

JANE AUSTEN AND THE
ENLIGHTENMENT

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services in the family chapel as among the 'improvements' there. The modernism that the Crawfords represent makes a clean sweep of anything that threatens immediate pleasure, making no allowance, at a conscious level at least, for what Hume would have called the 'artificial virtues'. Austen's criticism of this raw hedonism is neither puritanical nor unenlightened. It is in line with the observation made by her much admired Pasley that where money becomes the measure of all things, valour and learning are trampled underfoot, and with them all 'liberality of mind'.⁵⁶ But this is the commercial spirit carried to excess, and Pasley precludes his attack by reaffirming the old precept advanced by Hume that 'the luxury of individuals is infinitely more beneficial than dangerous to the state'.⁵⁷ Even in Fanny's case, it is a fortune of a kind – £10 – that enables her to join that most enlightened of institutions, a circulating library, causing her to feel for the first time that she is a person in her own right, and to exclaim that 'wealth is luxurious and daring'.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Military Policy*, pp. 474–5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 473; Pasley's argument at this juncture closely follows the sixth and seventh paragraphs of David Hume's essay 'Of Commerce', though the last point is made more trenchantly in 'Of Refinement in the Arts'. See *Political Essays*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, pp. 95–7, 110–14.

⁵⁸ *Mansfield Park*, p. 398. Fanny would have been left with lots to spare: a Southampton circulating library (possibly used by Jane Austen in 1808) charged three shillings for a season, and half a guinea for the year; a three-novel volume at this period could be twice as much – more than Mrs Norris's much-vaunted gift to William, which Jane Austen privately confided to be £1. See Christopher Skelton-Foord, 'To Buy or to Borrow? Circulating Libraries and Novel Reading in Britain, 1778–1828', *Library Review*, 47 (1998), 348–54, 352.

Emma, and the flaws of sovereignty

Jane Austen began *Emma* shortly before the hiatus in the war with France that followed on Napoleon's abdication in April 1814, and she finished it in March 1815 just at the moment that the deposed Emperor was resuming power. The peace may have been an illusory one, but if Austen wrote with the prospect of peace in view her timing was impeccable for Waterloo was history and Napoleon already on St Helena when the novel finally appeared. It was *Pride and Prejudice* that caused Winston Churchill to exclaim over the benignly becalmed lives led by Austen's characters, and in many ways *Emma* marks a return to the pacific settings of the earlier fiction. It also picks up on many of the earlier themes with a directness that suggests that Austen was consciously engaging in a rite of restoration. Indeed, at first sight the novel seems, for all its brilliance and intricacy, to be a summation of the work initially drafted in the nineties, but although the old Enlightenment motifs recur, many prove on closer inspection to have undergone a subtle sea change.

Emma, the imaginist, springs (to an extent seldom realized) from the same eighteenth-century tradition of female quixotry that gave birth to the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, for her plots owe as much to romance fiction as do the frenzied perceptions of Catherine Morland, even if their source is relatively concealed. Where Catherine transposes *Udolpho*, Emma's preoccupation with the type of the noble orphan and with the erotic fruits of heroic rescue are fully prefigured by *The Romance of the Forest*, its immediate predecessor.¹ There is more than a hint that Harriet's high regard for this book is shared by her mentor, since it is while apologizing for Robert

¹ On her mother's death, Adeline is sent to a convent at the age of seven, and later falls in love with Theodore who dramatically rescues her from the clutches of an evil Marquis. It turns out that she is the daughter of the Marquis's long-murdered elder brother. See *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard (Oxford, 1986), pp. 35–6, 167, 346. The relevance of this novel to Harriet's situation has recently (and independently) been commented on by Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan in a valuable note that also draws out parallels with another of Harriet's books, Regina Roche's *The Children of the Abbey*: see 'Harriet's Smith's Reading', *Notes and Queries*, 49 (2002), 449–50.

