-off family, cherished by her father and admired by virtually everyone who is her acquaintance. Despite her charms, she frequently meddles in other people's relationships and inserts herself in them, acting as someone who is entitled to make decisions about others' lives, especially regarding their romantic choices. It is often claimed by her that she is responsible for arranging the marriage of her former governess, Miss Taylor and her husband, Mr. Weston, which reinforces her confidence and belief in her qualifications for matchmaking. Throughout the book, one of her most extensive and engaged —later shown as misguided— efforts in matchmaking consists of that for her freshly acquainted friend, Miss Harriet Smith, with an affluent man, whom she describes as a gentleman equal to Mr. Knightley in propriety: Mr. Elton, the local clergyman. In an act of craftiness, Emma tries to dissuade her friend Harriet Smith from accepting a marriage proposal from a humble farmer (Mr. Martin), insinuating that she is "saving" Harriet from a modest life in the absence of the high

society to which Emma belongs. Those interventions display the protagonist's lack of boundaries and decorum, as well as her inflated self-perception, as she assumes to have the authority to persuade her friend to reconsider the proposal in the name of her superficial judgment of Mr. Martin's character.

Conversely, Mr. Knightley serves as a moral compass in the story, not due to a general disapproval of matchmaking, as he supports the union between Harriet Smith and Mr. Martin, but because he approaches the concept of marriage with a greater emphasis on character, compatibility, and social pragmatism. He is a critical observer of people's personalities and intentions, especially of Emma's; he openly acknowledges her flaws, while still caring for her. His criticism often sheds light on the disastrous consequences of Emma's meddling for a great part of the novel. As a close family friend — his brother is married to Emma's sister, and he is friends with their father — Mr. Knightley shares her social environment but contrasts sharply in maturity and judgment, underscoring his role as both a character who contrasts with the protagonist and a guide in Emma's personal development towards wisdom and propriety.

Thus, the present research is based on comparative analysis, a common approach in adaptation studies. The artworks that were analyzed were those of *Emma*, the novel, and *Emma* (1996a), the movie adaptation by ITV. To collect the data, the film was viewed multiple times, and the book was read multiple times to identify key scenes and moments that define Mr. Knightley's role in the narrative. Scenes such as the Box Hill episode and pivotal dialogues between Emma and Mr. Knightley — particularly those involving Harriet Smith and Frank Churchill — were selected for examination; there was a focus on the narrative structure, character portrayal and stylistic choices. Particular attention was given to traits like posture, gestures and mannerisms, which served as physical interpretation of the character's inner qualities. Possible reasons behind adaptation choices were contemplated, taking both the period of release of the movie and contemporary perspectives into consideration. Special attention is given to Mr. Knightley and what he represents in the narrative as well as in the movie adaptation. One limitation of this work is that there is an intrinsic subjectivity in interpreting visual cues and character representations. Since such analyses depend heavily on individual perception and cultural context, different readers or viewers may derive varying meanings from the same gestures, postures, or symbolic traits. Mr. Knightley's posture in a given scene might be interpreted by one critic as a sign of authority and kindness, while another might see it as aloofness or superiority. However, through careful observation and analysis

of both the movie and the book, it was effectively mitigated. This research seeks to offer valuable insights and understanding from the comparison between the movie and the book.

2. Adapting canonical literature

From oral traditions to contemporary media, it is possible to observe that mankind has consistently engaged in renewal and reinterpretation. Classic examples include adaptations of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales into Disney's animated films, which themselves have recently been reimagined as live-action remakes. These cycles of adaptation also extend to fanfiction, spin-offs, and the previously mentioned derivative narratives across media.

