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CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON

Emma: "Woman, lovely woman reigns alone"[†]

There was a time, and not too long ago, when Austen was considered to be above—or was it really below?—the anxieties of authorship. For Richard Simpson, as for many of Austen's Victorian admirers, it was necessary to presume an "unconsciousness of [Austen's] artistic merits" in order to regard her, in his own words, as "dear Aunt Jane," a kindly spinster who never minded being interrupted while at work because her "powers were a secret to herself," and who was gratefully surprised to earn even the little money she did because she rated her own abilities too low to expect acknowledgment.¹ Encouraged by members of Austen's own family, who in the "Biographical Notice" and the *Memoir* protest with obtrusive defensiveness that Austen put her family before her art, such views have survived well into our own century. Taking particular care to "redeem" Austen from "any possible suspicion of superiority or conceit," R. Brimley Johnson asserts that Austen's "taste was strong against any parade of authorship, and her affection would have accused herself of both conceit and selfishness, had she required privacy for work, or allowed herself to be so absorbed as to neglect any social or domestic duty." R. W. Chapman later affirmed that "the sweetest reward of her labours" was nothing more ambitious or independent than "to have pleased her family." And as late as 1957, in the biographical sketch prefixed to his widely available edition of *Emma*, Trilling's stress on Austen's commitment to a charmed family circle assures us that Austen never upset the parlor or the dining room with overweening authorial preoccupations as unladylike as they are egotistical.²

For our current recognition of Austen's artistic self-consciousness we have to thank, not the discovery of any new information, but rather a disposition to pay attention to what has always been before us. Austen's account of the profits generated by her novels, for example, is now acknowledged to indicate an interest in matters as vulgar as commercial success. Her somewhat testy preface to *Northanger Abbey* is now permitted to betray lingering mortification at the refusal of Crosby & Co. to print this, her first formally submitted novel, and to convey a wish that readers properly consider

[†] From *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 121–43. Reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

1. In B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 263, 265.

2. R. Brimley Johnson, *Jane Austen* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1927), p. 74.

the historical provenance of her work. And of course the remarks scattered throughout the letters and her collection of opinions about *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* plainly attest to an intense curiosity about responses to her novels outside the family circle. To all appearances, she deemed no opinion about her novels too stupid or malapropos to copy out and preserve for future reference.

Austen's concern about the fate of her novels with the public was deeply felt and often manifested itself in decidedly personal attitudes towards her heroines, about whose popularity with the public she was a good judge. Elizabeth Bennet, she was certain, was so delightful a creature that if readers did not like her, it was no fault of her own. But with *Emma*, Austen knew she was taking a risk. Authorial solicitude on her behalf, however, has proved a mixed blessing. Her statement "I am going to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like" has been treated more as an invitation to search out what is objectionable about *Emma* than as a calculated challenge to the judgments of her audience, for the criticism of *Emma* is freighted with alarming animosities.³ Concerning this Austenian heroine, more than any other, commentary conspicuously gives the lie to the naive assumption that literary criticism is the business of disinterested professionals whose discussions evolve from ideologically neutral historical, aesthetic, or merely commonsensical criteria. If Austen enters the canon because she seemed to deny or devalue her authority, *Emma* has been the heroine critics have loved to scold precisely because it never occurs to her to apologize for the control she takes over the destinies of others. Because *Emma* is often charged with the same transgressions—being "arrogant, self-important, and controlling" or "narcissistic and perfectionist"—from which critics diligently attempted to exempt Austen, it is worth considering them at some length.⁴ The absolution of one and the arraignment—sometimes indulgent and sometimes not—of the other alike derive from a profound discomfort with female authority, and female authority itself is the subject of *Emma*.