Martin's interest in books such as *The Vicar of Wakefield* (which Emma 'would not think any thing of') that Harriet speaks of her plan to get Robert to read the Radcliffe which he has – perhaps unsurprisingly – forgotten to borrow (34).² But the matter is left open, and the relative detachment of fantasy from its literary source has its point, for it accords with the novel's premiss that there is fiction in the very air that the characters breathe. Already in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine's fanciful constructions are a lot more plausible than the strained leaps of Charlotte Lennox's heroine, making the novel's quixotry more domestic than female. Catherine's daily muster of new evidence to fit her case provides a demonstration, however dramatic, of a quite normal cognitive process – and one much fixed upon by sceptical philosophers. Thus David Hume insisted on the ubiquity of 'fictions', and on how our 'remarkable propensity to believe' generates its own momentum, so that 'any train of thinking is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse'.³

In *Emma* quixotry is generalized further than in *Northanger Abbey*, for we are shown that it is not only heroines that 'can see nothing that does not answer'. Mr Woodhouse, for one, turns out to be as much of an imaginalist as his daughter, unconsciously attributing many of his own feelings and expressions to Mr Perry; and the scrupulously accurate Miss Bates is puzzled to find that she has visualized Mr Dixon as a look-alike of John Knightley, explaining that 'one takes up a notion, and runs away with it' (233, 107, 176). If George Knightley has a better idea of what is going forward than the other characters, it is because he is unusually ready to make allowance for what he projects. And when he self-reprovingly quotes from Cowper, 'Myself creating what I saw', he somewhat overcorrects his wish to think badly of Frank Churchill, for the tender look Frank has given Jane Fairfax is, indeed, a telltale one.⁴ Even Mr Knightley's judgements are liable to warp, however, as we see when Frank Churchill suddenly begins to rise in his estimation after Emma has said that she never loved him (433).

² Jane Austen's preference for the Goldsmith seems very clear here, which is odd, perhaps, in view of her earlier respect for Radcliffe. *The Romance of the Forest* is, however, a considerably less interesting novel than *Udolpho*, as Claudia L. Johnson concludes in her sensitive account of it (*Equivocal Beings*, pp. 73–93). It is as well to keep in mind that Radcliffe's reputation had declined significantly in the decade after her death, see my "'Strange Fits of Passion': Wordsworth and Ann Radcliffe', *Notes and Queries*, 45 (1998), 188–9.

³ *THN*, I.iii.ix.113; I.iv.ii.198; see also I.ii.viii.

⁴ Cowper, *The Task*, iv, 'The Winter Evening', line 290; *Emma*, p. 344.

Not content with generalizing mental waywardness in *Emma* through a wide cast of imaginalists, Jane Austen is out to show that her reader is an imaginalist too. Where plot is collapsed in *Northanger Abbey* and Catherine's extravagant construction round the figure of Montoni continually exposed to the daylight of 'probability' and the 'natural course of things', in *Emma* the reader is as much in the dark as the characters themselves, and kept guessing about outcomes. Emma's own ideas on what is in the offing are quite in line, moreover, with the resolutions provided by many of Austen's fellow-novelists and found acceptable by the audience she shared with them. Only Austen's refusal to understate the mercenariness of the marriage market makes a non-starter of Emma's darling scheme of uniting Harriet to Mr Elton, whose love of money (with only a small deflection of character) might well have been subdued by lust. As she wrote Austen must have realized that she had it in her power to supply sufficient substantiation to make many of Emma's fantasies come true. But the snuffing out of fictive plots also conveys the sense that the ways of reality are deep and intractable, uniquely right like the answers to riddles. Emma and Harriet's much talked-up collection of these provides the reader with a clue to the nature of the novel's plot, a clue confirmed on second reading when the solution to Emma's puzzle over why Jane Fairfax should be enduring Highbury for so long – 'She is a riddle, quite a riddle!' – seems blindingly simple (285). A successful riddle poses a question to which there appears to be no possible answer, usually because its component clauses are, on the face of it, incompatible, and in *Emma* this obfuscatory function is performed by the various fictions that grow up around the secretly engaged couple. Frank himself, in the first place, makes a show of flirting with Emma 'in order to assist a concealment so essential to me', even if this may seem a rather suspect rationalization for his habitual coquetry (438). And Emma, for her part, assigns Jane to Mr Dixon, providing an adulterous attachment for her rival at which Frank mischievously connives, before she goes on to assign Frank to Harriet, after the episode with the gypsies. Even if some of these fictions obviously ring false they are enough to put the reader off track, so that the union of Frank and Jane is lost on all but the most disciplined of imaginalists.

