

Emma - II

The story is basically as follows: wealthy Emma Woodhouse interferes to prevent her much poorer friend Harriet Smith marrying a farmer, to the fury of the local landowner, Mr Knightley, who is close to Emma but can see her faults. Emma herself flirts with Frank Churchill, the son of a local man who has grown up with relatives elsewhere. Realising that things are not as good as they might be with Frank, she hints to Harriet that he might be attracted to her; but Harriet takes the hint to refer to Knightley himself. Moreover, Frank turns out to have been secretly engaged to Jane Fairfax, a girl in the village with whom Emma has never got on. Shocked by the possibility of Knightley ending up with Harriet, Emma is forced to realise that she herself loves Knightley. Knightley, having been forced to a similar realisation through the threat of Frank, proposes to Emma and is accepted; Harriet ends up with her farmer after all.

One of the things that sets *Emma* apart from Austen's previous novels is a much more serious concern with the social interconnectedness of a small country town. *Pride and Prejudice* comes closest, but it concerned itself much more with the emergence of nation-wide networks of family and interest for which small town life is present as a foil. *Pride and Prejudice* begins with the lines: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife'. But this 'universal truth' quickly reveals itself as Mrs Bennet's: its universality is not confirmed by the authority of the narrator, but nor is it underwritten by any general wisdom accepted in the community of which Mrs Bennet is a part. It is Mrs Bennet's subjective perception of a general wisdom that may not otherwise exist. In *Emma* we find something much closer to a genuinely communal voice, a point of view at work in the narrative that cannot be reduced to the subjectivity of any one character. This point of view appears both as something perceived by Emma, an external perspective on events and characters that the reader encounters as and when Emma recognises it; and as an independent discourse appearing in the text alongside the discourse of the narrator and the characters. A particularly complex case in point is the return from Bath of Mr Elton, the local vicar whose proposal of marriage Emma has rejected, at the beginning of II.iv.

The charming Augusta Hawkins, in addition to all the usual advantages of perfect beauty and merit, was in possession of as many thousands as would always be called ten; a point of some dignity, as well as some convenience: the story told well; he had not thrown himself away—he had gained a woman of 10,000 or thereabouts; and he had gained her with delightful rapidity—the first hour of introduction had been so very soon followed by distinguishing notice; the history which he had to give Mrs Cole of the rise and progress of the affair was so glorious.

At first, the adjective 'charming' appears to be in the narrator's voice, as authoritative as the novel's opening description of Emma as 'handsome, clever, and rich'. But the following clause includes an association of the 'usual' with the 'perfect' which is on the verge of self-contradiction: 'perfection' is not 'usual'. It sounds as if there are two voices, two discourses, being juxtaposed here, to produce this tension. The following clause, with its passive voice ('as would always be called ten'), allows us to identify one of these discourses with the communal voice of general wisdom, the discourse of a community gossiping excitedly about a new member: it is in such gossip that a

moderate fortune will always be rounded up in this way. The tension of the second clause then resolves itself into one between this discourse, eager to attribute 'perfection' to Mr Elton's fiancée, and the narrator, who can see how 'usual', how routine, such attribution is in gossip about a new bride. At this point the initial 'charming' begins to look as if it may not be the narrator's judgement either: the reader must wait until later in the story to discover just how far from charming Augusta Elton née Hawkins actually is.

The following phrases introduce new puzzles (and the reader might be wondering at this point why this paragraph consists of a series of clauses and phrases separated by dashes and semi-colons instead of Austen's more usual well-rounded sentences). Some 'dignity' and 'convenience' may accrue to the community by Elton's marriage to a wealthy woman; the passive voice of 'the story told well' once again, by not identifying a speaker, invites us to attribute this comment to the impersonal voice of communal gossip. But 'he had not thrown himself away': while this could well be an approving (and slightly envious) comment passed in a shop or street, it might also reflect Elton's own self-satisfaction in a good marriage; and the adjective 'delightful' must be his (only he was there, in Bath, to be delighted by the speed of his progress with Augusta). The dignity and convenience now look more like Elton's than Highbury's, and the final sentence that I quote above suddenly identifies a specific situation in which Elton might be making this speech: his telling the whole story to Mrs Cole. At this point the reader can look back over what had seemed impersonal gossip in the preceding paragraph and realise that all this information in fact comes from a single source: Mr Elton himself. Rather than circulating impersonal or communal judgements on Augusta and Mr Elton, that voice has been merely repeating the version of events that Mr Elton has given to Mrs Cole.

