Close Readings of Jane Austen's *Emma*, Volume II

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Edited by

Kenneth R. Morefield

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

It feels fitting that a project that conceived years ago as a solo venture has evolved into a collaboration. Emma Woodhouse is famous for making grandiose and well-intentioned reading plans that get thwarted by life's events. I suppose that is one of many ways that I am like her. While the bulk of the close readings in Volume II are my own, I would not have been able to complete this volume without the timely participation of my contributors. Alex, Jacob, Tyler, Stephanie, and Mary answered my calls for help at various stages of this project when I was overwhelmed by teaching duties, a tenure application, and other professional commitments. I am grateful to each of you, both for your contributions and your friendship.

An additional but not unexpected benefit of recruiting new contributors is that their voices reveal how rich is Austen's text. We argued and discussed whether or not Emma really was in love with Frank Churchill after all, whether Mrs. Elton was Emma's foil or doppelganger, whether anything important to the plot actually happened in Volume II, and why some people – philistines – think the novel is "boring." It was a comfort to have some of my decades-long ideas about the novel confirmed by astute readers, and it was a joy to have others challenged, forcing me to rethink what I believed I already understood. That practice, too, parallels the development of Austen's heroine. Perhaps we cannot be steeped in a novel for too long before we begin to conform to it.

A few years ago, in trying to justify this project academically, I wrote: "Faculty and, increasingly, students are bombarded with a dazzling and daunting array of secondary criticism filtered through various disciplines and ideologies." That is still true, but in the last decade I have seen (at the undergraduate level) a decreased interest in literature as an academic discipline and a tendency to treat a B.A. in English as a preprofessional writing degree. That means more tech writing, writing across the disciplines, internships, reports, and all manner of exercises that treat writing as a "process" rather than as the expression of complex analysis. Reading, in my experience, continues to get marginalized academically, but I remain as convinced as ever that it is the core skill necessary to succeed in our discipline. Close attention to a text slows us down in a media-rich, sound bite, social media age. That age is not built for

contemplation, much less rumination. To linger over a text is a profligate practice. Even in the classroom, "coverage" is prioritized over critical thinking, the breadth of one's shallow knowledge rewarded over the depth of one's understanding.

Since another theme of Volume II is that of repetition, it also seems appropriate that I repeat some expressions of gratitude that accompanied Volume I. Elizabeth Morefield and Ernie Astin once again provided me with a writing haven while I was facing key deadlines. Their generosity is both an inspiration to me and a model for me. My academic institution, Campbell University, continues to support faculty development during economically challenging times. Whether I have been asking for travel funds to help with professional development, premium library space to write free of interruption in the spare moments between office hours, or the salary and benefits needed to support the increased demands placed on modern faculty, I've generally found a sympathetic ear in my institution's administration.

This book is, I have learned through writing, profoundly influenced by the fact that it is about a middle volume. The "middle" is often a hard place to be. It requires some knowledge and achievement for one to have arrived there, but the end is not always in sight. The middle is often a place where we experience fatigue, depression, confusion, perhaps even a touch of hopelessness. Emma Woodhouse experiences all these things. In thinking about how she deals with those experiences, it has been inevitable that I ended up contemplating how the lessons she learns apply to my own life. It is my hope that having these chapter-by-chapter analyses will help readers of this volume to do the same.

CHAPTER ONE

I HAVE JUST GIVEN YOU A HINT OF WHAT JANE WRITES ABOUT

KENNETH R. MOREFIELD

Volume II begins with Emma and Harriet walking and with the former's "opinion" that they had "been talking enough of Mr. Elton for that day." We are not told how much time has passed since the end of Volume I and the onset of Harriet's disappointment. Neither do we know how much talk of Mr. Elton there actually has been. It is unclear whether Emma's strategy to limit conversation about Mr. Elton has more to do with a genuine desire to help Harriet get over her pain or a more selfish desire to not be reminded of her own part in helping to bring it about. If, as we have noted earlier, the reader may often have trouble distinguishing what has actually happened from Emma's perception of it, it is because Jane Austen so often only gives us the latter. Harriet does appear to confirm Emma's judgment by making an awkward transition—"Mr. Elton is so good to the poor!" Much of Volume I, however, has shown the dangers in extrapolating too broadly from single incidents as well as the human tendency towards confirmation bias.

Emma's desire to steer Harriet's (and her own) thoughts away from Mr. Elton cause her to stop in for a visit with Mrs. and Miss Bates. In Volume I, Chapter 3, Mrs. Bates was described as "the widow of a former vicar," so the description here of them as "people in business" appears to be a slight continuity error. We might infer from this error that the distinction between the widow of a vicar and the widow of a man in trade is not that great either to Austen or Emma, the material point being that Mrs. Bates is part of the "second set" (VI:C3) of Highbury residents. Mrs. and Miss Bates have been mentioned two or three times to this point, but this chapter marks the first fully described interaction with them. That their active participation is deferred until after readers have been told enough to form judgments of them follows the pattern of the novel in introducing Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax, Robert Martin, and indeed

Emma herself (see comments on VI:C1). Miss Bates is described as an "old maid" by Harriet and as "so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing—so undistinguishing and unfastidious" by Emma (V1:C10). Given the strength of Emma's insistence that there is no likeness between her and Miss Bates excepting that they are both unmarried, we see in her character the antithesis of how Emma wishes to be perceived. As a character, Miss Bates has something important in common with Emma: they are both introduced in the least favorable light, Emma by the narrator, Miss Bates by Emma.

