Word Count: 2266

Izzy Nedland

Jane Austen's *Emma:* "Developing" Chess Allegory Beyond the Game Motif

Introduction: Expanding The Game Motif

The first appearance of the game/puzzle motif in *Emma* is Mr. Elton's charade. Emma misinterprets the answer to the riddle, "courtship," as a hint of Mr. Elton's intentions to form a relationship with Harriet. She is blind to the affections Mr. Elton directs toward herself (Austen 70). Because of this, Emma encourages Harriet to further pursue relations with him, despite the implausibility of the relationship. Another notable instance of the motif is the word puzzle at a social gathering. Frank places words in front of Jane, and she angrily pushes them away (326) Mr. Knightley, already sensing a sort of relationship between Jane and Frank, understands this as a confirmation of his suspicions, as does the previously skeptical Emma; consequently, the words become "loci of conflict and tension" (Barchas 314). Finally, conversation surrounding a casual game is what prompts Emma to channel her frustration in the form of a thinly veiled "riddle" toward Ms. Bates and her tendency to ramble (Austen 347). These word games are "a reflection of the novel's self-consciousness" concerning language (Barchas 314), and by extension, a self awareness concerning the word-based games that the language serves to represent.

These three instances are some of the most discussed in academic literature, and rightly so, as they are examples which explicitly propel the plot forward and have tangible implications in the form of characters' actions. They serve to advance the idea of love as a game; and, as Austen scholar Michael Suk-Young Chwe understands, games as being intertwined with characters' own understandings of their social surroundings (Chwe 137). I would like to further expand *Emma* as a modern version of a chess allegory which complements these already established notions of games in the novel. I have found only one academic work that mentions chess as related to *Emma*, albeit in insignificant passing[1], but I feel Austen's use of language,

[1] Marie, Beatrice. "EMMA' AND THE DEMOCRACY OF DESIRE." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1985, p. 1. *MLA International Bibliography*.

exploration of social order, use of the bildungsroman genre, and dabbling in game theory are heavily redolent of chess, and are worth discussing.

I: Language

Game and chess symbolism are conveyed in a subtle manner through Austen's intentional, "self-aware" choice of language, which serves to advance the game motif beyond plot points. For example, Emma thinks the words which Frank Churchill presents to Jane during the game "were but a vehicle for gallantry and trick…child's play, chosen to conceal a deeper game on Frank Churchill's part" (Austen 326). This *game*, of course, being the game of love. In her sympathetic thoughts of Harriet concerning her poor luck in friendship and romantic relationships, Emma thinks of her as a "loser in every way" (420). Mr. Knightly, referencing Frank's neglect of Jane and attention to Emma, mentions Frank as "playing a most dangerous game" (416).

"Blunder," while being applicable to games in general, holds a particularly strong connotation to chess. The word is used repeatedly throughout the novel in addition to being Frank's word of choice during the game with Jane. In his apologetic letter, Frank admits his "blunder" in momentarily ruining his engagement to Jane (Austen 413). Emma continuously meditates on her "blunders of head and heart" (386), blunders in her development of Harriet's failed relationship (127), and so on. Another potential instance of chess terminology being used in the context of love is the "N. takes M." allusion, in which the letters N and M respectively stand for bride and groom. And, phonetically, Knightly and Emma's names (433). Not only is Knightly taking Emma to be his wife in marriage, but, using chess terminology, is *taking* and "conquering" his target in the game of love.

II: Historical Context, Chess Literature, and the Social Order

Jane Austen most likely would have been familiar with chess. The game was making its way into middle class homes gradually since the 18th century and would have been established in upper middle class homes by the time the novel was written (Golombek 113). As far back as medieval times, the game of chess had a history of being highly allegorical and intertwined with literature—Austen would not have been the first to experiment with chess and game symbolism. Amongst the numerous allegories, the most (loosely) similar work in terms of balance between chess and plot is Thomas Middleton's 1624 play *A Game At Chess,* in which Middleton aimed not to "fit the dramatic action to the game," but instead "exploit the game" in order to "give point to a dramatic situation" (Yanchin 318). *Emma,* like *A Game At Chess,* still retains a completely novelistic structure unlike the older chess literature which maintains one-to-one, more technical plots.