Determining the common denominator in much *Emma* criticism requires no particular cleverness. *Emma* offends the sexual sensibilities of many of her critics. Transparently misogynist, sometimes even homophobic, subtexts often bob to the surface of the criticism about her. Even those critics who do not specifically address the subject of gender employ loaded oppositions about moral and social values, supposedly endorsed by the author herself, which imply a sexual hierarchy reified in marriage. For example, A. Duckworth's conten-

tion that "Emma in the end chooses society rather than self, an inherited order rather than a spontaneous and improvised existence," implicitly opposes and prefers the orderly, patriarchal, rational, masculine, and, above all, right to the disorderly, subjectivist, imaginative, feminine, and self-evidently wrong.⁵ In much *Emma* criticism, however, psychosexual concepts are not merely implicit. To many of this novel's most distinguished critics, Emma's want of feminine softness and complacency is her most salient and most grievous shortcoming. Mudrick's assertion that Emma is a "confirmed exploiter" is an erotic complaint disguised as a moral one. His "Emma has no tenderness" really means that she is not sexually submissive to and contingent upon men: hers is "a dominating and uncommitting personality." Curiously enough, though, because he does not notice his own assumption of a masculine monopoly on desirable qualities, Mudrick inadvertently justifies Emma's dereliction from "femininity." If Mr. Woodhouse "is really" that most contemptible of creatures, "an old woman," we can hardly wonder that his daughter opts for the emotional detachment and the penchant for managing that could place her beyond such scorn. But though Mudrick complains that Emma "plays God," what he really means is that she plays man, and he, as well as others, will not permit her thus to elude the contempt that is woman's portion, do what she may. Wilson, who alludes ominously to Emma's "infatuations with women," and Mudrick himself, who darkly hints about her preference of "the company of women" whom "she can master and direct," treat Emma's "coldness" as though it were a culpably perverse refusal of their own sexual advances. To critics at a loss to account for how Emma could like Harriet more than she likes Mr. Elton, what other than an unacceptable attachment to women could possibly account for a failure to be impressed with and "humanly" committed to men.⁶

Readers who have not cared to ponder Emma's sexuality have still entangled her in unexamined and curiously revealing attitudes which are, if anything, more pernicious in their linkage of sex and politics. Blowing the whistle on readers who doubt that marriage will cure Emma, Wayne Booth, for example, declares with the preventive dogmatism peculiar to outraged decency, "Marriage to an intelligent, amiable, good, and attractive man is the best thing that can happen to this heroine, and the readers who do not experience it as such are, I am convinced, far from knowing what Jane Austen

5. Alistair Duckworth, *Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971), p. 148.

6. Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 181–206; Edmund Wilson, "A Long Talk About Jane Austen," *New Yorker* 20 (24 June 1944), p. 69.

3. J. E. Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (London, 1870), p. 157.

4. Bernard Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels: A Psychological Approach* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), pp. 69, 73.

is about."⁷ Never implying that this highstrung young lady really needs a good man, Trilling argues that Emma's objectionable behavior derives from a sexual peculiarity more subversive than a mere passing disinterest in marriage: "The extraordinary thing about Emma," he claims, "is that she has a moral life as a man has a moral life." Emma's anomalous status as a moral agent is owing entirely to her self-love, a sentiment which in turn derives from "the first of virtues, the most basic and biological of the virtues, that of self-preservation." Untroubled by the Darwinian premise that nature, in the guise of biology, has in depriving women of the survival instinct, de facto barred them from the moral life, Trilling, it is true, does not chide Emma for her manly trespasses. But this is only because they are so reassuringly uncalculated and exceptional as to deserve his curiosity and his indulgence. Trilling also appeals to "the biological nature of moral fact" in his essay on *The Bostonians*, after all, and in that novel challenges to male hegemony that are based on *principle* meet with a very different response.⁸

In the animadversions of even the most sympathetic of Emma's critics, then, the political import of sexual difference is clearly exposed, for what they present as pertaining to female nature really pertains to female rule. Emma assumes her own entitlement to independence and power—power not only over her own destiny, but, what is harder to tolerate, power over the destinies of others—and in so doing she poaches on what is felt to be male turf. The royal dedication of *Emma* is often cited to account for the patriotism of its outbursts about English verdure, English reticence, and English social structure. But if it is appropriate to speak of *Emma* as a patriotic novel—and I believe it is—then it must be acknowledged that its patriotism is of a very unusual sort. Austen privately expressed hesitations about the Prince Regent in strong terms, and she inscribed the dedication to him only after realizing she had no choice.⁹ When we recall further that Austen disapproved of His Royal Highness specifically because of his notorious infidelity to his wife, the inscription of a novel predominated by female power can conceivably look more like an act of quiet cheek than of humble submission. In stunning contrast with *Mansfield Park*, where husbands dominate their

households with as little judiciousness as decency, in *Emma* women does reign alone. Indeed, with the exception of Knightley, all of the people in control are women: Mrs. Churchill's whims as well as her aches and pains are felt, discussed, and respected miles away from her sofa; at least some, if not all, people in the neighborhood accept Mrs. Elton's ministrations as "Lady Patroness"; and Emma's consciousness that she is considered "first" in consequence at Highbury may peeve her critics, but it does not faze her neighbors, and no one—least of all Mr. Knightley—questions her right to preeminence.

