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# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

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## About this hypertext

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## About the Contributors to *Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life*

**Michael Gamer** Michael Gamer is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. Articles by him have appeared in *ELH*, *PMLA*, *Theater Survey*, *Studies in Romanticism*, and other journals. His first book, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation*, will be published in September 2000 by Cambridge University Press. He is currently completing an edition of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* for Penguin Classics, which will appear in the Fall of 2000. With Jeffrey Cox, he is editing *Romantic Period Drama: An Anthology*, which will be published by Broadview Press in 2001.

**William Galperin** is Professor of English at Rutgers University and the author of two books: *Revision and Authority in Wordsworth: The Interpretation of a Career* (1989) and *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (1993). He is currently completing a book-length study tentatively titled "The Historical Austen."

**George Levine** is Kenneth Burke Professor of English, Rutgers University, and Director of the Rutgers Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture. He is author of several books and collections of essays including *The Realistic Imagination* and *Darwin and the Novelists*.

**Diedre Lynch** is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York, Buffalo. She is the author of *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (U of Chicago P, 1998), which won the MLA Prize for a First Book. She has also edited *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees* (Princeton UP, 2000) and is currently at work on a cultural history of "loving" literature.

**Adam Potkay** is Associate Professor of English at the College of William & Mary. His publications include *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (Cornell UP, 2000) and *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Cornell UP, 1994), as well as many articles on the literature and philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

**William Walling** is Professor of English at Rutgers University. He has taught and written on a broad range of subjects, from Shakespeare to contemporary literature.

**Susan J. Wolfson** is Professor of English at Princeton University and the author of numerous articles and essays on writers and issues in the era of British Romanticism. She has recently published *Formal Charges*:

*The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (1997) and with Peter Manning has edited *Selected Poems of Byron* (1996), *The Romantics and Some of their Contemporaries* (Longman Anthology of British Literature) (1998), and *Selected Poems of Hood, Praed, and Beddoes*. She is completing a study of issues of gender in the Romantic era, *Figures on the Margin*.

# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

## Introduction to the Forum on the Box Hill

William Galperin, Rutgers University

1. The idea for this forum on the Box Hill episode in *Emma* came almost immediately in the aftermath of a meeting of the Washington Area Romantics Group, where I had just read a portion of my ongoing study on Jane Austen. As I recall, the choice of the Box Hill episode as an object of inquiry—as something that critics with a more-than-casual interest in Romanticism might be interested in exploring—was Neil Fraistat’s and Orrin Wang’s and not mine. Nevertheless, the identification of Austen as a topic for a volume in the *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* seemed sufficiently useful in the wake of disciplinary initiatives and transformations, following which British “Romanticism” has increasingly stood poised between a movement, with constitutive parameters and orientations, and a period or time line, in which crucial distinctions are dissolved or revised in the welter of contemporaneity.
2. The issue for me, then, in assembling this group of diverse yet strangely cooperative readings, was not the one that I’ve been pressing students at all levels with for nearly twenty years: namely the bearing of Austen on Romanticism and of studies in Romanticism on Austen. If anything, the motive behind the solicitation of six interpretations of this most Austenian of all moments in Austen’s fiction, effectively presupposed that the question I have been asking throughout my career had proceeded in that time from being a real problem in literary history to essentially a non-problem or something sufficiently contained by the state of the discipline that a presentation on Austen to a group of Romanticists was altogether plausible and suddenly meaningful. I am not suggesting, of course, that Austen’s relationship to her (predominantly) male Romantic contemporaries, along with Romanticism’s place in a larger discursive formation to which Austen’s works are equally apposite, are issues that no longer warrant scrutiny. Nor am I discounting the fact that to virtually any group of students of literature Austen’s relevance—following her still-representative function as the sine qua non of the literary per se—is happily a moot point. What I am suggesting is that with the ongoing dilation of Romanticism into other genres and writers, along with the “deep background” that these previously contiguous phenomena both demand and provide, a discussion of the Box Hill episode either by or for a group of romanticists seems completely justified.
3. I had no idea what the contributors whom I contacted would produce and certainly no idea what I would deduce from their contributions. My only motive—with the question of Box Hill as a “Romantic Praxis” provisionally settled—was to assemble a group of scholars from various generations and with a range of critical predilections, knowing only that something useful and interesting would presumably emerge even if it might not cohere, particularly as a forum for romanticists. I had no idea, for example, that George Levine, whose foundational work on realism receives an impressive amendment in his consideration of Knightley and the countervailing forces of indeterminacy that that character’s “getting it right” only partly mitigates, would find a useful counterpart in Michael Gamer, who comes at the episode from an altogether different angle of vision. In Gamer’s accounting, which bears the marks of the historicizing methods that he deploys elsewhere, the guides to legibility or to understanding human character in the late eighteenth century, specifically class and countenance, fail in this occasion to anchor any stable or consistent sense of what is transpiring here. Thus, while the episode operates as a scene of instruction for the eponymous protagonist, the particular and necessarily stable sense of things on which Knightley’s instructions are predicated, is ultimately insufficient in dispelling a “social density that is unsortable, unexplainable, and [. . .] unanswerable to any discursive formation.”

4. Nor had I anticipated that Deidre Lynch, who reads the episode as an acting out of the various and contradictory imperatives of nationhood and British identity, would find a powerful accomplice in Susan J. Wolfson. In her characteristic close reading of the episode and of its ramification in the novel as a whole, Wolfson demonstrates the manner and degree to which the abject Miss Bates, who doubles here and throughout the novel as an object of both loathing and reluctant identification, is instrumental in an idea of community that shifts uneasily between a self-satisfied solidarity on the one hand and a pervasive fear and loathing on the other.
5. I thoroughly expected—and indeed had hoped—that Adam Potkay would situate the Box Hill episode within a decidedly eighteenth-century context. And he does this quite effectively, responsibly tracking Austen’s stated proclivities for Cowper and Johnson in pursuing issues of theatricality and display here, particularly as they are alleged to dissipate under the corrective and essentializing ministrations of Mr. Knightley. But what I did not expect—though it accords all-too-seamlessly with at least *one notion* of Romantic praxis—is the ultimately deconstructive yield of Potkay’s inquiry. For, as Potkay sees it, there is, even the wake of the humbling correctives to which Emma tearfully submits, no escape from performance and thus no way, in Austen’s calculus, to make ethics and interiority sufficiently commensurate for there to be an entity on the order of an ethical—or dare I say it romantic—subject.
6. This de Manian tack is equally evident in the last of the contributions here, that of William Walling, whom readers of the *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* will remember as one of the distinguished Romanticists who initially wrestled with the question of Austen’s “Romanticism” in the *Wordsworth Circle* devoted to that topic. Walling begins by broaching and then wrestling with the problem of anachronism, particularly as it bears on presentist accounts that marshal the wisdom of hindsight in either valorizing Austen’s progressivism or bemoaning her containment by various cultural vicissitudes. But his conclusion follows Potkay, and the deconstructive legacy that he and Potkay draw alternately from de Man and from the Romanticism to which de Man was necessarily drawn, in echoing what readers, regardless of the interpretations they have offered, have long intuited. And this quite simply is the degree to which Austen’s irony and her “engagement with the putative reality of her narratives” are sufficiently at crosspurposes that any attempt at “reduction” or understanding is met ultimately by a “remarkable resistance.” The critical complement to such resistance at Box Hill and elsewhere—indeed the only criticism adequate to what all of the essays underscore in one way or another—is a forum of this nature and at this level.

# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

## Box Hill and the Limits of Realism

George Levine, Rutgers University

1. Perhaps the most difficult thing for a modern reader of *Emma* to do is to take it straight, to accept Mr. Knightley as the moral authority the story seems to make him and to agree that Emma should indeed marry him. How can we take without either a shudder or a laugh the abject refusal of Emma—that "imaginist," self-indulgent, independent, charmingly creative and snobbish heroine—to call Knightley "George" after they are betrothed: "I never can call you any thing but Mr. Knightley" (III.xvii, 420). Moreover, taking Knightley at face value means, it would seem, taking at face value the idea that after all has been worked out, Emma has left for her "Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in the future." What a banal, reductive and limiting "moral" for a novel so extraordinarily rich in nuanced dancing around doubleness of meaning, around the virtual inaccessibility of a stable and verifiable truth of the matter, around the edgy if muted excitement of female independence and imaginative play!
2. Recent criticism has delighted in the novel's preoccupation with puzzles, with the extraordinary variety of evasions, diversions, deceptions, and verbal play that mark social behavior on every page and almost every bit of dialogue. Much of the extraordinary pleasure of the book derives from the fact that even the most trivial comment is likely to imply some complexity of possibility that cannot be reduced to the bourgeois lessons of self-discipline: taming the imagination and learning humility. Even the very first paragraphs of the novel, written in the apparently authoritative, precise, judgmental voice of the Jane Austen narrator, will not quite hold still. So in what might pass as a directly expository mode, we are told "with what self-denying, generous friendship" Emma "had always wished and promoted the match" between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston (I.i, 4). But this turns out to be an early instance of Emma's "imaginism"—these are Emma's perceptions, and Knightley will challenge them only a few pages later, indicating authoritatively that Emma had in fact done nothing but make a "lucky guess" (10). And this little ambivalence opens into the whole sequence of mistaken actions and guesses about potential marriages that marks the rest of the novel's narrative and edges out into its moral crisis on Box Hill, where Frank blatantly flirts with Emma, enjoying the deception while Jane looks on, secretly wounded, secretly engaged, and Knightley, always surreptitiously in love with Emma, watches severely—and jealously. Nothing in *Emma* is exactly what it seems, it seems. Everything means something other or more than what is said, either for the reader or for the characters engaged in conversation. The anchor of judgment of all these instabilities would seem to be Knightley himself.
3. Not that his own self-interest doesn't open his authoritative judgments to the same sort of questioning appropriate for all the others. He himself confesses, for example, that his early unfavorable judgment of Frank might have been influenced by his feeling for Emma. As with many scenes, the dramatic presentation of Knightley's critique profits from rereading, for it sounds utterly reasonable, and even Emma shares Knightley's views though she perversely encourages his critique and argues against it. Nevertheless, Knightley got it right, and virtually always gets it right. He knows that Elton won't think about Harriet Smith, believes, along with his brother, that Emma is the more likely object of Elton's attentions, knows that Robert Martin is the man for Harriet (and his view of Martin marks him as far less snobbish and far more perceptive than Emma), knows that Frank Churchill could have visited his father—Mr. Weston—if he had wanted to do so, recognizes that there is something going on in the relation between Frank and Jane Fairfax. Knightley advises Emma appropriately on every important issue, and, of course, at the moral climax of the novel, fairly reprimands Emma after her insult of Miss

Bates during the Box Hill picnic. Knightley is almost always watching, and his observations have the quality of the realist novelist's: they turn nuances into significant actions, a grain of sand into a world.

4. The catalogue of Knightley's accuracies could go on, but it should be read along with the dignity of his insistent demand for directness (and his necessary reticence about his feelings for Emma), with his openness and clarity in all relationships, with his refusal to be bullied by Mrs. Elton (in the matter of preparation for strawberry picking at Donwell Abbey, for example), with his rescue of Harriet from the indignities of the Eltons' behavior at the ball. The novel confirms Knightley's unquestioned superiority to all others when, in the penultimate chapter, Emma sees Frank Churchill once more and notes how "she had never been more sensible of Mr. Knightley's high superiority of character. The happiness of this most happy day, received its completion, in the animated contemplation of his worth which this comparison produced" (437). And at last, with the marriage of Emma and Knightley, this novel of evasions and complications concludes with the assurance that "the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union" (III.xix, 440).
5. All of which is to argue that *Emma* offers itself as a novel that is, through its various detours and duplicities, what it claims to be, and this, for skeptical modern readers, is rather hard to take. Although the word "realistic" would, in application to Jane Austen's novels, have a touch of the anachronistic about it, they were long seen as "realistic" models for the more developed and programmatic versions of realism that followed. In the heyday of Victorian realism, George Eliot, George Lewes, William Dean Howells—virtually everyone who would talk about her (even Charlotte Bronte in her criticism of her)—saw Austen as a realist. *Emma*, in an exemplary way, fits into the pattern of English realism, most particularly in its working through of the protagonist's "formation," her *Bildung*.
6. We have been hearing much, too, about the ways in which nineteenth-century realism was ideologically complicit in the construction and affirmation of bourgeois society and consciousness. The protagonists of *Emma* are instinctively aloof to people who are "vulgarly" related to money (by work, like Farmer Martin, or the Coles, or by nouveau riche connections, like Mrs. Elton), and they are explicitly, unselfconsciously "complicit." The education of Emma is precisely the education into self-control, social discipline, and acquiescence in larger social norms that has been attributed to books more obviously, even egregiously so, like *David Copperfield*. There is no hidden conservative agenda in Austen's writing, no ruse of resistance, as D. A. Miller might see it. She is, rather, quite overtly committed to good old money and land and self-discipline. Yet Mr. Weston, who is one of the select few, somehow makes his fortune, and John Knightley is rather busy making money in London. And if the thoroughly landed Emma and Mr. Knightley preside unequivocally over the community with the qualities of true gentleman and lady, that community is subtly infested with the odor of the new bourgeoisie. The novel gives the impression of seeking socially equal matches, and formally it has, therefore, a wonderful precision of shape, but while the matching works with Emma and Knightley, it is less obviously precise elsewhere. Mrs. Elton is a parvenu, and a grossly unpleasant one, but the amiable Mrs. Weston was a governess elevated above her position, Harriet Smith is a bastard who marries into farming respectability, and Jane Fairfax would have been a governess and is rescued by the old money given to the son of new money, Frank Churchill: that is, despite appearances, the marriages tend actually to be unequal as to class, if largely equal as to "merit"—as merit is defined by Mr. Knightley (even here, there's a question of whether Harriet is good enough for farmer Martin, if Frank is good enough for poor Jane; to be sure, the Eltons deserve each other).
7. There would seem to be nothing in *Emma* that resists the ordering of bourgeois consciousness, the transference of the best of the aristocratic ideal to the newly emerging bourgeoisie, and the confidence in the comforting solidity of the social real. Moreover, the book is obviously not—like the later realism of some of the high Victorians—reformist. It is not so much that its resistances are actually to be

understood as complicities, but that it unequivocally takes its complicities as the social and moral ideals, usually affirmed by Mr. Knightley, as the measure against which all other behavior is to be judged. Emma, like Elizabeth Bennett before her, is allowed the fullest reach of her individuality and specialness, and acquiesces, of her own choice, in the general values that Knightley persistently affirms and that, the book always reminds us, Emma has always shared, deceived only about her own power independently to achieve them.

8. *Emma* reverberates with the strategies of realism even in its multiple complications of them. The realism that took deep root in the nineteenth century was, at its most interesting, always pressing the limits of empirical validation, resisting its own awareness of the impossibility of its project. The excitement of realist texts, like the excitement of much of *Emma*, is their tightrope walk across the abyss of uncertainty, inevitable deception and self-deception, alternative possibilities. The narrator of *Adam Bede*, in a passage that is often taken as the fullest articulation of the mid-Victorian realist project, notes that his work is to "give a faithful account of men and things," but only "as they have mirrored themselves in my mind." Moreover, "the mirror is doubtless defective." While Austen's narrator writes with an apparent authority that belies such defect, she is sparing of narrative omniscience, and every character within the novel, even Knightley himself, is a defective mirror. For the most part, though not entirely, the narrator stays out of it, slides into Emma's consciousness, records dead pan (often, of course, in hilariously funny ways) what people say and think, and only appears unequivocally as narrator at the points at which she makes sure we are aware of the conventions of romance happy endings. She leaves the sorting out of truth and values to the characters themselves—for the most part. And yet some voice announces, at the point when Emma has at last recognized her love for Knightley and her determination to allow nobody but herself to marry him, and when Knightley has made it clear that the feeling is mutual: "Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken" (391). The test of realism is precisely its encounter with the impossibility of getting it right, of registering the really real.
9. Realistic novels often turn at a point of crisis—an extreme situation—that extends realism beyond its normal limits. Such crises frequently occurs at some extreme geographical point, often on open waters, as, say, in *The Mill on the Floss* or *Great Expectations*, but usually on some height, as in garrets, mountains, or hills. Waverley's trials begin in the highlands, from which he is expelled in spite of himself. Lucy Snowe's gothic nun and her rehearsal for M. Paul's play take place in the attic. The landscape of realism, literal or moral, is traditionally urban or flat; its excursions into geographical extremes, like the Alps, almost invariably test the limits of the ordinary that is so often affirmed as the "real" in English realism. Box Hill, of course, is not the Alps, but its heights seem to crystallize the divisiveness and instability that the social norms of Highbury and Jane Austen's prose work hard to judge and restrain. Somehow, as against the intense sociality of the rest of the book, on Box Hill "there seemed a principle of separation" (III.vii, 332). And even Emma, after two hours of "flattery and merriment" from Frank Churchill "wished herself rather walking quietly with any of the others, or sitting almost alone, and quite unattended to, in tranquil observation of the beautiful views beneath her" (III.vii, 338). Beautiful views, it seems, are not quite compatible with the delicate interrelations that sustain society and form the substance of a realist world of compromises and connections.
10. It is, perhaps, excessive to talk of "extremes" in *Emma*, which begins with Emma attending lovingly to the hypochondria and nervousness of Mr. Woodhouse, who imagines anything but gruel as poisonous to health and, later, fears a light sprinkling of snow an occasion for being snowbound. Frank Churchill's quick excursion for a "haircut" is quite obviously beyond the limits of realistic constraint. It is surely only an Austenian extreme that brings the novel to its moral crisis on Box Hill, when in two lines Emma wittily and woundingly acts out her impatience with the garrulous Miss Bates. Yet Box Hill is unmistakably marked as extreme: the chapter devoted to it ends with Emma in tears. It is the only time



that Emma cries, and, indeed, the tears are shocking in their suddenness; they throw into relief Emma's wonderful difference from usual sentimental heroines. She is no weepy, romantic, pining heroine, and her relation to all others in the novel—even as she almost parodies the sentimental novel in her labor at matchmaking—is so knowing, so superior, so supremely confident that tears mark, with the geographical heights, the emotional extreme of her career, the vulnerability she has persistently resisted. The narrator allows the extremity in a phrase that seems almost a throwaway, that even in announcing the strangeness almost refuses to acknowledge the tears' significance. "Emma felt the tears running down her cheeks almost all the way home, without being at any trouble to check them, extraordinary as they were" (III.vii, 341).

