Emma is the most intricate, stylish, and elegant of Jane Austen's novels. Through a concentration on the perspective of the heroine, through internal monologue, and through the most complex use of free indirect speech, the reader is forced to identify with a character displaying Lydia Bennet's 'hurtful degree of self-consequence'; Austen wrote that Emma is a heroine 'no one but myself will much like'. Unlike the heroines that precede and follow her, she is little occupied with her motives and memory or with past events; being a plotter, she naturally looks to a future she expects to control – as it turns out, a futile endeavour, frequently hurtful to the unwitting pawns in her fantasy dramas. That the overall effect of the book is comic rather than cruel is due in part to the narrative techniques and in part to the sheer linguistic vitality of the fictive world, coupled with the attractive energy of the heroine. It is as if Jane Austen, having just insisted on her readers' appreciation of the weak, inhibited Fanny Price, dares us to accept a rescue of Mary Crawford, another woman with a 'lively mind' and a desire to act with something of a man's freedom, and to see in her a resemblance to the approved Elizabeth Bennet after all. The title page reads 'by the author of "Pride and Prejudice"', not *Mansfield Park*, the previous novel.

A number of early critics lamented the lack of story in *Emma*. However, this lack of story is in part the subject of *Emma*, as it is of the letter*:* life's tedium and how to make it bearable. Consider the famous passage where the heroine stands at Ford's shop door waiting for her friend to complete her purchases:

> Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury; – Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole's carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer. (*E*, 2:9)

In this book 'nothing' aims to 'answer'. It has to – for there is nothing more necessary or cheerful than to see the world realistically but with enough imaginative power to let it 'answer'. The book reveals the desirability – and difficulty – of holding the two ways of seeing in balance. 'Some desire is necessary to keep life in motion, and he, whose real wants are supplied, must admit those of fancy', wrote Samuel Johnson. This emotional and social economy is played out in the village society of Highbury rather than in the single house of Mansfield Park or in a single individual.

Happy and rich

Cheerfulness allows comfort and ease in mundane life; it is related but not identical to 'happiness' and to the conduct-book requirement of gratitude for what one has. Emma's cheerful disposition allows pleasure in what might seem restricted and dull; it lets her get through with tolerable ease what might otherwise be insufficient.

Yet this cheerfulness is ambiguous and may mask inadequacy. Emma's friend Mr Weston is cheerful, but not especially deep in his feeling; John Knightley, her brother-in-law, rightly judges him more sociable than familial – he remarries only when economically ready and equably waits years to see his only son. The spinster Miss Bates seems cheerful and silly, and she infuriates Emma throughout the novel. 'Happiness' may be even more suspect; Emma's young companion Harriet Smith protests she is 'happy' when most conflicted: 'Nobody cares for a letter', she says while trying to suppress her obvious affection for its writer Robert Martin, 'the thing is, to be always happy with pleasant companions' (*E*, 1:7). When Emma works to destroy Martin's powerful effect, she makes Harriet exclaim: 'I am never happy but at Hartfield.' A claim of happiness may be defence against pain and disappointment.

Certainly it masks Emma's social isolation, an isolation which partly comes from her desire for pre-eminence; in his 1816 review Walter Scott called Emma 'the princess paramount'. Although narratively introduced as 'happy', self satisfied, and rich, with choices no other Austen heroine possesses, the first time the reader hears from her directly she is in danger of suffering 'intellectual solitude'. Her home village of Highbury, whose 'brilliant days' have passed, contrasts with Mansfield in remoter rural Northamptonshire; from Mansfield London appeared distant and decadent, but Highbury is so close it almost feels the metropolitan tentacles of a city that has by now passed its million and which provides it with consumer goods like pianos, picture frames, and folding screens and services like hairdressing and dentistry. The village is both declining and modernising: its ballroom at the main inn is used only for a whist club, but it has added a post office and a successful bourgeoisie in Messrs Perry, Cox, and Cole, doctor, lawyer, and merchant, whose rise mirrors the decline of the clerisy, the Bateses, and their old parish clerk. (Even in *Mansfield Park* the financial drawbacks of the Church without old-fashioned patronage and fortune were accepted). Emma wants Highbury to remain almost feudal, stationary through time, so that she will always be 'paramount'. Like her tremulous father, as indolent as Lady Bertram but more dominating, she is represented as fearing uncontrollable change or any disturbance of the social scene that privileges and constrains her. She worries that after a dance people will have difficulty 'returning into their proper place'. Hence she must keep herself apart from the most enterprising sections of her community.