Once the novel's central riddle is resolved, the disclosure has a knock-on effect. Emma is not left to worry for long over the imaginary grief of Harriet, and the discovery that it is Mr Knightley whom Harriet has set her heart on rather than Frank, precipitates the recognition that she wishes to marry Mr Knightley herself. Jane Austen compresses what must rate as one of the most superbly managed of all denouements into a few pages, and simultaneously clinches a central and pervasive theme: that blindness is the

reward of assuming a godlike control. Harriet breezily asks Emma, once the secret of the engaged couple is out, if *she* at least had had no idea of it – ‘You, perhaps, might. – You (blushing as she spoke) who can see into everybody’s heart; but nobody else.’ In fact it is ‘with her own heart’ that Emma has, for the first time, to come to terms (404, 407). And her moment of truth, which is treated to the heightened language of a formal recognition scene (‘With insufferable vanity . . . with unpardonable arrogance . . .’), brings with it the perception that in being deceived about others she has also deceived herself (412). At a relational level it is the accident of her manipulation of her puppet-like companion into the posture of a potentially serious rival – for hasn’t she already told Mr Knightley that Harriet is just the right wife for him? – that breaks the spell of her dominance, and suddenly calls into question what she has presumed to be her special right – ‘to arrange everybody’s destiny’ (413).

The forces that underpin Emma’s exercise of sovereignty will occupy us later, but the immediate point to grasp is that Emma’s fictions are themselves shaped by her habitual stage-managing. The context of her description as an ‘imaginist’ is suggestive here, for it is the news of Harriet’s rescue by Frank that sets her planning once again, and rescue of one kind or another is at the root of all her imaginings. It is the account of how Dixon saved Jane at Weymouth from being dashed into the sea ‘by the sudden whirling round of something or other among the sails’ that gives her the germ for her graphic and ever-expanding story of their affair (160), and it is rescue that holds the key to her adoption of Harriet whom she yearns to raise from obscurity to a position of eminence through matchmaking. It would be wrong to suppose that Jane Austen had no time for the ‘preserver’ motif. Indeed, it is put to work in *Emma* when Colonel Campbell takes the orphaned Jane under his care out of gratitude for having been saved from death during a camp-fever by her father (163). But it is characteristic, all the same, that the rescue that carries the most weight in the novel is Mr Knightley’s unobtrusive act of kindness to Harriet after she has been cruelly snubbed by Mr Elton at the ball, an act ‘much more precious’ than Frank’s dashing intervention on the scene with the gypsies (328, 406). But the special attraction of rescue for Emma – what stamps it as her personal motif – is that she finds particular enjoyment in a role (whether vicarious or not) which safeguards her supremacy by allowing her to be the obliger rather than the obliged.

If the novel’s concern with fiction is bound to questions of rank, this is true also of its treatment of sociability. Thus a theme of Austen’s earlier career is, again, given a new direction in *Emma*, and one continuous with

the analysis of social position that is so conspicuous in *Mansfield Park*, only from the opposite point of view, since Emma occupies a place as exalted as Fanny’s is lowly. Though these two novels – which together represent the climax of Austen’s career – are strikingly different, they are given a complementarity by their joint concern with the psychological effects of circumstance. This, too, as much as the analysis of imagination, and of group-bonding, is a traditional Enlightenment concern, though we shall see that Austen’s treatment of it is as individual as ever. While still on the subject of plot, however, we should first look at the relation between Emma’s development and her shifting attitudes towards the social life of Highbury.

Emma’s fitful movement towards self-knowledge is tied, as is the case with the sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*, to her widening recognition of adjacent lives, so that she is involved in a process of discovery loosely analogous to the reader’s, a ploy that was to become increasingly standard for the liberal novelist. But included in this inbuilt paradigm (always at risk from her vitality) is a gradual alteration in the way she thinks about herself. Social position is of the utmost importance to Emma at the novel’s start. Her arrangements of destiny have everything to do with the articulation and preservation of rank. Her decision to patronize Harriet (‘delightful inferiority’) rather than befriend Jane, is in keeping with Alexander Pope’s dictum on Atossa: ‘Superiors? death! and Equals? what a curse! / But an Inferior not dependant? worse’.⁵ And her chagrin at having to stand second to Mrs Elton on the dance floor, or hear her assume equality with Mr Knightley, is intensified by the way she has collapsed any alternative scale of value by repeatedly pronouncing on the priority of rank over worth. So Robert Martin is dismissed for his want of gentility and ‘air’, regardless of the quality of his letter, and Harriet is informed – despite all professions of lasting regard – that under the name of Mrs Robert Martin she can receive no visit (32, 53). It is Emma’s remorse over her rudeness to Miss Bates at Box Hill that at last provides the turning-point in this unhealthy scheme of things. The choice of Miss Bates is significant not simply because as an unmonied spinster she is a type of the socially defenceless, but because she is particularly richly endowed with ‘universal good-will’, a virtue that comes in for high praise throughout *Emma* (21). Austen returns here to a debate of the nineties in which, as we have seen, she earlier took part, and she once again upholds a belief in philanthropy while distinguishing between it and personal affection.⁶ It is while reflecting on Mr Weston’s indiscriminating attentions to all his acquaintance that Emma is brought