Stam states that "Transposition to another medium, or even moving within the same one, always means change or, in the language of the new media, 'reformatting'. And there will always be both gains and losses" (*apud* Hutcheon 2006, p. 16). His stance denotes, therefore, that the medium plays a pivotal role in the experience, thus evidencing the impossibility of comparing and expecting these two works (the source text and the outcome) to be the same. Furthermore, debates about adaptation often overlook the fact that many viewers may not encounter the source text before watching the film; yet it is not necessary to overlook the original work to appreciate the adaptation. Adaptation is unique in its dual nature, and it is enriched by intertextuality, meaning that the two works do not need to be completely separate entities. Stam (*apud* Hutcheon, 2006) emphasizes that adaptation inherently involves intertextuality, as long as the audience is familiar with the original work. He argues that viewers engage in a dialogical process, comparing the source material with the adaptation. This dynamic relationship highlights how adaptations can both honor and reinterpret their sources. Hutcheon (2006) challenges the common misconception that adaptations are a lower form of entertainment, defending the value of adaptations by noting that many audiences first learn about adaptations rather than the source texts. This undermines the assumed cultural superiority of the original and "challenges the authority of any notion of priority", asserting that "multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically" (p. XIII), thus rejecting hierarchical distinctions between originals and adaptations.

This misconception that a film must be a direct replica of the book on which it is based raises the issue of how the two media are perceived: books are favored, while screens are not. Stam (*apud* Hutcheon 2000) argues that some people resist the idea of adaptation in the name of what might be described as iconophobia, i.e., a fear of the visual, or the imagery and also of logophilia,

a reverence for the written word. He also suggests that a negative view of adaptation could simply stem from disappointed expectations. Additionally, it is necessary to understand that there is no problem in deeming adaptation as repetition, since art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories. It is possible, however, to look at both with different lenses and understand that they serve different purposes, without comparing. Linda Hutcheon further explains:

They are, in different ways and to different degrees, all “immersive,” but some media and genres are used to tell stories (for example, novels, short stories); others show them (for instance, all performance media); and still others allow us to interact physically and kinesthetically with them (as in videogames or theme park rides). These three different modes of engagement provide the structure of analysis for this attempt to theorize what might be called the what, who, why, how, when, and where of adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006, p. XIV).

A nuanced understanding of each medium requires recognizing its distinct genres and valuing their unique qualities instead of focusing on limitations. This approach allows narratives to reach their full artistic and emotional potential. For example, literature often unfolds at a slower pace that encourages deep character development and thematic exploration. In contrast, cinema works within a shorter timeframe, using visual and auditory techniques to tell stories with immediacy and impact. Appreciating these differences may promote a more informed engagement with various narrative forms.

The creative crew behind ITV adaptations seems to understand what is in their favor, and they capture visual beauty as an important hallmark in the movie. Landscapes being represented, such as the famous Box Hill scene, not only underscore its possible main purpose in the movie (showing Mr. Knightley’s influence and money), but it also allows for a romanticist (heightened sense of emotion or idealism tied to the setting) air to be evoked; a common phenomenon for adaptations of novels. Hutcheon seems to agree by quoting Cardwell stating that “after several decades, British televised versions of classic novels now generate in their viewers expectations about style, “sumptuous, beautiful, pictorial images, strung together smoothly, slowly and carefully” (Cardwell *apud* Hutcheon 2006, p. 124). These adaptations take advantage of the visual nature of movies. They might also benefit from true representation, since according to Monaco (2000), the development of recording arts has historically aimed to enhance realism, with technological advancements, such as the transition from black-and-white to color and from silent to sound films, bringing representations increasingly closer to actual human experience.

This desire to portray the beautiful landscapes often mentioned in Austen's novels (often owned by wealthy characters) may be attributed to the financial security that such adaptations often provide. As Ellis (1982) observes, there is a significant economic incentive driving adaptation, particularly within British television, which has long relied on culturally established eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels. This preference for what Ellis describes as "tried and trusted" material reflects a broader commercial rationale, wherein producers tend to favor familiar and proven narratives — not only during periods of economic uncertainty but also as a consistent strategy to attract and retain audiences (*apud* Hutcheon, 2006, p. 5). Seger (*apud* Hutcheon, 2006, p. 24) emphasizes that the appeal of adaptation is not solely artistic but also economic, since films and television shows can reach audiences far beyond those of best-selling novels or stage plays. This commercial potential often plays a significant role in the decision to adapt certain texts, especially those with proven popularity.

However, this preference raises important questions, as the British standard often portrayed in adaptations of classic Austen novels tends to focus exclusively on the lives of wealthy, white characters, without any critique of it. Such portrayals contribute to the continued idealization of a narrow, class and race-specific vision of British heritage, often at the expense of more inclusive or diverse narratives. These adaptations typically follow the source material closely, avoiding substantial changes that might challenge dominant social norms or introduce alternative perspectives. This adherence reflects the market-driven motivations of the period in which these adaptations were produced (in this case, a 1996 film). In recent years, however, it is possible to observe a shift in approach. Contemporary series such as *Bridgerton* (2020), while still rooted in historical settings and conventions, adopt more inclusive casting choices, reflecting a growing effort to recreate classical narratives through a broader and more diverse cultural lens.