Jane Austen subtly portrays Emma's horror of social encroachment by showing how it blinkers her and associates her with those she most despises. Through this portrayal we are invited not just to mock absurd characters, as Emma tries to do, but to see their resemblance to those with whom we identify. In the carriage when the vicar Mr Elton proposes, the event is delivered solely through Emma's eyes, which see not a sexual but a social assault. Emma is as culpable as Mr Elton: he is shocked at her assumption that he would accept the illegitimate Harriet Smith as his wife, and she is appalled that he considers himself her equal. Her horror suggests some social instability, similar to that displayed by Mr Elton's next choice: Augusta Hawkins, who relates to Emma much as the cunning Lucy Steele did to Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*. Both Emma and Mrs Elton are conceited about their 'independent resources' while displaying little of them; both have been the object of Mr Elton's pursuit; later both want to manipulate the squire, Mr Knightley – Mrs Elton requires him to be more familiar, Emma more distant – and both have rather unclear class status: Mrs Elton has an uncle 'in the law line' and Emma her remote noble antecedents.

Emma and Mrs Elton belittle those below them. Mrs Elton condescends to the refined Jane Fairfax, while Emma, empathetic with the very poor – she 'could allow for their ignorance and their temptations, had no romantic expectations of extraordinary virtue from those, for whom education had done so little' – is insensitive about those closer to her level. 'One should be sorry to see greater pride or refinement in the teacher of a school' (*E*, 1:7), she remarks, and she seeks opportunities to snub the modest but rising Coles. She sees Harriet's lover Robert Martin not as an up-and-coming farmer who writes and expresses himself well, but as a clownish yeoman of feudal times, although she observes that his sisters have had 'a superior education'. Curiously, she declares that Martin cannot become 'rich through speculation' – possibly the ultimate source of her own wealth –when no one beside herself considers the possibility.

In this need to *degrade* there appears a faint fear of others' degrading her. To Harriet, who, she considers, must be 'a gentleman's daughter' because she is pretty, well-mannered, and respectful of Emma and her father, she remarks, there 'will be plenty of people who would take pleasure in degrading you'.

As this remark suggests, Emma is often opaque and there are hints in her of impulses never quite explored, encouraging the reader to speculate on what may be hidden. For all the energetic confidence of her speech and displayed thoughts, she often provides a failed example of Adam Smith's ideal 'impartial spectator', described in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Instead of judging others through reference to her own emotions, then seeing herself through the presumed eyes of an impartial spectator, as Smith proposes, Emma imposes her own ideas and obscure fears on others. Having played adored wife – or rather husband – to her weak and coercive father since her mother's early death, she has come to assume that she lacks the qualities more virile men want. It is reasonable to suppose that her sister had startled her adolescence by being chosen by Mr Knightley's clever brother John. Along with the fecund, sweet, and limited Isabella and the obliging governess, the simple Harriet (all one-time inhabitants of Hartfield under Emma), seems what men desire: 'I know that such a girl as Harriet is exactly what every man delights in – what at once bewitches his senses and satisfies his judgment', she tells George Knightley (*E*, 1:8). As a result of this emotional fear and her lively mind, Emma uses other women as substitutes for her guarded self – very unlike Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, whom she otherwise resembles in the making of romance in life. So she acts through them in the heterosexual, adult world of love and marriage, while at the same time usurping the freedom of a man or parent in relation to them. She becomes an 'imaginist', both a substitute author and a reader, using real-life characters for her own emotional needs.