Frank, like Augusta, is constructed as the object of this kind of discourse, as a member of this discursive community, long before he physically sets foot in Highbury, as a result of his father's proud reports of him to his neighbours. 'He was looked on as sufficiently belonging to the place to make his merit and prospects a kind of common concern'. And Emma's response to Frank is mediated by the way in which she imagines other people see them: by her belief, for example, that they must be seen as a potential couple, once his father has married her former governess: 'He seemed by this connection between the families quite to belong to her. She could not but suppose it to be a match that every body who knew them must think of'. Later, she anticipates his return by 'fancying what the observations of all those might be, who were now seeing them together for the first time'.

At the same time, Emma is capable of an ironic distance from this communal voice (the same ironic distance as we have seen enjoyed by her narrator), as when she tells Jane of their young vicar, 'When you have been here a little longer ... you will understand that Mr Elton is the standard of perfection in Highbury, both in person and mind' (II.iii). 'Perfection' once again marks the uncritical judgement of the community at large. The fact that Emma and the narrator share this ironic distance from the discourse of the community does, however, make it very hard to distinguish them when Emma's own subjectivity is the object of the irony. In a passage like the following, for example, where Emma is placing herself in relation to Frank, it is hard to tell the narrator's ironic commentary on Emma's consciousness from Emma's own ironic selfconsciousness:

This was all very promising; and, but for such an unfortunate fancy for having his hair cut, there was nothing to denote him unworthy of the distinguished honour which her imagination had given him; the honour, if not of really being in love with her, of being at least very near it, and saved only by her own indifference—(for still her resolution held of never marrying)—the honour, in short, of being marked out for her by all their joint acquaintance. (II.vii)

'Promising' and 'unfortunate' are clearly Emma's own judgements, but it is hard to tell if Emma is conscious that her high self-regard turns her estimation of his feelings into a 'distinguished honour', or if the irony here is the narrator's, revealing a truth about Emma's response to Frank that Emma herself is not aware of. With the ambiguities of knowledge in this passage comes a shifting attribution of agency. Emma grants herself an agency she does not have: the power to make Frank either in love or not in love with her through her interest or indifference. The final comment places ultimate agency elsewhere: Emma is only thinking in these terms because of the way that other people see both of them. On its own, this seems to be the judgement of the narrator, a truth hidden from Emma, and the passage as a whole seems thus to shift from free indirect discourse representing Emma's consciousness, to the commentary of an omniscient narrator, via a series of judgements that could be attributed to either.

However, we know from the comment in I.xiv. quoted above that Emma is conscious that other people think of her and Frank in this way: so this final comment also could be Emma's criticism of herself, an awareness that her thoughts and feelings about Frank have their origin somewhere other than in her own judgement or imagination. Emma's subjectivity, that is, consists not only of judgements, and of her awareness of the subjective nature of those judgements (that her self-esteem turns this one into a 'distinguished honour'), but may also include an awareness that the origins of her subjectivity lie somewhere other than in herself. Her consciousness may appear at first as autonomous from the society around it; it is in fact produced by that society.