3. Adapting Mr. Knightley

As previously discussed, adaptation is not merely the transfer of a story from one medium to another; it is a transformative process involving interpretation, context, and form. Telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can result in a significantly different interpretation (Hutcheon 2006, p. 8). Thus, adapting a story allows for new perspectives to emerge. As Hutcheon explains, in the process of adaptation, creators seek "equivalences" in different sign systems for various narrative elements such as themes, events, settings, characters, motivations,

perspectives, consequences, contexts, symbols, and imagery (Hutcheon 2006, p. 10). These equivalences are not exact replications, but creative reinterpretations shaped by the medium's unique affordances. Adaptations insert themselves into broader cultural conversations, reflecting and responding to their historical moment, intertextual influences, and audience expectations. This happens in the many adaptations of *Emma*, none of which can be deemed superior based solely on fidelity to the original novel. Through the dialogic interaction between the book and film, adaptations can take an activist stance, consciously interpreting or reviewing their source material in light of contemporary context. As Hutcheon (2006) says: “For the reader, spectator, or listener, adaptation as adaptation is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text” (p. 21). Within the academy, these inevitable comparisons should not be viewed as reductive or problematic, but should be perceived through the lens of intertextuality, which recognizes this dialogic relationship between adaptations and their sources.

A key example of this dynamic can be found in the adaptation of the character Mr. Knightley in the 1996 movie (*Emma*, 1996a). Austen’s novel presents Mr. Knightley with certain qualities shaped by early 19th-century social norms, and the process of adaptation by ITV makes some of these features more visually and emotionally prominent. For instance, the significant age gap between Mr. Knightley and Emma becomes more prominent on screen through casting, performance, and the visual storytelling tools unique to television. The movie also does not refrain from evidencing their age gap. Her being 21 and him being 38 introduces a number of problematic elements, including the stark age difference itself, the power imbalance it implies, and the fact that Mr. Knightley has long been a close friend of her father and a kind of mentor figure to her. This does not complicate their eventual romantic relationship in the narratives, however, it raises questions about autonomy, maturity, and the influence of patriarchal structures embedded in the social norms of the period. This faithful depiction of their age difference, consistent with the novel, is an deliberately a creative choice, particularly evident in lines such as “I remember holding you this once upon a time” and “I held you in my arms when you were three weeks old” which highlight the age gap as a central and unavoidable aspect of their relationship in the movie. This maturity lends Knightley a trustworthy and authoritative presence, strengthening the impact of his critiques of Emma and emphasizing the mentorship dynamic between them. In contrast, portraying him as younger and more relatable, as seen in the 2020 adaptation, risks downplaying the significant age disparity and the maturity difference that comes with it, although it arguably makes their

relationship more palatable for contemporary audiences. Those adaptative differences alter the dynamic between the characters in notable ways, although the former is perceived as especially inappropriate by modern audiences. This lack of shift in tone invites contemporary audiences to engage more critically with questions of maturity, authority and gendered power dynamics.

In Lawrence's movie adaptation, there is an emphasis on his dual role as both a mentor and romantic lead. Mr. Knightley, portrayed by Mark Strong, seems to enhance some traits of Mr. Knightley from the book that would only seem possible through visual elements, namely, anything that would allude to the figure of a significantly older, wiser, higher in social status man. Multitrack medium, thus, allows for changes in camera angle, focal length, music, mise-en-scene, performance, or costume, revealing the creative freedom allowed by such a medium (Stam *apud* Hutcheon, 2006). His tall, visibly larger build, particularly when compared to Kate Beckinsale's petite frame, amplifies his visual dominance on screen and his distinctiveness, not only physically but in stance, among other characters. This is a point that the book could not convey as successfully as through visual means. Therefore, the following image (figure 1) evidences the disparity between such characters:

Figure 1 - A frame from the movie: the ending scene in which all the couples gather to dance at Mr. Knightley's hall



Source: Emma, 1996a

Additionally, these traits, combined with his composed demeanor and articulate speech, reinforce an image of traditional British gentility. Such traits are not only consistent with Mr. Knightley's social status from the novel but are also emblematic of the refined masculinity often idealized in period dramas. In the context of British Jane Austen adaptations, ITV's portrayal aligns with a popular aesthetic that favors poised, upper-class male figures who visually and intellectually command their environment, reinforcing ideals of heritage, propriety, and class distinction.