Something her home required

The governess, now Mrs Weston, was supposed to have replaced Emma's clever mother, but instead became a replacement sister, joining the circle of admiration that Mr Woodhouse makes round his remaining daughter. Although Emma obscures the fact, Mrs Weston knows she was no equal: the fierce remarks of Jane Fairfax about the status of governesses underline this and the ex-governess seems to accept it when she comments on Jane's engagement to her rich stepson Frank, 'it is not a connexion to gratify'. Presumably this compliments her own choice, Emma, but it also suggests assimilation of Emma's own oppressive social values, since her stepson is marrying on the same level as his father. Mr Knightley, too, points out that the

relationship of Emma and Mrs Weston has been unequal: for him the governess has acted less as Emma's sister than as her servile wife.

With such 'parents', Emma has not had to outgrow her favoured child status at Hartfield nor enter the adult world of marriage and adult emotion. As the ignored reading lists and excessive self-confidence of her pupil attest, Mrs Weston has been a flawed tutor; she also fails the grown-up Emma when she encourages her potentially harmful belief in the attraction of her stepson Frank and, far more, in letting Emma selfishly patronise Harriet, where the prime danger is to the unprotected girl. The main hazard for the heroine is defection; although Emma accepts her governess's marriage by persuading herself she made it, in a later scene she sees that her own engagement to Mr Knightley pleases but does not consume Mrs Weston: 'If any thing could increase her delight, it was perceiving that the baby would soon have outgrown its first set of caps.'

The paid governess as friend is succeeded by another quasi-companion, the younger, sillier, and more grateful Harriet Smith, comically reprising Fanny Price in her translation to the great house through a powerful patron. This time Emma is clearly presented as using another for self-gratification: Harriet is 'not inconveniently shy' and has 'proper and becoming' deference – she calls Emma 'Miss Woodhouse' throughout. Harriet is 'exactly the something which her home required', the sentimental friend she has read about in novels. With Harriet, Emma can make plots in the manner John and Isabella Thorpe had done for Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*. She is aware of her authorial role: in the managed courtship scene of Mr Elton and Harriet, Emma refers both to a prologue and to a mode change from poetry to prose.

Rather like the monster in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's youthful novel written in the year of *Emma*'s publication, the ladylike Harriet is a product of social isolation. Although Emma – and indeed Mrs Weston – insists on using the gentler word 'blunder', there is real potential 'evil' in the 'unnatural' tie between the two young women. Presumptuously Emma assumes knowledge of Harriet's inner feelings – they were not 'of that superior sort', not 'acute and retentive' – and she imposes on Harriet her own grave social error; because she has played the husband in her home since the age of twelve, she believes she can cross gender and confer status: '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!' (*E*, 1:8). Marvin Mudrick first stressed the fascination and inadmissible homoerotic love Emma felt for the pretty Harriet, whom only she and Robert Martin ever really admire. At times the relationship sounds marital: Emma reflects, 'I would not change you for the clearest-headed, longest-sighted, best-judging female breathing' (*E*, 2:13). Like the ideal wife, Harriet never takes attention from Emma: when she falls ill at Hartfield, she is eager to be gone to her motherly headmistress and cause no trouble to her friend. Emma demands absolute affection, pitting herself against the lover, until she forces Harriet to declare: 'I would not give up the pleasure and honour of being intimate with you for any thing in the world' (*E*, 1:7). She has made Harriet choose her over a man and become dependent on her, the fate which, according to Mr Knightley, Mrs Weston happily avoided.

Emma chooses for Harriet a suitor who will allow her own 'intimacy' to last 'forever': the pragmatic Mr Elton, who is to defeat the passionate farmer Robert Martin. She then tries to overpower Harriet with her visions, picturing Mr Elton in London thinking of his beloved – she even gives him a loving family ready to receive his illegitimate

bride: ‘how busy their imaginations all are!’ But Harriet, a giggling boarding-school child of seventeen, still growing, is not entirely controlled and is not quite the simpleton Emma assumes. At times she resists. Concerned always to be the controlling watcher, never the object of others’ gaze, Emma is surprised when Harriet turns the gaze on her, insisting on seeing her benefactor as a potential ‘old maid’, like Miss Bates. Emma responds with curious rhetoric:

> I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s. (*E*, 1:10)

She claims she likes being an aunt because a mother’s love is blind and warm and she wishes to see clearly and coldly. Yet Harriet continues to assert the reality of the spinsterhood embodied in Miss Bates. Perhaps this is because she herself has inspired the sexual love in Martin so obviously missing from Emma’s declaration and presumed to be absent from Miss Bates’s narrowed and (to Emma) threatening life. It is a clever move, for Emma is obsessed with the horror of Miss Bates.