The novel's tendency to interpret characters before introducing them is mirrored in Miss Bates's habit of summarizing Jane Fairfax's letters before reading them. The stated reason for this practice is Miss Bates's fear that some unexpected piece of bad news might upset or shock her mother. There is no reason why this custom needs to be practiced with Emma, or anyone else, so in it we get an example of how customs become habits. The explanation for the habit's origin is itself comically undercut by Miss Bates's admission that her own anxiety and surprise upon learning of Jane's cold led her to cry out in surprise, thus creating more anxiety and worry than would have a straightforward reading of the letter. Miss Bates's defining characteristic is her verbosity, and Austen underscores it by transcribing so many of her speeches verbatim while curtly summarizing most of the dialogue of other characters. It would be wrong, however, to state that Emma's (or the reader's) impatience with Miss Bates is manufactured by Austen through technique alone. Miss Bates does dominate the conversation. In this chapter she has nearly five sentences of spoken dialogue for every one of Emma's, and those sentences are often run-ons. Austen here begins the technique of allowing Miss Bates to go uninterrupted by even the narrator to make the audience complicit in Emma's impatience with her.

It is worth noting in passing that even in this visit there are authorial decisions about what to summarize and what to give verbatim, and that these decisions shade our judgments of Emma's conduct. Emma's reluctance to visit stems from her dislike of hearing about Jane Fairfax. She stops only because she (wrongly) judges they were "just now quite safe from any letter from Jane Fairfax." Yet scarcely a paragraph later we are told that "the mention of the Coles was sure to be followed by that of Mr. Elton." Emma is judged to have gone through this part of the discussion "very well" because she keeps up their part of the conversation so that Harriet need not speak. Even so, if the reason for the visit really were to distract Harriet from Elton, it was an odd choice given the admitted likelihood that Elton would be a topic of conversation, a

likelihood made greater by the fact that it is not the time of the week where they would typically have a letter from Jane. Also, while the parts of the conversation that are irksome to Emma are given in laborious detail, those parts that are potentially painful to Harriet are glossed over in a one paragraph summary. It is quite possible to interpret Emma as caring more about getting an onerous duty out of the way when it is least likely to include discussion of Jane than about how it would impact Harriet's emotions. The description of the encounter would be markedly different if the exchanges about Elton were written out and the discussion of Jane were reduced to brief summary. By carefully structuring a chapter about a mundane visit, Austen has subtly hinted at Emma's (perhaps unconscious) continuing selfishness.

Another function of Miss Bates's verbosity is that it allows the author to introduce information without obviously telegraphing or foreshadowing its relevance. Much like the stereotypical lawyer who hopes to distract her adversary from a damning piece of evidence by burying its inclusion underneath a pile of irrelevant and superfluous documents, the narrator here embeds Jane Fairfax's recent history beneath a pile of gossip that all but the most self-disciplined readers often skip over. (As a professor, I have always been surprised by the number of students willing to admit to skipping over passages in the assigned reading. Only more recently, as I have seen a pattern emerge in which passages they skip, have I begun to ponder whether Austen subtly or overtly invites them to do so.) The circumstances leading to Jane's impending visit are related in the second half of the visit, only after Emma (or many a reader) has been lulled to boredom by the Miss Bates's gratitude for the Coles and a description of having misplaced the letter. It is contained in one particularly long speech in which Miss Bates goes on, uninterrupted for ten sentences, at least two of which are particularly long and set off by dashes.

When the train of information is finally interrupted it is so we can be told that "an ingenious and animating suspicion entered Emma's brain with regard to Jane Fairfax, this charming Mr. Dixon, and the not going to Ireland." Yet again the author slips into passive voice to soften a moment when Emma's thoughts or actions are particularly uncharitable. This use of the passive voice isn't describing Emma mitigating her own responsibility; it is the narrator using it to describe Emma's actions. Few readers who have drifted over the course of the paragraph will go back, upon hearing the suspicion, and remind themselves of the particular details regarding the trip. As readers we are more apt to remember the beginning or end of a series of details, so in this case we are much more apt to take

from this conversation that Emma had a suspicion about Jane's involvement with Mr. Dixon than we are to focus on any other details.

The narrator uses some of her strongest language of this chapter to describe Emma's suspicion. She calls it "ingenious" and "animating." Perhaps most tellingly, she describes Emma's response, an attempt to get more information that could confirm the suspicion, as "insidious." Similar to the use of "evils" in Volume I, Chapter 1, the use of "insidious" is so cavalier that its impact is almost immediately blunted. The human tendency is to undercut moral claims or criticisms by complaining that those who use such language are being melodramatic. That there is little to none of the moral indignation that we are used to hearing from those who use such language further complicates our interpretation when we scrutinize this passage. The narrator makes a strong, harsh moral judgment, but she does not linger over it, further dissipating its impact.