Chess was often likened to the "social" or "civic order," and allegories commented on politics, as explored in William Caxton's *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (Adams 124). As Professor Begam mentioned in lecture, Austen's characters in *Emma* are isolated and secluded from the rest of the world and any politics. In this sense, the characters form a sort of pseudo body politic; or, their own world amongst themselves. Instead of the chess pieces aggregating into society as a whole, they are confined to representing the high class of Highbury.

It is particularly fitting that a refined "game of status" (Golombek 84) should be chosen as a rhetorical device in a comedy of manners, a genre which explores rules and conventions of society. One medieval chess allegorist states that "[t]he world resembles a chess board…the chessmen are the men of the world who have a common birth, occupy different stations, and hold different titles in this life" (Golombeck 67). Indeed, each piece represents a given social rank,

with rules ascribed to its mobility. A rook may move horizontally, a bishop diagonally, a knight in an L-shape. A different set of rules also governs the mobility of characters in *Emma.* The novel's heroine is particularly concerned about the hierarchy of society and rank. For example, she feels the Coles' invitations of the higher society to come to a dinner is out of place and unacceptable for people of their rank, who have made an "illegal" move (194). She criticizes Elton, who she feels is below her own rank, for trying to propose to her, as he is unworthy (128) and unable to occupy the position on the board which Emma bars him from.

Emma, with her complete riches and social mobility, resembles the queen. People praise her and bow to her wishes. Mr. Knightley's name not only serves to suggest the trope of the knight in a love story (Barchas 314), but the chess piece. Elton as a clergyman seems a viable match for the bishop. And poor Harriet, with her questionable origins and more lowly upbringing, is the pawn of the story. The least socially mobile, she is the easiest to be sacrificed. She is the one who constantly gets heartbroken, and she is at the mercy of more powerful figures around her accepting her presence. The pawn's description in one English allegory seems particularly applicable to Harriet's situation: "The pawns are poor men. Their move is straight, except when they take anything: so also the poor man does well so long as he keeps from ambition" (Golombek 67). Harriet would have been—and ultimately ends up—perfectly content with Mr. Martin. Instead, she aims for men out of her reach and finds herself consistently disappointed and uncomfortable. Harriet's rise in the social rank is ultimately against the rules—a disturbance in the social order, which cannot be allowed.

III. Piece Development and the Bildungsroman

Chess literature, originating in the medieval times and flourishing for centuries after, focused on parables and moralities (Golombeck 64); it was seen as a game of virtues and growth, both symbolically between the pieces themselves and between the players. Further, chess is centered around what is called "piece development." A player must move one's pieces and pawns in order to gain advantages against their opponent. To effectively do so, one must have an acute awareness of surroundings. British chess player Paul Morphy in his 1779 *Morals Of Chess* states that through the game of chess, one may learn "caution, circumspection, and foresight" (Golombeck 124).

In this sense, a player's experience with the game of chess mirrors the bildungsroman. In the bildungsroman genre, the hero undergoes a transformation; a *development* in a moral, intrapersonal sense. In this aspect, Emma is cast not as the mobile queen as discussed earlier, but as a chess player in charge of the board. In the beginning of the novel, Emma is very self assured and does not think about the ramifications of her selfish actions: she is lacking this "caution" and "circumspection." She makes the same mistakes over and over in giving Harriet false hope that she will find love amongst the high class and even schemes to bring Harriet and Elton together, alone, going as far as to call them lovers (Austen 86). Despite her feelings of "be[ing] on fire with speculation and foresight" (314), she is comically poor at predicting what is to be. She thinks she sees signs that Elton loves Harriet—she is sure of it—yet, her predictions are far from what unfolds.