11. The significance is, finally, in the descent that follows, the retreat to the real to which they lead. The tears are provoked, of course, by Knightley's just reprimand of Emma for being "so unfeeling to Miss Bates. How could you be so unfeeling," he asks, "to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible" (III.vii, 339). Although throughout the novel, Emma had been almost unpleasantly severe in her impatience with Miss Bates, she had always publicly restrained her dislike, and for precisely the reasons Knightley offers in his reprimand. It seems "impossible" that Emma would so overstep herself, so violate the order of Highbury behavior. Yet in the artificial intensity of Frank Churchill's reaction to his arguments with Jane Fairfax that the novel to then has only hinted at for alert readers, Emma lapses from her characteristic social attentiveness and indulges her own wit and the pleasures of the flattery. Emma's tears in response to her "impossible" behavior are private, although Harriet, herself "not in spirits," accompanies Emma on the ride down from the hill. It is in fact because she has no time to redeem herself on Box Hill, to become social and connected once again (with Mr. Knightley, primarily, of course), that the tears come.
12. Emma's response to the privacy and separateness of the extremes of Box Hill is immediately social and self-disciplinary, for the next chapter opens with her "pleasure" in attending to the comforts of her father: "As a daughter, she hoped, she was not without a heart. She hoped no one could have said to her, 'How could you be so unfeeling to your father?' [. . .]" (III.viii, 341). Her selflessness is read as public; it matters enormously how she is judged. And the morning after, she moves to redeem herself directly by an apologetic visit to Miss Bates: "she would not be ashamed of the appearance of the penitence, so justly and truly hers." Once again, repentance is read as public and social. She takes pleasure, for the first time, in hearing: "the ladies were all at home! She had never rejoiced at the sound before, nor ever before entered the passage, nor walked up the stairs with any wish of giving pleasure, but in conferring obligation, or of deriving it, except in subsequent ridicule" (III.viii, 342). The crisis of Box Hill has made an irrevocable change, and Emma's *Bildung* is almost complete.
13. But of course, nothing in Emma is as uncomplicated as it might look. Yes, Emma is deeply repentant, and yes, she is angry with herself. She asks herself, as she drives away from Box Hill, "how could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates." But she also asks herself, "how could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued!" (III.vii, 340). The public drama of sin and repentance, of excess and self-discipline, is the secret drama of Knightley and Emma's love for each other. Knightley's appropriate reprimand is in fact driven by his jealousy of Churchill's gross flirtation with Emma; Emma's repentance may have more to do with the loss of Knightley's regard than with concern for Miss Bates. The tears mark Emma's entrance into the role of romantic heroine as well as her developing renunciation of her own self-love. The repression of imaginist energies is clearly an internalization of the values of Knightley himself. Emma, in her growth to maturity, within the *Bildung* pattern, achieves the freedom of renouncing the recklessness of her imagination and the satisfactions of self for the constraints of the Knightleyan social ideal. The novel makes the inevitable realist move to social compromise. The two narratives, the unspoken romance and the taming of the *Bildung* heroine, play out together.

14. Yet the novel and the drama of Box Hill are infinitely more interesting and complicated than the Bildung schema, itself interesting enough, might suggest. The "extremity" of Box Hill is played out not only in Emma's unkindness to Miss Bates and her single lapse into tears, but in the dance of possible meanings and misunderstandings that mark almost every line of dialogue. No character fully understands what is happening, and as readers, constrained as we are by Emma's own perspective, we can only guess. The strange "separateness" of the couples on the hill is played out in the way the scene is narrated. Frank, though he seems to know that Emma does not love him, has misunderstood Emma's sense of their relationship; Emma takes the flirtation seriously enough but is preparing for a match between Harriet and Frank; she has no idea of Frank's relationship with Jane and certainly no notion that Frank behaves as he does because of that relationship; Knightley is jealous of Frank's flirtation but, as ever, turns that jealousy into more general moral judgment, both of Frank and of Emma; Mr. Weston blindly and genially plays into Frank's flattery of Emma, assuming of course that Frank's flirtation is serious and hoping that Frank will in the end marry Emma. Frank's comments about the Eltons are only fully intelligible when the history of his relations to Jane are spelled out in later chapters. It is not easy to read what is a rather angry and nasty attack on Jane in his contemptuous dismissal of the way in which the Eltons met, briefly, at Bath: "as to any real knowledge of a person's disposition that Bath, or any public place, can give—it is all nothing; there can be no knowledge. [. . .] How many a man has committed himself on a short acquaintance, and rued it all the rest of his life!" (III.vii, 337). Frank's meeting of Jane at Weymouth is the retrospectively obvious allusion here, but as the chapter unfolds, the reader can only guess, or accept the comment at face value. Virtually all the language of the Box Hill section grows in the light of later information the book supplies. So while the scene seems self-contained and fits splendidly into the Bildung pattern, it is constantly suggesting other possibilities, possibilities that only the shrewdest readers might guess on their first time through the book.
15. All the worst of the events on Box Hill begin when Frank tries to liven the party by asserting that "I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking about" (III.vii, 334). Knowing what everyone is thinking is in fact the dominant problem of the book, at least Emma's problem, for Emma consistently gets it wrong. Frank's outdoor parlor game pushes beyond the limits both of the restrained narration of *Emma* and of possibility. It is nevertheless the case that the narrative would have changed significantly if everyone had in fact volunteered his thoughts. Yet Knightley, appropriately cuttingly, inquires: "Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are all thinking of?" While Emma knows that many in the company are thinking hostile thoughts, she does not know what Knightley, Harriet, Frank, or Jane are thinking: knowing that would change the nature of the narrative, and hasten the denouement. Yet, when the ground shifts to asking everyone to say something entertaining (or dull), Emma in fact sins precisely by saying what she thinks but shouldn't say: her hostility to Miss Bates' verbosity and tedium burst out. So the Box Hill episode, raising the question not only of whether one can know what others are thinking, but whether it is a good idea always to say what you think, threatens to complicate once more the overt commitment of the book and of the protagonists to the supreme value of openness. Being social, being kind, being generous is often incompatible with full knowledge.
16. The reader leaves Box Hill, like Emma, with very incomplete and even contradictory knowledge. Yet, in the end, the novel resists its own multiplicities and instabilities. If we can read Knightley's chastisements in more than their literal sense, understanding how the firm moral judgments are directed by personal interest, and if in the end we need to agree with the narrator, who tells us that it is impossible ever to tell the whole truth undistorted, it is difficult to disagree with Knightley and Emma's revulsion from deception, indirectness, and with their urgent satisfactions in openness. The drama of Box Hill emphasizes the risks of deception and incomplete knowledge, the inevitability of mixed motives, the dangers of undisciplined openness. And precisely because the world is so obviously a web of uncertainties, doubleness, contradictions, and multiplicity of meanings, the urgency of the Knightley ideal carries its weight.

17. And so by various strategies of confirmation of guesses and plot resolutions Austen moves her narrative toward a confident sense of what might count as true and good without requiring the narrator to claim omniscience. There is just the slightest touch of clumsiness to the primary device Austen uses to settle things—Frank Churchill's extensive, explanatory letter—but the clumsiness, so utterly unusual in Austen's work, is a sign of the difficulties and of the seriousness of what's at stake. Frank's letter to Mrs. Weston, which the novel gives in full, accounts for what turns out to have been Frank's deliberately misleading behavior. The attentive reader will have figured most of this out: the frequent visits to the Bates, the coincidence of Frank's visiting his father with the return of Jane Fairfax to Highbury, the explanation of Frank's bad behavior at the outing at Donwell Abbey by the fact of an angry encounter with Jane on her way down from the party, the flirting with Emma.
18. Of course, Frank, too, even in the letter designed to clarify, has some things wrong—in particular, his notion that Emma had some inkling of what was going on between Frank and Jane. But what matters is that the evidence is in: Knightley, for all his prejudice, turns out to be right. The letter itself, in its self-exculpation, good enough for Mr. Weston and perhaps also for Mrs. Weston, is hardly good enough for the reader, who should by now have internalized the lessons of Knightley and the final judgments of Emma. Frank's commitment to secrecy and fear of losing Mrs. Churchill's support have led him to a kind of cowardice that only a clever letter can in part disguise. The novel and Emma are certainly right: Mr. Knightley is by far the better man. Austen's characteristic perfunctory way of concluding the "romance" of the novel, with language that offers itself as cliché, or something close to cliché, may suggest some unease with the authority she allows the narrative to take over the extraordinary dramatic complications of the realist crisis, but it also suggest her novel's final refusal to acquiesce in the confusions and obscurities it has so brilliantly dramatized on Box Hill.

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# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

## Unanswerable Gallantry and Thick-Headed Nonsense: Rereading Box Hill

Michael Gamer, University of Pennsylvania

1. As Marilyn Butler and Claudia Johnson have noted, reading *Emma* is very different from rereading it. It is a difference, moreover, celebrated in a majority of critical treatments of the novel, whether as a proof of Austen's artistry or as a starting point for exploring her politics. Austen's technical mastery, Johnson argues, lies in her ability to make "Emma's misapprehensions seem utterly plausible when we read the novel for the first time" (133). Our pleasure in rereading *Emma*, then, comes in part from noting our own previous misreadings, with their tendency to ignore, like Emma, important details as superfluous because they happen to contradict existing hypotheses. For Butler, "*Emma* is the greatest novel of the period" because "every movement of thought finds its verbal equivalent in a nuance of speech" (250); or, put another way, she finds every speech both nuanced *and* interpretable. A first reading of *Emma*, then, provides us with the pleasure of speculating with Emma upon characters' intentions from their speech and actions, and of beginning to understand how Emma's own desires obscure her ability to read, as Knightley puts it, with "impartial [. . .] judgment" (III.xv, 404). Given *Emma*'s denouement—which pledges for Emma the end of "disguise, equivocation, mystery, so hateful to her" and the beginning of "full and perfect confidence which her disposition was most ready to welcome as a duty" (III.xviii, 432)—we might expect our rereadings of the novel to supplement the prior pleasures of first- and second-guessing with the informed hindsight of close reading. Yet what I find emerging from my own (multiple) rereadings of *Emma*—and particularly the Box Hill Episode—is the growing conviction that few or none of the lessons learned in the course of the text provide access to the unobstructed reading that *Emma* ultimately promises.
2. In focusing, like my fellow contributors, primarily on the Box Hill Episode of *Emma* (volume 3, chapter 7), part of my aim is simply to show its complexity of signification, particularly the degree to which Austen frustrates even the most fundamental acts of interpretation and upsets rudimentary correspondences between signifiers and apparent signifieds. If Nicola Watson and others are correct in charting in *Emma* a drive towards "transparency" (103), Box Hill undermines this notion by rambunctiously celebrating what various characters in *Emma* call "nonsense"—the very enigmas, disguises, and equivocations supposedly rejected at its closure. With this celebration *Emma* ceases to be a novel about disciplining a heroine into right reading, and instead becomes one intent upon exposing the possibility of autonomous right reading as a fantasy. This is not to say that *Emma* does not put forward various interpretive keys before Box Hill, but rather that those provided do not allow Emma (or *Emma*'s rereaders) to understand fully what occurs there. I call attention to Butler's phrase ("verbal equivalent"), then, because it so nicely describes the ideal of verbal uprightness that *Emma* by its end claims to provide; and in this sense, Box Hill does function as the ideal's nightmarish opposite. But as Johnson has argued persuasively, Austen often raises such polemical antitheses—here opposing verbal transparency to verbal play and obfuscation—"in an exploratory and interrogative, rather than hortatory and prescriptive, manner" (xxi). I would like to trace a few of the strategies of reading Austen explored in *Emma*'s earlier chapters before bringing them to bear on Box Hill and its aftermath.
3. The majority of Austen's commentators—among them Butler (1975), Janet Todd (1980), Mary Poovey (1984), Johnson (1988, 1993), Adela Pinch (1996), Lisa Moore (1997), and Deirdre Lynch (1998)—have found her assumptions concerning the relation between speech and thought to arise out of her interest in, and suspicion of, a body of assumptions loosely grouped under the heading of "sensibility." With its roots in Lockean subjectivity and Enlightenment theories of emotion, sensibility usually

structures social interaction and the acts of reading that come with it into an exterior-interior binary, where speech and physical signifiers like tone of voice, sighing, or physical unsteadiness promise to represent interior emotional states and, as Butler puts it, "every movement of thought." Sentimental fiction's obsession with involuntary bodily responses lies in its core assumption that human speech and countenances are reliably readable and that strong emotions produce physiological symptoms (like blushing and weeping) that cannot be counterfeited convincingly. Much of its drama therefore lies in the detection and performance of emotion and in the suspense of when and how feeling will betray or display itself.

4. Within the early chapters of *Emma*, Austen characterizes John Knightley and Harriet Smith as initially transparent characters along these lines. In John Knightley's case, much of the tension of *Emma*'s eleventh and twelfth chapters stems from the threat of his temper—that at some point during his visit to Hartfield he will become so irritated with Mr. Woodhouse as to lose patience and speak his feelings directly. Emma's primary social function in these chapters is as a sentimental reader whose job is to monitor John Knightley's speech for signs of vexation and, whenever possible, assuage these feelings or deflect conversation away from the source of their irritation. Harriet Smith, on the other hand, presents an equally readable female counterpart, although in this case Harriet's readability in the first half of the novel comes less from the strength of her feelings than from her total transparency. When Emma speaks with Harriet regarding Robert Martin, for example, Austen finds in it an opportunity to appropriate a foundational scene of sentimental fiction—that moment where an exterior (bodily and verbal) surface loses its ambiguity, becomes entirely readable, and betrays its depths of feeling:

[Harriet and Robert Martin] remained but a few minutes together, as Miss Woodhouse must not be kept waiting; and Harriet then came running to her with a smiling face, and in a flutter of spirits, which Miss Woodhouse hoped very soon to compose. [. . .]

"Only think of our happening to meet him! How very odd. It was quite a chance, he said, that he had not gone round by Randalls. He did not think we ever walked this road. He has not been able to get the Romance of the Forest yet. He was so busy the last time he was at Kingston that he quite forgot it, but he goes again tomorrow. So very odd we should happen to meet! Well, Miss Woodhouse, is he like what you expected? What do you think of him? Do you think him so very plain?" (I.iv, 27-28)

Harriet's smiling face and running flutter of spirits here work in sync with the flutter of her speech, and Emma immediately interprets both as external semblances of a corresponding internal state—i.e., the beginnings of first love. Emma's response that Robert Martin "is very plain, undoubtedly—remarkably plain [. . .] so very clownish, so totally without air," is designed to do more than "compose" Harriet out of this state of excitement. When Harriet responds, as Emma anticipates, "in a mortified voice" that "To be sure [. . .] he is not so genteel as real gentlemen" (I.iv, 28), Emma assesses Harriet's new state of feeling and proceeds to compare Robert Martin unfavorably to the other gentlemen of the neighborhood until Harriet can only agree "rather solemnly" to the truth of Emma's comparisons. As in the case of her successful regulation of John Knightley's temper, Emma's ability to persuade Harriet to refuse Robert Martin's eventual proposal stems less from her own skills at manipulating the language of feeling than from John Knightley's and Harriet Smith's openness of countenance and readability of speech.

5. As Emma's subsequent misreadings demonstrate, however, part of Austen's project is to make the limitations of such sentimental reading clear from the outset. During these scenes, after all, Emma often must misrepresent her actual opinions—she respects Robert Martin far more than she says, for example—and suppress her own feelings of the moment. While characters like Miss Bates, Mr. Woodhouse, John Knightley, and Harriet Smith provide instances of easy readability in *Emma*, the bulk

of its other characters are skilled at *not* providing verbal equivalences for every nuance of thought. These characters instead wield sentimental signifiers as elements of social performance or for social gain, and their activity renders them at best only imperfectly readable and at times downright puzzling. Mr. Elton might sigh like a sentimental man in love, but, as Emma discovers angrily, there is little way to ascertain his sigh's object. And even when Elton surprises Emma with his unlooked-for proposal of marriage—"declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping—fearing—adoring—ready to die if she refused him" (I.xv, 117)—she still doubts the authenticity of his feelings. Elton's own anger at her subsequent refusal arises from his belief that he has "marked" his feelings in acceptable verbal form and that she therefore has tacitly encouraged them. Emma's disbelieving silence at this claim, furthermore, provides Elton with a second opportunity to engage in further sentimental misreading: "Allow me to interpret this interesting silence. It confesses that you have long understood me" (I.xv, 119).

6. My point here is that, for all its limitations and for all of the repeated critique and satire directed at it by Austen, sensibility remains a dominant mode of reading in *Emma*. Even after Emma ruminates on her misinterpretations of Elton's behavior, she still allows sensibility's assumptions concerning interiority and exteriority to structure her thinking:

The picture! How eager he had been about the picture! And the charade! And a hundred other circumstances; how clearly they had seemed to point at Harriet! To be sure, the charade, with its "ready wit"—but then, the "soft eyes"—in fact it suited neither; it was a jumble without taste or truth. Who could have seen through such thick-headed nonsense? (I.xvi, 121-122)

Rather than rejecting the belief that Elton's countenance and speech are interpretable, Emma concludes that his "thick-headed nonsense" stems from his being inarticulate in the language of feeling, an interior deficiency that in turn renders his words and actions "a jumble without taste or truth."