Moreover, the cultural context plays a vital role in shaping how adaptations portray characters and themes. British and American versions of *Emma* often diverge in their approach, reflecting different audience expectations, their characteristics based on their cultures, and interpretive priorities. The American version of 1996 focuses on portraying a more charming Mr. Knightley, played by Jeremy Northam, focusing on his romantic role throughout the movie, thus, not focusing primarily on this distant, stern approach as the British version. Such variations highlight how adaptation is not a one-to-one translation but a culturally situated act of reinterpretation that responds to both medium and moment.

Throughout the novel, Mr. Knightley consistently embodies traits traditionally regarded as desirable in Jane Austen's male protagonists: humility, wisdom, and emotional restraint. This stability has been considered a hallmark of the romantic interests in Austen's works. Although Mr. Knightley is wealthy, he never boasts about his status. He commands respect not only from his friends and acquaintances but also from his servants, making him both approachable and honorable. These qualities enable him to serve as an ideal model of a gentleman, admired by other characters in the novel and reflecting values highly esteemed in the British society of that era.

Furthermore, Mr. Knightley plays the role of a moral compass. He is positioned in direct contrast to Emma's impulsive and often highlighted immature nature. Conversely, he represents a rational force in the novel. His presence in the narrative functions as a crucial character in this *bildungsroman* (a novel of a coming of age): Emma is the immature, proud, socially unaware character who needs to improve ethically to achieve a moral character and finally reach the desirable trait of propriety often exalted by Austen's narratives. Mr. Knightley is the one who directly advises her in many moments, working as a stabilizing power for her character. This dynamic is effective because Emma respects him and views him as a model gentleman. For instance, she compares Mr. Martin unfavorably to Mr. Knightley to convince Harriet of Mr. Martin's inadequacy. This is illustrated by the excerpt on page 30, where it is stated that "Mr.

Knightley's air is so remarkably good that it is not fair to compare Mr. Martin with him. You might not see one in a hundred with gentleman so plainly written as in Mr. Knightley." (2010, p. 30). His role as Emma's social and ethical mentor is especially evident in the way he responds to her mistakes. Different from other characters, he is immune to her charms. An example of this is his immediate hatred of her heavy influence on Harriet's refusal to marry the humble gentleman, Mr. Martin, who serves his property. Mr. Knightley is especially mad at Emma as he says that Harriet could not do better than Mr. Martin and insinuates that Emma might have spoiled her friends' one chance at domestic bliss and overall felicity. This is one of the remarkable scenes in the movie in which Mr. Knightley's famous remark of disapproval is uttered: "Badly done, Emma" (Emma, 1996a). Thus, rather than indulging her vanity or ignoring her faults, Mr. Knightley directly addresses her mistakes and makes sure to tell her of his disapproval of her actions as well as the reasoning behind his opinion, which seems like a genuine attempt to change her mind. He serves not only as a model, but mainly as a corrective force.

In sum, Mr. Knightley's portrayal in the novel reflects Austen's enduring emphasis on responsibility and the slow, often uncomfortable process of personal growth and the development of a mature character. As a character, he serves both the romantic fantasy and a thoroughly constructed moral figure, though the latter is the one evident throughout the entire novel; a role that becomes even more complex when adapted to the screen.