Then again, Emma's own sensibilities have perhaps been blunted to the nuances of language by her own willingness to use hyperbole and understatement as methods (however ineffective) of self-justification. The visit begins with the admission that Emma's "deficiency" in meeting her duty to call on Mrs. and Miss Bates is something hinted at "from her own heart," but that admission comes only after the offense has been eliminated from the category of serious errors by saying the charge originated in "the few who presumed ever to see imperfection in her." More telling still is the reason given why Emma's guilt is so ineffectual at prompting reformation. The "danger of falling in with the second rate and third rate of Highbury" renders the prospect of such visits not merely "disagreeable" and "tiresome" but a "horror." Is the narrator calling Emma's gossip-fishing "insidious" simply giving her a taste of her own medicine, or is she simply more severe in her judgments than modern readers are comfortable with? Perhaps a little of both. The Pauline epistles of the New Testament often list actions worthy of moral censure, discomfiting many a reader by lumping together seemingly serious offenses such as thieving, fornication, and idolatry with those we tend to look at less severely, such as coveting and slander.

That Emma is held to particularly high standards by the narrator and other characters, Knightley in particular, seems indisputable. She holds herself to such standards to the point where her character borders on the scrupulous. But Austen was on record as saying that she loved Emma, even while fearing she might be the only one who did so. Thus sympathy for living under such demands is probably meant to outweigh disgust or disapproval at her failures. Even so, Austen rarely dismisses or excuses those failures or character defects outright. Indeed it is only as Emma

comes to see them as such that the high standards become an aspirational beacon rather than a crippling millstone.

Chapter Two

There May Be Some Truths Not Told

Kenneth R. Morefield

It is sometimes easier to say what Jane Fairfax is not than what she is.

She is not Emma's antagonist, although Emma would probably be hers were the novel about her. Were readers to randomly open the book to this chapter, they might be forgiven for thinking Jane was the protagonist. This chapter bears many structural and thematic similarities to the early chapters of Volume I. As with the second chapter of Volume I, there is a backstory for a supporting character that is in many ways more detailed than that provided for the protagonist. That story is told absent any reference to Emma and solicits different emotions from those sought in the main character's introduction.

Jane is perhaps best described as a foil, that broadest of literary terms intended to convey that a character provides some sort of meaningful contrast to the protagonist. In a narrower vein, literary foils often share characteristics or situations with the protagonists so that key differences can take on greater causal significance. Jane, for instance is an orphan, whereas Emma has lost only one of her parents. And while Emma's introduction subordinates that fact to a list of Emma's present characteristics—handsome, clever, and rich—Jane's gives it priority by listing it first and setting it apart in a one sentence paragraph. Jane is also an only child, whereas Emma is introduced as the younger of two sisters. Emma is described as mistress of the house; Jane is the "property" of her grandmother and aunt. In those elements of personal suffering that are perhaps meant to recapture some of the reader's empathy for Emma as a poor, selfish, rich girl, Jane Fairfax supersedes her.

Both Jane Fairfax's introduction and Emma's also contain a pointed use of the word "evil." In Emma's case, as previously noted, we are told that the "evils" of Emma's situation were her disposition to think too much of herself and her power to have "too much her own way." Jane, having "fallen into good hands" is facing the quickly approaching "evil day"

when she must leave the care of the Campbells and take on her appointed role as teacher or governess. If there is credence to Mr. Knightley's opinion that Emma's dislike comes from jealousy at Jane's reputation as "the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself," then the comparative designations of evil—having too much and not enough of one's own way—hint that Austen may be on Knightley's side in the argument about Frank that concludes Volume I. Circumstances can influence character, but they do not determine it.

Fiction readers are second only to sports fans in their love of underdogs, and Jane's status as poor and seemingly without prospects make her that. Emma dislikes Jane, and she admits to that antipathy. As the novel progresses, plain speaking increases, but it is still rare enough in the early parts that it comes as a bit of a surprise here. Even so, one requires more than antagonism to be an antagonist. Whatever her feelings towards Jane, Emma has not yet acted to cause Jane injury. To the extent she does so at all, she does so inadvertently. Or does she? Emma is aware of her dislike, and aware, too, that it is not "just." In more lucid moments she may even recognize that even the "imputed faults" used to justify her dislike are "magnified by fancy." In language and tone, this chapter echoes the previous one, with Emma expressing misgivings about her dereliction of some perceived social duty (visiting Miss Bates, friendship to Jane) followed by recidivism rather than reformation. Emma's resolution to do better lasts until Jane's next visit to Highbury in which Emma finds her "disgustingly" and "suspiciously" reserved.