7. Satirized yet not abandoned, sentimental misreadings in *Emma* differ in their causes from those produced by Catherine Moreland in *Northanger Abbey*. While Catherine's quixotic errors at Northanger stem from her misapplication of gothic fiction to reality, Emma's stem from her belief in her own powers of analysis and, by extension, her faith in the assumptions that govern her reading. In the chapter that follows Elton's proposal, Emma searches for other analytical tools to supplement her analysis of Elton's actions, and the critical approach that she ultimately adopts is the one previously recommended to her by Knightley—class:

She thought nothing of his attachment, and was insulted by his hopes. He wanted to marry well, and having the arrogance to raise his eyes to her, pretended to be in love [. . .] Sighs and fine words had been given in abundance; but she could hardly devise any set of expressions, or fancy any tone of voice, less allied with real love. She need not trouble herself to pity him. He only wanted to aggrandize and enrich himself; and if Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty thousand pounds, were not quite so easily obtained as he had fancied, he would soon try for Miss Somebody else with twenty, or with ten. (I.xvi, 122-23)

On a first reading, one might suspect the above passage to be another instance in Emma's mistaken judgment were it not for the fact that, half a dozen chapters later, we find that Mr. Elton has engaged himself to a Miss Hawkins of some ten thousand pounds. In my own rereadings of *Emma* for this issue of the *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, in fact, I have been most surprised by the relentless nature of Emma's class analysis—both the frequency and accuracy with which she employs it. Such arguments dominate her reasoning with regard to Robert Martin ("The yeomanry are precisely the order of people

with whom I feel I can have nothing to do" [I.iv, 25]), Mr. Elton ("he must know that in fortune and consequence she was greatly his superior" [I.xvi, 123]), the Coles ("they were of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel" [II.vii, 186]), Mrs. Elton ("A little upstart, vulgar being, with [. . .] her airs of pert pretension and underbred finery" [II.xiv, 250]), and even the feared marriage Harriet and Mr. Knightley ("It was a union to distance every wonder of the kind. [. . .] Such an elevation on her side! Such a debasement on his!" [III.xi, 375]). Perhaps more surprising still is that Emma's class consciousness, while famously bordering on a kind of snobbery early in the novel, is never incorrect in the foundations of its reasoning. Her only real piece of mistaken romanticizing, in fact—her estimation of Harriet—comes because she ignores Harriet's class position and its discrepancy with her own. And in this case, Mr. Knightley correctively provides what can only be called the "facts" of Harriet's social status ("She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations. She is known only as parlour boarder at a common school" [I.viii, 54-55]).

8. Knightley's reading, furthermore, is supported by Emma's own inconsistent behavior on the subject. Willing to ignore the difference in status between Harriet and Mr. Elton, Emma is perfectly able to comprehend the similar distance that lies between Elton and herself and to think his presumption in proposing to her offensive. Even in the case of Harriet, Emma by the end of the novel adopts Knightley's more "impartial" views:

Oh! had she never brought Harriet forward! Had she left her where she ought, and where he had told her she ought!—Had she not [. . .] prevented her marrying the unexceptionable young man who would have made her happy and respectable in the line of life to which she ought to belong [. . .] (III.xi, 375)

By the end of *Emma*, class reading emerges as a reliable anchor to sentimental reading, one that secures signifiers of feeling to their correct signifieds and allows Emma to make sense of Mr. Elton's effusions, Mrs. Elton's aggressiveness, Miss Bates's agreeableness, Jane Fairfax's reservedness, and even Mr. Knightley's watchful benevolence.

9. While sentimental and class reading constitute the two dominant modes of analysis throughout the novel, they meet their match at Box Hill. Or, put another way, neither mode provides Emma or *Emma's* readers with any kind of foothold or defense for what happens there. On Box Hill class does not even enter into consciousness until Mr. Knightley's closing reprimand of Emma as the excursion is ending; and to read the day's various conversations as sentimental representations of interior emotional states is to confront a series of linguistic surfaces without corresponding depths, where even apparent depths of feeling actually veil unknown motives, resentments, and agendas. What other Austen commentators have called the epistemological failure of *Emma's* ending—with Frank Churchill's letter of explanation not even beginning to explain what really has gone on in the novel and why—begins in earnest at Box Hill. For the remainder of this short essay, then, I would like to demonstrate how the episode celebrates the kinds of "disguise" and "mystery" Emma is taught to hate.
10. As if to set up what follows, volume 3, chapter 7 of *Emma* opens with a series of statements about appearances and realities at odds with one another: the day is "very fine [. . .] and all the other outward circumstances [. . .] in favour of a pleasant party," yet over it presides "a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union, which could not be got over" (III.vii, 331-332). In spite of Mr. Weston's competent hosting and general conviviality, the party soon splits off into groups that Austen presents as seemingly accidental yet "never materially var[ying]": "The Eltons walked together; Mr. Knightley took charge of Miss Bates and Jane; and Emma and Harriet belonged to Frank Churchill" (III.vii, 332). Given the oppositional logic of the chapter's opening statements, Austen invites her readers to interpret the group's divisions according to the same logic as the chapter's opening sentences. While appearing to be

one party, the group is "really" at odds with itself, and the resulting divisions formed are tacit, unvarying, and natural. Such reasoning also agrees with the chapter's representations of the spirits of Frank Churchill and Emma. Frank Churchill for the first part of the day is "silent and stupid," but when sitting down he becomes "talkative and gay" (332). Emma, similarly, is not "gay and thoughtless from any real felicity [. . .] [but] rather because she felt less happy than she had expected" (III.vii, 333).

11. Yet we only need look back at the party's groupings themselves to realize that they are not the underlying realities that they pretend to be. The Eltons walking together might strike us as possibly correct, yet the other groupings correspond neither to the novel's final allegiances nor those operating at the time of Box Hill. And when we consider the groupings themselves as signifying some buried reality we find further inconsistencies, for each group forms according to different rationales: the Eltons pair up in spite of their usual desire to be the center of all social intercourse; Mr. Knightley joins Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax out of a sense of social duty and pleasure in Jane's company; Harriet and Emma pair up out of either habit or friendship; and Frank Churchill, whether from his attraction to Emma, his pleasure in satisfying his own vanity, his desire to conceal his engagement to Jane, or his desire to inflict pain upon Jane, joins Emma and Harriet. Needless to say, the party divides for reasons neither natural nor coherent despite Austen's presentation of the divisions as such.
12. A similar slipperiness informs Emma's and Frank Churchill's flirting, which Emma assumes to signify nothing yet expects will be misinterpreted:

[His attentions] now, in her estimation, meant nothing, though in the judgment of most people looking on, it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could very well describe. "Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively." They were laying themselves open to that very phrase [. . .] (III.vii, 332-333)

Far from meaning nothing, their flirting proves one of the unknowable puzzles of *Emma*, anticipating the unsatisfactory excuses of Frank Churchill's own letter at the end of the novel. Churchill's flirting with Emma may deflect suspicion from his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax, but it also (apparently) gratuitously and intentionally wounds Jane. And while this reading would appear to be further supported by Churchill's well-aimed request that Emma find a wife for him, and his disparaging comments about the "ill-luck" of "weak, irresolute characters" who have "committed [them]sel[ves] on short acquaintance," the Frank-Jane relationship also remains the one element of the novel that always remains unavailable to *Emma*'s omniscient narrator (III.vii, 337). To borrow Emma's prophetic statement, "[Frank's] gallantry is really unanswerable" (III.vii, 333), and in the aftermath of Box Hill no account surfaces that can explain fully his motives or his part in the flirtation.

13. If no satisfactory cause ever emerges for Frank's behavior, even less of one is provided for Emma's. Austen might gesture early in the chapter to her enjoyment of flattery, but the explanation makes little sense given the assiduity with which Emma usually attends to appearances. Even more striking (and unexplainable) is Emma's lack of consideration for Harriet. Having spent the bulk of the novel scheming to marry Harriet to one of the eligible young men around her—and having for the last four chapters conspired to throw Frank Churchill and Harriet together—Emma's behavior at Box Hill fundamentally does not make sense, whether from a matchmaking or a sororial point of view. One wonders what Emma, having become convinced (mistakenly) of Harriet's affection for Frank Churchill only three chapters before, can be thinking while flirting "excessively" directly in front of her. We might discover later with Emma that Harriet is oblivious to the affront because she has set her sights on Knightley, but the fact remains that Emma believes Harriet to be in love with Frank. In this light, it is difficult not to believe Emma cognizant of her own behavior, and therefore to be acting with an intention to hurt Harriet similar to Frank Churchill's apparent desire to hurt Jane. The scene becomes almost laughably complex when, in rereading, we find that Emma, while not affronting Harriet, has



been unknowingly wounding Jane and Knightley. We are left with a situation in which, simply put, Emma and Frank affect an unknown portion of the party in unknown ways by acting nonsensically for unknown (or unascertainable) reasons.

14. Austen, moreover, revels in this tangle of signification by further dwelling upon the situation Emma and Frank have brought into being. When Emma notes in a whisper to Frank that they have been "talking nonsense for the entertainment of seven silent people" (III.vii, 334), the combination of their own noise and their audience's silence suggests that the scene has become at least "unanswerable" if not unreadable. Rather than endeavoring to correct this situation, Frank instead responds with a further piece of "nonsense" that obfuscates things still further. By stating that "Miss Woodhouse [. . .] desires to know what you are all thinking," he attributes to Emma something that she does not desire; by first whispering to Emma that "any nonsense will serve" and then asking this question, he makes it unclear to Emma and to us whether he even wishes to know its answer (III.vii, 334). Knightley's response, "Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are all thinking of?" (III.vii, 334), immediately calls attention to fallacious nature of the question by suggesting that it has not been asked out of a genuine desire to know the answer. Emma's nervous retraction and Frank's revised request that each member of the party say "something very entertaining" reiterates that conversation at Box Hill is without foundation. It is at this crucial moment—when language ostentatiously has lost its signifying status and become pure verbal play—that Emma, with "mock ceremony of manner," publicly humiliates Miss Bates by calling attention to her dullness. As if to seal this irony, Mr. Weston follows Emma's own remark with his conundrum, and it is no accident, at the moment in the text when Emma has fallen furthest from moral rectitude, that no one in the party can answer Mrs. Weston regarding which two letters ("M. A.," i.e., "Emma") spell perfection. Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax in vain attempt pointed comments that only their respective targets (Emma and Frank) will understand, but it is unclear whether they are heeded or even understood.
15. In my own ruminations on how signification works at Box Hill, I find myself most often reminded of similar patterns that occur in Ann Radcliffe's fiction. There, character motivation and psychology are structured by sentimental assumptions even while the fiction itself systematically frustrates them through its dizzying labyrinths, sublime landscapes, mysterious portents, and unreadable villains. Reading a novel like *The Italian*, we become aware quite early on that, like Vivaldi and Ellena, we simply do not know what really is happening. With rereading, we find that one of the surprising pleasures of Radcliffe's fiction is not that of having our uncertainties explained but rather confirmed and expanded. Feeling this way, Radcliffe's early reviewers often noted the degree to which her fiction depended upon misdirecting readers and exciting them by tricks and coincidences. Yet by the time they arrived at *The Romance of the Forest* and the works that followed it, they came up against settings mired in the same kinds of linguistic ambiguity, disguise, and mystery that rule in a more mundane way at Box Hill. Given the central role that Radcliffe's fiction plays in *Northanger Abbey*, it does not surprise me that one of the first books that Emma hands the impressionable Harriet is *The Romance of the Forest*. Given the celebration of conundrum and unreadability that occurs at Box Hill, it surprises me even less that *The Romance of the Forest* ends up having little or no significance in *Emma*. It is exactly this kind of detail—potentially significant but actually signifying differently, if at all—that presides over Box Hill and gives both the episode and *Emma* an opacity that does *not* become less opaque or more deliciously ironic on subsequent readings.
16. I dub Box Hill one of the scenes in which Austen pays most powerful homage to Radcliffe, then, because of this pleasure she takes in providing surfaces that point to corresponding depths, only to expose those apparent depths as surfaces that are never fully known or explained. *Emma*'s final chapters may expose the "real" alliances that have driven the episode and that constitute *Emma*'s ending, but they cannot account for Frank Churchill's behavior or describe Jane Fairfax's feelings, let alone explain Emma's loathing of Jane or her reasons for attacking Miss Bates. Even Knightley's

attempt to close the episode by chastizing Emma leaves fundamental questions unanswered, such as whether Emma should support Miss Bates because she has fallen from her former stature (i.e., has become an object of sympathy) or because she remains, however tenuously, of the same class (i.e., is a person whose fall matters). Knightley's attempt to reduce the episode to class, moreover, occurs at the end of a chapter until then surprisingly free of such awareness; and class analysis, so useful in previous chapters, does not even begin to provide insight into how people behave at Box Hill. It neither answers why the parties divide as they do nor explains why they converse with such strain. I am left as well with a similar impression of *Emma's* ending, and (at least with this rereading of it) find the promise of perfect communication between Emma and Knightley too at odds with the kinds of misreading and disguise Austen celebrates elsewhere. The spectacular failure of Frank Churchill's final letter to explain his actions strikes me as a kind of corroborating testimony for the novel's unwillingness to bring its multiple strains together. I find myself, therefore, believing less in the deep interiority of *Emma's* characters—an interiority that would defy surface—than in Austen's belief in a social density that is unsortable, unexplainable, and therefore unanswerable to any discursive formation.

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# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

## Social Theory at Box Hill: Acts of Union

Deidre Lynch, State University of New York, Buffalo

1. The plan to journey to Box Hill originates—but not in a straightforward way—in one of those moments of unanimity that seem to define the common course of Highbury days. The choice of Box Hill as a destination for an exploring party is initially Mrs. Elton's. The scheme is tailor made for showing off the famous barouche-landau, although Mrs. Elton in fact continues to adhere to it even after the Sucklings, the barouche-landau's famous owners, have canceled their visit. Soon after, Emma takes up the idea and with Mr. Weston begins the preliminary arrangements for a second excursion, only to see "her" party quickly joined to the Eltons'—an act of union that comes about as the predictable result of Mr. Weston's incorrigible propensity for "general friendship" (III.ii, 287).
2. I am interested in how the numbers involved in the famous exploring party wane and wax: the vicissitudes of the two guest lists in question seem yet another example of how often the definitions of perfect happiness that *Emma* tenders hinge on judgments about how many people are to be included in our "circle," or "party," or "special set." Is the pleasure of a Christmas dinner at Randalls diminished by the loss of Harriet, confined to bed by a sore throat? To Emma's dismay, Mr. Elton thinks not: "it will be a small party, but where small parties are select, they are perhaps the most agreeable of any. [. . .] for my part, I would rather [. . .] fall short by two than exceed by two" (I.xiii, 105). Alternatively, is it the case that, as Mr. Weston claims, "One cannot have too large a party" (III.vi, 319)? I am also interested in the ways in which this question—how many?—is recast by the two words that Austen's narrator uses when she explains to us that Emma in proposing to go to Box Hill does not see herself as following the lead of the vicarage party in particular (far from it), but instead characterizes her scheme as a matter of joining a much larger, and indeed potentially innumerable crowd. When the narrator gestures toward what we might call a "national canon" of tourist attractions, she salvages at least the semblance of universal agreement from the fractiousness and faction that have hitherto characterized the arrangements for the journey: Emma wishes, the narrator informs us, "to see what *every body* found so worth seeing" (III.vi, 318, my emphasis).
3. While signaling to the reader the fact that "every body" encompasses various degrees of numerousness, while signaling, that is, the fact that there are crowds Emma will join and crowds she won't, that passage likewise indexes Austen's participation in a project of social theory that had preoccupied the moralists of the previous century. *Emma* continues the eighteenth century's discussions of sympathy and social cohesion. And the power of this novel lies in large part, I shall propose, with how Austen, in the Box Hill episode especially, takes up the question of whether the unanimity (the "perfect agreement" or "understanding") which "every body" can flag is a quality that might also characterize interpersonal relations more geographically dispersed, more pressured by the dislocations of modernity, than those of the Highburians: the question, for instance, of whether novel readers might through their sympathetic fellow feeling form a nation.
4. For many readers, *Emma*, more than any other novel Austen wrote, has seemed to exemplify Mary Russell Mitford's canon-making account in *Our Village* (1824) of the feelings of insidership that are fostered by Austen's choice of a "confined locality." Mitford opens her book by reminding us of the books that we have already read, Austen's first and foremost:

Of all situations for a constant residence, that which appears to me most delightful is a

little village far in the country; a small neighbourhood [. . .] with inhabitants whose faces are as familiar to us as the flowers in our garden. [. . .] Even in books I like a confined locality; and so do the critics when they talk of the unities. [. . .] [N]othing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen's delicious novels, quite sure before we leave it to become intimate with every spot and every person it contains (3-4).

Informing this celebration of the parochial is that peculiar product of the Romantic era, a rhetoric of English nationhood that attempts to dissociate national feeling from precisely the widened circle of sympathy with which we might otherwise associate one's love of one's country. To some extent, Mitford reinscribes a scheme propounded by the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, whose editors in 1797 at once condemned (as symptoms of a nefarious francophilia) their contemporaries' "liberal spirit of indifference, of diffused and comprehensive philanthropy," made a point of glorying in their own insular preference for "particular portions of the human race," and made it appear as if it were in England alone that such local attachments would be treated with the reverence they deserved (*Prospectus*, n.p.). A similar concept of a "local" nationhood would, in nineteenth-century Australia, inspire Captain Macanochie, governor of the Norfolk Island penal colony, to make the annotations of daily doings in the Home Counties supplied by *Our Village* required reading for the colony's inmate population: so "as to invest country and home with agreeable images and recollections [that] are too much wanting in the individual experience of our lower and criminal classes" (quoted in Trumpener, 257).

5. Of course, the Austen novel has often been subjected to comparable nationalizing readings. "Not long ago, a party of friends were sitting at luncheon in a suburb of London, when one of them happened to make some reference to Maple Grove and Selina, and to ask in what county of England Maple Grove was situated. Everybody had a theory" (v): in commencing in this manner, with an account of Janeite inside knowledge, Anne Thackeray Ritchie arranges to make her 1883 discussion of Austen do double duty. Ritchie is also providing a portrait of a scaled-down, domesticated England: Austen is invoked as the muse of English snugness. (And since a Frenchman has unluckily found himself a part of this party — unluckily, because he proves unable to contribute to its prandial small talk about *Emma* — the category of "every body" operates here in explicitly geopolitical ways.) And yet if *Emma* is snug in this manner, and if it is about what "every person" thinks and does in the way that Mary Mitford indicates, Austen is, all the same, highly self-conscious about how, within the Highburian context, *every body* can designate a very restricted circle of acquaintance. In order to secure that sense of cozy exclusivity that Mitford celebrates in her picture of a country neighborhood, somebodies of all descriptions have to be edited out. It would be fair to say that in *Emma* Austen proceeds by calling attention to such omissions, almost in a spirit of self-parody. The result is a novel that names more names than Austen's other works — but makes a habit, as in the Sucklings' case, of deferring indefinitely the moment when we get the faces to go with those names. *Emma* does not feel depopulated; it feels full of people. These are the extras who don't get speaking parts but whose presence still puts pressure on all definitions of community, exposing their partiality: such people as "the butcher with his tray, [the] tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket" whose doings entertain Emma as she stands by the door at Ford's (II.ix, 209-10); or "the ladies in the Irish car party" whom Miss Bates glimpses at Box Hill (III.vii, 338).
6. The undertone of archness that we hear whenever Austen gives voice to Highburian parochialism suggests one reason to hold off on seeing *Emma* as engaged in any straightforward way either with local solidarities or with that Anti-Jacobin, Burkean nationalism that would view the "little platoon" of the Highburians as synecdochical of England — of a nation that is more successful than other countries at eliciting patriot love precisely because it makes feelings fostered in such parochial spaces "the first link in the series" that leads to an attachment to the state. In fact, the very possibility of such a series is queried throughout the tradition of sentimentalist social theory that supplies me with my lens for

reading *Emma*.