But, through playing this "game," she recognizes through her failure to "develop" her surrounding people—or "pieces"—to her liking, she undergoes a "development of self" (383). She realizes how her meddling has been detrimental to not only others' lives, but her own. She

hopes that "lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection" (445). This line of thought resembles the chess player Paul Morphy's view of a person's ability to refine their strategic skills through the game—which, I will state again, is the game of love.

IV: Game Theory and Strategy

Continuing along the line of circumspection and strategy, I would like to place my proposal in deeper conversation with game theory—the study of choice, preference, and strategy occurring between agents. Michael Suk-Young Chwe understands an early version of game theory to be a "central theoretical concern" of the novel (Chwe 18). While this is not my direct argument, I feel it is a helpful framework for understanding the chess allegory. Chwe does not mention chess, but game theory can be applied to *Emma* in similar ways it is to chess, which is arguably the ultimate strategy game. Just like a player in the game of chess, "Emma's goal is to demonstrate strategic prowess" (90), although as discussed, she is overconfident despite her ability to scheme well; her story serves not as a "course in strategic thinking," but a "corrective for those impressed by their own abilities" (86)

One example which demonstrates these ideas is Chwe's analysis of Emma's "never think[ing] of herself" in Mr. Woodhouse's terms, as her "spending so much time manipulating others" so that she does not spend enough time developing her own life (172). This is her ultimate downfall—-she is too focused on attacking the other side, and only notices she is "in check" when it is too late. In game theory and chess, strategy—defined as considering the external agent's thought processes—is vital (7). Emma "craves praise and validation," and "thinks constantly about how her strategic actions will be reviewed by others, particularly…Mr.

Knightley" (95). So, paradoxically and detrimentally to herself, she *does* think about what people want, but only in terms of what she wants herself.

Chwe also suggests *Emma* demonstrates a sort of joint application of preference and rational choice theory, which is the theory of what determines the value of an object. He states that Emma values Harriet in terms of the time and effort she spent developing her, not necessarily based on specific attributes (Chwe 229-230). The same can be said of a piece on the board. Value depends on the care and thought a player puts into the development of a piece—-a mere pawn can be of more value than a rook depending on the board layout or what the other player will exchange or lose from an interaction (230).

Chwe also examines the central tenet of choice in game theory, in which he argues choice is better than no choice. To have choice is to have power. For example, the power to refuse an invitation from the Coles (Chwe 98), or the power to refuse a swap in chess. The worst position one can be in is one in which one has no true choice or desirable option—-when one's king and queen are forked by a knight, for instance. The player has no choice but to move their king and lose their queen. In Emma's case, this "forking," this "paralysis," manifests itself as her lack of ability to understand and manipulate Jane Fairfax. Jane is "disgustingly" reserved and unreadable, which makes Jane a superior opponent. She does not provide Emma with enough gossip to form schemes or make strategic choices—Jane is a "situation" over which Emma has no command. As a result, Emma lets her imagination run wild and loses any semblance of control she thinks she has.

Conclusion

The chess allegory can be understood through the novel's use of language, similarities between historic chess literature, participation in the bildungsroman genre, and emphasis on strategy. Critics may say I am "over strategizing" like our heroine in my understanding of Austen to have extended this significance to the novel. But, it's undeniable that there are a notable number of correspondences between chess and the whole of *Emma* that seem to go beyond coincidence. Nonetheless, I find placing the novel in this light is valuable, especially when understanding it as complementary to the already established motif of games throughout the novel.

Works Cited

Adams, Jenny. "'The Kynge Must Be Thus Maad': Playing with Power in Fifteenth-Century England." *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006, pp. 122–55. *MLA International Bibliography.*

Austen, Jane. *Emma.* Penguin Books, 1996.

Barchas, Janine. "Very Austen: Accounting for the Language of *Emma*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2007, pp. 303–38. *MLA International Bibliography.*

Chwe, Michael Suk-Young. *Jane Austen, Game Theorist: Updated Edition.* Princeton University Press, 2014. *MLA International Bibliography.*

Golombek, Harry. *A History of Chess.* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.

Yachnin, Paul. "A Game at Chess and Chess Allegory." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1982, pp. 317–30. *MLA International Bibliography.*