Darcy and Emma: Austen's Ironic Meditation on Gender

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SUPPOSE JANE AUSTEN had told the story of her most famous novel from the point of view of Mr. Darcy instead of Elizabeth Bennet. In this fanciful version of *Pride and Prejudice*, instead of seeing Darcy through Elizabeth's eyes, readers would have full access to his self-deceptions, excuses, and follies. Darcy, of course, would still be "proud, . . . above his company" (*PP* 10), and "spoilt" (*PP* 369); he would still fall in love with his severest critic, whose clear-eyed observations about his faults would improve his manners. However, so that Austen would not seem to be recycling her characters and plots, she would obscure this hypothetical revision by reversing the gender of all the main characters: the role of Darcy would be turned into a woman, the role of Elizabeth into a man, and so on. The newly created heiress would still be "handsome" (*PP* 10), "clever" (*PP* 16), and "rich" (*PP* 378), with a "comfort[able]" home in Pemberley (*PP* 384), and a disposition to be "happy" once she gets what she wants (*PP* 312). At this point, we must stop and note that the result bears a striking resemblance to another Austen novel, *Emma*.

The coincidence between the novels is that of a *mirror image*, something reversed in the process of reflection as an object is by a mirror. Mirroring as a literary technique differs from the inclusion of stock characters, such as the incapable mothers (Mrs. Dashwood, Mrs. Bennet, Lady Bertram), or idle ne'er-do-wells (Willoughby, Mr. Wickham, Henry Crawford), who wear superimposed similarities from novel to novel. Instead, mirroring reverses a central

trait—a reference such as gender—to disturb and examine paradigms. Inverting the characters in this way makes gender pivotal, positioning it as a central theme of the novel. As Austen’s “concern with . . . the pathetic plight of women in the society of her time and place” (Emmett 404) can place her in the tradition of feminist commentary, it is worth examining the example she offers by turning *Pride and Prejudice* inside out genderwise. Through gender, Austen examines preconceptions about how men and women are similar (internally or individually), how they differ (externally or socially), and what happens when someone does not quite fit the expected social pattern of gendered behavior. The use of gender in *Emma* and the possible sources of inspiration for this whimsical topsy-turvy—the works of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, William Shakespeare, and the Reverend James Fordyce—reveal the truly remarkable depths in Austen’s insight and writing.

The reversed-gender mirroring of *Pride and Prejudice* in *Emma* is extensive. It begins with the two proud figures, Darcy and Emma, both of whom are “handsome, clever, and rich” (*E* 5). Both receive too much deference from the world, causing them to suffer from “the power of having rather too much [their] own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of [themselves]” (*E* 5). As a result, both believe, at least initially, that whomever they love must likewise be in love with them; in *Pride and Prejudice*, the one assumed smitten is Elizabeth Bennet, and in *Emma*, Frank Churchill. Neither Darcy nor Emma needs to marry to improve financial situation or social position. Both reside at fine estates (Pemberley and Hartfield) with a single relative in their care; these dependents are Georgiana Darcy, Darcy’s younger sister, and Mr. Woodhouse, Emma’s childish father. Both Darcy and Emma interfere in the lives of close and easily influenced friends, Mr. Bingley and Harriet Smith, to prevent matches deemed imprudent in terms of connections. Finally, each falls in love with his or her critic, a sensible person whose pointed disapproval will materially correct the flaws of pride and self-centeredness.

If the reversed-gender mirroring of the two novels is unobtrusive, there are good reasons for it. One is that *Emma* is fully developed as a novel in its own right, with inimitable characters and unique locations, to realize Austen’s trademark naturalness and consistency. The heroine is no one-dimensional figure, nor is the work itself a parody of *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen was certainly capable of parody, as evidenced by her juvenilia and *Northanger Abbey*. Parody, however, typically retains an elevated style while abusing its subject. Further, the “goal of the parodist is to comment critically and to expose and explode flaws of the original”; thus for “parody to work compellingly, it must

hint at the original at every turn" (Williams 313). If there is any such abuse of its subject or hinting at the original in *Emma*, it is far too subtle for detection as parody. Another reason for the unobtrusive mirroring is *point of view*, the perspective Austen uses to tell the two stories. The point of view from which the two proud characters are seen is significantly altered from one novel to the next. Darcy is seen mainly through Elizabeth Bennet's eyes, while Emma admits the reader to her internal consciousness. The external or internal perspective makes a notable difference to how Darcy and Emma are perceived and judged: Elizabeth's external criticism of Darcy is generally severe while Emma's internal criticism of herself is either light or nonexistent. Austen thus accurately renders the real-life tendency of people to be less apt to see and more inclined to forgive their own faults than those of others.