This problem of the relation of Emma's consciousness to the background noise of the communal life of Highbury is one that corresponds to the central problem acted out in the plot of *Emma*: the role of women in the construction and maintenance of that community. Unlike any of Austen's other heroines, Emma is born into the sort of wealth and position that allow her a leading role in her neighbourhood right from the start. Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price enjoy the moral authority of the virtuous domestic woman, but they must marry wealthy men if that authority is to be offered a wider social function beyond the home. Such a wider function for feminine virtue is what is figured in the marriages that close *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. But Emma Woodhouse has this function to begin with. Frank describes her as 'She who could do anything in Highbury!' (II.vi.); it is she, and not her father, who organises the charitable distribution of the produce of their estate to the likes of the Bates household (II.iii.). When she comments to Harriet that she has 'none of the usual inducements to marry... Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want' (I.x.) she identifies a difference, not only between herself and other women, but in the plot of her novel, whose culminating marriage will have some other type of ideological work to do than that of its predecessors.

This is not to say that Emma enjoys anything like the social power reserved for men in a patriarchal society. Knightley is not only the owner of Highbury but its magistrate (I.xii.); we glimpse him at work in running his estate or governing the parish, though

usually only after, for example, 'Mr Woodhouse had been talked into what was necessary... and the papers swept away' (II.iii.). 'Parish business' is something engaged in by Knightley, Mr Weston and the other men once the ladies have withdrawn from the dining table (it is what Frank is eager to escape from at II.viii.). Emma has a significant degree of agency of various other kinds. One is the feminine influence of example, as Emma's power over Harriet Smith is not just that of a mentor, but of a model to imitate: Harriet's habits are of 'dependence and imitation' (I.x.). Perhaps more important is her active charity towards the poor, rather more concretely sketched in here (in I.x.) than Fanny's in the previous novel. But the plot of the novel subjects Emma to a process of education whereby she discovers the limitations of her judgement and learns the superiority of Knightley's: theirs is a lover-mentor relationship such as we have seen in several of the other novels, albeit that Emma has far more confidence in her own abilities to start with than either Catherine Morland or Fanny Price. Even at the beginning of the novel, indeed, she has 'a sort of habitual respect for his judgment in general' (I.viii.); by the end, once they are engaged to be married, she has nothing to wish for 'but to grow more worthy of him, whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own' (III.xviii.).

Emma has sufficient authority in at least one further area to bring her into conflict with Knightley right at the start of the novel. This is the conventionally feminine area of courtship and marriage, but the argument with Knightley is one about the policing of distinctions of rank, and whether Harriet Smith belongs with the prosperous tenant-farmer class in the shape of her suitor Robert Martin, or with the property-owning class to which Emma and Knightley themselves belong. Knightley is ready to acknowledge Emma's real effect in improving Harriet's manners (I.viii.); but having talked the illegitimate Harriet out of accepting Martin's proposal of marriage, Emma finds she must defend this use of her social power against Knightley's objections. One should note that Harriet's case is not one of feminine virtue or inner 'character' demanding recognition from masculine power: Harriet is not Fanny Price or Elizabeth Bennet. In fact the opposite is the case: Harriet is characterised throughout, and not merely by Mr Knightley ('Her character depends upon those she is with'; I.viii.), as a blank surface on which Emma can inscribe whatever habits of thought or behaviour she chooses. Martin is described by Knightley, in contrast, in terms of his established and proven worth as friend, brother, son, farmer and businessman, his social identity fixed by his place in the networks of dependence that constitute the masculine community. Knightley's criteria for assigning someone to a particular rank go well beyond blood: 'What are Harriet Smith's claims, either of birth, nature, or education, to any connection higher than Robert Martin?' (I.viii.). But they do not include the prettiness and good temper that are all he is ready to acknowledge in Harriet, and this remains a question of rank: what is at stake for Knightley is ultimately not the suitability of two people for each other as individuals but the maintenance of a hierarchy of 'connection'.

As indeed it is also for Emma, but the only connection that matters for her in this context is Harriet's to herself. Having adopted her as a friend, Emma must now find her a husband of high enough status to legitimate that friendship: "What! think a farmer, (and with all his sense and all his merit Mr Martin is nothing more,) a good match for my intimate friend!...a man whom I could never admit as an acquaintance of my own!" (I.viii.)