7. This essay *will* arrive at Englishness in the end, but, as I hope to demonstrate, when we travel toward nationhood via Box Hill we pursue a more circuitous route than we might expect. The misunderstandings that occur at this beauty spot at the heart of the "garden of England" (II.xiv, 245) recall the scenarios that the earl of Shaftesbury, Samuel Johnson, and Adam Ferguson envisioned when they considered the distinctively modern vicissitudes of humanity's propensity to "assembl[e] in troops and companies" and "to follow the croud [sic]" (Ferguson, 9; 21). But the Box Hill episode also proposes an account of local attachments that refuses them the primordial, "natural" status that they have both in this philosophical tradition and in Edmund Burke's models of the loveable nation. (As I shall suggest shortly, Austen sees local attachments—intimate insidership—and national consciousness—fellow-feeling that is extended over a wider arena—as equally *un*-natural: indeed, as products of acts of the imagination, *both* lie within the jurisdiction of an imaginalist like Emma.) Thomas Reinert has written recently of how often eighteenth-century philosophy figures "the crowd" "as an agent of moral disorientation" (23). In my reading, the sentimentalist tradition that Reinert engages is, when worrying about the appropriate scale on which the units of human society should be constructed, also worrying about the fate not so much of moral action but of the affections and affect generally. In *Rambler* 99, Samuel Johnson outlines the fate that can befall the kinds of "universal amiability" and "general friendship" that, in *Emma*, are ascribed to Frank Churchill and his father: "if man were to feel no incentives to kindness, more than his general tendency to congenial nature, Babylon or London, with all their multitudes, would have to him the desolation of a wilderness; his affections, not compressed into a narrower compass would vanish like elemental fire in boundless evaporation." Eighteenth-century thinking both about urban crowds and about the modern, commercial, empire-building state is troubled by the prospect that fellow feeling may cease when its object is enlarged (so that, as in the example the Rambler gives, the fellowship fostered in a tête-à-tête is not so much recommended on its own merits, but is rather to be indulged as a prophylactic measure, because private friendship can prevent sympathetic feelings from flagging altogether). Sociability can be obstructed if it has too much material to work on. Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) argues strenuously that it is in the "little district" (61) only that fellow feeling comes naturally: "There is [. . .] a certain national extent, within which the passions of men are easily communicated from one, or a few, to the whole; and there are certain numbers of men who can be assembled, and act in a body" (123).
8. The modern commercial nation to which Ferguson belongs, as a British subject, a Highlander by birth but one born too late to claim to be the scion of an independent Scotland, in fact typifies a state in which the press of numbers and the extent of territory have begun to make the bonds of society inapprehensible. Ferguson is well aware of this. To avoid the charge of national disloyalty—to avoid being faulted for lack of feeling himself—he shifts the blame in his account of the internal colonialism that enabled this distended state to come into being: "When the kingdoms of Spain were united, when the great fiefs in France were annexed to the crown, it was no longer expedient for the nations of Great Britain to continue disjointed. [. . .] [I]n modern Europe, republics [of a limited extent] are like shrubs, under the shade of a taller wood, choked by the neighbourhood of more powerful states" (61). The other characteristic of the modernity Ferguson describes is ennui (the bane, famously, of life in Highbury, where exhausted spirits are always needing to be re-animated [169], and where, accordingly, the flimsiest pretexts are adopted to make the merit and prospects of a virtual stranger—think of Frank and Jane—"a kind of common concern" [14]). The more populous the state, the more it has implemented the division of labor that, according to Ferguson, underwrites its refinement and prosperity, the more difficult it is to keep the currents of passion travelling along the circuitry of society and the fewer opportunities we have to *take an interest* in others. (Note that the adjective in *Emma* that vies with "every" for preeminence is "interesting.") Such populous, commercial nations, Ferguson observes, "by leaving too little to agitate the spirits of men, bring on ages of languor if not decay" (208). Indifferent to one another, their citizens get bored quickly. And so they seek out stimulation.

9. In this reading of human history, the expansion of a social order is thus offset, repeatedly, by individuals' tendency first to separate into bands or sects, to affect a "distinction of name and community" (25), and then leave behind such divisions of society in their turn, so as to seek out the most minute subdivisions, where "the mind recognises its natural station" (207). The term that Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* uses to describe this process is "cantonising": "to *cantonise* is natural," Shaftesbury asserts, because people long to feel "the confederating charm" (quoted in Reinert, 19). "Every body" agrees the beauties of Box Hill are worth seeing, but when Emma and the Highbury contingent actually begin their sightseeing, *cantonising*, and not unanimity, is the order of the day. "Every body had a burst of admiration on first arriving; but in the general amount of the day there was deficiency. There was a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union, which could not be got over. They separated too much into parties" (III.vii, 332). Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, and Mr. Knightley stick together and keep their distance both from the Eltons and from Harriet, Frank Churchill, and Emma. (Mr. Weston, in the meantime, mobilizes his talents for general friendship in the vain attempt to get the three parties to mix.) These people speak and take pains to be agreeable only among their own confederates.
10. A "principle of separation" (*Emma* III.vii, 332) has been manifested before in the novel. Repeatedly little parties have become littler still. Midway through the novel, for instance, when the ladies withdraw at the end of the dinner that Hartfield is hosting in Mrs. Elton's honor, Emma finds "it hardly possible to prevent their making two distinct parties" (II.xvii, 269). But the Box Hill episode adds a new element to what has become a pattern. The manner in which civility is derailed there attests, to a degree, to the "confederating charm"—to how we can be seduced from good conduct by the pleasure of keeping company with those few persons to whom we are "always interesting and always intelligible" (I.xiv, 106), with confidants who appreciate our local information, know our secrets, and are known to us in turn. At the same time, however, the episode's depiction of insidership is counterpointed and recontextualized by its allusion to a much wider web of interconnections and interactions. Importantly, Austen also arranges for us to hear about the long-distance communication of feeling and about an epistolary network of national scope.
11. When the three parties all sit down for the obligatory "cold collation" Frank ostentatiously pays court to Emma. At this late date in their acquaintance, our heroine is certain that all his gallantry means nothing,

though in the judgement of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could very well describe. 'Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively.' They were laying themselves open to that very phrase—and to having it sent off in a letter to Maple Grove by one lady, to Ireland by another. (III.vii, 332-33)

The passage reveals Emma imagining herself out of her tête-à-tête with Frank, and conceiving of her doings as creating the interest that will stimulate other social circles. She adopts the unmoored outsider's point of view, that of a community of far-flung correspondents whose alliance is the product of an impersonal postal system. This is also the vantage point that is, in the novel, closely associated with Jane Fairfax, a figure whose history is shaped by imperialism—her father's position in the army, his death, her adoption by his military superior—more decisively than it is by a handful of neighbors in country village (see Stewart). And it seems to me just right that this transcript of Emma's thoughts should bring us up against the limits of England and Englishness—for a moment requiring us to step outside our linguistic idiom and imagine how Emma and Frank's conduct would be described in some other language. Indeed, the passage takes us to the remotest outposts of a nation assembled on the distended, imperial scale that Ferguson frets over when he considers Scotland's political assimilation into "Great Britain." The points of connection in this epistolary network seem all the more far-flung,

because the first time in the novel that we hear of Ireland—and of Jane Fairfax's choice to remain behind when the Campbells travel there— Miss Bates absent-mindedly conjures back into existence bygone geopolitical divides and thereby makes the Irish Sea an even more formidable barrier to fellowship. When she remarks on how natural it is that Mrs. Dixon should feel homesick three months into her marriage—especially so now that she and her family are "in different kingdoms"—Miss Bates at first forgets the Act of Union of 1801, which did to Ireland what had at the start of the eighteenth century been done to Scotland: "different kingdoms, I was going to say, but however different countries" (II.i, 141).

12. Emma's speculation about her fellow picnickers' postal activities represents yet another instance in which our heroine is vain enough to believe herself to be "in the secret of every one's feelings" (III.xii, 382). Emma is wrong, of course, about where Jane Fairfax directs her letters. She is wrong, too, to imagine she knows Frank's motives in this scene. But I want to propose that her confidence in her omniscience looks rather different when we recall the scheme that Benedict Anderson elaborated to discuss the imaginings that lead millions of people who will never meet to think of themselves as a collectivity (a scheme that, we should note, reworks the distinction between the intimate sphere and society as a whole theorized by a figure like Ferguson and proffers an arrangement whereby membership in an inclusive national community becomes—quite precisely—an intimate component of identity and the object of a personal passion). In the context delineated in Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Emma's conviction that she can empathically project herself into the place of others and think what they think is not so much misguided as mandated.
13. In fact, Emma has the kind of well-developed sense of simultaneity—the wherewithal with which to deliver "gloss[es] on the word 'meanwhile'" —that Anderson sees as crucial to the process of "creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (31; 40). *Imagined Communities*, we should recall, highlights the capacity of newspapers and novels, the new vernacular print commodities of the early modern period, to weave together otherwise disconnected bits of information into a unity that creates the impression of a "sociological organism moving through homogeneous, empty time" (31); presenting simultaneity, newspapers and novels supply readers with a prototype that prompt them to imagine the community in which they jointly participate every moment of every day, even though the identity of that community does not afford them the comforts of neighborly proximity. We might think here of the cameo Emma uses to entertain Harriet the evening after Mr. Elton rides to London to purchase a frame for Harriet's picture — a vignette that, extended, might serve as a chapter of that celebrated unwritten novel *Miss Harriet Smith*: "At this moment, perhaps, Mr. Elton is shewing your picture to his mother and sisters [. . .] and after being asked for it five or six times, allowing them to hear your name. [. . .] How cheerful, how animated, how suspicious, how busy their imaginations all are!" (I.vii, 50). We might think too of the conjectures (whose subject is, again, others' conjectures) that inform the remarks Emma makes to Jane following the arrival of the piano: "How much your friends in Ireland must be enjoying your pleasure on this occasion [. . .] I dare say they often think of you, and wonder which will be the day, the precise day of the instrument's coming to hand" (II.x, 217). (This way of bridging distances—imagining the thoughts that at a given instant might be filling the heads of absent friends, or, as in this case, of absent strangers—is one Highbury models frequently.) Despite exemplifying, as if in keeping with Mitford's program, a "constant residence" in a "confined locale," Emma knows something—as her creator does too—about the technical means for representing the imagined community that is the nation.
14. Austen seems to intuit, that is, that national consciousness depends on the same powers of divination—of telepathy (feeling across a distance)—that are at the root of Emma's blunders, the same that are in demand during the parlor games that so often engage her particular social set. Totalizing descriptions of what "the nation" or "society" does or believes (like sentences whose grammatical subject is "everybody") can seem to assume a transparency of mind to mind. "It is a familiar fact that we do not

know how the common purpose comes about in the great insect communities: possibly it is done by means of a direct psychical transference." Nicholas Royle's *Telepathy and Literature*, which applies this passage from Freud's "Dreams and Occultism" (107) to the great *national* communities, hints that the narrator of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* may be the world-champion candidate for the position of paradigmatic national subject. Saleem Sinai's radio-receiver brain, tuned in on the cerebral activity of all children born in the inaugural hour of India's nationhood, makes him a prodigy of fellow feeling. For most national subjects—even those who live together "in a little village far in a country," where, as Mitford writes (just before launching into her praise of Austen's settings), people are "close-packed and insulated like ants in an ant-hill or bees in a hive" (3)—the act of knowing the minds of one's compatriots is much more a matter of using one's imagination, much more of a guessing game.

15. The troubles at Box Hill are exacerbated when the party from Highbury start to play guessing games. More precisely, the troubles are exacerbated when the Highburians neglect the rules of such games: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse (who, wherever she is, presides) to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking of" (III.vii, 334). Frank's use of the imperative, his reinscription of hierarchy on an occasion when every body is supposed to be on an equal footing, are not at all conducive to conversation and the creation of social unity, though presumably these are the goals he is aiming at. The conundrum ("What two letters of the alphabet are there, that express perfection?") that Mr. Weston offers later on—though better attuned to the norms of game-playing—is only marginally more successful. Badly timed, Weston's riddling reference to "M. and A.—Em—ma" (III.vii, 336) ends up, as we know, serving only as an ironic gloss on our imperfect heroine's incivility to Miss Bates. Patricia Meyer Spacks writes of Emma's testy violation of manners in this episode as lying in the way that Emma talks "to Miss Bates as she might have spoken of her" (165). Paraphrasing, we might say that Emma rudely fails to recognize Miss Bates as some one included inside that category we so often have recourse to in polite conversation, the category of "present company." ("Present company excepted, of course.") The multiple failures of sympathy in the episode—and attendant failures of imaginative conjecture—suggest, in fact, much uncertainty about this category's boundaries. Emma must already be confident that she is among intimates (and accordingly must already be claiming clairvoyance) to fall in with Frank's design and to conjecture that it would be pleasant to hear the private thoughts of her companions. Mr. Weston must likewise be sure that there is a positive consensus on Emma among the picnickers in order to present his conundrum as a witty contribution to the afternoon's entertainment. His guessing game, that is, is necessarily founded on his best guess about "what [everybody] is thinking of": and his best guess isn't good enough.
16. There *are* moments in the novel when mutual understanding looks perfect—perfect enough to forego words. My favorite of these telepathic moments occurs just after Frank offends Jane as they and Harriet and Emma play at puzzling one another with the little Knightleys' box of letters. Miss Bates knows, before her niece speaks, that Jane requires rescuing: "Ay, very true, my dear, cried [Miss Bates], though Jane had not spoken a word—I was just going to say the same thing. It is time for us to be going indeed" (III.v, 315). But there is much to counterbalance this incident of reassuring simultaneity. There is, for a start, timed to coincide with the climax of the novel's matchmaking, the narrator's account of the blunders that always attend on our attempts to know one another's feelings. Calling attention to the fact that Emma can't ever come clean about why Harriet intrudes on her thoughts at the moment when Mr. Knightley proposes, the narrator states "Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken" (III.xiii, 391).
17. Yet even as she admits this, Austen makes community—in both the narrow circle of acquaintance we discover in Highbury and England at large—*depend* on human disclosure or, more precisely, on what approximates it. Rather than coming naturally, social affiliation depends (in the wishful, best-case scenario) on mind-reading or (less optimistically) on a guessing game. Either as near neighbors or as



compatriots, we cannot know one another's feelings—but we need to imagine that we can and we need to act as if we do. In emphasizing these tensions in *Emma*, and in emphasizing how the novel's dramas of insidership and outsidership produce a universe of strangely shrinking and extending proximities and separations, I have aimed to mark the distinctiveness of Austen's response to the idea of the "little district" elaborated in eighteenth-century social theory. Austen eschews a cut-and-dry opposition between the local and the long-distance. She blurs the boundaries between daily life and national life: in *Emma* "conjecturing" happens everywhere, and everywhere falls short of perfect accuracy.

18. I want to push this argument a step further still. *Emma* is testimony to the fact that when Austen confronted the eighteenth-century sociological narrative of the transition from small-scale to large-scale societies, she saw an occasion ripe for exploitation by a professional creator of fiction. If that transition made community something that needed to be imagined before it could be experienced, who better to prompt such imagining? Austen responds to the eighteenth-century moralists' story of diminishing opportunities for local intimacies by helping to re-invent the institution of national literature. Beginning in the nineteenth century, when it was placed under the new, professional management writers such as Austen or Mitford (or Wordsworth) supplied, "English literature" has operated to make the local and the intimate reproducible anywhere. As an arrangement that could enable the long-distance national distribution of the pleasures of inside knowledge, English literature begins in Austen's lifetime to offer itself to the individual reader as the reservoir of her private memories of life *as* a reader: the canon, familiarized, becomes an institution that returns the reader home to herself, where the reader feels at home. Let me close by zeroing in briefly on the question of how *Emma* in particular might be involved in this reinvention and in the renegotiation of the relation between personal taste and an impersonal print culture it entailed.
19. This is the place to think about how often our reading of *Emma* is prefigured for us within the novel. A national literature must negotiate geographical and social divides in the manner depicted in that phrase "a letter [sent] to Maple Grove by one lady, to Ireland by another"; it is by definition susceptible to the same problems of unseasonableness and irrelevancy that make Mr. Weston's conundrum about the letters of perfection so *mal à propos*. *Emma* forestalls such problems by establishing—through its irony for a start—a complicity with its readers founded on the irresistibly gratifying premise that we, *particularly*, have understood what we have read; we have a special purchase on a text addressed to a wider public. It is as if the text signals to each the message that Knightley, unable to speak openly to Emma because of the presence of her father, communicates just "plain enough to be very intelligible": a message of "approbation" (II.iii, 151). Terry Castle writes of something comparable to this sense of perfect understanding: how Austen's prose provides the reader with the opportunity to "relive [. . .] the primal satisfaction of learning to read itself [. . .] that moment when [. . .] the marks on the page first began to 'make sense'" (xiii). Our reading matter is made familiar in and by *Emma* in another way—one that connects us, in the pleasures we take in inside information, to others and the pleasures they take in their turn. Like Mr. Weston, the novel also plays games with letters (in multiple senses of that term): not just posing riddles, not just investigating characters' reading habits, canvassing the issue of literary competence, and examining what it means to read *together*, but also catering, as all three of Austen's last novels do through their allusiveness, to the pleasures that lie in quotation-spotting. In its anthologizing capacity, sauntering through the canon (breezily citing Shakespeare, Gay, Gray, Cowper), *Emma* enables readers to recognize again what we saw before in our "first acquaintance with poets." Adopting measures like these, Austen situates the English canon in general where Edmund in *Mansfield Park* says Shakespeare is—as part of "an Englishman's constitution" (306). (As if foreseeing *Emma*'s treatment of mind-reading, Edmund also casts Shakespeare's "thoughts" as that with which we are "intimate [. . .] by instinct.")
20. And the process of reading *Emma* does come to seem, thanks to this allusiveness, what Mitford said it was: a return to a neighbourhood in which we have long been settled. Its characters, from strangers,

quickly come to seem acquaintance of long standing, whose prospects "are a kind of common concern" — Austen's readers learn in their turn to perform the ceremonies of repatriation that Highbury enacts in adopting that feckless bird of passage, Frank Churchill, as a native son. In the context of Adam Ferguson's worry about an affectless age of languor brought on by states' super-sizing, such strategies for redeeming and remanufacturing local attachments can seem something more than an endearing if rather dotty manifestation of that Highburian habit of "general friendship." They might also seem strategies for coping with the distinctively modern challenges of expanded horizons and an expanded sphere of mutual recognition and responsibility.