The most significant reason the mirroring is unobtrusive, however, is the reversal of gender, which subjects the characters to the very different expectations Austen's society held for men and women. An action performed by a woman is perceived differently than when performed by a man: Bingley's "sweet tempered" affability in allowing Darcy to dissuade him from connecting with the Bennets (*PP* 82) becomes in Harriet a gullible foolishness as she refuses Robert Martin on Emma's advice. Temperaments are also perceived differently. Darcy, for example, is "haughty" (*PP* 16), but his responsibilities and position as a "great m[an]" entitle him to be so (*PP* 258). Society may disapprove but suffers his behavior, dismissing it as mere "whimsical[ity] in his civilities" (*PP* 258). The same flaw in Emma, however, makes her endearingly obtuse one moment and unselfconsciously self-absorbed and manipulative the next. Her behavior is not excused "without a remonstrance" (*E* 374); if not repaired, Emma's insolence to Miss Bates and her wrongheaded advice to Harriet Smith will materially damage the social and financial wellbeing of her acquaintances. Emma's greater potential to cause damage is ironic, given that her sphere of influence as a woman is so much smaller than Darcy's as a man.

Gender, the mirror's reference, is a constructed social status, the same conceptual category as social rank, another common Austenian theme. In Austen's day, "the sex-gender system was not yet stabilized in modern terms," but the differences between genders were found then, as they are today, in behavior, social expectations, and the "radically different privileges and opportunities" that the "culture . . . affords" (Rankin 121–22). Individual men and women behave more or less in conformance with the social permissions and prohibitions applied to all men and women, and it is easier for some to conform thus than for others. Men and women who do not quite fit the socially

approved pattern for gender encounter restrictions and sanctions in sometimes humorous, oftentimes painful ways, and these lessons teach them what behaviors are acceptable and which to avoid. This insight would have been easy for Austen, a keen and critical observer of social behavior, especially since she did not fit the pattern herself, being “that singular anomaly, the lady novelist” (Gilbert 253)—with an emphasis on every sense of *singular*.

In terms of constructed social gender, Emma is remarkably similar to Darcy. They have, in Rankin’s formulation, the “identical nature, nurture, and social rank” (122): both are proud but worthy, indulgently parented, and gentry of importance within their respective circles. Like Darcy, Emma does “just what she like[s]” and is “directed chiefly by her own [judgment]” (*E* 5); she is “inordinately self-determined” for a woman (Moffat 49). Just as Darcy interferes with Bingley’s courtship, Emma assumes she knows what is best for others and confidently meddles, as exemplified by her blithe interference in Harriet’s marital decisions. Emma is relatively free from male authority; she has social prominence (within an admittedly small circle), the responsibility of caring for another adult, and, as she explains to Harriet, relief from the need to marry for financial or social advantage (*E* 84). She speaks to Mr. Knightley as an equal (Moffat 46): “‘We always say what we like to one another’” (*E* 10). While she may mean well, she is—to phrase it delicately—not as considerate as she might be of the feelings of others, as in the tactlessness with which she refuses Mr. Elton’s proposal (*E* 129–32) or later wittily derides Miss Bates’s innocent self-deprecation at Box Hill (*E* 370). This hubristic presumption is what makes Emma unconventional. She does not fully conform to socio-gender expectations for women, allowing Austen to explore Emma’s nature as woman “untrammelled by the customs of femininity” (Dusinberre 271). Austen concludes that, as individuals, women are similar to men in many respects, once the externals of gender have been stripped away.