4. Mr. Knightley's disapproval of Emma and Frank Churchill's impropriety

In the book, scenes that took place in two different moments happened in the Box Hill section of the movie. The first one shows a moment regarding Emma and her friendship with Frank Churchill, when they were laughing at the expense of Jane Fairfax, denoting not only intimacy, but also a lack of decorum on their end. Additionally, the movie evidences Emma and Frank Churchill's inside jokes by adding some scenes, such as Frank Churchill's remark prior to the word puzzle game. There was the addition of a sentence uttered by Frank Churchill: "Mr. Fairfax is to be a governess, I understand, so she can teach us all" (Emma, 1996a). Since being a governess, as previously discussed in the book (and as generally understood, especially since Austen's novels always involve romantic relationships), was considered an inferior fate for a woman's life. Thus, he was being disrespectful by drawing attention to her situation, not acknowledging how she might feel or be perceived by others. Later in the novel, it was shown that he supposedly behaved the way

he did in order to disguise their secret relationship. Another action in that concealment was being overtly friendly and flirtatious towards Emma. The book states an initial unapologetic stance adopted by Emma regarding this flirtation, perceived by all, with excerpts like “Emma was not sorry to be flattered” (2010, p. 358) in front of everyone at their gathering.

In the book, it is extensively shown that Mr. Knightley has some questions regarding Frank Churchill and Miss Fairfax’s level of acquaintance. Excerpts revealing his thoughts, such as “... Mr. Knightley began to suspect him of some inclination to trifle with Jane Fairfax” (2010, p.334) and “Mr. Knightley suspected in Frank Churchill the determination of catching her [Jane Fairfax] eye...” (2010, p. 337), further evidence his social awareness. This curiosity of his culminates both in the movie and in the book when he warns Emma of his suspicion and her attitude towards them. Scenes as the ones in which he says “May I ask what the joke was that caused so much entertainment on one side and so much distress on the other?” or “Emma, are you sure you understand the degree of acquaintance between those too?” to which she vehemently denies, stating that they could not possibly know one another.

Moreover, the film makes a small but meaningful alteration by having Mr. Knightley politely ask, “May I?” (Emma, 1996a) before assisting Harriet with her turn in the word puzzle game. This small gesture suggests a desire to portray his attentiveness and willingness to offer support, yet without overstepping, portraying him as considerate and self-aware. In contrast, in the novel, it is Harriet who initiates the interaction by directly seeking his help. This difference highlights a shift in agency and subtly emphasizes Mr. Knightley's proactive and decisive nature in the film adaptation.

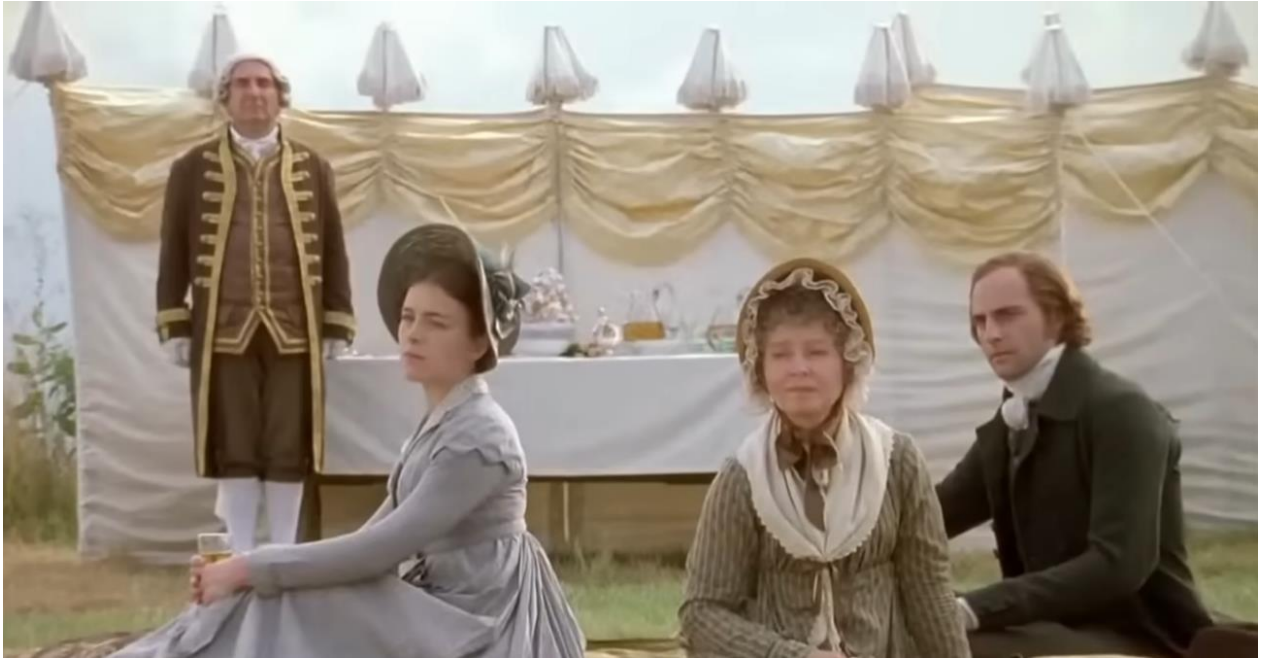
The movie also places strong emphasis on Frank Churchill’s impropriety, showcasing not only his overt flirtations towards Emma throughout many of his appearances in Highbury but also his insensitive jokes at Miss Fairfax's expense. This behavior served to mask his secret entanglement with Miss Fairfax, revealing his tendency to deceive and fool those around him. Such moments highlight how socially improper and morally questionable Frank Churchill truly is. His childish behavior creates a striking contrast with Mr. Knightley’s composed and mature demeanor, mirroring the dynamic between Emma and Mr. Knightley. Throughout the story, Frank Churchill appears as the opposite of everything Mr. Knightley represents; he is young, carefree, dependent on his aunt, and playful. He lacks the kind of firmness and discipline that characterize Mr. Knightley and contribute to his admirable qualities. The film underscores Mr. Knightley’s clear