The linking of an emotion as strong as disgust with a grievance as tenuous as reserve is more damning evidence of the extent of Emma's dislike than any half-serious admission made during "moments of self-examination." One hardly needs to be a repeat or prophetic reader to realize that Jane Fairfax has good cause to be circumspect with opinions around Emma. In Volume I, Chapter 10, Emma calls Jane's aunt "silly," "undistinguishing," "unfastidious," and her situation "contemptible." That she is free enough with her contempt that Harriet is comfortable calling Miss Bates an "old maid" in Emma's presence suggests that this example was not the first time Emma has made her allegedly private feelings well known. Indeed for Knightley to have opined on the root of Emma's dislike of Jane evidences that she has either shared it with him or been unable to hide it in his presence. Within two chapters we are told that Emma feels "horror" at the prospect of being drawn into an intimacy with Highbury's second tier of residents, yet conversely feels disgust at those same people's hesitation to bare their souls in the face of her animosity. The chapter concludes with the observation that "Emma could not forgive her,"

implying that Emma takes Jane's reserve as a personal affront rather than as appropriate social conduct.

Upon hearing of Jane's pending visit (in the last chapter), Emma entertained an "ingenious and animating suspicion" about a connection between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon. Upon meeting Jane's arrival that "suspicion" is elevated to a "highly probable circumstance of an attachment to Mr. Dixon, which she had so naturally stated to herself." That the suspicion has so quickly grown to certainty is evidence that the lessons Emma have learned from trying to match Elton and Harriet have been limited. She may have resolved to do no further matchmaking, but she has not yet understood that the matchmaking fiasco was a particular manifestation of a deeper problem—the tendency towards being overly certain regarding her own judgment. Even so, there appears to be some progress in Emma's maturation here, as in between the suspicion and the conviction that it is "highly probable" comes some attempts at introspection and reasoning. In between Jane's history and an account of the "first visit" comes an admission that Emma is sorry to have to "pay civilities" to someone she does not like. This admission is followed by attempts to understand the reasons for her antipathy and a resolution to render "justice" by disliking Jane "no longer."

This resolution marks the second time that Emma has indicated that she thinks of affinity as something that can be decided upon only to find that acting upon what she had decided to feel is harder than acting upon what she actually feels. Before ever meeting Frank she has stated that his "character and condition" make him the sort of person that would suit her if she were ever to marry. Yet when he delays the visit to Randalls, she admits she cannot be pleased with him, despite Mrs. Weston's defense, until he comes. Before paying the visit to Jane, Emma resolves to no longer "dislike" Jane. In fact, the narrator states that "it seemed impossible" to feel anything for Jane but "compassion and respect." Emma is similarly unable to convert this resolution into reformed action. In a subtle but telling shift, the narrator tells us that she left her first meeting with "softened, charitable *feelings*" (emphasis added) but that these "charming feelings" were "not lasting." Emma's inability to distinguish between resolutions based on duty and those grounded in feelings is a major theme in this chapter and the novel as a whole. That she recognizes a duty (as communicated to and by Knightley) but is unable to enact that duty because of emotional difficulties links her thematically to Frank Churchill and, perhaps, provides some psychological insight as to why she defends him to Knightley at the end of Volume I. When she says that Knightley does not know what it is "to have tempers to manage," she is

directly referring to Mrs. Churchill and her husband, but she could just as easily be speaking of managing one's own feelings. Knightley, being more practiced in choosing duty over feelings appears to have none. Emma does not deny Frank has an obligation to his father and step-mother, she only insists that circumstances can make acting on perceived duties easier or harder.

Is there a connection between Emma's suspicions about Jane's attachment to Mr. Dixon and her inability to follow through on her resolution to treat her justly? It is telling that even as she calls Jane's attachment "highly probable," Emma expresses some consciousness that her imagination has been working overtime. She is now willing to "acquit" Jane of have seduced Mr. Dixon "or any thing mischievous which her imagination had suggested at first." Even the belief that Jane is unilaterally pining for Mr. Dixon, causing the illness she can't shake, is prefaced by the conditional "if." Jane "might have been" nursing such feelings. It seems clear that that Emma's imaginative scenario about Jane is prompted in part by jealousy at "the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself." Perhaps in an unconscious way she is trying to come up with an excuse for the behavior—Jane's reserve—that infuriates her and injures her pride. Were Jane to have a secret attachment, her reserve would be reasonable caution, and her inability to confide in another would be less a reason to take insult and more to give sympathy. Such a reading might exonerate Emma slightly. Were she to genuinely believe that Jane was in love with Mr. Dixon, her sense of insult at Jane's reserve would make no sense. Conversely, if on some level she knows this to be a fanciful imagining, her attempts to use it to trick herself into feeling more compassion than she actually does is doomed to failure. But she is trying. A more mature Emma, one in charge of her own feelings, might be capable of feeling or expressing empathy with Jane without the particular details of why she did not make the trip to Ireland. She knows all too well that Miss Bates is tiresome, and she cannot imagine Jane choosing her company over that of her adopted companions, another echo of Frank's decision at the end of Volume I. Imagining Jane made the choice out of genuine love and affection would be an admission that she made the choice Frank was unable to make and would heighten Emma's sense of inferiority.