By the end of the novel, Harriet is even more self-confident. She had always partly escaped Emma, as revealed in the disjointed speech which greets the instruction to aim at Mr Elton and forget Robert Martin:

> I shall always feel much obliged to him, and have a great regard for – but that is quite a different thing from – and you know, though he may like me, it does not follow that I should – and certainly I must confess that since my visiting here I have seen people –. (*E*, 1:7)

But, when her mentor has failed in her schemes, Harriet, once a ‘humble, grateful, little girl’, can exclaim concerning the mistake over Mr Knightley as her next supposed lover: ‘Oh! Miss Woodhouse, how you do forget!’ Harriet is growing up, but Emma sees in this transformation only her own handiwork. Like her father, she has trouble accepting the existence of people she cannot control. Perhaps this is why, when Mr Knightley proposes, she feels such exultation in her triumph over Harriet: despite the ‘serious’ nature of the situation, like Elizabeth Bennet before her Emma ‘must laugh’. The heroine’s laughter and Austen’s breezy narration swiftly move towards a ‘comedy of errors’ ending, in which Harriet’s tooth breaks rather than her heart.

The friend Emma should have had is Miss Bates’s niece Jane Fairfax, her superior in abilities but not wealth, brought up, unlike Emma, by ‘right-minded and well-informed people’. Because the novel sees so much only through Emma’s eyes, it is some time before the reader notices in the reserved Jane a troubled woman, heir of Fanny Price in nervous suffering. Emma ascribes her dislike to this reserve, later explained by the hidden engagement, but it began long before as jealousy, for Emma had been ‘depreciating’ her for the two years of their separation. When she sees her again, she is struck by Jane’s appearance: elegant, tall, graceful, and ‘blooming’, with the height, the ‘dark eyelashes and eye-brows’ Emma had wrongly given Harriet when she drew her for Mr Elton. The ‘bloom’ is of someone beloved and admired, and the reserve is of a bespoken woman in a social world in which marriage must take precedence over

all other ties: Jane is paying the price of an adulthood that Emma has not achieved with her schoolgirlish desire for ‘intimacy’ with Harriet.

Although Emma may warm to Jane Fairfax, she does not do so to her aunt. Unlike Elinor Dashwood with the good-hearted, garrulous Mrs Jennings, Emma never loses her resentment of the talkative Miss Bates. The parallel of herself and Miss Bates proposed by Harriet was rejected, but Emma is haunted by another closer one: between Miss Bates and her father. Like Mrs Churchill with Frank, Mr Woodhouse and Miss Bates are presented as lovingly coercive and suffocating parental figures. Emma pities Jane her imprisonment with her aunt, and Mr Perry ascribes her illness in part to her claustrophobic circumstances. But Emma’s own servitude to an exacting father, obsessed with controlling everyone’s intake of food, neither results in self-pity nor in pity from the apothecary.

Catherine Morland and Emma are the only Austen heroines not ashamed of their relatives. Throughout the book Emma is seen anticipating her father’s feeble wants and manipulating him into ease. One might argue that her fear of change derives from the extraordinary life this selfish, adoring man has created for her. His source of income is never declared, but presumably he has a fortune in public funds or government stock. In his 1807 treatise on nervous diseases, Thomas Trotter associated ‘sloth and inactivity’ with ‘easy fortune’, claiming that ‘The public funds of this country are one great cause of those torpid habits of living; where the security of property is so compleat, that any care about its safety is needless.’ Rich Mr Woodhouse has no landlord duties; he owns a few pigs and poultry for domestic use and has pretty ornamental rather than functional grounds.