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# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

## Boxing Emma; or the Reader's Dilemma at the Box Hill Games

Susan J. Wolfson, Princeton University

1. The Box Hill games are the famed harrowing of Emma's pride and flippant self-esteem: for publicly mocking a vulnerable Miss Bates she privately gets her ears boxed by Mr. Knightley, the reprimand constituting the last round of her training for the big box on the hill, Donwell Abbey, as Mrs. Knightley. This disciplinary sequence—his rebuke, her "true contrition" and "penitence," then a restoration to "perfect amity"—has entered the critical literature as a story of the heroine's moral and emotional maturation. Yet the novel has also been busy weaving other designs that not only resist neat alignment but provoke contrary sympathies—a conundrum that the close, if not the closure, of *Emma* lets stand. To make this case, I'll be setting the critical moralizing that presumes to be channeling an absolute authorial intention against the way other readers have made their way toward and out of Box Hill, not with any perverse resistance to Austen but teasing out her several apparent intentions.
2. That something is at stake for any interpretation is suggested by the misshape of Box Hill. Much anticipated, frustratingly postponed, effected at last, the summer outing almost immediately hits a sour note. Though "they had a very fine day" and everything is formally perfect—"outward circumstances of arrangement, accommodation, and punctuality"—the banded host of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds: "there was deficiency [. . .] a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union, which could not be got over" (III.vii, 331-32). Bored even in play-acting a public flirtation with Frank Churchill (Emma does not know she lacks the full set of director's notes), "gay and thoughtless," eager for entertainment, she snaps the bait of garrulous Miss Bates's chance self-abjection (III.vii, 333). Pretending Emma's authority, Frank casually provides the general set-up:

Ladies and gentlemen—I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse to say, that [. . .] she only demands from each of you either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated—or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed, and she engages to laugh heartily at them all."

"Oh! very well," exclaimed Miss Bates, "then I need not be uneasy. 'Three things very dull indeed.' That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I?—(looking round with the most good-humoured dependence on every body's assent)—Do not you all think I shall?"

Emma could not resist.

"Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once."

Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush showed that it could pain her.

"Ah!—well—to be sure. Yes, I see what she means, (turning to Mr. Knightley,) and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend." (III.vii, 335)

Although Miss Bates may have asked for it (being just self-conscious enough to know her faults but too weak or vain to reform them), Emma's jest violates even Frank's Law: "She is a woman that one may, that one *must* laugh at; but that one would not wish to slight" (II.xii, 234)—and he's no stranger to taking his amusement at the expense of vulnerable women. Mr. Knightley, who has been itching with judgment even before this slight ("Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are all thinking of?" [334]), would never have said such a thing (would never, he is sure, even thought it), and he lets Emma have it, soon and hard. Austen has gotten us used to reading by Knightley-lights, flattering us ever since Volume I with a cognitive alliance, if we too had guessed Mr. Elton's true designs and foresaw Emma's first humiliation. And the Knightley view haunts any rereading, by which time the reader knows his rebuke is impending. Our convener, Bill Galperin, sees Frank as his narratological ally here (71-72): casting Emma as Picnic Queen is an arbitrary empowerment that in effect solicits Mr. Knightley's coup de grace. His educating her better self through such chastisement is related to something else we know on rereading: that Frank has been frank with no one about his romance with Jane Fairfax, having kept all Highbury, including the usually "penetrating" Mr. Knightley, (and of course us) in the dark<sup>[1]</sup>. When we learn of this "offstage" plot, we can think only less of him and less of Emma for the self-deluded conceit that lets him use her to taunt Jane: "Very lucky—marrying as they did, upon an acquaintance formed only in a public place!" he gossips of the newlywed Eltons in terms that he knows Jane must take to heart; "They only knew each other, I think, a few weeks in Bath! [. . .] How many a man has committed himself on a short acquaintance, and rued it all the rest of his life!" As if this were not pain enough, he then enlists Emma in what he knows she loves best, managing a marriage: "I shall go abroad for a couple of years—and when I return, I shall come to you for my wife" (III.vii, 337-38).

3. The "artificial amiability" fronting such cruelties makes Frank the real "villain of Box Hill," says Richard Poirier (167). In a "moral nadir" for both, he is "uglier," Marilyn Butler agrees (257)<sup>[2]</sup>. That Emma has been flippant rather than villainous is the saving grace that makes Mr. Knightley's reprimand seem not only tolerable but meliorative, an appeal to a latent, better self, one informed by the "natural charity" of her "heart," as A. Walton Litz puts it (141). The canonical critical gesture is thus to anoint Knightley as knight exemplar, not just of Highbury social propriety but of English decency itself. How could Knight St. George not be Emma's ideal reader and reformer? He "remains the normative and exemplary figure he has traditionally been considered," declares Alistair Duckworth (148); "he remains the reader's objective point of reference" (160). A band of Knightley-readers has evolved into a virtual cheering gallery at Box Hill. The "Queen of Highbury" suffers a "humiliation of self-conceit, through a long self-wrought succession of disasters," intones Reginald Farrer with palpable savor; and a "real appreciation" of this process "is the final test of citizenship in [Austen's] kingdom" (266-67). With a knightly nod to Farrer, Wayne Booth passes the test with a full charge at Emma, staged in the arena of the "reform" that will enable a "happy and deserved marriage" (244-45). Austen, he contends, makes "the reader" "desire" this reform (246) via the groom-to-be himself, ever "reliable," "directing our intellectual, moral, and emotional progress" (256), as if we all were bad Emmas in need of this "chief corrective": "He can tell the reader and Emma at the same time precisely how she is mistaken"; his attack on her "for being 'insolent' and 'unfeeling'" is "Austen's judgment [. . .] rendered dramatically" (253).
4. The zeal with which Knightley-readers prosecute Emma's indiscretion is worth noting. "She abuses Miss Bates because of her own essential lack of 'tenderness' and 'good will'," is Booth's reading of the charge (247). A judgment of Emma at fault or at least in default has pretty much held, even among critics who read a class- or gender-structuring in her instruction. Yet I am not forcibly struck with the inevitability of this verdict. I don't mean that Emma is essentially moral, only that she is essentially human. Her harshest judges not only cut her no slack for this but also give a free pass to the deformation that is Mr. Knightley's nightstick. My prompt is a recurrent, legible rhetorical effect:

Austen's enlistment of her reader in sympathy with Emma's Box-Hill jab at Miss Bates. This is not the sort of "surprised by sin" plot Stanley Fish has famously proposed about *Paradise Lost* (to rationalize the effect of generations of readers signing on to the Devil's party)—the Highbury version being our entrapment in a complicity with Emma's humiliation of Miss Bates that requires our remanding, along with Emma, to Mr. Knightley's reform school to earn back our certificate of English decency. This is always a potential effect, and I don't want to coopt "the reader" as Booth & co. have done to claim its impossibility. But I do want to account for other readers, not necessarily benighted, for whom *Emma* and Emma have provoked and released energies that are not, finally, resolvable to Knightley's reform.

5. We all know Austen's canonically quoted view of Emma as "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (Austen-Leigh 157). Her biggest challenge was not getting us to like Emma, after all, after her abjection, but getting us to like her at the moment when she "could not resist," and to admit our likeness—our likeness not only to Emma's impatience, but to the deeper anxieties it would exorcise. The cumulative rhetoric of Austen's fiction (if you will) is to jab at us with a dilemma at Box Hill: Would *you* have said such a thing? Thought it? Smirked? Every time I teach *Emma*, I poll students on how they negotiated the big blocks of babble that are the Bates hallmark. Did you give her polite, or at least dutiful, attention? Most say they gamely labored in the first event (II.i) but, exasperated by the slim return, when they sensed that strain coming round again (say, in III.ii), they (including professionally committed graduate students) felt more than a dying fall. Ever more quickly scanning the wall of words that promised only a stupefying wash of gossip, triviality, and inanity, they resumed slow reading only as Miss Bates dwindled into silence. My own confession is my listening to *Emma* on tape to spell a cross-country drive (I don't recommend this, by the way): with the full vocal impact of Miss Bates—no silent text but a relentless, tedious chirping—I was soon pawing at the fast-forward, or if I felt duty-bound, was driven to daydreaming while she rattled on about everything and nothing.
6. "I seriously doubt whether any real enjoyment could be extracted from Miss Bates," Agnes Repplier sighed back in 1893, just warming to her subject; "Miss Bates, I must confess, taxes my patience sorely. She is so tiresome that she tires, and I am invariably tempted do what her less fortunate townspeople would have gladly done,—run away from her" (208). "Make Miss Bates, there, stop talkin' or I'll die," cries Humberstall of an irritating woman in Kipling's story "The Janeites." Of the professional readers I surveyed, only Nancy Armstrong noted (in passing) the semiotic of "places seamlessly filled with her speech as pages one can afford to skim over quickly" (155) and only David Miller was willing to describe the "abundant text" as "stupid [. . .] boring, supererogatory prattle" (40-41). Under constraints of courtesy and social surveillance, Emma has no option to absent herself from this infelicity, but must endure Miss Bates's chatter, politely, and with more than a glazed semblance of attention. So when Austen's narrator produces that terse, one-paragraph headline, "Emma could not resist," she is depending on two probabilities: our recognition that Emma has been more severely tried than we, and that we have already indulged our own escapes and exits.
7. Booth seems to suspect the tendency, for his pains to chastise it are as notable as his zeal to prosecute its consequences. Our sympathy for Emma (i.e., our desire for her happiness) might "lead to a serious misreading," he cautions: "reacting to Emma's faults [. . .] as if they were our own, we may very well not only forgive them but overlook them." Thus he warns that "readers who do not recognize her faults with absolute precision cannot enjoy details of the preparation for the comic abasement which must precede that marriage" (249-50). What Booth can't admit is a reader who may not share his precise view of this prenup contract, who may not "enjoy" such precise clauses as "Emma's faults and mistakes are brought home to her in a rapid and humiliating chain of rebukes from Knightley" (258), or who may feel some disproportion between the infraction and the Knightley effect: "*Never* had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at *any* circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. [. . .] She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel?" (III.vii, 340, my italics). The novel itself has always been rather more divided.

8. But the division is of ambivalence rather than contradiction. Even as Miss Bates provokes ridicule, this is never separate from a horrific identification—namely, that save the contingency of class, marital status, sex, or age, anyone might be or become Miss Bates. That everyone cuts her slack (she is pathetic and sympathetic) and still finds her tedious or ridiculous is the dynamic of an identification that one wants to break but cannot. Miss Bates's power (paradoxical as this term may seem) in the community as well as her trouble to Austen's readers is her resistance to exorcism from this tangled web. The terms with which Austen limns her circumstances render her a specter for any woman without Emma's fortune, including Austen herself:

[. . .] a woman neither young, handsome, or rich, or married[,] Miss Bates stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favour; and she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction, and her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible. And yet she was a happy woman [. . .] thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings. (I.iii, 17-18)

Coming just ten pages after the opening account of Emma as "handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition," seeming "to unite some of the best blessings of existence" (I.i, 3), this is a calculated repetition with a difference.

9. What brings it to Box Hill is a repressed link of gendered fate (see Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen* 138-39). When Emma says that one of the things she can resist is marriage, Harriet cries, "But then, to be an old maid at last, like Miss Bates!" Emma's detailed denial suggests that this is not the first time she has thought about the likeness:

That is as formidable an image as you could present, Harriet; and if I thought I should ever be like Miss Bates! so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing—so undistinguishing and unfastidious—and so apt to tell every thing relative to every body about me, I would marry to-morrow. But between *us*, I am convinced there never can be any likeness, except in being unmarried." (I.x, 77)

With penetrating simplicity, Harriet remains fixated on the mirroring: "But still, you will be an old maid! and that's so dreadful!" Old maid: there is a world of social difference between the deformation of the marriage-commodity thus called and the ever amiable "old boy." Scott's blazon of Miss Bates as "a good-natured, vulgar, and foolish old maid" (345) is our witness, overwhelming any credit of nature with insults of class and gender. Emma's primary safety-net is her money:

"Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable." (I.x, 77)

This sport is ever being put in her mind, however, first by Harriet, then by Mr. Knightley, who stings her with the inversion: not that you could be Miss Bates, but that she was once you, born to comforts and of sufficient consequence that her "notice" would constitute "an honour":

She has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. [. . .] You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and

the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her [. . .] and before others, many of whom (certainly *some*.) would be entirely guided by *your* treatment of her. (III.vii, 339-340)

This is the topography of the "antisocial" that George Levine deftly sees claiming the modest heights of Box Hill: "the laws of civilization are violated as Emma cruelly insults Miss Bates" (208). Butler narrows this gloss to the law of gender and widens its application: this insult is part of "a pattern in the novel of vulnerable single women, whom it is the social duty of the strong and rich to protect" (257).

10. Outside the novel but invested in this insult, the not-quite-missing link between Miss Bates and Miss Woodhouse is Miss Austen herself, a forty-something spinster when *Emma* was published, whose letters detail the small income (a few hundred pounds/an.) and abject economies on which her household survived after her father's death (cf. Harding 350). Austen's sense of her genteel vulnerability, suggests Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin, makes Emma's jest a threat to "social order" not because it violates any ethical foundation, but because it exposes the social superstructure, its arbitrarily privileges. To drop "the veil of chivalrous manners" is to reveal the basis of social relations "on property and privilege, on wealth and rank" (421). Thus, regret about a slight to Miss Bates can attach a word such as "mortification" while the novel's slight glances at the lives of the dirt-cottage-poor, at homeless gypsies, and at subsistence-wage laborers separated from their families, along with a pervasive, unironized discourse of contempt for new money (versus the old money that grabbed "Donwell Abbey" after the Dissolution) do not convey any such sociology, but serve merely as plot devices or conversational referents for the gentry. The "values and standards of the Highbury world," remarks Arnold Kettle (in a trenchant essay cut from the Norton Critical's 2nd edition of *Emma*), are "based on the assumption that it is right and proper for a minority of the community to live at the expense of the majority"—among the latter, the cooks, porters and carriagesmen whose labor produces the "pleasant party" at Box Hill. Kettle's point is not the division of labor and leisure per se but "the fundamental condescension, the basic unkindness which permits the sensitive values of *Emma* to be applicable only to one person in ten or twenty. [. . .] the standards we are called on to admire may be inseparably linked with a particular form of social organization" (397).
11. Miss Bates's lack of resources to "frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect" (I.iii, 17) puts her in jeopardy of unkindness. Should Austen default on her cultural capital, her wit and irony, she could also lose respect. The appearance in 1932 of a volume of her Batesy-letters "profoundly disillusioned some of the more fastidious admirers of her novels," Robert Donovan reminds us; "Harold Nicolson and E. M. Forster professed themselves disenchanted with the triviality of the letters and the vulgarity of the mind which produced them" (109, referring to reviews in *New Statesman* and *TLS*). "Trivial and dull," Nicolson sighed; a "desert of family gossip." If Miss Bates is "a great talker upon trivial matters" (I.iii, 18), so seems Austen. Forster implied the link, and *Virginia Quarterly Review* was explicit: the letters "contain the raw materials" for Miss Bates. "Triviality, varied by touches of ill-breeding and sententiousness," it elaborated; "she has nothing in her mind except the wish to tell her sister everything; and so she flits from the cows to the currant bushes, from the currant bushes to Mrs. Hall of Sherborne, gives Mrs. Hall a tap, and flits back again" (362-63; cf. even Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* 207). A habitually dyspeptic H. W. Garrod was inspired to fresh bile: "a desert of trivialities punctuated by occasional oases of clever malice," he sneered, setting the lexicon; "wearying lengths in which one meets nothing but the most uninspired talk about petticoats and drawing-room curtains, colds, coquelicots and magnesia" (23); "feminine triviality interests her immensely and entertains her adequately" (26). To discount such reactions as "phallogocentric" condescension to legitimate female interests, as Suzanne Juhasz proposes (418), seems sheer desperation, not the least because some of the complaints issued from avowed Janeites (see Johnson, "Divine" 150). A more interesting rescue is David Miller's proposal that Miss Bates is Austen's mother-tongue, her "tribute to the gestation of her text in the womb of trivial communications and unreserved gossip" (39), or Finch and Bowen's hope to convince us that the narrator's free indirect style is of a piece with Bates-gossip,

both discourses constituting the Austenian social-text and its ideological imperatives (3-4).

12. Yet what seems more noticeable are not the tributes to "family resemblance" but the stylistic differentiations, as if, Miller suggests, these were a "reaction formation" (40). Here we find ourselves back at Box Hill, with the narrator's parody of Bates-gossip:

In the judgment of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could very well describe. "Mr Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively." They were laying themselves open to that very phrase—and having it sent off in a letter to Maple Grove by one lady, to Ireland by another. (III.vii, 332-333)

This wry one-sentence report is worlds away from the wall of words that bears Miss Bates's voice, whose description by Richard Simpson in 1870 has stood uncontradicted: her "fluent talk only requires memory....etc., etc., for it might go on for ever" (350-51). And throughout the novel, it does.