disapproval of Frank's conduct, reinforcing his role as a morally grounded and honorable gentleman who upholds the standards of proper behavior and attentiveness towards others.

One pivotal moment that encapsulates the adaptation's treatment of Mr. Knightley occurs during the confrontation over Harriet Smith and Mr. Martin's proposal. When Emma cunningly influences Harriet's response, Mr. Knightley reacts with sharp disapproval, reminding Emma that her actions carry consequences far beyond what she could have imagined. Additionally, his defense of Mr. Martin's character shows his sensitivity to other characters' social well-being. His critique of Emma, nevertheless, is rooted in care, not cruelty, though his sharp demeanor and harsh words and tone. He tells her plainly that it was "badly done", a sentence uttered by him in another moment that shows how much he cares about others as well as herself. Although this conflict was not based on a desire to humiliate her or assert himself as superior, but rather on showing her what disastrous outcomes could arise from her meddling. He makes sure to mend their relationship afterwards by agreeing when she says in the next scene that they "must never be enemies". This exchange evidences the adaptation's interest in making him a firm character, but also a compassionate character.

Delving into the contrast between Mr. Knightley and Frank Churchill, as well as Mr. Knightley's evident dislike of Frank, one scene captures some members of the party's reaction towards Emma and Frank engaging in conspicuous flirtation that provokes reactions from others. Their boisterous behavior disrupts the social atmosphere, drawing attention to themselves while disregarding the decorum observed by the rest of the party. In the following image (Figure 2), the general discomfort inflicted by such actions is evident.

Figure 2 - A servant, Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates and Mr. Knightley seated together in Box Hill.



Source: Emma, 1996a

Here (Image 2), the expressions of the guests indicate their detachment from the surrounding conversations, suggesting discomfort with the impropriety of being excessively loud and turning others into an unwilling audience. A closer examination of Mr. Knightley's countenance reveals his evident displeasure with Emma and Frank Churchill's exhibitionist behavior.

Mr. Knightley's disapproval of Frank's poor manners extends beyond this particular scene. Various moments highlight Frank Churchill's overall impropriety, including his prolonged neglect of visiting his family. Mr. Knightley's disdainful perception of Frank's behavior further highlights his deep commitment to social responsibility, an ethical concern notably absent in Frank. These contrasts culminate in the Box Hill scene, where Emma's flirtation with Frank and her cruel jokes at Miss Bates' expense expose the very immaturity Knightley has warned against.

The Box Hill picnic scene poses as the emotional climax of the adaptation. Set on Mr. Knightley's own estate, the scene visually underscores his wealth and social standing. The presence of servants, the mansion, and the class distinction among guests reinforce the narrative's underlying themes of hierarchy and decorum. In a scene of the analyzed film adaptation (Emma, 1996a), Emma is offensive to Miss Bates:

Frank Churchill: Mr. Woodhouse orders me to say she requires something entertaining from each of you. It can be one very clever thing or two moderately clever things or three very dull things, indeed.