In his torpor, he fears movement and any external events: the departure of a daughter or a governess, the approach of gypsies, even an outing in his own coach. He diminishes everything round him. The half-glass of wine offered to Mrs Goddard becomes a small half and is then diluted with water. Similarly, he contracts Emma’s world – even appealing to his coachman’s needs when her interests conflict with his own – until she is almost housebound: she has never been to the sea, may not even have gone to London, cannot walk the half-mile to Randalls on her own (in striking contrast to Elizabeth Bennet and, indeed, Jane Fairfax, who walks from Donwell to Highbury alone, to Emma’s amazement), and has not visited Donwell for two years. As a result she is more restricted than Fanny Price, yet less aware of it. Mrs Weston notes the absence of friends, and Mr Knightley of potential suitors. That Mr Woodhouse’s ‘gentle selfishness’ has less dire results than the authoritarianism of Sir Thomas in *Mansfield Park* suggests that, as Emma herself surmises when considering the spoiling of Mrs Weston’s baby daughter, unwise adoration is less damaging than wiser tyranny, and some self-consequence is not entirely a bad thing for a woman. Nonetheless, Mr Woodhouse’s defective parenting has made his clever daughter live in a cocoon and fear the unruly world outside.

This is why she reacts so badly to an event away from Hartfield: the outing to Box Hill, not part of her usual ‘feudal’ scene but a rural place designed simply for modern tourist pleasure which exerts no power of ‘union’ over its visitors. There characters become most out of control, Miss Bates too garrulous, the Eltons too rude, Frank too subversive, and Emma too frank. She fails to realise that the public role of sardonic commentator, taken sometimes by the antisocial John Knightley, is not open to a lady and for a moment she fractures her community with her wit. When, in a verbal game,

Miss Bates offers to say ‘three things very dull indeed’, it might have been on the tip of many tongues to reply, but only Emma ‘could not resist’ retorting, ‘Pardon me – but you will be limited as to number – only three at once.’

In *Pride and Prejudice* Darcy has to learn to curb his tongue after he delivers his gratuitous insult to Elizabeth Bennet at a provincial ball. Here the insult halts Miss Bates as she instantly comprehends Emma’s hurtful meaning: ‘I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend’ (*E*, 3:7). The nastiness of Emma’s retort is underlined by its juxtaposition with the less obvious cruelty of the outsider Frank Churchill, whose barbed remarks about ill-conceived and hasty marriages Jane receives as body blows while watching his public flirting with Emma.

Another bleaker view is that Miss Bates conveys an ‘existential loneliness’, disclosing ‘the possibility of an “inner” life omitted in the story proper’. There is some truth to this. Her cheerfulness is overly resolute and does have a disturbing quality: old, poor, and lacking any entertaining cultural resources, she yet must please and be pleased if she is to flourish, and gratitude has to be her mode; so her stuttering, tedious speech may sometimes suggest the choking of repressed feelings. Perhaps, though, the latter view is too close to Emma’s appreciation of Jane Fairfax only when she makes her into a romantically pathetic governess.

Emma never gives up her contempt for the older spinster. She never engages with her, despite at one point perceiving that she expresses the vulnerable condition of all women. Yet Miss Bates has a pivotal role in the novel’s affective social theme. She is necessary to the community and its ‘cheerfulness’, and an insult to her becomes a general insult. Her persistent talk is inclusive; greeting all, she is at the hub of exchanges on ailments and the weather, as well as the physical exchange of food: pork and broth from Hartfield, apples from Donwell, baked in the Wallises’ oven (only her niece Jane interrupts this circulation by refusing Emma’s gift of arrowroot). Emma and Frank rupture the outing to Box Hill and, despite Mr Knightley’s best intentions, the strawberry-picking at Donwell is not enjoyable, but at the Crown Inn ball, contrived by Frank but nearly spoilt by his irritation with Mrs Elton, Miss Bates provides almost euphoric cohesion with her gathering talk. On that occasion, after being forgotten, she and Jane are fetched in the Eltons’ carriage. Miss Bates arrives and in her gushing speech transforms the dingy room into ‘fairy-land’. Later, retaining her sense of painful reality, she leaves alone on foot to put her old mother to bed, then quietly returns. In striking contrast to the images of her created by both Emma and Mr Knightley, she remarks: ‘I am not helpless.’