Externally or socially, however, the differences between the genders are many. Austen explored some obvious ones in her earlier novels: in *Sense and Sensibility* she criticized the exercised (or at least unchecked) power of patriarchy to do harm rather than good through the displacement of the Dashwood women, in *Pride and Prejudice* the financial need for women—but not as much for men—to marry, and in *Mansfield Park* the double standard applied to adulterous lovers Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford. Austen probes the more subtle socio-gender differences in *Emma*, many of which go unremarked because they are manifestations of gender norms and are considered (or unthinkingly accepted as) appropriate. For example, society treats Darcy and Emma

differently because of their respective genders. Darcy is “not to be laughed at” (*PP* 57), but Emma clearly is, a circumstance that cannot be dismissed solely as a consequence of her clumsy cluelessness. Emma’s receipt of guidance from Mr. Knightley also seems entirely natural, reinforcing the unconventionality of Mr. Darcy receiving—from a woman, no less—the sound criticism of his ungentlemanly behavior that shakes his complacency and helps him mature as an individual.

Society affords Darcy and Emma different opportunities. For all her unconventional advantages (unconventional, that is, for a woman), Emma is as stereotypically idle as any woman of the gentry class; in her case, “[w]oman’s usual occupations of eye and hand and mind” are “draw[ing],” “read[ing],” “music . . . [and] carpet-work” (*E* 85), all of which are starkly useless, especially when contrasted with Darcy’s employment as “landlord, and . . . master” (*PP* 249). Emma’s geography is similarly restricted. She has “never been to Box Hill,” which is less than ten miles from Hartfield (*E* 352), and, prior to the strawberry picnic, she has “long [been absent from Donwell] Abbey” (*E* 357), only “about a mile from Highbury,” the “village . . . to which Hartfield . . . belong[ed]” (*E* 7, 9). Her geographic limits are all the more claustrophobic when Darcy’s travels are considered: London, Hertfordshire, Derbyshire, and Kent. Emma’s talents and energy, under the gender restrictions of idleness and a small, unvaried environment, make her bored; her boredom inspires her to act, and when she does, she gets herself and others into trouble. The solution, little as the modern reader may like to admit it, is for Emma to conform more fully to the gender norms for women of the time: she must attend more diligently to “a habit of self-command . . . , [her] duty, . . . propriety, . . . [to] endeavour to avoid the suspicions of others, to save [her] health and credit, and [to be tranquil]” (*E* 268). Ironically, Emma offers Harriet this very same advice.

Austen explores and tests the limits of gender norms in *Emma*, causing small social disruptions. Georgiana Darcy’s dependency in *Pride and Prejudice*, however appropriate for her age and gender, differs from that of Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*. His passive dependency is equally inappropriate on those same grounds, highlighting the pathetic ridiculousness of adult dependency in general. What is brought under scrutiny is the patriarchal system that forced healthy, capable women into this condition in Austen’s day, as well as the fact that women are still the more frequent caretakers of elderly parents. While Darcy’s postponement of marriage until he is “able to please himself” is unremarkable (*PP* 183), the idea that Emma might choose not to marry—the state

thought to make women the “happiest, . . . [the] most respectable in the eyes of the world, and the most useful members of society” (Gregory 109)—is a “painful . . . topic,” the shirking of a divinely ordered duty (Fordyce 1:25). She nonetheless toys with the notion, declaring, “I am not only, not going to be married, at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all” (*E* 84). Mrs. Darcy moves to Pemberley to reside with her husband (*PP* 385), but when Mr. Knightley reverses the marital residence pattern by moving into Hartfield, it creates a social dissonance that resonates even today, illuminating the expectation that women follow their husbands into marriage and provoking thought of what women give up once they wed that men do not. By not materially changing her situation at Hartfield when she marries Mr. Knightley (who becomes complicit by acceding to her wishes), Emma overturns social expectations of gender in a way that could be considered “disruptive” (Dusinberre 244).