Although several of the themes of this chapter are similar to themes from Volume I, we may note a key stylistic difference. The narrator is slightly more overt in signaling to readers that, like Emma, we do not yet know everything simply because we have been filled in on some details of Jane's story. In between the recitation of Jane's history and the shift in

focus to Emma and her resolution, we get a full paragraph of direct exposition from the narrator. The most pointed sentence in this passage states that "with regard to her not accompanying them to Ireland, her account to her aunt contained nothing but truth, though there might be some truths not told." Since the narrator, unlike Emma, knows Jane's thoughts, it is reasonable to read this as a hint to the reader rather than as mere conjecture. Were it in a passage about Emma's thoughts, we could be excused for treating this as one more conflation of narrative exposition and character's perception. Since that conflation is the normal means by which the narrator misdirects first-time readers, it creates a reverse misdirection here. In a chapter filled with acknowledged conjecture, it becomes easier to read over a narrator's declaration as simply one more repetition of Emma's suspicion rather than as what it is: confirmation that Jane is holding back some information from her aunt and that the narrator is holding back that same information from us.

Given the novel's overriding mode is that of only partial narrative omnipotence—the narrator relates the thoughts of Emma but only the actions of other—this passage's inference that the narrator knows more than Emma about Jane's history might be seen as a slight stylistic breach. (If so, it may be just coincidence that Chapter II of Volume I also contains a structural anomaly; it consists only of back story and some of Miss Taylor's/Mrs. Weston's perceptions.) Alternately, we may take it as a revelation that the narrator always knows much more than she is telling but scrupulously avoids drawing attention to that fact. That degree of circumspection is much closer to Jane's conduct than Emma's, which in turn, puts the reader in an analogous position to Emma. We may want to be sympathetic, but we realize it is hard to be so in the face of such taciturn inscrutability. In my analysis of Volume I, Chapter 1, I suggested that Austen subtly aligns the reader against Emma by foregrounding her blessings and glossing over her hardships. Emma's conduct in Volume I is held up for censure, threatening to amplify any potential animosity towards the character. But by the beginning of Volume II, we see that transformation has begun, even if its process is painfully slow. Similarly, Austen's changes in structure, like her hints about withheld knowledge, are not powerful enough to instantaneously overcome whatever frustrations with Emma have built over the first nineteen chapters, but they are judiciously embedded into the text so that repeat readers, or particularly attentive first readers, can see that Emma's transformation into a more self-disciplined and self-aware adult is a slow and consistent one rather than a sudden one brought about by any single incident.

CHAPTER THREE

WITH A SINCERITY WHICH NO ONE COULD QUESTION

KENNETH R. MOREFIELD

For the second time in four chapters, Emma takes up a position in an argument against what we know to be her views. In Volume I, Chapter Eighteen, she defends Frank Churchill against Knightley's claim (which is also her own) that Frank ought to pay a visit to his father despite any opposition of his adoptive parents. In this chapter, after perceiving Jane to be "disgustingly" and "suspiciously" reserved to the point where Emma "could not forgive her," she responds to Knightley's compliments with a strange reversal: "You think her diffident. I do not see it." This reversal differs from that at the end of Volume I in a few ways. In the previous instance, Emma is aware of (and expresses amusement at) her own inconsistency. In that instance, too, she is defending the person about whom she and Knightley are conversing. Here it is Knightley who appears to defend the other party. Emma's own position is to defend her own conduct. To see that most clearly, we must look closely at what led to Emma's reversal.

One of Austen's gifts is to show how conflicts often escalate slowly and develop from seemingly innocuous conversation. The superficial nature of the conversation can lead readers to pay less attention to exchanges that begin inauspiciously, thus they (like Emma) often find themselves surprised when they find themselves in the middle of a disagreement, scrambling back over what was half heard or read to catch what was missed. One example of Emma having to do the same is when she is at the Randalls party and Elton's solicitations keep her from following the news about Frank's impending visit. Another is when she deliberately breaks her lace and engages the housekeeper in conversation to try to allow conversation between Harriet and Elton to be semi-private. In both instances Emma is listening closely enough to hear but not attending closely enough to know exactly what transpired. It is one of the

ways, from a Reader-response perspective, that Austen ties Emma's miscalculations to her status as a less than careful "reader."

Emma claims that Knightley has said Jane is "diffident," but Knightley has suggested that only "part" of Jane's "reserve" is founded "in diffidence." That part Knightley believes Emma will overcome—and it's worth noting he thinks it is up to Emma to overcome it—but that in doing so she should honor the part of Jane's reserve grounded in discretion. "Diffident" can be used as a synonym for "reserved," though it is clear here that Knightley is meaning to convey a quality of shyness that leads to the reserve rather than the reserve itself. Emma's refutation of the characterization is less clear. She herself said "Miss Fairfax is reserved," leading to Knightley's defense. Her insistence that Miss Fairfax is not diffident isn't strictly speaking a flat out contradiction. But to the extent it is not, it means Emma is no longer describing Jane's behavior; she has revealed her opinions about Jane's motives.