Miss Bates understands her place but is not over-deferential, so she can bind together disparate elements – it is significant that the impudent Wallises are polite only to her. More than anyone else, she holds the village’s communal memory: she remembers the good orchard, old John as a young clerk, and Emma as an infant. With the boring Miss Bates, the reader may see that community has to be created and recreated through social habit or sociability by all its members, and that only by such means are poverty and lowly status made bearable – for not everyone can, with Emma, command ‘the best treatment’. Such social inclusiveness helps make a bulwark against real evil: supported by a good man and prying, worthy neighbours, susceptible Harriet will not, like Maria Bertram, be ‘led into temptation’, assumed possible without these aids (young women are especially vulnerable in *Emma*). Perhaps it is as well for Miss

Bates's efforts that her niece and Frank leave the village at the end, for Jane with her melodramatic flair and Frank with his enjoyment of subterfuge had better continue their story somewhere else.

True English style

Emma invests Mr Knightley with Burkean conservative values – he heads a family of 'true gentility, untainted in blood and understanding'; but she avoids one aspect of his depiction: as a modern agriculturist, the only Austen landowner seen actually producing foodstuffs. Given eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century agricultural changes, from rotations of crops to enclosure of land, a landowning man wishing to increase or keep intact his wealth had to interest himself in the new science: indeed, the agriculturist Arthur Young noted that gentlemen who had in earlier times left matters to their stewards now managed their farms themselves and studied 'husbandry' and 'rural economics'.

In his care and rural investment, Mr Knightley is depicted as this kind of modern gentleman. He rarely uses his horses for his carriage; presumably, with his tenant, he reads the agricultural reports, and he constantly converses on practical agricultural matters. In his lamentation for the torpidity of the rentier class, Trotter gives as his ideal the working farmer and his agrarian life. Unlike Sir Thomas of *Mansfield Park*, who lives in a modern (eighteenth-century Palladian) house and derives part of his income from exploitative colonial enterprise, Mr Knightley in economic terms is Trotter's farmer and, for all the feudal tone with which Emma tries to invest him, he even comes close to the approved worker in the radical Tom Paine's remark: 'the aristocracy are not the farmers who work the land, and raise the produce, but are the mere consumers of the rent; and when compared with the active world are the drones . . .'

Mr Knightley was reputedly Austen's favourite portrait of a traditional country gentleman. If so, he seems to imply her moderate political views. He is a hereditary landowner, but neither inevitably corrupted by privilege like the radical Godwin's hereditary squire Falkland in *Caleb Williams* nor embodying a Burkean 'sure principle of conservation'. Rather, he sees need for some reform – much as liberals in the post-Revolution period of war thought of England. At the same time, it is well that in the end he will marry Emma, who can leaven his agriculture with her culture, make his grounds prettier with her money, inhabit more fully his large house, afford to send more than apples to the community, and even perhaps bring in a little un-English frivolity.

For, although some critics find Jane Austen's 'authority . . . vested in Mr Knightley', he does seem somewhat limited. There is no mention of a library at Donwell, although there are 'books of engravings, drawers of medals, cameos, corals, shells, and every other family collection within his cabinets', and it seems doubtful that, unlike his tenant Martin, he will aim to read the novels that engross his lady. He does not always live appropriately for his station: he often refuses to dance, something that damns Mr Darcy in a gathering with supernumerary ladies. His presenting of apples to the Bateses is kindly, but that he has none left for himself suggests he feels the need for squirely giving even when his substance cannot quite allow it. He stands on his rank when he snubs Mrs Elton with the argument that 'gentlemen and ladies, with their servants' had better eat indoors, rather than outside in fashionable mock-peasant style. He can be socially awkward; he is unnecessarily brusque about Emma's portrait

of Harriet and he does not always converse when civility requires it. At times he is quite rude – almost as rude as Emma on Box Hill, if not so witty, when he snaps at Miss Bates about Jane's excessive singing: 'Are you mad?' and later talks loudly over her. At such moments he echoes his bad-mannered brother John, who can only be contained at Hartfield by Emma's soothing tact. The 'English' manner of greeting between the Knightley brothers, which Emma appreciates, draws on the French caricature of English taciturnity and bluntness, as well as on English pride in sincerity: 'John Knightley made his appearance, and "How d'ye do, George?" and "John, how are you?" succeeded in the true English style, burying under a calmness that seemed all but indifference, the real attachment which would have led either of them, if requisite, to do every thing for the good of the other' (*E*, 1:12).