Other interpretations of these matters are certainly possible, and they may be more typical as well. Mr. Knightley’s moving into Hartfield, for example, is explained away in the novel. Emma simply cannot bring herself to leave her father, and neighborhood robberies—“Mrs. Weston’s poultry-house [is] robbed one night of all her turkies” and “[o]ther poultry-yards in the neighbourhood also suffered”—necessitate that Mr. Knightley provide “protection” for the household (*E* 483–84). This interpretation remains somewhat unsatisfactory because of the artificiality of the plot device, though one is clearly needed to enable Emma to marry while simultaneously continuing to care for her father without traumatizing him by moving him from his home; moreover, the fact that an explanation is needed highlights the discomfort with gender norm disruptions inherent in the situation. In the childlike need for care and trivial amusements of Mr. Woodhouse—“[b]ooks of engravings, drawers of medals, cameos, corals, shells, and every other family collection within [Mr. Knightley’s] cabinets” are offered as an indoor alternative to the picnic (*E* 362)—there may be only humor, the gentle mocking of the hypochondriac that Austen would explore further in *Sanditon*. It is also evident that Emma needs and can only benefit from Mr. Knightley’s advice; he is, after all, older and wiser than she is, and she “makes mistakes . . . because, like all other human beings, she is fallible. She also makes more [mistakes] than she needs, [when] . . . she underrates the need for objective self-criticism” (Butler 266). Ultimately, Emma’s taking advice from and then marrying Mr. Knightley are emphatic confirmations of social norms, even though his moving to Hartfield manages to shake them up a bit.

Does Austen's exploration of gender in *Emma* have an overarching message for society? Emma's independence, for example, implies something about the capabilities of all women, a tacit criticism of patriarchal limits; Mr. Knightley's rational flexibility suggests the system need not be absolute. Any answer must be sought in the context of Austenian morality. Austen's heroines, including Emma, find their "moral progress [in] discerning, and submitting to, the claims of the society around them" (Butler 1). Emma's flirtation with social disruption can only be temporary. Emma does marry, and at some future date, there will be no need for Mr. Knightley to continue at Hartfield. Mrs. Knightley will undoubtedly reside with her husband at Donwell Abbey, and Emma the unconventional heroine will disappear into the unremarkability of full compliance with social conventions. Austen is not offering the same level of moral criticism that one finds in *The Wind Done Gone*, the so-called parodic rejoinder to the antebellum mythology of *Gone with the Wind*; after reading Alice Randall on the horrific injustices of slavery, one might fear the nation's racial divide is too deep ever to be healed. In contrast, Austen's critique of patriarchy is much more hopeful. Emma's reformation echoes Darcy's; the commonsense wisdom of Mr. Knightley is also Elizabeth Bennet's, and these happy resolutions help to recall the good that is in men and women alike. Austen's solution to the eternal war between the sexes is the uniting of hearts and minds in marriage. If the dénouement, the union of Emma and Mr. Knightley, is a trifle awkward or dissatisfying, it is an accord nonetheless, one of the most conventional type, and the issues of where the Knightleys initially resided and their reasons for it will likely be soon resolved and conveniently forgotten. Social norms are ultimately reinforced, and in this respect, *Emma* is no different from Austen's other novels.

Austen—like most if not all authors of more than a single novel—learned from and reacted to her own work and that of others in developing *Emma*. Artistically, the novel displays in full her impressive attainments in her craft, including her ability to represent things with a layered complexity that admits the reader to different depths of understanding, emulating the process of discovery that is life. The characters play multiple, shifting roles and comically misunderstand each other, highlighting Austen's skillful use of ambiguities in identity and point of view to subtly highlight gender. The identities of many of the characters are ambiguous: the "[s]ocial and familial roles [of the characters] . . . are combined or reversed: Mr Knightley is to Emma . . . brother, father, and husband; Mr Woodhouse is Emma's father and child"; "Mrs Weston is also . . . Miss Taylor" (Berendsen 13); Frank Churchill is the

friend, lover, or deceiver of Emma; and so on. While these are ambiguities of relationship to Emma, Emma's identity in regard to gender is ambiguous. She is endowed with a man's advantages and a woman's circumscriptions; her gender also morphs as she shifts, for example, from being a woman who neither needs nor wants to marry (atypically feminine), to being one in love who must wait for the man to declare himself first (stereotypically feminine) (*E* 429-30).