Miss Bates: Well, I'm happy to oblige Ms. Woodhouse. Three very dull things indeed that'll just do for me, you know, I shall be sure to say three very dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shall I? Do not you all think I shall?

Emma: But there may be a difficulty for you, Miss Bates. You'll be limited as to number. Only three at once (Emma, 1996a).

When Emma humiliates Miss Bates in front of others, Mr. Knightley removes her discreetly and admonishes her in private. His decision to scold her not as a romantic partner, but as a concerned and principled friend, reinforces his position as a man who values social grace, personal responsibility, and emotional honesty.

Overall, in the 1996 ITV adaptation, Mr. Knightley embodies an uptight, reserved interpretation of Austen's character. His moral integrity and emotional restraint remain intact, but his romantic appeal is subtle and more intellectually grounded. The adaptation, through casting, performance, and visual framing, amplifies the hierarchical, almost paternal aspects of his role, foregrounding the power dynamic between him and Emma in ways similar to the novel.

5. Conclusion

The character of Mr. Knightley functions as a moral and a narrative anchor in both the novel and its screen adaptations. However, the process of adaptation — especially across cultures and media — inevitably reshapes how that character is presented and interpreted. One example of this is the Douglas McGrath version of *Emma*, released in the same year, starring Gwyneth Paltrow (Emma, 1996b). While being released in the same year, the movies come from two different cultures for two different audiences and two different mediums (the American one for the theaters and the ITV one for television).

The ITV adaptation leans heavily into careful attention to language, period detail, and the restrained social codes of Austen's world, represented through many character interactions. Mr. Knightley, as portrayed by Mark Strong, reflects this emphasis: he is stoic, composed, and emotionally withheld. His relationship with Emma develops slowly, often through tension and correction rather than flirtation or overt affection. This approach emphasizes the mentorship and moral guidance aspect of their dynamic, positioning Knightley as a figure of authority, almost paternal in nature, whose romantic potential emerges only near the end of the narrative. His

sternness, age, and restraint, as well as the power imbalance in their relationship, make modern viewers question astounding choices. For example, the age gap.

By contrast, the American film adaptation (Emma, 1996b) opts for a lighter, more romantic tone, prioritizing charm and emotional accessibility. Jeremy Northam's Knightley is softer and less overtly authoritarian. His interactions with Emma are warmer and more playful, shifting the tone of their relationship from one of correction and maturation to one of romantic tension and mutual growth. This version downplays the age difference and frames the romance more conventionally, reflecting a broader trend in American period dramas to favor emotional clarity and narrative satisfaction over historical realism or textual precision. Thematically, both adaptations preserve Mr. Knightley's role as a guiding force in Emma's moral development, but they diverge in tone.

This illustrates that even in contemporary adaptations, the choices in portrayals of Mr. Knightley caters to the creative objectives and are tailored to their target audience. One focuses on more dynamic, emotionally accessible elements, whilst the other opts for a more restrained and serious depiction. Box office data from 1990 reflects the dominance of the American film industry in global markets, particularly when compared to British productions of the same period. This difference in approach could be a possible factor to explain why the American version grossed more globally, as they focus on a trendy, more agreeable tone.

Ultimately, the comparison between these contemporarily released movies underscores how adaptation is never a neutral act. Each version constructs a particular Mr. Knightley — either emotionally restrained and morally inflexible, or emotionally accessible and romantically idealized. These portrayals reflect both the creative goals of adaptations and the cultural contexts into which they are released.

Thus, this research aimed to highlight the importance of understanding adaptations as more than mere representations of books or simple remakes by focusing on Mr. Knightley in the 1996 adaptation of Emma by ITV. This shift in perception fosters a richer plurality of works. As Linda Hutcheon asserts, adaptations are "not vertical but horizontal" (2013, p. 13), emphasizing the lateral, dialogic relationship between texts rather than a hierarchical one. For instance, the portrayal of Mr. Knightley as a stern character, remarkable to the book but even more evident in the movie, becomes a point of critical engagement. ITV's choice to amplify this existing trait rather than alter it entirely reflects a deliberate creative decision to remain within the "safe space" of familiarity.

This approach reveals much about the production's intentions and its interpretive stance toward the source material.

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