13. "Everybody's words were soon lost under the incessant flow of Miss Bates, who came in talking, and had not finished her speech under many minutes after being admitted into the circle of the fire. As the door opened she was heard [ . . . ]"; "after a pretty long speech from Miss Bates, which few persons listened to [ . . . ]"; "Miss Bates, who had been trying in vain to be heard the last two minutes [ . . . ]"; "Some laughed, and answered good-humouredly. Miss Bates said a great deal [ . . . ]." None of these sentences is Emma's or even the free indirect style of her thoughts. All are the narrator's objective reports (III.ii, 289; III.v, 310, 312; III.vii, 334). If, as Miller writes, "Emma finally [comes] to share the narrator's view of her errancy" (109), it also seems clear that the narrator has been sharing her view. Funding this share, moreover, is Austen's "clever malice" (that "sharp tongue" to which Garrod attributes her winding up an old maid [33-34]), which can exceed Emma's worst moments: "Mrs Hall, of Sherbourn, was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright.—I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband" (October 1798; *Letters* 17); "Dr Hall in such very deep mourning that either his Mother, his Wife, or himself must be dead" (17 May 1799; *Letters* 40). Donovan sees Austen enacting "the same impish prompting which leads Emma to make fun of Miss Bates at Box Hill—the sudden and overwhelming impulse to treat irreverently what we have been taught to regard with respect and solemnity" (379-80).
14. This "we" assumes a different consensus from the Knightley "we"—the club cherished in Farrer's claim that Miss Bates "comes so near our hearts that Emma's abrupt brutality to her on Box Hill comes home to us with the actuality of a violent sudden slap in our own face" (268)<sup>[3]</sup>. Donovan's "we" speaks to the human impulse that prompted Poirier to ventriloquize,

What [ . . . ] is all the excitement about? Emma has, after all, in a moment of flightiness, only made a thoughtless remark to garrulous old Miss Bates. And when she does so, no one except Miss Bates and Knightley himself seem even to notice it. [ . . . ] Mightn't it legitimately be asked [ . . . ] if her notions of "grief" and "mortification" are not as superficial as is the meaning assigned in all her novels to the term "evil"? (164)

Poirier raises these skeptical questions only to limit them to an aberrant theatrical moment in which "Emma literally forgets who she is" (176), saying that they become "irrelevant" in the symbolic structure of the novel, which implies a contract with "a vision of English life and society": the definition of "English delicacy" at once embodied in Mr. Knightley and so deficient in Box-Hill Emma as to make her "a 'denaturalized' citizen'" (165; 174). But I think his initial protest withstands his restriction, because (as I think he senses) the episode has more than one contract with the reader. It involves a vision of human probability that, while not delicate, does not require judgment as



"denaturalized." In a brilliant reading of this energy, someone I know coined "boxhill" into a verb on the occasion of a department meeting when a colleague given to pointless long-windedness was requested by the chair (after years of polite forbearance) to come to a point. Although the orator was pained by being "boxhilled," no one else complained; all sighed relief.

15. Emma's boxhilling of her Miss Bates seems culpable of no more than expressing what oft was thought. Austen makes it clear that even Mrs. Weston, the novel's unimpeachable feminine perfection, can be outed. To Mrs. Weston's fancy of a match between Mr. Knightley and Jane (II.vii, 201), Emma reacts first with a mock-gothic ghost of her own fears of affinity ("How would he bear to have Miss Bates belonging to him?—to have her haunting the Abbey [. . .]?" ), then with a mimicry so dead-on that Mrs. Weston could not resist:

" [. . . ] thanking him all day long for his great kindness in marrying Jane— 'So very kind and obliging!—But he always had been such a very kind neighbour!' and then fly off, through half a sentence, to her mother's old petticoat. 'Not that it was such a very old petticoat either—for still it would last a great while—and, indeed, she must thankfully say that their petticoats were all very strong.'"

"For shame, Emma! Do not mimic her. You divert me against my conscience." (II.viii, 203)

Mrs. Weston protests not because her conscience has been offended, but because it hasn't; it's been successfully diverted by a recognition.

16. Her attempt to admonish her former charge on the conjecture of Mr. Knightley's courtliness only helps Emma's Box Hill case: "I do not think Mr. Knightley would be much disturbed [. . . ] she might talk on; and if he wanted to say any thing himself, he would only talk louder, and drown her voice" (203). Not long after, Austen makes good on this "if": "So began Miss Bates; and Mr. Knightley seemed determined to be heard in his turn, for most resolutely and commandingly" did he have his say before a small company (II.x, 219-220). It's hard to know whether this vocal terminator (not merely mastering Miss Bates but also exposing her provocation) humiliated her any less than Emma did. To recall Mr. Knightley's impatience is to wonder whether the real problem for him with Emma's barb was its reminder of his own failures to resist. Is silencing Miss Bates a male prerogative only? And what of his gratuitous rudeness to her, in a pique of jealousy about Frank's duets with Jane?

"That fellow," said he, indignantly, "thinks of nothing but shewing off his own voice. This must not be." And touching Miss Bates, who at that moment passed her—"Miss Bates, are you mad, to let your niece sing herself hoarse in this manner?" (II.viii, 206)

Austen's play from Knightley's "indignantly" to his accusing Miss Bates of being "mad" is a telling collation. In the guise of chivalrous concern, he lets fly a rebuke that wounds Miss Bates where she lives: her unerring solicitude for Jane's well-being.

17. If Box-Hill Knightley is not quite a "hypocrite lecteur," Austen at least invites us to see him as projecting what he can't accept in himself on to Emma: would Mr. Knightley like to hear what we are thinking of? Over and against any chance of this imperfection, Knightley's enablers in the critical community embrace him as "mon semblable—mon frère," usually with an appeal to what is "natural." "Emma recognizes and rejects social artifice and is then in a position to accept her natural place in society as Knightley's wife," is Poirier's story (177); "His commentary on Emma's errors is a natural expression of his love," says Booth (253); Knightley speaks for what is "natural" in Emma's heart, adds Litz (141), likewise sure that Austen's "authority is quickly vested in Mr. Knightley" (148). Yet as

Wollstonecraft commented in *Rights of Woman* (1792), what's "natural" is a matter of "prevailing opinion." Austen herself suggests as much in the scene in which Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Elton negotiate a pre-Box Hill party at Donwell Abbey. Mrs. Elton is eager to have "everything as natural and simple as possible," a "sort of gipsy party" out of doors; Mr. Knightley's "idea of the simple and natural" is to have a "table spread in the dining room" to match the "nature and simplicity of gentlemen and ladies, with their servants and furniture" (III.vi, 320-321). While his concern for his guests' comfort prevails both socially and morally over her whimsy, his refutation betrays no irony about a "simple and natural" order of things marked by dining rooms and furniture, gentlemen, ladies, and servants. Whether or not this is also Austen's irony (I confess on such occasions I am never sure), I don't agree with Poirier that it is only Mrs. Elton's idea of the "natural" that is "false, affected, and pretentious" (175).

18. This debate inflects the novel's conclusion, and not just because the Knightleys are once again at odds with Mrs. Elton's sense of style. Booth's price of admission is our agreement that "marriage to an intelligent, amiable, good, and attractive man is the best thing than can happen to this heroine," and that any indifference on her part only betrays "her totally inadequate view of the sources of human happiness." But when he adds, "readers who do not experience it as such are, I am convinced, far from knowing what Jane Austen is about" (260), the need of personal conviction concedes more than he knows. "I am a little sorry for both parties when Emma marries Mr. Knightley," grumbled Garrod, testy about the apparatus of "happy ending" (39). When Booth contends that Mr. Knightley has "stood in the reader's mind for what [Emma] lacks" (244), he means moral maturity, but another way to fill in the blank is just plain years, seventeen in fact. Knightley's resistance to marriage ever since his majority is another of those offstage histories, this one paced in an Elvisy fascination with a child he has seen grow up from a period when his notice was an honor. While husbands bear a sociocultural script for "paternal" authority, his enactment flirts with a severe extreme<sup>[4]</sup>. The projected post-nuptial seems a tad perverse. Do we all agree with Stuart Tave that "we can only rejoice that Emma says she will never call her husband anything but Mr. Knightley" (231; see *Emma* III.xvii, 420)? Or is this Austenian frisson at the periphery of perfection?
19. No wonder that the too-harmonious-by-half close of her novel—"the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union" (313)—has struck more than a small band of readers as so patently artificial as to invite a guess at irony. It seems only the latest turn in the novel's larger suspicions about plots of amelioration. In the arena of Box Hill, "Mr. Knightley gravely said, [. . .] '*Perfection* should not have come quite so soon'" (336), and it's not clear that it has come here, at last, either. As the plot of *Emma* drives toward closure, the energies that impel this drive exceed its full government. Amid other plots, Mr. Knightley's masterplot remains a relative construction. If, in another oft-quoted remark, Austen confessed to her sister that she found *Pride and Prejudice* "rather too light & bright & sparkling;—it wants shade" (letter, 4 Feb. 1813; *Letters* 203), she compensates in *Emma* not by rejecting the glints, but by putting them in a shady setting. At Box Hill, Emma gives a chance expression to human, communal impulses and frustrations in ways that Austen has made it difficult to close the lid on. Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure. And where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may indeed be very material.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mary Lascelles, who argues that the novel's pleasures accrue on "re-reading" because "so much is missed" by any brief "failure of attention," has pointed out that hints could be sifted from Miss Bates (175-78; Frank has news he could have heard only from Jane); but Lascelles's level attention, though

impressive, is hardly exemplary (Austen's narrator embarrasses no one with such missed intelligence).

<sup>2</sup> It's hard to redeem him, even with Mary Poovey's view that "the passion between Jane and Frank contains all the disruptive elements" that Austen's masterplot "is at pains to control. Their desire for each other defies class distinction, social decorum, parental approval; it is an alliance formed in secret and operating subversively" and so promising "autonomy and power" (394); cf. Galperin's adroit argument that unrepresented (passion) constitutes an escape from the "cultural aegis" wielded by the knights of Highbury (67ff). Yet for Jane, this is a distinction without a difference. Whether under or outside the cultural aegis, Jane is radically dependent: in the strength of her "love for Frank and the weakness of her social position, she suffers more than we will ever know" (Poovey 394; cf. Duckworth 178).

<sup>3</sup> Kettle repeats this language in commenting on Austen's ability to enchant her readers with the class-formed "values and standards" of Highbury: "When Emma is rude to Miss Bates on Box Hill we feel the flush rise to Miss Bates's cheek" (394; his italics).

<sup>4</sup> Litz describes Knightley as "fatherly" in his function "as a moral chorus" (134); Johnson calls him "half paternal" (*Jane Austen* 140), while Gilbert and Gubar go all the way: "the happy ending of an Austen novel occurs when the girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man who has been her teacher and her advisor" (154).

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# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

## Leaving Box Hill: Emma and Theatricality<sup>1</sup>

Adam Potkay, College of William and Mary

1. As volume 3, chapter 7 of *Emma* and its "very fine day for Box Hill" both draw to a close, Emma takes a carriage ride home that removes her, literally and allegorically, from the novel's central scene of theatrical display. Emma leaves Box Hill and all that it represents. That she never gets very far from it, however, Austen makes clear at the outset of volume 3, chapter 8. In involving her heroine in both outward display and inwardness, Austen engages a central topos of what I take to be Romantic writing—its ongoing dialectic of the external and the internal, the eye and the I. "Radicalized," as de Man and de Manians liked to say, these oppositions may reduce to the representable and the unrepresentable, mimesis and the opacity of language; yet it seems with hindsight that deconstruction served but to put a spin on the story already told by Hartman and Abrams when they wrote of Wordsworth's poetry or, as its extension, Romantic literature.
2. In volume 3, chapter 7 of *Emma*, Austen situates the dialectic of outer and inner between Hill and carriage or, generically—as the Hill like the theatre has its "Box" seats—between drama and the Christian conversion story. Theatricality, along with sociability itself, is banished at the end of chapter 7, when Emma is vexed into silent meditation; a somewhat chastened theatricality returns, however, in the very next chapter. While we might call this narrative trajectory Austen's Romanticism, we ought to note its signal debt to works by her two favorite moral writers of the eighteenth century—who were, according to her brother Henry, "Johnson in prose, and Cowper in verse." For Emma, in the Box Hill episode and its immediate aftermath, veers between the interiority Cowper praised, and the inevitable posturing that Johnson, in *Rasselas*, gently exposed. A deep distress humanizes Emma's soul, showing her—and, in some reflective way, us—that at least some portion of the truth lies within. Austen, however, is as eager to curb excessive inwardness as she is to censure thoughtless play-acting; for we are, in part, what we are beheld to be.
3. Before turning to a close reading of the Box Hill episode, I'd like briefly to address the roots of Austen's Romanticism—the road, as it were, to Box Hill. Austen would have found the song of the interior self, among other places, in William Cowper's *The Task* (1785). According to some of Cowper's more programmatic lines:

He that attends to his interior self,  
That has a heart, and keeps it; has a mind  
That hungers, and supplies it; and who seeks  
A social, not a dissipated life,  
Has business; feels himself engag'd t'achieve  
No unimportant, though a silent task. (3.373-38)

4. For Cowper, interiority, while not incompatible with a chastened sociability, clearly takes precedence over it; indeed, the social life Cowper invokes seems forsaken once his sentence culminates in "a silent task." The credo of these lines is one that Cowper held in common with many other evangelical Christians of the later eighteenth century. More distinctive, and in retrospect more distinctively Romantic, are the lines of Cowper's from which Austen will quote, conspicuously, in *Emma*. They involve a description of staring at a fireplace on a winter evening:

I am conscious, and confess  
 Fearless, a soul that does not always think.  
 Me oft has fancy ludicrous and wild Sooth'd with a waking dream of houses, tow'rs,  
 Trees, churches, and strange visages express'd  
 In the red cinders, while with poring eye  
 I gaz'd, myself creating what I saw.  
 Nor less amus'd have I quiescent watch'd  
 The sooty films that play upon the bars,  
 Pendulous, and foreboding, in the view  
 Of superstition, prophesying still  
 Though still deceiv'd, some stranger's near approach. (4.284-95)

The individual mind creates or, properly speaking, half-creates the wondrous world it sees—note that strange visages here appear in familiar cinders, superstitious beliefs play on real soot. Cowper's aperçu, elaborating on a line of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (6.424), will of course become a banner for Blake, Wordsworth, and especially Coleridge.

5. What does Cowper's musing on his own musing mean to Austen—or, at least, to the narrator of *Emma*? Cowper's lines, conjured within a passage of Austen's free indirect discourse, may attach either to the narrator (in a sly aside?) or to the train of Mr. Knightley's thoughts, or to both. In any event, they appear, in context, to be vindicated:

Mr. Knightley, who, for some reason best known to himself, had certainly taken an early dislike to Frank Churchill, was only growing to dislike him more. He began to suspect him of some double dealing in his pursuit of Emma. That Emma was his object appeared indisputable. [. . .] But while so many were devoting him to Emma, and Emma herself making him over to Harriet, Mr. Knightley began to suspect him of some inclination to trifle with Jane Fairfax. He could not understand it; but there were symptoms of intelligence between them—he thought so at least—symptoms of admiration on his side, which, having been once observed, he could not persuade himself to think entirely devoid of meaning, however much he wished to escape any of Emma's errors of imagination. She was not present when the suspicion first arose. He was dining with the Randalls' family, and Jane, at the Eltons'; and he had seen a look, more than a single look, at Miss Fairfax, which, from the admirer of Miss Woodhouse, seemed somewhat out of place. When he was again in their company, he could not help remembering what he had seen; nor could he avoid observations which, unless it were like Cowper and his fire at twilight, "Myself creating what I saw," brought him yet stronger suspicion of there being a something of private liking, of private understanding even, between Frank Churchill and Jane. (III.iv, 309-10)

Conscious of Cowper's lines, Knightley—or the reader of *Emma*—is aware of the creative imagination as well as his drive to get the facts straight. As it eventually turns out, Knightley is right in seeing intimacy in Frank's glances at Jane Fairfax. But he is also right to note that his perception is not without the color of a wish fulfilled. Knightley resents Frank as a possible rival for Emma's affections—this is the "reason best known to himself" for disliking Frank from the start. Frank's casting his eyes elsewhere cannot but gratify Knightley, who, despite his turning the necessary dialectic of perception into a conundrum, knows this all too well. Indeed, in his case, the eye sees what the heart knows.

6. Let us proceed to look at Emma's turn toward understanding her own heart—which in her case lies in a turn away from understanding life as only a stage, and all the men and women merely players. In evangelical—and, I will argue, Wordsworthian—fashion, the inward turn away from a dissipated life

hinges on a moment of profound vexation. Emma had begun: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (I.i, 3). The Box Hill episode veers Emma away from "seeming," uncovering the terrible importance of being vexed.

7. The picnic at Box Hill begins propitiously—or so hopes Emma, or the reader who attends wholly to outward circumstances, the stage scenery of life. "They had a very fine day for Box Hill; and all the other outward circumstances of arrangement, accommodation, and punctuality, were in favour of a pleasant party" (III.vii, 331). Yet this view from a Martha Stewart magazine does not suffice: "There was a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union, which could not be got over" (III.vii, 332). For Emma, the chief disappointment at first is that Frank fails to perform: "She had never seen Frank Churchill so silent and stupid. He said nothing worth hearing—looked without seeing—admired without intelligence—listened without knowing what she said." To Emma, who thinks only of social roles, Frank's abstraction is inexplicable; it is, indeed, not abstraction, but performing badly.
8. Hence her relief when he resumes his guise: "When they all sat down it was better, for Frank Churchill grew talkative and gay, making her his first object. Every distinguishing attention that could be paid, was paid to her. To amuse her, and be agreeable in her eyes, seemed all that he cared for [. . .]" (III.vii, 332). Emma, although still not stirred to "any real felicity," seems contented with Frank's show. There follow thirteen volleys of wit, in dialogue form, between Emma and Frank—Frank, in command even as he professes being wholly "under [Emma's] command," begins and ends the exchange (III.vii, 333). (As will become clear later in the novel, his command of the course of these dialogues is framed by his broader scheme of theatrical diversion from his "real" situation with Jane Fairfax, a relationship made sensitive by being the one thing that depends on material circumstances beyond Frank's control.) *Emma's* narrator intrudes on their repartee only three times, in short stage directives that underscore the scene's mounting sense of theatrical self-consciousness:

"Your gallantry is really unanswerable. But (lowering her voice)—nobody speaks except ourselves, and it is rather too much to be talking nonsense for the entertainment of seven silent people."

"I say nothing of which I am ashamed," replied he, with lively impudence. "I saw you first in February. Let every body on the Hill hear me if they can. Let my accents swell to Mickleham on one side, and Dorking on the other. I saw you first in February." And then whispering—"Our companions are excessively stupid. What shall we do to rouse them? Any nonsense will serve. They *shall* talk. Ladies and gentlemen, I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse (who, wherever she is, presides,) to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking of." (III.vii, 333-34)

9. Mr. Knightley challenges Emma on this last point: "Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are all thinking?" (III.vii, 334). Does she, that is, really want to descend from her theatrical elevation to the level of serious and perhaps mundane sentiment? Does she recognize how drunk she's grown on display? Is she ready for the inevitable hangover of a thinking being? Or perhaps Knightley's query recalls Cowper on the absences of thought: "I am conscious, and confess / Fearless, a soul that does not always think." In any event, Emma clarifies with good comic timing that snappy dialogue is all she desires: "Let me hear any thing rather than what you are all thinking of" (III.vii, 334).
10. Frank then proceeds to elaborate: "Ladies and gentlemen— I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse to say, that she waves her right of knowing exactly what you may all be thinking of, and only requires something very entertaining from each of you, in a general way." All are called upon to offer "one thing



very clever [. . .]—or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed." The first reply comes, as it were, from the Box—the Box being, in Johnson's definition, "the seats in the playhouse, where the ladies are placed":

"Oh! very well," exclaimed Miss Bates, "then I need not be uneasy. 'Three things very dull indeed.' That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I?—(looking around with the most good-humoured dependence on every body's assent)—Do not you all think I shall?"