⁵ Pope, *Epistle to a Lady*, lines 135–6; *Emma*, p. 38.

⁶ See above, pp. 143–4.

to realize that 'General benevolence, but not general friendship, made a man what he ought to be', and her remark, while it recalls her insight into the overlooked merits of 'tenderness of heart' in Harriet and her father, clearly points forward to a growing appreciation of those who are actively well-disposed, whether that be Mr Knightley or the 'good-humoured and obliging' Robert Martin (320, 269, 28).

The concern with benevolence in *Emma* marks a return to specifically Enlightenment themes, for though the term was sometimes used by latitudinarian divines, it was with a consciousness of its original provenance in the writing of the sentimental philosophers. When Joseph Butler speaks of 'a natural principle of attraction in man towards man' so strong that even the bare fact of membership of a community is sufficient to create a bond, he echoes a passage in which Francis Hutcheson compares 'universal Benevolence' to the 'Principle of Gravitation' because of the way its power increases with propinquity to form 'strong Ties of *Friendship, Acquaintance, Neighbourhood, Partnership*; which are exceedingly necessary to the Order and Happiness of human Society'.⁷ Later thinkers who distrusted the optimism of the Shaftesbury school were nevertheless deeply impressed by the force of this conception, and took it further. So David Hume, while insisting that social sympathies are, in practice, never enough to curb an innate selfishness, argues hypothetically, in the *Treatise*, that were 'the benevolence of men or the bounty of nature' to be increased to a sufficient degree, justice would be rendered useless.⁸ Roy Porter once observed that it was in the equivalent to Ferdinand Tönnies's notion of *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to *Gesellschaft* (i.e. in a communal society) that the Enlightenment found its chief answer to the question of how individual expression could coexist with moral order.⁹

Sensitive to the different kinds of sociability afforded by different kinds of grouping and circumstance, many Enlightenment writers commented on the relatively tight weave of the social fabric in country districts, so that the country often emerges, ironically enough, as the best model on offer of the civil. Jane Austen's much quoted recipe for novels of courtship – '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' – falls in well with Anglo-Scottish theory on the makings of sociability, more especially when taken in context, for she was busy at the time with *Emma*,¹⁰ the demographics of which are plotted

⁷ Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons* (1726) (Edinburgh, n.d.), sermon 1, p. 41; Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), II.v.ii, 220.

⁸ *THN*, III.ii.ii; 494–5.

⁹ 'The Enlightenment in England', in Porter and Teich, *The Enlightenment*, p. 15.

¹⁰ To Anna Austen, 9–18 Sept. 1814, *Letters*, p. 275.

in John Knightley's remark at a late stage to Emma: 'Your neighbourhood is increasing, and you mix more with it' (311–12). But if Emma is slow to develop sympathies, and risks 'being left in solitary grandeur', it is through fear of acting out of character rather than through lack of empathy. Her natural considerateness is early brought home by the dinner at which she humours her father's anxieties about eating while silently ensuring that the guests are well fed, as also by her unconditional (though by no means unpatronizing) care for the poor. But this sensitivity is disrupted by the priority she attaches to rank, in defence of which she sacrifices the chance of winning the confidence of Jane Fairfax. It has been pointed out that Highbury poses a particular challenge to Emma's social sympathies by virtue of its sheer limitedness; 'in so compressed a society', Oliver MacDonagh remarks, 'personal preference could not safely be indulged'.¹¹