The pastoral patriotism is unlike the stern moral sort implied in *Mansfield Park*, and the difference reflects a different time of writing. *Mansfield Park* was composed before the tide of war had turned in England's favour with Wellington's success in the Peninsular War. *Emma* was written in 1814–15 when prospects were hopeful and before the war's end brought the depression and disillusion that would inform *Persuasion*. Emma's vision – if it is hers alone – is of prosperity without capitalist activity; it is aestheticised in a way Mr Knightley never sees his land.

By contrast, Mr Knightley's patriotism is connected with the duty of farmers urged in the war years to maximise the yield of their land while imports were scarce. The two visions are ironically aligned. For Emma is actually looking not at Donwell Abbey and its immediate grounds but at its tenancy, Abbey-Mill Farm, home of the Martins, the place it would have degraded Harriet to inhabit. This farm is not just a pastoral example, 'safely viewed with all its appendages of prosperity and beauty, its rich pastures, spreading flocks, orchard in blossom, and light column of smoke ascending', but also a sign of the rise of what Emma has called a 'yeoman' to the status of Mr Knightley's 'gentleman farmer' during this final period of the war, when internal prices were high. The prosperous farm embodies the kind of aspiration that most agitates Emma's social vision, the encroaching of lower classes, the changing of place.

Emma is not entirely contained in her 'English' vision either. For all her holding to Highbury ways, she feels the alien fascination of Frank Churchill as Mr Knightley never does. To her he is not just the prized son of the village but – and here his first name comes into play – a contrast to the very English *George* Knightley in his stagey French flirtatiousness, his fashionable triviality and ennui, his deceit, restlessness, and rootlessness. He is even 'sick of England', a statement made just after Emma sees the apotheosis of Englishness at Donwell. '[N]ot quite the thing' is perhaps Mr Woodhouse's most perceptive judgement in the novel. Yet Emma sees her kinship with this foreign-inflected young man. She suspects that he has enjoyed deceiving Highbury over his engagement to Jane Fairfax and admits she, too, might have done so in his place.

But he took her hand

Emma and Mr Knightley repeatedly misconstrue each other: when Emma had watched him conversing with Harriet, she had erroneously thought he was, first, being kind and, second, falling in love, when he was in fact discovering her good principles. These he praises Emma for helping instil; she accepts the compliment, knowing she has done no such thing. Indeed, she has actually inflated Harriet out of her becoming modesty

into a belief in her worthiness for the highest match in the community. Emma and Mr Knightley intend to treat each other with 'full and perfect confidence', doing away with all mystery, but they begin marriage with the husband's ignorance of his wife's bizarre suspicions about himself, Harriet, and Jane. Mr Knightley's sturdy belief in transparency remains the best ideal on offer perhaps, but needs qualifying. Emma had been close to truth with Miss Bates on Box Hill: that was the problem. As the narrator remarks: 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure' (*E*, 3:13).

The union of Emma and Mr Knightley may, then, appear only marginally better in Emma's mind (and the reader's) than the amicable singleness of both. The counterfactual of Emma's life has none of the horror Fanny Price felt when she contemplated what existence might have been with Henry Crawford. Emma would have had a different life without Knightley, but she was already preparing for it in her usual exaggerated way when he proposed. Her days would have been 'inferior in spirit and gaiety' but she would have become more 'rational', more self-aware, combining some repression with some self-knowledge; and she would have spent time reading those ignored lists, or have meant to. It is not so different from her proposed future *with* Mr Knightley: 'What had she to wish for? Nothing, but to grow more worthy of him, whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own. Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future' (*E*, 3:18).