Emma could not resist.

"Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number— only three at once."

Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush showed that it could pain her. (III.vii, 335)

11. Emma here confounds the proper boundary between the stage on which she performs and the box which holds beings who do not always perform. Her most polished riposte—the perfection of the scene's theatrical mode—collapses with the recognition, offered us here by the narrator, that life is not all stage. The butt does not live solely for the jest. Things deemed uncomprehending or insensate have feelings like ours, perhaps more exquisite than ours. Miss Bates here differs more in degree than in kind from Wordsworth's scarcely yet poignantly human characters, Betty Foy's Idiot Boy or the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor. And Emma here resembles, to her great disadvantage, the "strutting and vap'ring" satirist deplored by Cowper (2.330), or worse, Wordsworth's dread Infant Prodigy: "Arch are his notices, and nice his sense/ Of the ridiculous" (*Prelude* [1805] 5.307-8).
12. After Miss Bates's embarrassment, one more moderately clever thing is heard from the box, no one besides Knightley appearing to notice the indecency of the game's continuance. The stage show eventually ends for want of energy, not for any access of moral clarity. But later, as the party breaks up, Knightley confronts Emma, who is standing by herself, with her moral fault:

"Emma, I must once more speak to you as I have been used to do: a privilege rather endured than allowed, perhaps, but I must still use it. I cannot see you acting wrong, without a remonstrance. How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible."

Emma recollected, blushed, was sorry, but tried to laugh it off.

"Nay, how could I help saying what I did? — Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me."

"I assure you she did. She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since. I wish you could have heard how she talked of it—with what candour and generosity. I wish you could have heard her honouring your forbearance, in being able to pay her such attentions, as she was for ever receiving from yourself and your father, when her society must be so irksome." (III.vii, 339)

Knightley proceeds to enumerate Miss Bates's misfortunes: "She is poor; she has sunk from the

comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!" (III.vii, 339). He concludes with the assurance that in rebuking her, he seeks not his own pleasure or her displeasure, but rather her moral reformation: "I will tell you truths while I can, satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now" (III.vii, 340).

13. There quickly follows what looks like the start of Emma's reformation. Emma, unpropped, enters the carriage that will take her away from Box Hill. The narrator evokes her interiority with a rush of thinking, beginning: "She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed—almost beyond what she could conceal" (III.vii, 340). Her thoughts may lie too deep for expression here, but she is not yet wholly out of the theatre: the inexpressible is still that which can be concealed. Nonetheless, Emma is, like Wordsworth in the preamble to *The Prelude*, vexed by the energies that lie between response and expression. In so vexing Emma—a vexation now seen to have been prophesied in *Emma's* opening sentence—Austen evokes (unintentionally, of course) Wordsworth's special sense of what it means to be vexed. For Wordsworth, "vexing" crosses the boundaries between physical commotion and mental flurry, and between things as they are and things as they could be recreated. It's well known that the breeze that opens *The Prelude* calls forth "a corresponding mild creative breeze" in Wordsworth; what we tend to forget is that this mild breeze "is become/ A tempest, a redundant energy, / Vexing its own creation" (1805, ll.43-47). This vexation, "breaking up a long continued frost, / Brings with it vernal promises, the hope/ Of active days, of dignity and thought [ . . . ]" (ll.49-51)<sup>[2]</sup>. Is Emma promised any less for her vexation?
14. The subsequent course of her emotions suggests no less than broken frost and vernal promise, body blossoming into thought: "Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart." Emma's inner experience is limned with subtle mastery: she at first "feels," without a (conscious) object of feeling; she is, like a purely passive body, agitated and struck. Only then does thought, in the recognition of truthful representation, dawn upon her: "she felt it." "As she reflected more, she seemed but to feel it more. She never had been so depressed. Happily it was not necessary to speak" (III.vii, 340).
15. Presumably it is not necessary for Emma to speak because there is no one there with whom to speak. The reader certainly hasn't heard of anyone else's entry into Emma's carriage, and Emma has by now been in her carriage for the space of one long and very agitated paragraph. But then we learn, "There was only Harriet, who seemed not in spirits herself, fagged, and very willing to be silent; and Emma felt the tears running down her cheeks almost all the way home, without being at any trouble to check them, extraordinary as they were" (III.vii, 340-41).
16. Why introduce Harriet here, somewhat surprisingly, in the very last sentence of the chapter? Why this complication of our intimacy with Emma's thoughts? Perhaps Harriet's body, distracted and silent, is here to remind us of how far we've traveled from Emma's earlier annoyance, at Box Hill, with an unresponsive audience—"seven silent people," every distracted "body on the Hill." Harriet's attenuated presence helps us better appreciate Emma's new inwardness. Harriet is there, but not there; Emma's tears, the object of her thought objectified, are not shed for effect, certainly not to affect any other character in the novel.
17. Emma has attained that blindness to the external world that is the necessary prelude to insight, and to rejoining that world with deeper imaginative vision. This story goes back, of course, to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus: "suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven. And he fell to the earth [ . . . ] and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man.... And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9:3-9). Paul's story became a template for the

narratives of conscious conversion promulgated by eighteenth-century evangelicals, especially those written under the auspices of the Methodist movement<sup>[3]</sup>. Paul and those who re-write (or re-live) his tale gain new vision after their blindness—the scales, so to speak, fall from their eyes (Acts 9:18). In a similar manner, the once-blinded Emma will have her own revelation: "It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself! [. . .] She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before" (III.xi, 370). Emma's new eyes are emotional, erotic, and not a little conscious of social rank. Yet Austen discreetly hints that Emma has also experienced something of a divine awakening. Pondering whether Knightley might not actually stoop to marry the lowly Harriet Smith, Emma generalizes: "Was it new for any thing in this world to be unequal, inconsistent, incongruous—or for chance and circumstance (as second causes) to direct the human fate?" (III.xi, 375). The parenthetical remark, "as second causes"—secondary, of course, to providential order—may well be the most subtle sign of the eyes of faith ever inscribed.

18. Alternatively, it might be literature's most perfunctory nod to religious orthodoxy. With Austen it's hard to tell. The core of her genius is precisely this fine give and take between decorum and irony, between muted pathos and gentle bathos. The parenthetical phrase "as second causes," I would suggest, oscillates between these poles. So too does the description of the immediate aftermath of the Box Hill outing. Having arrived back at her home:

The wretchedness of a scheme to Box Hill was in Emma's thoughts all the evening. [. . .] In the warmth of true contrition, she would call upon her [Miss Bates] the very next morning, and it should be the beginning, on her side, of a regular, equal, kindly intercourse.

She was just as determined when the morrow came, and went early, that nothing might prevent her. It was not unlikely, she thought, that she might see Mr. Knightley in her way; or, perhaps, he might come in while she were paying her visit. She had no objection. She would not be ashamed of the appearance of the penitence, so justly and truly hers. Her eyes were towards Donwell as she walked, but she saw him not. (III.viii, 341-42)

Do the sentences that trace Emma's walk to Miss Bates's house do so with marmoreal restraint, or with gentle irony? "She had no," "She would not": one imagines Emma quite self-consciously holding her head high. Is there pathos or bathos in the paragraph's final flourish of inversion: "she saw him not"? It flattens Austen's art to think of these choices as mutually exclusive.

19. Emma is contrite—but Emma takes pride in the thought of appearing contrite in the eyes of her ideal spectator (who looks a lot like Mr. Knightley). She is penitent, but posturing. She regrets Box Hill, but has not wholly left its stage behind. And, finally, how could she wholly leave it? Theatricality in some moderated form is instrumental to sociability itself, and sociability is, for Emma as for the novel form, constitutive. "Her eyes were towards Donwell," and her eyes still see more than her heart knows.
20. In a general way, Emma's morning after draws upon and refines the already wan humor found in Johnson's *Rasselas*. Prince Rasselas's first moment of inwardness in the Happy Valley, an eloquent plaint on the hunger of the imagination which distinguishes thinking things from beasts, is promptly followed by the narrator's aside: "With observations like these the prince amused himself as he returned, uttering them with a plaintive voice, yet with a look that discovered him to feel some complacency in his own perspicacity, and to receive some solace of the miseries of life, from consciousness of the delicacy with which he felt, and the eloquence with which he bewailed them" (Chapter 2). Relative to the satiric vein of earlier English writers—or of Emma in her ridicule of Miss Bates—Johnson's archness here is refined, his irony generous. Austen would cultivate these qualities still further, in a prose itself considerably lighter and more intimate than Johnson's.

21. But she would not lose Johnson's sense that the world is more often than not a stage. Emma en route to Miss Bates's is, in her chastened but resilient theatricality, not unlike Rasselas in his bower, conscious of the dignity of his lone thoughts, and admiring himself when there's no one else around to admire him. Attending to the interior self may, as Cowper insisted, be crucial; but apart from her extraordinary carriage ride, is Emma ever less alone than when alone? Vexation may be the first step towards moral wisdom, or even the rapprochement of inner and outer worlds; yet Emma's vexation, by the time she casts her eyes towards Donwell the next morning, seems in retrospect more like a flash of lover's pique than a pivotal moment in moral reformation. As Fielding's Shamela complains to her mother about her own (relatively) bashful lover: "Oh what a prodigious vexation it is to a Woman to be made a fool of!"

### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The power of a vexing wind to efface the boundary between inner and outer, natural scene and imaginative recreation, is also evinced in the "spot of time" recorded in *Prelude* 11. 278-327.

I should need  
Colours and words that are unknown to man  
To paint the visionary dreariness  
Which, while I looked all around for my lost guide,  
Did at that time invest the naked pool,  
The beacon on the lonely eminence,  
The woman, and her garments vexed and tossed  
By the strong wind (ll. 305-15).

<sup>3</sup> The purest version of which I am aware comes in *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black* (1785); see Potkay and Burr, eds., *Black Atlantic Writers* (78-80). Alongside this strain of spiritual autobiography, there develops as well a related line of poetic hymns to the insight fostered by blindness, from Milton's invocations of the Holy Spirit and Homer through to Wordsworth's invocations of Milton and the life of things.

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# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

## Saying What One Thinks: Emma—*Emma*—at Box Hill

William Walling, Rutgers University

1. Among the many ironies soliciting us in the chapter Austen sets at Box Hill, Mr. Knightley's first recorded remark is the one I've chosen for my starting point. Until we come to it, Frank Churchill has been dominating the representation of the dialogue, eventually appropriating even Emma's voice as his own, grandly claiming that he has been "'ordered by Miss Woodhouse [. . .] to say that she desires to know what you are all thinking of'" (III.vii, 334).
2. In the flurry of responses that follow, Austen neatly reinforces our sense of at least two of the seven people constrained by Frank Churchill into an audience: "Miss Bates said a great deal; Mrs. Elton swelled at the idea of Miss Woodhouse's presiding." It is only Mr. Knightley, however, who is given the privilege of an explicit reply: "Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are all thinking of?"
3. The question, of course, is one of those moments in Austen that her sophisticated admirers especially prize. At its most alluring, it seems to invite the watchful reader into a private pact with the knowingness behind the novel—a benign conspiracy, as it were, of two (or is it three?) intelligences too perceptive to be seduced by mere appearances. For what after all has the narrative authority been doing up to this point at Box Hill but unmasking, to even the least watchful of readers, the darker reality behind the bright charade Emma has been busily enacting with Frank Churchill? "Not that Emma was gay and thoughtless from any real felicity; it was rather because she felt less happy than she had expected" (III.vii, 333).
4. Yet, as my parenthetical uncertainty about the number of intelligences involved in this superior knowingness implies, the issue of Mr. Knightley's relationship to the narrator's authority stands today as a troubling complication in our reading of the novel. It was not always so. To Wayne Booth for example, writing almost forty years ago, the "issue" I've posed was resolvable into a simple matter of highly sophisticated technique: "When [Mr. Knightley] rebukes Emma for manipulating Harriet, when he attacks her for superficiality and false pride, when he condemns her for being 'insolent' and 'unfeeling' in her treatment of Miss Bates, we have Jane Austen's judgment on Emma, rendered dramatically" (253).
5. By this reduction of Booth's argument to the technical, I hasten to add, I don't at all mean to indulge in a facile dismissal of an earlier mode of close reading. Booth is quite clear that the rhetorical mastery he finds in Austen is inseparable from a profound moral concern. But the sea change of late twentieth-century feminism has carried most of us to a rather different shore, and I suspect attentive readers now are quite as likely to be struck by the circumstance of Austen's choosing a male voice to dramatize her "judgment on Emma" as by her skill in doing it.
6. The dreaded name of patriarchy seems the inevitable explanation—except that such a label, in its overarching generality, doesn't help us very much with a writer so locally precise as Austen. Indeed, "patriarchy" and "feminism," concepts hardly unrelated to one another, may be the two terms most vexing the study of Austen today, since their very inevitability now in discussions of her work presents a constant temptation to dehistoricize, given the nearly transhistorical force these terms have assumed in our own time. What I'd like to do in the space remaining to me, then, is return to the specificity of

Box Hill itself for a little while before concluding with a few summary remarks about the novel as a whole.

7. I'll begin with the subject of cruelty, a somewhat more transparent matter at Box Hill than the issue of patriarchal control. Or so it would seem. Consider, for example, the manner in which Austen virtually compels the reader to register, by the episode's close, the heartless nature of Emma's "wit" at Miss Bates's expense (III.vii, 339). Clearly enough, it's done through the device of having Mr. Knightley spell out a detailed and unambiguous judgment on Emma's behavior, as though fulfilling the role Austen so often assigns to him of being the most reliable reader of her text.
8. No doubt a recognition like this scarcely carries us much beyond the analysis I quoted earlier from Wayne Booth. Still, there is another implied cruelty enacted at Box Hill far more sustained and infinitely more calculated than Emma's, and because the very surety of Mr. Knightley's judgment tends to obscure the larger design implicit in the episode, I want to reconstruct what's been partially occluded.
9. Admittedly, it's an occlusion that no one who's read the entire novel fails to recognize at some level—that the far greater presumptive cruelty at Box Hill is Frank Churchill's, inflicted upon an almost defenseless Jane Fairfax. Nevertheless, because Austen chooses to delay our initial knowledge of it for more than another two chapters (the excursion to Box Hill occurs in chapter 7 of Volume III, the revelation of the secret engagement between Frank and Jane occurs in chapter 10), the sense of outrage we might be expected to feel for the apparent brutality of Frank's behavior is—and, I would argue, remains—curiously muted.
10. Unaesthetic as it may seem, then, the reconstitution of that second implicit cruelty in the face of Austen's design does emphasize the striking pattern of injustice which survives at Box Hill beneath the authority of even Mr. Knightley's voice. On the one hand, of course, there is the relatively minor offense of an impulsive rudeness on Emma's part to Miss Bates that is placed at center stage and soon merits its perpetrator unmistakable punishment. On the other hand, there is the contemptible malice we are tempted to find in Frank's coded language to a powerless Jane Fairfax for which Frank suffers no appreciable consequence at all.
11. To be sure, Emma does cry out afterwards her incredulity that Jane Fairfax should have submitted to the treatment Frank inflicted on her: "And how could *she* bear such behavior!" (III.x, 360). But Emma is, as usual, the least reliable reader of Austen's text, and my point in reconstituting what Austen has obscured is to call attention to the extended similarity of the two injured parties at Box Hill—unmarried women without incomes, bound to each other by blood—and the conspicuous difference between the two actors who have assumed the right to impose on these paired women as they choose: a privileged woman and a privileged man.
12. Such a similarity and such a difference does seem to prefigure the feminist dilemma in our own time of assessing the relative weight of gender and class. (I consign to parentheses the equally problematic issue of race, although few readers familiar with Austen will want to ignore the near-hysterical irruption of "the slave-trade" into one of Jane Fairfax's earlier conversations [271], as if in compulsive, belated echo of the formidable subtext haunting *Mansfield Park*.) For the moment, however, I'd like to leave these deliberate anachronisms and return to Emma and Frank as the joint agents of unfeeling privilege at Box Hill.
13. Indeed, if we do reconstitute these two together as covert equals—secret sharers, as it were, in a sense of entitlement neither has earned and for which neither is worthy (until one of them, at any rate, is raised to the proper level of social responsibility by Mr. Knightley's admonishment)—then the

extraordinary passage near the close of the novel on "the stain of illegitimacy" takes on a much sharper significance. But because the passage I'm referring to *is* so extraordinary, I'll quote it in full:

Harriet's parentage became known. She proved to be the daughter of a tradesman, rich enough to afford her the comfortable maintenance which had ever been her's, and decent enough to have always wished for concealment.—Such was the blood of gentility which Emma had formerly been so ready to vouch for!—It was likely to be as untainted, perhaps, as the blood of many a gentleman: but what a connexion had she been preparing for Mr. Knightley—or for the Churchills—or even for Mr. Elton!—The stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed. (III.xix, 438)

14. At first glance—and possibly at second—this seems to be Austen in her least attractive mode. All the same, I think something rather different can be made of the passage if we grant Austen the right to be anachronistic on her own terms. For what I would argue she's doing here is using the trope of "the bastard" in Emma's consciousness to address, however deviously and even anxiously, the fundamental issue of social inequity.
15. Seen in this light, Harriet Smith becomes both more and less than the comic projection of Emma's own ambivalencies about her destiny as a woman. Clearly an almost flat character, Harriet may well appear to be contained in Emma's naively erotic view of her. All the same, Austen's larger narrative also suggests a far less manageable anxiety at work—the perpetual near-panic of Emma's father is the most obvious case in point—which Harriet's own "illegitimacy" can't help but adumbrate. Not unlike the latest fear of Mr. Woodhouse's we learn about, his terror of "*housebreaking*" on the final page of the novel, "the stain of illegitimacy" in Harriet offers a shadowy subversion to the ordered world that Mr. Knightley's marriage to Emma so presumably validates.
16. Still, to say as much is to yoke Austen to a much earlier vision of the bastard as social trope. That this vision in its most preeminent form is Shakespeare's probably doesn't need a great deal of stressing. From the relatively crude Faulconbridge of *King John* to the unsettling culmination that Edmund represents in *King Lear*, Shakespeare apparently relished the concept of the "illegitimate" as the surest means for addressing the inherent arbitrariness of the "legitimate." And if Austen's use of the same trope two centuries later seems oddly dated, I suspect the very anachronism of her choice is a testament to the actual, contemporary anxieties *Emma* obliquely addresses and often contains. (Not for nothing, for example, is the subject of inequality one of the themes of Mr. Knightley's lecture to Emma at Box Hill—"Were she [that is, Miss Bates] your equal in situation—but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case" [339].)
17. This is not quite to suggest that what Mr. Woodhouse really fears at the close are "housebreakers" chanting *Liberte! Egalite! Fraternite!* in between stanzas of the *Marseillaise*. Nonetheless, I do want to maintain that Austen's choice of bastardy with Harriet may have been her own strategic anachronism for writing the beautifully controlled, seemingly "timeless" novel she has. Anachronism, in other words, is a strategy with at least two contrary energies whenever it confronts the "contemporary": it can impose the seemingly central concerns of the moment on an earlier time (as I suspect we too often do with Austen); or it can evade too direct a confrontation with the present by resorting to the formulations of an earlier time.
18. That Austen often chooses the second of these strategies seems to me self-evident. And in this respect Shakespeare, particularly the Shakespeare of *Lear*, is arguably more central to her imagination than anyone else, not only with the bastard in *Emma*, but with the family structure she creates for her next novel, *Persuasion*—a widowed father not very far from madness through vanity, and three daughters, only one of whom has any value—as well as with the supererogatory third sister Austen unaccountably

attaches to Elinor and Marianne in the much earlier *Sense and Sensibility*. (I leave for parentheses the far more outrageous proposition that *Mansfield Park* recasts, in the Bertrams and the Prices, the *two* families of *Lear*, so that Fanny Price is *both* put-upon Cordelia *and* uncanny cuckoo-child, somehow managing to cast Goneril and Regan out of their own patrimonial nest without even trying.)