The lesson of Highbury is not that you have to learn to like everybody, but rather that you have to get on with people you do not like, and that these will never be in short supply. Of the six novels *Emma* is the one most concerned with the provisions and skills that make for affable contact and easy accord, and Austen once again relies on the framework of empiricist psychology for her exposition. In keeping with Adam Smith's notion of 'attunement', the narrator observes how her male characters on entering Mrs Weston's drawing room have to temper mood and temperament to the prevailing atmosphere:

Mr Elton must compose his joyous looks, and Mr John Knightley disperse his ill-humour. Mr Elton must smile less, and Mr John Knightley more, to fit them for the place. (117)

And the converse process is observed at Box Hill where a 'want of union' amounting to a 'principle of separation' spoils the enjoyment of all (367), setting the scene for a competitively egotistical display from Frank and Emma that proves hurtful to Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates. When it comes to more intimate relations, Smith's belief that approbation and a flow of feeling go hand in hand is evident in the treatment of each courtship. Emma takes it as a danger signal that Robert Martin is 'always mentioned with approbation' by Harriet, and later flatters Mr Elton in Harriet's hearing by declaring that his gallantry can only win 'every woman's approbation', though she is herself left a little uncertain that the 'balance of approbation' is in his favour (28, 82, 111). When Emma and Mr Knightley fall out over Robert Martin, the jarring sensations of their discord are dwelt on, and

¹¹ MacDonagh, *Real and Imagined Worlds*, p. 134.

they are both left after the fray to take stock of their 'self-approbation' (67). On the other hand, when Mr Knightley arrives at the Westons' party in a carriage (rather than as usual on foot, for he keeps no horse) Emma is so delighted at the sight of him accoutred as a gentleman that she speaks 'her approbation, while warm from the heart'; a response that pleases him, despite his brusque reprimand of her snobbery (213–14). So highly does Emma come to value Mr Knightley's approval that he figures for her as the nearest thing to an 'impartial spectator', as when she imagines him seeing into her heart and finding no blemish in her dealings with Jane Fairfax (391). But to an extent that is unique in Austen's fiction, the central characters in *Emma* are continually and extensively represented in relation to the many lives that make up the existence of their parish, and the focus on Highbury is never allowed to stray to another setting. So intertwined with place is Emma and Mr Knightley's relationship, that even gifts of food in the village can readily be accepted as a part of their story. Originating from Hartfield, the hindquarter of pork that Mr Woodhouse ineffectually attempts to reduce to a leg, and that looks set to provide Mrs Bates with a roast and Mrs Goddard with a stew before it is salted, becomes inextricably wrapped up with the news of Mr Elton's engagement (172–7). And the apples from Donwell Abbey that Mr Woodhouse eats baked three times over and the Bateses in partial deference to his opinion only twice, and that Jane enjoys fresh, provide a small clue to her secret engagement, when she tries to prevent Mr Knightley from gallantly (as she supposes) renewing the supply (238–9).

If that, however, was all there was to Austen's representation of the social scene, there might be justice in the claim that the novels made the squirearchy appear, as Leslie Stephen complained, 'an essential part of the order of things'.¹²

RANK, COURTSHIP, AND GENDER: ADAM SMITH AND
WOLLSTONECRAFT

The political thrust of Adam Smith's theory of approbation is that there is no excuse for authoritarian rule. Human beings are such that the thirst for approval and the avoidance of dispraise make for a natural social order which, though its success will depend on various kinds of governmental intervention and institutional support, is likely to be more just than a

society engineered according to a plan, or put under the control of an absolute monarch or Leviathan. Rank, however, appears to Smith to be an inevitable feature of any social formation, more particularly of societies in the commercial phase, and rank in itself automatically attracts approbation. The desire to gain in rank is thus universal but it proves nonetheless to be something of a delusion, for neither health nor happiness enter into it. 'To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation' – *that* is what underlies the itch for social betterment.¹³ And there is a further paradox in the fact that the approbation that goes with high position has a dulling effect on ambition, so that achievements that count for something almost invariably come from those of middle or lower rank. Smith notices as a regrettable but inevitable fact that 'the man of rank and distinction' whose glory consists in 'the propriety of his ordinary behaviour' is essentially static, without the motive to find the resolution necessary to take on tasks 'attended either with difficulty or distress' (55).