In its willingness to explore positive versions of female power, *Emma* itself is an experimental production of authorial independence unlike any of Austen's other novels. . . . The texture of *Emma* is remarkably spare. There is a hue and cry about an "infamous fraud upon the rights of men and women". But the crime in question is a conspiracy to deprive them of their dinner, not their dignity as autonomous agents. Austen does not allude to the tradition of political fiction as regularly in *Emma* as she does elsewhere, but such relative silence does not signify an abandonment of the political tradition. In fact, the case is quite the opposite. At the height of her powers, Austen steps into her own authority in *Emma*, and she participates in the political tradition of fiction, not by qualifying or critiquing it from within, but rather by trying to write from its outskirts. *Emma* is assuredly unlike the anarchistic and egalitarian novels of Godwin, Holcroft, and Wollstonecraft in fundamentally accepting English class structure, and in being able to discriminate positive authority figures. Emma is frequently brought to task for her "snobbiism."¹⁰ But if she offends democratic sympathies when she declares that "a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it", she is merely describing with unwonted bluntness a mode of social organization which the most attractive of Austen's heroes—Darcy, for one—thrive on and honor without raising our dander. Knightley himself opposes Emma's plans to match Harriet with Mr. Elton, certainly not because Harriet should make up her own mind, but rather because, though "men of sense" and "men of family" will rightly scorn to marry her, she is good enough for a farmer such as Robert Martin.

But at the same time, *Emma* is a world apart from conservative fiction in accepting a hierarchical social structure not because it is a sacred dictate of patriarchy—*Mansfield Park* had spoiled this—but rather because within its parameters class can actually supersede sex. Thus *Emma* recuperates a world Austen savages in novels such as *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*, in order to explore what was precluded in those novels, the place such a world can afford to women with authority. Though it may favor male rule, the

7. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 260.

8. Lionel Trilling, "Introduction" to *Emma* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. x; *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking, 1955), p. 116. Such attitudes cannot be dismissed as the crudeness of a bygone era, for a tacit belief that for women, at least, biology is destiny still underpins recent criticism about *Emma*. P. J. M. Scott, for example, insists that "Miss Woodhouse"—as she is repeatedly called—is "frightened of the wedded state"; see Scott, *Jane Austen: A Reassessment* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1982), p. 64.

9. *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: 2nd ed., 1952), p. 504 (16 February 1813); F. B. Pinion, *A Jane Austen Companion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, rev. ed. 1976), p. 21.

social system sustained in *Emma* recognizes the propriety of female rule as well, and it is to this system that Emma, in the absence of any social superiors, owes her preeminence.

Emma's self-assurance—"I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other"—is thus doubly unnerving because it exceeds the purely personal and is reinforced by a social privilege which commands a respect easier to extend to a man of Sir Thomas's stature than to a woman of Lady Catherine's, let alone Emma's. Furthermore, because we tend to read Austen's novels much as Mary Bennet would, as dramas of moral correction—where Marianne is properly punished for impetuosity, Elizabeth for her prejudice (and so on)—Emma's power is generally presented as the problem she must overcome. In no novel are Austen's methods particularly instructional, but *Emma* most conspicuously lacks the clarity of emphasis and the conclusory arguments that mark didactic fiction, omissions that have in fact disturbed many readers. One recent critic has vigorously complained that Emma's humiliation is too brief and too private, and that she is never vigorously "punished" for her wrongdoing; and many readers have been troubled that Emma shows no sign of "reform" by the end of the novel. The leisurely eddying of *Emma*'s pace, combined with the insistent ordinariness—not to say vapidty—of so much of its material, makes strident moralizing sound a bit strained.¹ As a result, the identification and assessment of the faults which are supposed to make humiliation and reform necessary have a hyperbolic ring to them. When one critic lists among Emma's reprehensible "mortifications" of others' feelings her curt refusal of Mr. Elton's inebriated proposal, one feels this is scraping the bottom of the barrel indeed.² Since the steady absorption of feminist perspectives into the corpus of Austenian criticism, the incommensurateness of action and reaction has been noted, and some readers, who presumably cannot understand why Mr. Elton's feelings are deemed worthier of indulgence than Emma's—have ventured to confess that they could never figure out exactly what Emma did to merit so much indignation in the first place.