The intimacy and acquaintanceship that Emma cites here can be understood as forming a set of social connections distinct from, but not independent of, the masculine networks described by Knightley. Martin discusses his proposal of marriage with Knightley as, Knightley hopes, 'one of his best friends', but this friendship transcends a division of rank and is thus clearly not what Emma would call 'acquaintanceship': Knightley's friendship with Martin is inevitably closer to that of patron and client than the intimacy of two young women. 'Friendship' in Emma often refers to relationships where one party is in a position of power, is able to do favours for the other, including (and this is standard eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century usage) those we would now call relatives. To claim intimacy with someone, on the other hand, is to claim an equal social status with them. Mrs Elton is seen as a 'friend' to Jane Fairfax (by Emma at II.xv.; by Miss Bates at III.viii.) when she tries to find Jane a governess's position, but thinks of herself as enjoying 'intimacy' with Knightley (III.vi.). Emma welcomes Mrs Elton's arrival in Highbury, on the other hand, as an excuse for dropping her own intimacy with her husband (on this occasion, 'former intimacy might sink without remark'; II.iv.) while at the same time she tries to prevent a re-establishment of intimacy between Harriet and the Martins (II.iv.).

In all these cases, what is being established by these terms is membership of or exclusion from a local ruling elite. Emma's argument with Knightley in I.viii is not about the justification of the existence of this elite: the necessity of hierarchy is not called into question by either. Rather, their disagreement is, at a superficial level, about where the boundaries of that elite should be set, and what qualifies one for membership; and at a deeper level, about who has the authority to police those boundaries. Such policing is precisely what Emma is engaged in when she persuades Harriet to reject Robert Martin as beneath her. Marriage, as the area where private feeling and public status most visibly interact, is one within which Emma, as the town's highest-ranking woman, can exercise a rival authority to that of Knightley, its highest-ranking man. The regulation of sexual relations, a role assigned largely to women, is necessarily central to the regulation of social relations more generally. Emma begins by dramatising this clash of rival masculine and feminine authorities within the private life of a small town.

The arrival of Augusta Elton, however, complicates this pattern. Mrs Elton quickly appropriates to herself the social authority previously assumed by Emma, and directs it to the social elevation of Jane Fairfax. This is an exercise similar to Emma's project with Harriet, but at once more reckless and less ambitious. On the one hand, Mrs Elton's goal is no more than to find the propertyless Jane, destined by limited means to the social limbo of a post as governess, a position with one of her much-vaunted wealthy acquaintances. On the other hand, her plan of 'noticing' Jane in the meantime (inviting her to parties and so on) does no more than exacerbate the pain of her existing position, that of having been brought up to the tastes and comforts of a class to which she cannot, in the long term, belong.

"My dear Miss Woodhouse, a vast deal may be done by those who dare to act. You and I need not be afraid. If we set the example, many will follow it as far as they can; though all have not our situations. We have carriages to fetch and convey her home..." (II.xv.)

She even goes so far as to claim to be 'Lady Patroness' of a day at Knightley's house at Donwell Abbey, implicitly taking Emma's place as Knightley's female counterpart (a

move that Knightley firmly resists, of course; III.vi.). What makes Mrs Elton's claims particularly galling to Emma is, once more, a matter of rank. Her first sight of Mrs Elton suggests that she possesses 'ease' rather than 'elegance' (II.xiv.): that is, a self-confidence in her equal (or superior) status to those around her which is just too taken for granted, rather than the subtle signifiers in dress and behaviour of a genuinely expensive upbringing and education. From this point in the novel, indeed, 'elegance' is frequently used ironically, in Emma's free indirect discourse, to describe Mrs Elton's selfconscious attempt to deploy these signifiers, which only serves to mark, in Emma's mind, the fact that they do not come naturally, and are thus not really hers. Emma's first conversation with her confirms this impression. She already talks of 'Knightley' rather than 'Mr Knightley' (Emma's mode of address despite knowing him all her life; II.xiv.); she flatly contradicts Emma on Surrey alone being called 'the garden of England' (II.xiv.); and generally assumes an intimacy that she has not yet earned. This makes her 'pert and familiar' (II.xiv.), an 'upstart', 'vulgar' and 'under-bred' (II.xiv.). These terms, one should note, refer not only to bad manners but also to the economic situation that produces them. Mrs Elton is in fact from exactly the background, though not quite so wealthy, as the Bingleys in *Pride and Prejudice*: the first generation of her family to be brought up on a country estate, Maple Grove, bought by her father with money earned from elsewhere. Her snobbery, like the Bingley sisters', comes from the precariousness of her claim to gentility, not from its security:

"...I have quite a horror of upstarts. Maple Grove has given me a thorough disgust to people of that sort... Mr Suckling [her brother-in law], who has been eleven years a resident at Maple Grove, and whose father had it before him—I believe, at least—I am almost sure that old Mr Suckling had completed the purchase before his death." (II.xviii.)

The true English gentry would count their residence on an estate not in years, but in generations. Emma's social authority in Highbury, then, is defined in opposition to two alternative authorities: Knightley's and Mrs Elton's. With the former she shares a social rank: with the latter she shares a gender. I suggested above that the position of feminine social authority in a community like Highbury is a central problem for this novel. One can now read Emma's marriage to Knightley as a way of resolving this problem: the plot subsumes her feminine authority within the authority of her social class as a whole, explaining it decisively as the product of her rank and not her gender. Emma's recognition that she must marry Knightley is a recognition of the necessity of consolidating the power of their class and maintaining its exclusion, not only of the Harriet Smiths, but also of the Mrs Eltons, from their community. Mrs Elton indeed appears, on this reading, as a scapegoat with whom Emma's own presumption of power as a woman can be identified and then rejected. On this view, and in contrast to Austen's two previous novels, *Emma* works to legitimate established gentry power defined in opposition to an autonomous feminine authority over the regulation of social relations, and not through the vindication of such autonomous authority.

One can read the novel in this way, but it includes elements that seem to run counter to such a reading. For one thing, the novel is marked by a gradual widening of Emma's social sphere, an inclusion of a few of the previously excluded, a making more porous of the boundaries between the elite and other propertied groups. This process begins with her visiting the Bateses, purely to take Harriet's mind off Mr Elton, in II.i. Miss Bates, a spinster, and her mother perch on the very bottom rung of polite society,

maintained there by a small income and a lot of charity from, mostly, Mr Knightley. Emma is 'negligent' in visiting them due largely to her 'horror of being in danger of falling in with the second and third rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever' (II.i.).

But such visits become regular as the novel proceeds. Similarly, she finds herself obliged to accept an invitation to dinner at the Coles, a family 'of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel' (II.vii.) but whose recently increased income prompts them to reach out for social recognition to their longer established neighbours. Emma's initial opinion is that the Coles 'were very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them' (II.vii.). Yet once Knightley and the Westons accept their invitation, Emma goes along, and finds such company a comforting refuge from her continuing self-accusation over Harriet: 'all that she might be supposed to have lost on the side of dignified seclusion, must be amply repaid in the splendour of popularity' (II.ix.).

Similarly, when the ball is first mooted by Frank, Emma (it seems) objects that there are not enough 'proper families' in Highbury to make it worthwhile (II.vi.). Frank cannot believe this, and even when particulars were given and families described, he was still unwilling to admit that the inconvenience of such a mixture would be any thing, or that there would be the smallest difficulty in every body's returning into their proper place the next morning; and Emma judges that 'his indifference to a confusion of rank, bordered too much on inelegance of mind' (II.vi.). Frank's father, Mr Weston, here as elsewhere in the novel a one-man principle of social inclusion, is put in charge, and witnessing the number of people invited early to inspect the improved facilities at the Crown Inn, Emma similarly reflects that 'a little less of openheartedness would have made him a higher character.—General benevolence, but not general friendship, made a man what he ought to be.—She could fancy such a man' (III.ii.). This of course should make the reader think of Knightley, the embodiment of social hierarchy put to benevolent ends. And yet not only is the ball a great success, but Knightley himself plays his part in it, not only dancing, against his usual habit, but doing so with Harriet, precisely in order to maintain the inclusivity of the occasion, after she is snubbed by Mr Elton.