Points of view, here in the sense of the perspectives from which individuals see or consider things, are also ambiguous as the characters say one thing and are misunderstood to mean another, misunderstandings that can embroil the reader as well and which serve to reveal the characters' psychology. An example is found in the discussion between Emma and Mr. Elton concerning Harriet's health: "a throat very much inflamed, with a great deal of heat . . . [and] a quick low pulse" prevent her from attending a dinner (*E* 109). Emma thinks Mr. Elton means he is worried about Harriet. He, however, is concerned with Emma, and his speech may be interpreted either in the way Emma does or in the way Mr. Elton intends. The reader may see only Emma's point of view—at least upon reading the novel for the first time—and is thereby excluded from the actuality of what the other character intends, becoming involved in Emma's process of interpretation and discovery. The reader might also see in the passage Emma's willfulness, her deliberate attempt to keep Mr. Elton focused on the goal she has set for him (i.e., an attachment to Harriet), and her disinclination to allow Mr. Elton to attain a goal from which she would exclude him (i.e., an attachment to herself), all of which run counter to the traits deemed desirable in women: "softness, weakness, timidity, and tender reliance on man" (Fordyce 2:74). Through ambiguities, Austen simultaneously represents things as they are understood and things as they are meant, revealing in the process the psychology of both her characters and readers.

Austen's sly exploration of gender and brilliant use of ambiguities in *Emma* entitle us to speculate about where she found her inspiration. Four authors served as possible sources: Samuel Richardson, whose *Grandison* explored the social consequences of gender; Henry Fielding, whose parody *Joseph Andrews* reversed the gender of the characters in Richardson's *Pamela*; William Shakespeare, whose crossdressing characters provided insights about gender as performance; and the Reverend James Fordyce, whose sermons on proper behavior informed the gender norms of Austen's day. The influences of Richardson, Fielding, Shakespeare, and Fordyce do not appear in *Emma* through mere "imitation or mimicking"; instead, Austen offers readers "a new independent work of art that can stand comparison, which perhaps prompts in

readers a sense of deep similitude or affinity, but which rarely resembles the original in any obvious way" (Wiltshire 70). The four sources may have also informed some of Emma's more unusual qualities, enabling Austen to explore aspects of gender through the personality and actions of her unconventional heroine.

Richardson, whose work Austen enjoyed immensely, may well have served as one of Austen's inspirations for examining the social consequences of gender. Austen had already responded to Richardson's final novel, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (published 1753–1754), with "a fine mixture of admiration and irreverence" by adapting it as a satiric play "for family performance" sometime between the early 1790s and 1800 (Southam 136–40). She also alludes to *Grandison* twice in letters to her sister Cassandra less than two years before *Emma*'s publication (15 September; 11 October 1813). Although Richardson's earlier novels had featured female protagonists, *Grandison* "enact[ed] a crucial displacement of subject and perspective" by being "centred around a 'good man' rather than a good woman" (Batchelor 1). While *Grandison* is similarly "concerned with issues surrounding marriage and familial and social duty, the trials which emerge from such considerations take a markedly different form when faced by a 'Man of Honour' rather than a woman of virtue" (Batchelor 1). In addition, Austen perhaps found something of Emma's nature in that of Sir Charles. Like Sir Charles, Emma "consistently and quite uncritically approve[s her] own conduct" (Barker 503); she too has good intentions but shares a bit of his "sinister side," his "talent for psychologically manipulating the people around him" (Yates 546).

Fielding, Richardson's critic, might have influenced Austen to reverse the gender in *Pride and Prejudice* to form the central plot of *Emma*. The first of many authors who reacted in print to Richardson's first novel, *Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded* (published 1740), Fielding parodied it by reversing the gender of its characters in *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, and His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (published 1742). Richardson's Pamela Andrews is a virtuous maidservant pursued by her rapacious master, Mr. B., and the novel aligns its reader in unconscious sympathy with "the forces of patriarchy" (Moffat 47), at least to the point where Pamela weds her pursuer, whereupon the story loses both its literal and figurative steam. In Fielding's parody, Joseph Andrews is a footman protecting his chastity from the attempts upon it by Lady Booby. The reversal of gender in *Joseph Andrews* makes the story absurd in a way that Pamela's prurient flight from the seduction, blackmail, "incarceration, kidnapping, and attempted rape" is not (Kreissman 15). The overturned

socio-gender paradigms force the reader to “stop and examine the whole question of the relationship of the sexes” in terms of norms, power relationships, and the predicted outcomes of interactions (Kreissman 20).