What indeed? Austen anticipates the question as early as the fifth chapter, when Knightley and Mrs. Weston debate the wisdom of Emma's rule with the maturity and candor of opposition that mark so many of the disagreements in this novel. Emma has long been the subject of their quarrels, and Knightley has long been accustomed to monitor Emma with ready reproof. True to form, he warns that Emma's association with Harriet is "a bad thing". But

1. Scott, *Reassessment*, pp. 67–68.

2. Stuart M. Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1973), p. 246. I am much indebted to Tave's now classic study which so illuminates the distinctive features of Austen's language.

though they proceed from an anxiety for improvement that we can appreciate only later, even the very worst of Knightley's criticisms turn out to be fretfully minute: Emma, he complains, has never finished her reading lists; she has not applied her talents steadily; no one has ever gotten the better of her precocity; her new young friend will harm Emma by flattering her vanity, and Emma in turn will harm her by swelling her silly head. Mrs. Weston does not share Knightley's dire predictions about Emma's projects, because she considers her judgment worth relying on: "where Emma errs once, she is in the right a hundred times". Here is no blind dependence on the infallibility of Emma's authority, but instead a confidence in its basic soundness: "She has qualities which may be trusted; she will never lead any one really wrong; she will make no lasting blunder."

Emma amply corroborates Mrs. Weston's faith in the fitness of Emma's rule, but often so tactfully as to be almost imperceptible. This tact, however, is necessary first of all because Emma's best actions are of the sort which she, unlike Mrs. Elton, disdains to trumpet. A few strokes of the pen, for example, show that in her attentions to the poor and afflicted of her parish, Emma is intelligent, generous, compassionate, and—whatever she is in her studies—steady. Further, although Knightley thinks her "rather negligent" in contributing to the "stock" of Miss Bates's "scanty comforts", Emma's "own heart" ranks visits there an obligation. She is not shown to fuss over sending that hind-quarter of pork to the Bateses—though her father would mull and send less—and when she does explain to Knightley that respect for her father's peace prevents her from making her carriage of use to her neighbors, he smiles with conviction. Because she nowhere styles herself "Lady Patroness," we can only assume that Emma considers the performance of untold acts of kindness a duty attached to her social position requiring no announcement or praise.

Considering the contrast between Emma and Mrs. Elton can enable us to distinguish the use of social position from the abuse of it, a proper sense of office from a repulsive officiousness; and in the process it offers a glimpse of the conservative model of social control working well. The principle of difference between the two characters and their actions is not finally reducible to class. What makes Mrs. Elton intolerable is not that she is new money and Emma is old, and that Mrs. Elton thus only pretends to prerogatives of status Emma comes by honestly. Mrs. Elton's exertions of leadership set our teeth on edge because of their insistent publicity, not because of their intrinsic fraudulence. Emma may be convinced that in attending their party she "must have delighted the Coles—worthy people, who deserved to be made happy!" but she keeps the satisfactions of condescension to herself. But by tirelessly asserting her

centrality in the minds of others, Mrs. Elton bullies her auditors into frustrated acquiescence: "Nobody can think less of dress in general than I do—but upon such an occasion as this, when everybody's eyes are so much upon me, and in compliment to the Westons—who I have no doubt are giving this ball chiefly to do me honour—I would not wish to be inferior to others." Determined to advertise her sagacity, Mrs. Elton furthermore has a vested interest in airing what places others at a disadvantage, uncannily seizing on painful features of others' lives, and forcing them to the center of attention: "I perfectly understand your situation, however, Miss Woodhouse—(looking towards Mr. Woodhouse)—Your father's state of health must be a great drawback." But Emma has ready stores of "politeness" which enable her to respect what is delicate by leaving it unsaid. She feels gratified when Jane Fairfax divulges the hardships of living at home; but she exclaims "Such a home, indeed! such an aunt!" only to herself.