19. Still, rather than pursue this particular line of debatable argument any further, I'd prefer to return to the density of *Emma* itself, a density which for me is never far removed from the peculiar combination of irony and engagement that characterizes Austen as a novelist.
20. The irony in Austen, I'm sure I don't have to stress, is an almost inescapable topic when commenting on her work. We can see it at its most transparent in one of the sentences describing the group's arrival at Box Hill: "Nothing was wanting but to be happy when they got there" (III.vii, 332)—where the wonderfully understated *nothing* is not unlike the equally dry *all* a century and a half later in the Beatles' "All you need is love." But we can find a rather more subtle example soon afterwards in the emphasis Austen places upon the "want of union" among the nine people so disjointedly assembled for the excursion, while she moves the narrative onward, beyond Box Hill, towards an ending where, more than a hundred pages later, we are to be assured in the novel's final six words of "the *perfect* happiness of the union" between Emma and Mr. Knightley (III.xix, 440; my italics), especially since the idea of perfection itself has been exploded at Box Hill through its witty association with Emma's name (see the illuminating discussion of "perfection" and "Emma" in Park Honan's biography [356]).
21. Isolated occurrences like these, however, are less interesting than the more problematic moments where the ultimate point of the irony seems impossible to pin down. Consider, for example, Austen's notorious representation of the response Emma gives to Mr. Knightley's proposal: "What did she say? —Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does" (III.xiii, 391). Obviously, in its denial to Emma of explicit speech, one might argue (and I'm sure someone has) that the narrator has appropriated Emma's voice for her own as conclusively as Frank Churchill did earlier for *his* declarations at Box Hill. Or, with at least equal justice, one might claim that the "lady" in Austen's formulation is an arbitrary social construct effectively denying Emma all possibility of individual expression. Or, even more plausibly perhaps, one might argue that the three sentences reflect nothing more than Austen's good humored evasion of the clichés attendant upon the kind of "happy" ending that silly "lady" readers demand.
22. But in no way can we be certain of the real direction of Austen's irony, and in that respect her unfathomable tone approximates the interrogation of irony itself that we've seen in the past quarter century or so. (I'm thinking not only of Wayne Booth's analysis of "unstable" irony—in his later *Rhetoric of Irony*, 1971—but even more of Paul de Man's quite independent critique of the New Critics' all-too-complacent understanding of where, in their own well-wrought readings, the irony "stops.") Still, to venture any farther into this area is to participate too passively in another kind of anachronism, the inescapable one implicit in Croce's maxim long ago that "all history" (not to mention all criticism) "is contemporary."
23. Far less risky, on the other hand, is a simple recognition of a quality not commonly found in so distinguished an ironist: Austen's ability to maintain an illusion of engagement with the putative reality of her narratives, even while her impulse towards irony brings her so strikingly close—sometimes—to subverting their apparent integrity. And it is this surprising quality of engagement, I am sure, far more than any admiration for her wonderfully layered detachment, that explains her enduring readership. I choose to end, then, more or less where I began: with a sense of her truly remarkable resistance to reduction, even as that astonishing resistance continues to play itself not "out" but *between* the covers of *Emma*. That for now, at least for me, seems more than enough.



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# Re-reading Box Hill: reading the practice of reading everyday life

## Volume III, Chapter VII of *Emma*

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They had a very fine day for Box Hill; and all the other outward circumstances of arrangement, accommodation, and punctuality, were in favour of a pleasant party. Mr. Weston directed the whole, officiating safely between Hartfield and the Vicarage, and every body was in good time. Emma and Harriet went together; Miss Bates and her niece, with the Eltons; the gentlemen on horseback. Mrs. Weston remained

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with Mr. Woodhouse. Nothing was wanting but to be happy when they got there. Seven miles were travelled in expectation of enjoyment, and every body had a burst of admiration on first arriving; but in the general amount of the day there was deficiency. There was a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union, which could not be got over. They separated too much into parties. The Eltons walked together; Mr. Knightley took charge of Miss Bates and Jane; and Emma and Harriet belonged to Frank Churchill. And Mr. Weston tried, in vain, to make them harmonise better. It seemed at first an accidental division, but it never materially varied. Mr. and Mrs. Elton, indeed, shewed no unwillingness to mix, and be as agreeable as they could; but during the two whole hours that were spent on the hill, there seemed a principle of separation, between the other parties, too strong for any fine prospects, or any cold collation, or any cheerful Mr. Weston, to remove.

At first it was downright dulness to Emma. She had never seen Frank Churchill so silent and stupid. He said nothing worth hearing— looked without seeing—admired without intelligence—listened without knowing what she said. While he was so dull, it was no wonder that Harriet should be dull likewise; and they were both insufferable.

When they all sat down it was better; to her taste a great deal better, for Frank Churchill grew talkative and gay, making her his first object. Every distinguishing attention that could be paid, was paid to her. To amuse her, and be agreeable in her eyes, seemed all that he cared for—and Emma, glad to be enlivened, not sorry to be flattered, was gay and easy too, and gave him all the friendly encouragement, the admission to be gallant, which she had ever given in the first and most animating period of their acquaintance; but which now, in her own estimation, meant nothing, though in the judgment of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could very well describe. "Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively." They were laying themselves open to that very phrase—and to having it sent off in a letter

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to Maple Grove by one lady, to Ireland by another. Not that Emma was gay and thoughtless from any real felicity; it was rather because she felt less happy than she had expected. She laughed because she was disappointed; and though she liked him for his attentions, and thought them all, whether in friendship, admiration, or playfulness, extremely judicious, they were not winning back her heart. She still intended him for her friend.

"How much I am obliged to you," said he, "for telling me to come to-day!— If it had not been for you, I should certainly have lost all the happiness of this party. I had quite determined to go away again."

"Yes, you were very cross; and I do not know what about, except that you were too late for the best strawberries. I was a kinder friend than you deserved. But you were humble. You begged hard to be commanded to come."

"Don't say I was cross. I was fatigued. The heat overcame me."

"It is hotter to-day."

"Not to my feelings. I am perfectly comfortable to-day."

"You are comfortable because you are under command."

"Your command?— Yes."

"Perhaps I intended you to say so, but I meant self-command. You had, somehow or other, broken bounds yesterday, and run away from your own management; but to-day you are got back again—and as I cannot be always with you, it is best to believe your temper under your own command rather than mine."

"It comes to the same thing. I can have no self-command without a motive. You order me, whether you speak or not. And you can be always with me. You are always with me."

"Dating from three o'clock yesterday. My perpetual influence could not begin earlier, or you would not have been so much out of humour before."

"Three o'clock yesterday! That is your date. I thought I had seen you first in February."

"Your gallantry is really unanswerable. But (lowering her

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voice)— nobody speaks except ourselves, and it is rather too much to be talking nonsense for the entertainment of seven silent people."

"I say nothing of which I am ashamed," replied he, with lively impudence. "I saw you first in February. Let every body on the Hill hear me if they can. Let my accents swell to Mickleham on one side, and Dorking on the other. I saw you first in February." And then whispering— "Our companions are excessively stupid. What shall we do to rouse them? Any nonsense will serve. They *shall* talk. Ladies and gentlemen, I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse (who, wherever she is, presides) to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking of?"

Some laughed, and answered good-humouredly. Miss Bates said a great deal; Mrs. Elton swelled at the idea of Miss Woodhouse's presiding; Mr. Knightley's answer was the most distinct.

"Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are all thinking of?"

"Oh! no, no"—cried Emma, laughing as carelessly as she could— "Upon no account in the world. It is the very last thing I would stand the brunt of just now. Let me hear any thing rather than what you are all thinking of. I will not say quite all. There are one or two, perhaps, (glancing at Mr. Weston and Harriet,) whose thoughts I might not be afraid of knowing."

"It is a sort of thing," cried Mrs. Elton emphatically, "which *I* should not have thought myself privileged to inquire into. Though, perhaps, as the *Chaperon* of the party— *I* never was in any circle—exploring parties— young ladies— married women—"

Her mutterings were chiefly to her husband; and he murmured, in reply,

"Very true, my love, very true. Exactly so, indeed— quite unheard of— but some ladies say any thing. Better

pass it off as a joke. Every body knows what is due to *you*."

"It will not do," whispered Frank to Emma; "they are most

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of them affronted. I will attack them with more address. Ladies and gentlemen—I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse to say, that she waives her right of knowing exactly what you may all be thinking of, and only requires something very entertaining from each of you, in a general way. Here are seven of you, besides myself, (who, she is pleased to say, am very entertaining already,) and she only demands from each of you either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated—or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed, and she engages to laugh heartily at them all."

"Oh! very well," exclaimed Miss Bates, "then I need not be uneasy. 'Three things very dull indeed.' That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I? (looking round with the most good-humoured dependence on every body's assent)—Do not you all think I shall?"

Emma could not resist.

"Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once."

Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush shewed that it could pain her.

"Ah!—well—to be sure. Yes, I see what she means, (turning to Mr. Knightley,) and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend."

"I like your plan," cried Mr. Weston. "Agreed, agreed. I will do my best. I am making a conundrum. How will a conundrum reckon?"

"Low, I am afraid, sir, very low," answered his son;—"but we shall be indulgent—especially to any one who leads the way."

"No, no," said Emma, "it will not reckon low. A conundrum of Mr. Weston's shall clear him and his next neighbour. Come, sir, pray let me hear it."

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"I doubt its being very clever myself," said Mr. Weston. "It is too much a matter of fact, but here it is.—What two letters of the alphabet are there, that express perfection?"

"What two letters!—express perfection! I am sure I do not know."

"Ah! you will never guess. You, (to Emma), I am certain, will never guess.—I will tell you.—M. and A.—Em—ma.—Do you understand?"

Understanding and gratification came together. It might be a very indifferent piece of wit, but Emma found a great deal to laugh at and enjoy in it—and so did Frank and Harriet.—It did not seem to touch the rest of the party equally; some looked very stupid about it, and Mr. Knightley gravely said,

"This explains the sort of clever thing that is wanted, and Mr. Weston has done very well for himself; but he

must have knocked up every body else. *Perfection* should not have come quite so soon."

"Oh! for myself, I protest I must be excused," said Mrs. Elton; "*I* really cannot attempt—I am not at all fond of the sort of thing. I had an acrostic once sent to me upon my own name, which I was not at all pleased with. I knew who it came from. An abominable puppy!— You know who I mean (nodding to her husband). These kind of things are very well at Christmas, when one is sitting round the fire; but quite out of place, in my opinion, when one is exploring about the country in summer. Miss Woodhouse must excuse me. I am not one of those who have witty things at every body's service. I do not pretend to be a wit. I have a great deal of vivacity in my own way, but I really must be allowed to judge when to speak and when to hold my tongue. Pass us, if you please, Mr. Churchill. Pass Mr. E., Knightley, Jane, and myself. We have nothing clever to say — not one of us.

"Yes, yes, pray pass *me*," added her husband, with a sort of sneering consciousness; "*I* have nothing to say that can entertain Miss Woodhouse, or any other young lady. An old married man— quite good for nothing. Shall we walk, Augusta?"

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"With all my heart. I am really tired of exploring so long on one spot. Come, Jane, take my other arm."

Jane declined it, however, and the husband and wife walked off. "Happy couple!" said Frank Churchill, as soon as they were out of hearing:—"How well they suit one another!— Very lucky— marrying as they did, upon an acquaintance formed only in a public place!— They only knew each other, I think, a few weeks in Bath! Peculiarly lucky!— for as to any real knowledge of a person's disposition that Bath, or any public place, can give—it is all nothing; there can be no knowledge. It is only by seeing women in their own homes, among their own set, just as they always are, that you can form any just judgment. Short of that, it is all guess and luck— and will generally be ill-luck. How many a man has committed himself on a short acquaintance, and rued it all the rest of his life!"

Miss Fairfax, who had seldom spoken before, except among her own confederates, spoke now.

"Such things do occur, undoubtedly."— She was stopped by a cough. Frank Churchill turned towards her to listen.

"You were speaking," said he, gravely. She recovered her voice.

"I was only going to observe, that though such unfortunate circumstances do sometimes occur both to men and women, I cannot imagine them to be very frequent. A hasty and imprudent attachment may arise— but there is generally time to recover from it afterwards. I would be understood to mean, that it can be only weak, irresolute characters, (whose happiness must be always at the mercy of chance,) who will suffer an unfortunate acquaintance to be an inconvenience, an oppression for ever."

He made no answer; merely looked, and bowed in submission; and soon afterwards said, in a lively tone,

"Well, I have so little confidence in my own judgment, that whenever I marry, I hope some body will chuse my wife for me. Will you? (turning to Emma.) Will you chuse a wife for me?— I am sure I should like any body fixed on by you.

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You provide for the family, you know, (with a smile at his father). Find some body for me. I am in no hurry. Adopt her, educate her."

"And make her like myself."

"By all means, if you can."

"Very well. I undertake the commission. You shall have a charming wife."

"She must be very lively, and have hazle eyes. I care for nothing else. I shall go abroad for a couple of years—and when I return, I shall come to you for my wife. Remember."

Emma was in no danger of forgetting. It was a commission to touch every favourite feeling. Would not Harriet be the very creature described? Hazle eyes excepted, two years more might make her all that he wished. He might even have Harriet in his thoughts at the moment; who could say? Referring the education to her seemed to imply it.

"Now, ma'am," said Jane to her aunt, "shall we join Mrs. Elton?"

"If you please, my dear. With all my heart. I am quite ready. I was ready to have gone with her, but this will do just as well. We shall soon overtake her. There she is—no, that's somebody else. That's one of the ladies in the Irish car party, not at all like her.— Well, I declare—"

They walked off, followed in half a minute by Mr. Knightley. Mr. Weston, his son, Emma, and Harriet, only remained; and the young man's spirits now rose to a pitch almost unpleasant. Even Emma grew tired at last of flattery and merriment, and wished herself rather walking quietly about with any of the others, or sitting almost alone, and quite unattended to, in tranquil observation of the beautiful views beneath her. The appearance of the servants looking out for them to give notice of the carriages was a joyful sight; and even the bustle of collecting and preparing to depart, and the solicitude of Mrs. Elton to have her carriage first, were gladly endured, in the prospect of the quiet drive home which was to close the very questionable enjoyments of this day of pleasure. Such another scheme, composed

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of so many ill-assorted people, she hoped never to be betrayed into again.

While waiting for the carriage, she found Mr. Knightley by her side. He looked around, as if to see that no one were near, and then said,

"Emma, I must once more speak to you as I have been used to do: a privilege rather endured than allowed, perhaps, but I must still use it. I cannot see you acting wrong, without a remonstrance. How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?— Emma, I had not thought it possible."

Emma recollected, blushed, was sorry, but tried to laugh it off.

"Nay, how could I help saying what I did?—Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me."

"I assure you she did. She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since. I wish you could have heard how she talked of it— with what candour and generosity. I wish you could have heard her honouring your forbearance, in being able to pay her such attentions, as she was for ever receiving from yourself and your father, when her society must be so irksome."

"Oh!" cried Emma, "I know there is not a better creature in the world: but you must allow, that what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her."

"They are blended," said he, "I acknowledge; and, were she prosperous, I could allow much for the occasional prevalence of the ridiculous over the good. Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation— but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen

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grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her—and before her niece, too—and before others, many of whom (certainly *some*.) would be entirely guided by *your* treatment of her.—This is not pleasant to you, Emma—and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will,—I will tell you truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now."

While they talked, they were advancing towards the carriage; it was ready; and, before she could speak again, he had handed her in. He had misinterpreted the feelings which had kept her face averted, and her tongue motionless. They were combined only of anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern. She had not been able to speak; and, on entering the carriage, sunk back for a moment overcome—then reproaching herself for having taken no leave, making no acknowledgment, parting in apparent sullenness, she looked out with voice and hand eager to shew a difference; but it was just too late. He had turned away, and the horses were in motion. She continued to look back, but in vain; and soon, with what appeared unusual speed, they were half way down the hill, and every thing left far behind. She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed—almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of this representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued! And how suffer him to leave her without saying one word of gratitude, of concurrence, of common kindness!

Time did not compose her. As she reflected more, she seemed but to feel it more. She never had been so depressed. Happily it was not necessary to speak. There was only

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Harriet, who seemed not in spirits herself, fagged, and very willing to be silent; and Emma felt the tears running down her cheeks almost all the way home, without being at any trouble to check them, extraordinary as they were.

Notes

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