Knightley's response appears to suggest what the narrator has already confirmed in the build up: this conversation is not so much about Jane's character as Emma's manners. Knightley's praise of Emma as a host opens the dialogue, and his praise is uncharacteristically unreserved. "You left nothing undone." Yet Emma's response to his praise is surprisingly sullen. "I hope I am not often deficient in what is due to guests at Hartfield." The strain here is easy to explain. Emma is responding not to Knightley's proximate praise but to his more distant criticisms. The previous chapter revolved around Jane's back story, and readers were told in it that Mr. Knightley "once" told Emma that the reason for her dislike of Jane was because of a mix of envy at and jealousy of her accomplishments. We are not told how long ago this "once" was, only that Emma "eagerly refuted it" at the time but was subsequently convicted by it in her conscience.

Framed with that history, it is possible to see how Emma might perceive Knightley's praise as a backhanded reminder of former criticism. Is she right to do so? This novel is rife with examples of Emma misreading or misperceiving situations. In Volume I, most of those examples centered around her inability to correctly interpret Elton's behavior. Knightley, however, is a long-time friend of the family, which makes readers more apt to assume that Emma is reading his behavior correctly. This chapter, in particular, emphasizes non-verbal communication and Emma and Knightley are invested—at least in Emma's mind—with an ability to read each other's thoughts often reserved for couples who have been married for years. In at least three instances, we are told that Emma knew what Knightley meant to communicate. We are told that "an arch look" from Emma "expressed" that "I understand you well enough" even though she

did not verbalize those sentiments. This example contains a twofold assumption. Emma supposes that she has understood what Knightley meant (as opposed to what he said) and that she has communicated to him something different from what she actually says. Later, when Miss Bates gives the news of Elton's engagement, Knightley speaks with a smile "which implied a conviction of some part of what had passed between them." Also, Emma perceives Knightley's "anxiety" at one point and attempts to appease it by praising Jane. After she does so, we are told that Mr. Knightley "looked" (we might ask "to whom?") "as if he were more gratified than he cared to express."

Emma's interpretation of Knightley in each of these instances is reasonable. So reasonable, in fact, that we may not realize they are merely interpretations. The gulf between Emma's perceptions about what has been communicated and what people actually think is a reoccurring theme in the novel, and as it goes unchecked, it will culminate at Box Hill with Emma labelling "playful" and "judicious" what the narrator opines could only be described as scandalous flirting. John Knightley's warnings to Emma prior to the Randalls party in Volume I were summarily dismissed by Emma, but they too should give the reader (and not just Emma) warning that Emma's perceptions are not ironclad.

That this gulf is present is only hinted at through most of Volume I to allow for comedic misunderstandings. In Volume II, Austen begins to slowly draw the readers' attention to it more directly. Miss Bates's prattling response to Elton's engagement reveals that his pursuit of Emma was the subject of gossip between herself and Mrs. Cole; it was not merely noticed by John Knightley or others close to Emma. The first sentence of this chapter tells us that "neither provocation nor resentment were discerned by Mr. Knightley." He had seen "only proper attention." On a positive note, Knightley's surprise at Emma's dissatisfaction with Jane indicates that Emma is not a slave to her feelings. She is able to hide or suppress feelings that are at odds with the proper behavior required of her as a host or a lady. But Emma appears to think her thoughts and motivations, while hidden from most others whom she does not find it convenient to share with, are transparent to Knightley. The two examples cited are evidence that she is wrong on both counts. People like Miss Bates, while not as clever as Emma, are sometimes able to infer what Emma thinks has been masked or stated in a way to escape their notice. People like Mr. Knightley, while attentive and astute, can sometime fail to see what she really means.

It is ironic that Emma's confidence in Knightley's perception may lead to the sort of emphatic assertion of the opposite of what she feels. When

she notices Knightley's anxiety, she expresses admiration and pity for Jane "with a sincerity which no one could question." In other words she lies…convincingly. Such a judgment of Emma is descriptively true but perhaps overly harsh. If I am hesitant to slam Emma for the lie it is because this chapter makes us keenly aware of the performative aspects of speech, especially for young women. Rightly or wrongly, Emma is socialized to believe that it is one of her duties to speak graciously regardless of what she actually feels. Why is it her responsibility to alleviate Knightley's anxiety? Why, for that matter, does Emma's tacit admission that she has not warmed to Jane cause Knightley anxiety in the first place? First time readers might share Miss Weston's suspicion (articulated later) that Knightley's speech and conduct evidence a romantic interest in Jane. Repeat readers are more apt to pick up on the fact that the propriety of Emma's conduct is something which both the community as a whole and Knightley specifically are invested in. Feelings, as any young adult knows, are harder to master and control than conduct. Emma, having acted in a way to prompt a friend's praise can be forgiven for being disappointed that the praise is for feelings she doesn't actually have, for perhaps suspecting (like the author herself suspected about her) that those who catch a glimpse of the real Emma, her core self, would be forever disappointed. Such pressures to perform and conform socially in ways that are at odds with one's natural disposition can be emotionally exhausting. That Emma seeks relief from them by outwardly conforming while trying to carve out a space, a relationship, where she can be authentically herself, is understandable, even if her methods for doing so end up misleading those who can't read her mind.