More than nicety is at issue here. Just as the impoliteness Lady Catherine and Darcy evinced towards others in persistently appraising them of their inferiority constituted a socially significant wrong, a theft of the self-satisfaction to which all are entitled, so do Mrs. Elton's bruited exertions of authority triumph improperly in the dejection of others—as when she, intervening as friend as well as patron, hastens Jane's assignment as a governess, or just as bad, when she colludes with her husband to humiliate Harriet publicly for her upstart pretensions. At her worst, Emma transgresses in much the same way when she mocks Miss Bates at Box Hill, or when she discloses her suspicions about Jane Fairfax to Frank Churchill. Shameful though these infractions are, they stand out precisely because they are so infrequent, and if Mrs. Elton's presence on the scene helps us to identify and to deplore them, it also helps appreciate how much better Emma handles herself by comparison. Generally Emma is, if anything, admirably forbearing: she endures page after page of "quiet prosings" and often vexing developments without letting slip the slightest impatience, and she brooks Mrs. Elton's presumption without so much as a sarcasm or protest. Unlike Mrs. Elton, Emma has a proper regard for public opinion that—with a few very important exceptions—resisting her impulse to abuse. Forging of "pride or propriety" make Emma "resolve on not being the last to pay her respects" to the new bride, and when her neighbors celebrate Mrs. Elton's attractions, Emma lets the praise pass "from one mouth to another as it ought to do, unimpeded" by her own dissent. Because Emma does not wish to be "exposed to odious suspicions, and imagined capable of pitiful resentment," she behaves even more politely than she is inclined, while Mrs. Elton degenerates into the blatancy of incivility. The neighborhood that did not exist in *Mansfield Park* is

everywhere in *Emma*. Emma herself defers to its civilizing restraints and in the process shows conservative ideology working at its best. . . . But Emma is an authority figure responsive to the morally corrective influence of public opinion. This is what makes her feel the truth of Knightley's reproach at Box Hill, and this is what makes her resolute, swift, and feeling in her amends.³

Emma is so remarkable a novel at least in part for its ability to include what is politely left unsaid. The excellence of Emma's rule is often disclosed tactfully, because if it were vaunted brusquely à la Mrs. Elton, it would show her father at too great a disadvantage. Mr. Woodhouse's two-fold hostility to disruption and indigestion so unfits him for the duties incumbent upon the head of a respected household that Emma is often obliged to ignore or to oppose him quietly for decency's sake, and in the process she displays powers of delicacy and forbearance which are the more impressive given the vivacity of her own temper and the incisiveness of her wit. When a most unpatricianlike selfishness on Mr. Woodhouse's part would exclude even as old and indispensable a friend as Mr. Knightley from dinner, Emma's "sense of right" interferes to procure him the proper invitation. Similarly, while Mr. Woodhouse's anxiety for the health of others compels him to take food away from the guests at his table, Emma takes the duties of "patriarchal hospitality" upon her own shoulders without stinging; she "allowed her father to talk—but supplied her visitors in a much more satisfactory style." Thus the narrative style of *Emma* shows, but does not call attention to, the courtesy with which Emma manages the household around her. Her diplomacy is characteristically inobtrusive, as when she steers hypocritical companions away from topics, such as the insalubriousness of sea air, likely to occasion disputes not the less rancorous for their manifest pettiness; or when she intercedes to separate warring conversants, as when John Knightley indulges in one of his many eruptions of peevishness against Mr. Woodhouse himself.

This kind of superintendence is one of the prerogatives of rule, and it comes . . . spontaneously to Emma. . . . Progressives and reactionaries fought their ideological battles in the arenas of family and neighborhood, and the whos, whys, and why-nots of matchmaking were not the sole concern of middle-class women with nothing better to do. In Austen's fiction the making and prohibiting of matches preoccupies country squires . . . as much as it does well-meaning gossips . . .; and in this context, Mr. Woodhouse's opposition to marriage—he lamented that young people would be in such

3. For a complementary discussion of the ethical importance of the community, see Julia Prewitt Brown, *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

a hurry to marry—and to marry strangers too—is particularly comical. And even though, of all Austen's positive male authority figures, Mr. Knightley is remarkably the least officious and encroaching in this respect, as in all others, his recommendation that Emma mind her own business—"Leave him [Elton] to chuse his own wife. Depend upon it, a man or six or seven-and-twenty can take care of himself"—is slightly disingenuous, and he later retracts it. Far from being above applying his own understanding to other people's business, he oversees the personal affairs of his neighbors more closely than Emma does, and his indignation over Emma's "interference" with Harriet Smith is due in part to the embarrassment he feels for his own, now futile, interference with Robert Martin.