The marriage is a satisfying *community* affair in which Emma consolidates her status. As the only heroine in the position to contribute financially to the improvement of an estate, she will donate her £30,000 to ease the problems of Donwell – Mr Knightley has 'little spare money'. The social status quo will be sensitively maintained now Emma's fearful expectations of adult life have been exploded – and she has managed to marry while staying 'married' to her father. Presumably snobbery will be collective if restrained (neither thinks a girl like Harriet, without birth, good enough for a gentleman clergyman, and both tend to equate Miss Bates's status with her income). Mr Knightley's patriarchal notions of marriage have been dented by his choice of a wife without a 'delightful inferiority', one who will not, like Mrs Weston and Isabella, constantly respond to the moods of her husband, and he will make the sacrifice of moving from his masculine domain into Hartfield, despite his opinion that 'A man would always wish to give a woman a better home than the one he takes her from' (*E*, 3:13). Emma will not experience what Mrs. Elton calls 'one of the evils of matrimony'; instead she will fulfil her father's opening opinion `*a propos* of Mrs Weston, that a married woman does not need 'a house of her own', especially if she is 'first' in the familial one. Emma will bring her female skill to bear on their joint life. Although occasionally tactless outside, she is a constant social facilitator at Hartfield, both gracious and diplomatic; she can now use this skill to patronise two villages.

On her side, like her predecessors, Emma is given the physical language of feeling and, despite her cerebral life, she looks to her body for guidance when thinking of love. Presumably from the romantic fiction she has read with Harriet, she has grasped the signs and she scrutinises herself for them: can she see 'listlessness, weariness, stupidity,' she asks when she thinks of Frank Churchill. The answer is No. Instead, the first time her body opens to emotion is when Mr Knightley rebukes her for rudeness to Miss Bates at Box Hill and the tears run unchecked down her cheek. When a repentant

Emma is discovered compensating for her lapse, Mr Knightley replies with a ‘glow’. An erotic charge surges from the pain, and the pair move so close that physical boundaries disappear; the moment is captured in the fractured syntax Austen will later fully develop to express deep emotion in *Persuasion*: ‘He took her hand; – whether she had not herself made the first motion, she could not say – she might, perhaps, have rather offered it – but he took her hand’ (*E*, 3:9). (It is not clear why he drops it – perhaps he fears he will kiss it and appear Frenchified.)

In some ways, Emma’s love has a rather ‘unnatural beginning’ – to use Anne Elliot’s later phrase for the trajectory of her emotions in *Persuasion* – for it appears that she began taking her prudential ownership of Mr Knightley for granted even before she fell in love with him. When, knowing more of her own heart, she fears that he is pursuing Harriet, Emma is presented as unable to be still: she starts, sighs, and walks about, stands and sits – echoing unawares Emma the moving misery of Jane Fairfax when her engagement was broken. Body and mind unite to feel the arrow of desire and, when she knows it reciprocal, her body flashes out: she who had been so often stopped by her coercing father from dancing is now ‘in dancing, singing, exclaiming spirits’. The love of Mr Knightley becomes her ‘fever’ and the assurance of it makes for a ‘sleepless night’. Motherhood, once rejected, forms part of her new erotic vision: remembering her earlier concern for the rights of her nephew as heir of Donwell, she gives herself ‘a saucy conscious smile’, and her desire for a daughter for Mrs Weston argues a son for herself (even her new-found erotic feelings fail to break her habit of plotting and imagining other people’s romantic possibilities). The triangle of desire, so potent in *Mansfield Park*, serves here as well: Emma loves Mr Knightley in part because she unconsciously feared Jane Fairfax was her rival, and because she consciously wants to make her second supposed rival – her once ‘intimate friend’ Harriet – into ‘nothing’. While she asserts she *must* have Mr Knightley, she desires him still to be mastering; echoing Mary Crawford’s wish to control the ‘sturdy’ Edmund, when married Emma wants her husband to remain ‘Mr Knightley’.

Source: Janet Todd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.