Shakespeare, with whom, as Austen remarked through her character Edmund Bertram, “[every]one is familiar . . . from one’s earliest years” (*MP* 338), would have provided Austen with insight into gender as performance: behavior intended to garner societal applause rather than an indication of innate realities. In 1814, the year *Mansfield Park* was published (*Emma* would follow the next year), Austen would not have needed to go far to find Shakespearean inspiration to turn *Pride and Prejudice* inside out genderwise to see what would come of it. Austen mentions Shakespeare by name at least once in four of her six novels. However, *Mansfield Park* refers to the bard six times and makes playacting and the proper behavior of men and women around it central devices of the plot. A further suggestive tie to Shakespearean crossdressing is found in Austen’s letters to Cassandra: in 1811 Austen refers to Portia, the beautiful, intelligent, and wealthy heroine who disguises herself as a young man in *The Merchant of Venice* (6 June), and in 1814 she mentions the play itself twice (2 March; 5 March).

Associations between *Emma* and other plays by Shakespeare are certainly possible: Rand suggests *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; interestingly, he compares Emma to male characters in those particular plays (167–70). Wiltshire notes resemblances to both *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, highlighting Emma’s brief usurpation of a male editorial role for the latter (59–65). That *The Merchant of Venice* was a source of ideas for *Emma* is first suggested by the remarkable chain of romantic attachment—a device found in many of Shakespeare’s crossdressing comedies—and the chain in *Emma* is a whopper: Harriet is (stupidly) infatuated with Mr. Elton, who (proudly) aspires to Emma, who (briefly) thinks of Frank Churchill, who is (secretly) engaged to Jane Fairfax, who is (wrongly) suspected of involvement with Mr. Dixon, who is (faithfully, one presumes) married to the former Miss Campbell. Common to both *Emma* and *The Merchant of Venice* are marriage (a familiar Austenian theme) and a related riddle (Portia’s casket and Mr. Elton’s charade). Both works feature a father’s will: the testament of Portia’s father and the reluctance “to consent” to Emma’s marriage by Mr. Woodhouse (*E* 483). Emma echoes Portia’s contempt for her suitors with her cavalier dismissal of her own, as well as Harriet’s. When Portia disguises herself as a man, she achieves a “liberty of action” unusual for a woman (Maus 1087), a characteristic of Emma, who exercises her liberty while remaining

demurely attired in her Regency gown. Finally, both works mix ironic comedy with serious and sometimes painful consequences; the two texts have a faint but recognizable harmony despite the “bizarre disjunction” of “style, form and content” (Wiltshire 61-62).

Crossdressing, the exchange of gendered garb and roles, famously serves as a way into gender issues by raising “central questions . . . hav[ing] to do with the differences between men and women,” differences that remain “elusive” after the attire, behavior, and prerogatives have been switched (Rankin 121-24). Portia’s experiment with gender is explicit; she dons the garb and persona of a male lawyer (a term that continued to be redundant well past Austen’s day) to decide the legal argument between Shylock and Antonio. While Emma does not similarly disguise herself, she does assume male prerogatives, as in briefly declining to marry. However personally appropriate this stance seems to Emma at the moment, it is atypical for a woman of the Regency period and risks creating a social disruption. On the other hand, once Emma decides she wants to marry Mr. Knightley, her waiting passively for his declaration in stereotypically female fashion is an uncontroversial stance that could cost her dearly if he does not speak. Most significantly, Austen offers the reader a deeper reflection on the implications of gender than Shakespeare perhaps manages, showing her own “psychological (and, let us say, authorial) independence” from the bard (Wiltshire 71).

The humor of *Grandison*, *Joseph Andrews*, and *The Merchant of Venice* depends on the audience’s awareness of the mismatch between the disguised character’s external/social appearance and the internal/individual reality of his or her true gender, an awareness that imparts an ironic double meaning to dialogue and situations. The audience knows that Portia is really a woman flouting gender norms to display her wit; the resultant ironic humor is what classifies the play as a comedy. The humor in *Emma* is found in a similar place—the mismatch between external/social appearances and their internal/individual reality, or reality as filtered through Emma’s interpretation of events—but Austen excludes Emma from the mismatch while admitting readers and the socio-gender expectations they bring with them. Emma, for example, will doubtless marry someday, despite her disavowal, and readers recognize her announcement for what it is, an amusing self-delusion about her personal interests and the social realities that govern her. To achieve this humor, Austen relies on readers’ social expectations of gender to provide the metadramatic contrast.