Emma is always taken to task for her scheme to improve Harriet, and this disapproval exposes the importance we ascribe to the sex differential in matters pertaining to authority. * * * Emma, with the "real good-will of a mind delighted with its own ideas" contemplates the patron-ward relationship with the same sense of personal gratification: "She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners." * * * But Emma realizes that bringing Harriet to Hartfield accords her a status which Emma herself is now obligated to respect. Accordingly, when Harriet just as inevitably turns on Emma and threatens to supplant her in Knightley's affections, Emma's own "strong sense of justice by Harriet" prompts her to admit that Harriet "had done nothing to forfeit the regard and interest which had been so voluntarily formed and maintained", and acknowledging her own responsibility for Harriet's aspirations, Emma declines to oppose, however heartily she may lament them.

* * *

If *Emma* begins with the assumption of a broad arena for legitimate and useful female rule independent from masculine supervision, then, it does not end with the assertion of its sufficiency. By the conclusion of her story, Emma is brought low, and marriage saves her. To scholars who see Austen as a political conservative (this one list is particularly pertinent), it appears to be the case. Indeed, Mr. Knightley does look like the benevolent, all-seeing monitor crucial to the conservative fiction of Austen's day. Hovering like a chaperon around the edges of every major scene—the portrait party at Hartfield, the dinner at the Coles, the word game at the Abbey, the outing at Box Hill—he is always on the lookout for wrongdoing and nonsense, always alert in his benefactions for the poor and innocent. Knightley himself confesses that with Emma his role as moral censor has been particularly obnoxious: "I

have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it," and he is probably right. Alternately beaming with heartfelt approval when Emma acquits herself properly, and frowning with pain whenever she misbehaves, he has been half paternal and half pedagogical in his watchfulness.

But this story is no less a "human disclosure" than any of the other stories in *Emma*. Accordingly, it does not tell all either; something is "a little disguised, or a little mistaken." Knightley is not, first of all, above imaginative misreadings of his own, nor can he be. As his readiness to denounce Frank Churchill as an "Abominable scoundrel" attests, Mr. Knightley is just as apt as Emma to misconstrue where his interest is at stake, investing his upstart rival with the extremely literary character of the heartless cad. But Frank goes from "villain" to "not desperate" to a "very good sort of fellow" in a matter of moments as soon as Knightley learns that Emma never loved him. Furthermore, Knightley is not nearly so wise and all seeing as he appears to think. He extols "the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with each other," but many things—fortunately—have escaped his monitoring. Emma's worst faults among them. Knightley never learns, for example, that Emma did not stop with Mr. Elton, but proceeded to match Harriet and Frank; nor does he learn that Harriet, for her part, learned enough about gentility to disdain the very idea, and to prefer him instead, which is, after all, more than Emma had the wisdom to do. Emma, of course, must keep at least some of these humiliating little secrets to herself. To do any less would be an Eltonian trespass on Harriet's feelings. But even after Harriet's marriage takes the pressure off, Emma is still disingenuous about the "full and perfect confidence" she can now look forward to practicing on a conjugal "duty." She has had more to "blush" about than Harriet all along, and only moments later, Emma is blushing again, this time at the name of Dixon: "I can never think of it, she cried, without extreme shame." One wonders how Mr. Knightley would judge Emma's readiness not only to form scandalous thoughts about his favorite, but exultantly to impart them as well. But Emma's part in Jane's story is never disclosed, and Emma herself gets by with no more than some private embarrassment whenever she receives a little more praise than she deserved. Austen's refusal to expound and to arraign a heroine reprehensible by conventional standards shows how she parts company with conservative counterparts, and given the morally privileged position monitor figures of Knightley's ilk enjoy in their fiction, Austen's determination to establish a clear discrepancy between what he knows and what we know about Emma is daring.