Mr. Knightley is not the only one who has an expectation that Emma's primary obligation when using speech is not so much to tell the truth as to please others. This point is reinforced in the chapter's second incident, when Harriet relates a chance encounter with Robert Martin. After a lengthy description of the interaction, Harriet demands, "Oh! Miss Woodhouse, do talk to me and make me comfortable again." It is easy to focus on Emma's response to this request—and criticize her for bailing on her resolution to break the news of Elton's engagement gently—without considering the implications of the request itself. Is Harriet's plea all that different from Knightley's, "My dear Emma […] you are not going to tell me, I hope, that you had not a pleasant evening"? Both are supplications for speech. Both are also in some measure directive about the content or purpose of that speech. Harriet tells Emma to say that which will make her comfortable, although she does not know what that is. Knightley specifically tells Emma what to say.

One telling difference between the two exchanges is that Emma responds more directly to Harriet's supplication. Although she still wrongly but sincerely feels class prejudice towards the Martins, "she exerted herself; and did try to make her comfortable." By contrast, Knightley's directive is initially parried: "I was pleased with my own perseverance…" Only after Knightley expresses that he is "disappointed" with Emma's response and Emma witnesses his "anxiety" in an interaction with her father, does she capitulate and tell him what he wants to hear. It is also interesting that the text stresses that Emma wished to appease his anxiety "at least for the present." Her reluctance here hints at some lingering resentment, not so much at Mr. Knightley as at the constant pressure to deny or hide her true feelings and express and live for what will please others.

A common complaint that students make about Emma is that it is "boring." Usually what this means is that the plot unfolds at a slower pace than what they are used to experiencing. This chapter highlights the fact that the smaller interactions depicted in the novel, while not as exciting, are crucial in developing a full and fair portrait of Emma's character. They are sometimes subtle, but they show patterns of behavior and, more importantly, how those patterns are developed in part as a response to expectations placed on her. Seeing those patterns can help readers reframe Emma's behavior. While it is easy to look at the episodes in Volume II narrowly as examples of her recidivism, a closer look reveals that Emma is becoming more self-aware and is trying to address familiar stresses and triggers in new ways. Habits change slowly. Jane Austen realized that and depicts the process of transformation as a gradual one. While the gradual nature of Emma's transition may slow the plot, it also enriches it, investing daily encounters within the novel with more significance than we initially realize.

CHAPTER FOUR

ONLY THEMSELVES TO PLEASE

KENNETH R. MOREFIELD

The introduction of the future Mrs. Elton follows the novel's by now familiar pattern of reputation preceding actual presence. The most obvious parallel is to the introduction of Emma herself in Chapter One of Volume I. Indeed this chapter's aphoristic opener sounds, out of context, as if it could be the opening lines of another novel: "Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of." Just as the opening of Pride and Prejudice speaks of a "truth universally acknowledged," this chapter opens with a declaration about "human nature." Others, most notably Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, have had their character described and actions analyzed before making an appearance. We have already noted how this structural feature can prejudice (or at least influence) the reader—particularly when the boundaries between a character's impressions and the narrator's assertions are blurred. That Mrs. Elton is best described as a foil for Emma rather than an antagonist is underscored by several notable similarities in their respective introductions.

The very first things we are told about Emma are that she was "handsome, clever, and rich." The charming Augusta Hawkins is "discovered to have every recommendation of person and mind." More specifically, she is thought "to be handsome, elegant, highly accomplished, and perfectly amiable." The latter trait can be roughly paralleled to Emma's "happy disposition." Although Mrs. Elton's (relative) wealth is not introduced as quickly as Emma's, it is still one of the first things we are told about her. She had "an independent fortune, of so many thousands as would always be called ten." Perhaps the most significant parallel is implied rather than underlined. Mr. Elton and his betrothed have set a quick wedding date because they "had only themselves to please." Readers are far enough removed from the novel's opening pages to be excused if

this phrase doesn't immediately recall the narrator's warning that one of the "real evils" of Emma's situation was 'the power of having rather too much her own way." But in true literary fashion, the foils differ in one key way: Emma is "clever," while Augusta is "elegant." Later, at Box Hill, Mrs. Elton will make a point of insisting on her own lack of cleverness.

Repeat readers should quickly realize that this description, like most in the novel, is suspect. The actual Mrs. Elton, while certainly rich and probably beautiful, never quite comes across as elegant. That is an adjective normally reserved for Jane Fairfax. The word "elegant" is used twenty-eight times in Emma, though fewer than half of the instances are ones in which a person, always a lady, is described. Emma does once imagine Frank Churchill as writing elegant letters. Jane is called elegant at least five times, with Knightley adding "very" and "remarkably" as prefaces to this descriptor. Isabella is also deemed elegant (by Emma), and Mrs. Weston is crowned with that compliment by her son-in-law. Later in Volume II, Emma will insist that Mrs. Elton's clothes are elegant but not her voice, air, or person. In one of the passages where the narrative description and Emma's perception are merged, we are told that Mrs. Elton appeared "as elegant as lace and pearls could make her." It is apparent from its repeated use in various contexts that "elegant" is at the pinnacle of compliments (for a woman), a label that cannot be claimed for one's self but is sought after diligently. It implies something not merely about a person's appearance but also her conduct.