The external/internal dichotomies, seen chiefly in hindsight by Emma

and reader alike, facilitate Austen's explorations of gendered identity, the norms of which were exemplified by the writings of Reverend Fordyce. He is featured in *Pride and Prejudice*: his *Sermons to Young Women*, from which Mr. Collins reads aloud, is rudely interrupted by Lydia Bennet (*PP* 68), and his pedantic style is devastatingly lampooned in Mr. Collins's discourse. In the first of the two-volume *Sermons*, Fordyce lectures on the dangers of cross-dressing, and worse, on any confusion of behavior between the sexes:

I confess myself shocked, whenever I see the sexes confounded. An effeminate fellow, that, destitute of every manly sentiment, copies with inverted ambition from your sex, is an object of contempt and aversion at once. On the other hand, a young woman of any rank, that throws off all the lovely softness of her nature, and emulates the daring intrepid temper of a man—how terrible! The transformation on either side must ever be monstrous. . . . But what though the dress be kept ever so distinct, if the behaviour is not; in those points, I mean, where the character peculiar to each sex seems to require a difference? There a metamorphosis in either will always offend an eye that is not greatly vitiated. It will do so particularly in [the female] sex. (1:86-87)

Sermons to Young Women and its companion volume, *Addresses to Young Men*, provide sternly worded cautions about how men and women should and ought not to behave. Ironically, Emma is most unhappy whenever she follows Fordyce's guidance on what well-behaved young ladies ought to do, and she lands herself and others in trouble whenever she fails to heed the same advice. If "the calm and rational pleasures of th[e] home are preferable to the noisy and giddy diversions usually found abroad" (Fordyce 1:73), it must be admitted that within the narrow confines of Hartfield and Highbury, Emma is thoroughly bored. Emma, "no feeble character," has "sense and energy and spirits" (*E* 18); boredom and "idleness can persuade a [person] with potential . . . to slide into a pattern of self-serving motives and acts," and in this respect, Emma resembles not Darcy but one of Austen's male ne'er-do-wells (Hall 189). If a "sweet timidity [is] given [to young women] to guard their innocence, by inclining them to shrink from whatever might threaten to injure it" (Fordyce 1:76), Emma is hardly displaying high-mindedness when she suspects or incites sexual intrigue between Mr. Dixon and Jane Fairfax (*E* 217-19). Finally, if "sensible men [are] . . . averse to the thought of marrying a witty female" (Fordyce 1:162), it explains something of Mr. Knightley's displeasure at the Box Hill witticism Emma makes at poor Miss Bates's expense

(*E* 370). In other words, when Emma pleases others, she does not please herself, and in pleasing herself, she displeases others. Austen thus criticizes the near impossibility of reconciling the individual and social aspects of gender norms.

In the memories of her nieces, there is a tantalizing glimpse of Austen at work on *Mansfield Park*, which perhaps provided a Shakespearean spark of gender, and *Emma*, her exploration of socio-gender issues. Austen would “sit quietly working [sewing] beside the fire in the library, saying nothing for a good while, and then . . . suddenly burst out laughing, jump up and run across the room to a table where pens and paper were lying, write something down, and then come back to the fire and go on quietly working as before” (Le Faye 206). While we can never know for sure what aspect of her writing she found so amusing, nor the reason she said of Emma that “no one but myself will much like [her]” (Le Faye 209), we can consider Austen’s deeply ironic analysis of gender in *Emma*. The heroine may be “independent, psychologically accessible, and . . . seem[ingly] modern,” but she is “anomalous” for her time and gender (Moffat 46-49). She may indeed be a “masculine woman,” the “creature” Reverend Fordyce called “naturally . . . unamiable” (1:86). When we always and only compare Emma to other Austenian heroines—Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price, Anne Elliot, and the rest—something essential to our understanding of her is lost. In expanding our comparison to include Darcy, a fuller brilliance in Austen’s multifaceted writing begins to shine forth.

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