But Knightley is a far more extraordinary character than a monitor *manqué*. He himself does not set much store by his mentorship, and even though he always does lecture and blame, nothing ever comes of it. Monitors like Edgar Mandlebert⁴ in *Camilla* and Edmund in *Mansfield Park* enforce their advice by threatening to withdraw affection and approval if they are not immediately obeyed—"advice" being for them, as we have seen in *Mansfield Park*, merely a decent term for "command." They stand as fair-weather friends who may turn on naughty charges at any minute. But Knightley and Emma stand on an equal footing, and this necessarily modifies the dynamic of advice giving, endowing it with more of the friendly directness that marks the advice scenes between Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth. For Knightley, advice is not a function of power. He does not assume that the parental liberty he takes in reproaching due him—indeed it is a "privilege rather endured than allowed." Being who and what she is, Emma dishes out almost as much as she gets, and when she does not follow his advice—which is almost always—he does not turn away.

Knightley, * * * is thus a fantastically wishful creation of benign authority, in whom the benefits and attractions of power are preserved and the abuses and encroachments expelled. As such he is the very reverse of Coelebs in More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*. To the extent that *Coelebs* tells young ladies to comport themselves modestly like sweet helpmates if they want to catch a husband, it holds forth the promise to girls across the kingdom that their skill at housewifery and their strenuous exertions of self-subordination will all pay off in the end, making them more desirable to the best sort of men than lively women, wits, and flirts. But *Emma* does the opposite. Here choosy men prefer saucy women—not women who place themselves at the margins, letting themselves be noticed only so they may show that they are not so vain as to crave attention, but women who love even the unflattering limelight, and who do not hesitate to pen themselves the subject of other people's news to Maple Grove and Ireland: "Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively." In the character of Isabella, Austen shows that the good little wife cannot hold a candle to Emma: ". . . poor Isabella, passing her life with those she doated on, full of their merits, blind to their faults, and always innocently busy, might have been a model of right feminine happiness." The "might" here does more than underscore the difference between how Mr. Woodhouse deplors the destiny of "poor Isabella" and how more conventional people would envy it. It also places the statement outside narrative endorsement. Chattering vacuously, oblivious to how

4. Camilla's suitor in Frances Burney's novel *Camilla, or a Picture of Youth* (1796) [Editor].

she and her children endure the same curse of "living with an ill-tempered person" which she complacently pities in Mr. Churchill, Isabella has probably fewer claims to ready wit than Harriet herself. And to a man as discriminating as Knightley she presents "striking inferiorities" which serve only to throw Emma's "brilliance" into higher relief. Wifely virtues are not meet for Emma; her hand, as he says somewhat proudly, "is the strongest," and he likes it that way.

The conclusion of *Emma* shares the polyvalence characteristic of the endings in Austen's later novels. The tenderness of Emma's filial piety—strong enough to make her hesitate to marry at all—proves her to be reassuringly devoted to precisely those relationships which political conservatives wanted to protect. Moreover, Emma's devolution to marriage with a man seventeen years her senior puts an end to her "reign alone," and brings her back within the confines of that relationship which she had offended so many readers by slighting. But problems still remain. Because Emma and Knightley are social equals, marriage itself does not present the same difficulty it had in *Pride and Prejudice*. * * * In order to secure Emma's prestige and the prerogative that comes with it, the ending of *Emma* turns back on the very outlines it seems to confirm. Mr. Knightley himself avers, "A man would always wish to give a woman a better home than the one he takes her from"; and Mrs. Weston's feelings show that such generosity, far from being sublimely disinterested, confers an obligation which later affords "a man" the sweet pleasure of his wife's gratitude. But while Donwell Abbey is surely "a better home" than Hartfield, *Emma* closes by deferring Knightley's wish indefinitely to a time none wish to hasten—that is to say, until Mr. Woodhouse's death. As Emma well knows, Knightley's move into Hartfield is extraordinary considering his own power and independence: "How very few of those men in a rank of life to address Emma would have renounced their own home for Hartfield!" The conclusion which seemed tamely and placidly conservative thus takes an unexpected turn, as the guarantor of order himself cedes a considerable portion of the power which custom has allowed him to expect. In moving to Hartfield, Knightley is sharing *her* home, and in placing himself within her domain, Knightley gives his blessing to her rule.