But if Mrs. Elton is not elegant—or at least not as elegant as the fickle social world of Highbury imagines her to be—how is she different from Emma? Different she must be to be a foil, and yet the similarities are too emphatic to be missed or explained away. The question of who is wealthier and more powerful is less ambiguous or subjective than who is prettier, but it is complicated by Emma's unmarried status. Emma may insist to Harriet that she need not marry because she does not want fortune, but as a child she is clearly subordinate to the man for whom she keeps the home. Since Isabella is naturally deferential, a quality only exacerbated by her marriage to John Knightley, Emma has never had the societal privileging of the married woman lorded over her (the way, for example, Lydia lords it over Lizzy in *Pride and Prejudice*). No matter how wealthy or pretty or charming, a single woman in this world is inevitably going to be perceived as socially inferior to a respectably married one. Thus, when it comes to having the power to have her own way, Mrs. Elton may possess it to a greater degree than even Emma.

At this point, the two women may be more similar than different, but a foil may also differ from a protagonist in situation as well as character.

How differences in situation affect the characters becomes a comment on the providential nature of that situation. Mrs. Elton's marriage to a social and financial inferior affords her even greater freedom to have her own way, and that freedom (as we will see) exacerbates the same flaws Emma struggles with: vanity, pride, stubbornness, and selfishness. Thus Mrs. Elton becomes Exhibit A for those who would argue that Austen is no proto-feminist and that *Emma* supports a complementarian view of marriage. Those marriages where the wife rules the household—the Eltons and the Churchills—appear unhappy and unhealthy. (Readers should be cautioned in this judgment, though, by the reminder that we never actually see the Churchills interact and only infer the matriarchal nature of the relationship from self-protective assertions made by Frank.) Those marriages where wives defer to their husbands—the Westons and the John Knightleys—are described more favorably. The question of whether or not the novel is complementarian or egalitarian in its view of marriage is worth pursuing, but it probably needs to be deferred until the conclusion of the story; the eventual engagements of Jane, Emma, and Harriet will certainly complicate and may even change the way we answer it.

For now, it is important to emphasize that the narrator's assertion that having too much one's own way (even in marriage) is an evil is not applied exclusively to one gender. If the novel looks suspiciously upon marriages dominated by wives, it is equally hard to see how the demoralizing effects of wielding too much power can sustain an argument for patriarchy. When looking at Volume I, for instance, we saw how Mr. Woodhouse's hypochondria and "gentle" selfishness could be viewed as negative consequences of his unchecked power. John Knightley's temper is made worse (that is, it is harder for him to keep in check) by his marrying a woman who never challenges him as to his conduct.

Emma, like Miss Hawkins, may be self-absorbed, but her situation has not yet stripped her of all ability to self-scrutinize. In the latter part of Volume II, Chapter Four the narration reveals Emma's tendency to think of those outside her immediate social circle as generic types rather than actual people. "A Mrs. Elton could be an excuse for any of intercourse," while "a Robert Martin would have been sufficient" to induce Harriet to fall in love again. The inclusion of the indefinite article before these two names indicates Emma is not interested in the actual Mrs. Elton or the real Robert Martin. The latter she insists of thinking of as a danger[ous] acquaintance since his replacing Mr. Elton in Harriet's affections would threaten to disrupt the friendship, which Emma values more than her friend's well-being.

It's telling, however, that the final two paragraphs of this chapter are nearly identical. Structurally, this repetition implies hesitation. The penultimate paragraph begins, "After much thinking, she could determine nothing better [...]" while the final reinforces that "[s]he could think of nothing better." The penultimate stresses that in Emma's mind, a renewed acquaintance "must not be," while the final pushes past the moral and social objections to the plan for enabling Harriet a curt visit to the Martins by stating that "it must be done."

The repetition also gives us two opportunities to question Emma's conviction that some things "must" or "must not" be. A visit may well be called for, but given Emma's social status and power, the Martins would have no more recourse to rebut an insult than does Miss Bates at Box Hill. Indeed, the nature and timing of the visit is every bit as insulting as would be its eschewal, a fact that Emma seems well aware of. The invocation of some sort of imperative—be it moral, political, or social—is a common way of overcoming scruples or self-doubt. And it is easy to hammer Emma for her hyperbole. Given how much power Emma has to do what she wants, though, it is remarkable that her conscience is not yet fully blunted. She may be similar to Miss Hawkins in having the power to do pretty much what she likes, but she differs from her to the extent she evidences any compunction at all about exercising that power. Jane Austen's clearest moral and psychological insight in this novel is that few of us have the strength to govern our impulses where circumstance gives us relatively free reign. As Emma's own strength to resist the convenience of insisting on her own way wanes, not having any external checks on her power and freedom begins to take its toll.

When a party has only herself to please, all that separates an Emma Woodhouse from a Miss Hawkins may well be the former's ability to weigh her prospect of pleasures against what should and should not be. If what should be must be buttressed by imagining it as something that must be, at least it is still a consideration that holds some sway over Emma's behavior.