It is through this series of successful social events that the social barriers policed by Emma and Knightley are gradually expanded. It is striking that the one truly disastrous social gathering, the trip to Box Hill, is not disastrous because it includes the Coles or the Coxes or any of the other representatives of new wealth in Highbury. From the start, 'There was a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union, which could not be got over...there seemed a principle of separation...too strong for any fine prospects, or any cold collation, or any cheerful Mr Weston, to remove' (III.vii.). It may be that their very removal from Highbury, the very abandonment of the scene of their usual social duties to one another, is to be understood as producing this vague malaise. But the positive awkwardness that follows is produced by Frank's high-spirited if rather desperate attempts to overcome this internal division. The first consists of a demand to know what all their silent companions are thinking, offending a principle of mental privacy on which polite intercourse is grounded. The second is a demand that each of them say one very clever thing, two moderately clever or three dull, and it is this which produces Emma's thoughtless jibe at the voluble Miss Bates.

In many ways this is the crisis of the novel, trivial as it may seem. It provides the second knock to Emma's confidence in her own judgement after the debacle with Harriet and Mr Elton, and Knightley's censure begins the process of her realising her love for him. But the social circumstances that make such a blunder possible include a set of circumstances unknown to Emma and Knightley at the time: namely Frank's engagement to Jane Fairfax. For Frank's edgy flirtation with Emma on Box Hill, the parade of good spirits so at odds with the general mood of the group, is produced by his own secret unhappiness regarding his row with Jane the previous day. I have not discussed this secret affair at any length, but at this point it clearly functions as much more than a way of complicating Emma's otherwise placid emotional life for the sake of the plot. In a novel in which characters are constantly under the surveillance of their neighbours, in which subjectivity is (as we have seen in the case of Emma) produced by such surveillance, Frank and Jane's secret puts them outside that community despite their physical presence within it. There are forces at work in Frank's discourse at Box Hill which are not transparent to his hearers. But Emma does not consider that his high spirits might come from somewhere other than his attraction to her, and plays along with, is seduced into, Frank's discordant verbal world. The hurting of Miss Bates follows from this partial withdrawal by Emma from the rules of language that normally govern social relations in polite society.

Another element in *Emma* that does not accord with the social homogeneity of its closing marriage is the presence of Jane Fairfax herself. For if Emma is the embodiment of a certain sort of female social power, Jane represents a much more usual female powerlessness, and specifically the possibility of downward as well as upward social mobility. Just as Mrs Elton has acquired a certain wealth and status without having properly naturalised the polite manners that should accompany that status, so Jane is a 'really accomplished young woman' (Knightley's words; II.ii.) who is nevertheless destined to work for a living as a governess. To work for a living, as a woman, involves dropping out of the polite classes altogether. Leisured women like Emma and Mrs Elton may play at labour, picking strawberries in Mr Knightley's garden, but in the midst of this scene comes Mrs Elton's description of 'a most desirable situation' for Jane with a friend of her family: a reminder of the reality of the labour to which she is to be consigned (III.vi.). If there is a story in *Emma* in which true personal (feminine) value wins recognition from a powerful man despite its lack of wealth and status, that story is not Emma's or Harriet's: it is Jane Fairfax's. But that story, the narrative pattern that is repeated here from *Pamela* and *Burney*, and *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, is repeated under cover, as the novel's shaping secret, itself subordinated to a main plot in which gentry power is consolidated by the marriage of Emma and Knightley.

Source: Robert P. Irvine, *Emma*, London: Routledge, 2005