Strictly Emma belongs to the middle rank of society, but Highbury is parochial enough to constitute its own world, and in this world Emma holds a position that is supreme. Though the grounds of Hartfield are modest enough to prompt Mrs Elton to compare them to the 'extensive grounds' of Maple Grove (and to cause Emma to reflect that those richly endowed with land seldom have much interest in the estates of others), the Woodhouses have enough money and are of a family sufficiently long-settled and ancient to enjoy a status second to none. Blessed in addition with beauty, blooming health and intelligence, Emma has only to *be* in order to reap universal adulation, and, on the face of it, that is all she wants. If she dismisses the idea of marriage, the solitariness that she looks forward to is of a regal kind, well summed up in Mr Elton's veiled and thrice-repeated description of her in his charade: 'And woman, lovely woman, reigns alone' (71, 72, 73). Only when she sees that her decision to refuse the Coles' invitation and teach them a lesson about keeping their place entails 'being left in solitary grandeur', or when a summer storm and the thought of having lost Mr Knightley to Harriet, lead to a 'reign' of loneliness and melancholy at Hartfield, does she have any clear misgivings about her sovereignty (424).¹⁴ The reader, however, is alerted from the first to 'the real evils of Emma's situation', to the evils of a supremacy intensified by the special circumstances of her domestic history. These include the early

¹² Leslie Stephen, 'Humour', *Cornhill Magazine* (1876), collected in Southam, ed., *Critical Heritage*, II, 1870–1940, pp. 174–5.

¹³ *TMS*, I.iii.2.2, 50.

¹⁴ James Thompson comments shrewdly on this use of 'reign' in his *Self and World*, p. 173.

loss of her mother, and an escape from the 'shadow of authority' made all the more emphatic by the weakness of her father, the dullness of her elder sister, and the compliance of her governess. No one can doubt that Emma owes much of her energy and sunniness to the chance events that enable her to become – from the time that she is twelve – 'mistress of the house, and of you all' (37), but the freedom to assume control brings in its train a variety of impediments that appear, from a brighter perspective, to be the regalia of her rule.

Emma's education and talents are the first-mentioned casualties of that state of self-sufficiency that is encouraged by her rank. Only a few pages after the references to *The Romance of the Forest*, we hear of the many elaborate reading lists that Emma has been in the habit of drawing up since her early teens, but also of the reason why she has never applied herself to them. 'She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience', Mr Knightley observes, returning to the same verb later in the conversation when he wryly remarks to Mrs Weston that as Emma's tutor she must have received a training in 'the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will' (38). When in the next chapter the question is raised of why Emma with her exceptional talents for both drawing and music has fallen well short of what she might have attained, the answer again lies in her reluctance to take pains, in the 'so little labour as she would ever submit to' (44). The potential for real accomplishments is hinted at here, for a review of Emma's drawings and paintings follows, and the narrator applies to her the full-blown phrase 'to the steady eyes of the artist', though Emma's self-parodying commentary on her work betrays a lack of 'steadiness', just as later her deficiencies as a pianist are thrown into relief by Jane Fairfax's hard-earned musicianship. And there is more than a suggestion that the energies that she puts into matchmaking properly belong to more taxing kinds of 'labour', as when we are told that she finds it 'much easier to chat than to study; much pleasanter to let her imagination range and work at Harriet's fortune, than to be labouring to enlarge her comprehension or exercise it on sober facts' (69), where the blending of possessive pronouns is itself indicative of a relaxed agency. Indeed the compensatory nature of Emma's applied art is well brought home by Mr Knightley's remark, 'if Elton is the man, I think it will be all labour in vain' (66).

When Mr Knightley complains, while on the subject of reading, that Emma shows a resistance to any 'subjection of the fancy to the understanding' (37), he echoes, presumably unwittingly, a key point from Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of women's education. The question of how and why the 'cultivation of the female understanding' has been subverted in

contemporary society is the subject of a much quoted chapter from the *Vindication*, which grows out of the observation that women have been taught to respect the 'graceful before the heroic virtues'. Wollstonecraft's exposition of the social forces that underpin this state of affairs is based on Adam Smith's account of approbation, from which she quotes freely. At the heart of her thesis is the bold proposition that 'the whole female sex are, till their character is formed, in the same condition as the rich', the reason for this being that they are automatically accorded a chivalrous deference which saves them from the need to 'ever think of works of supererogation'.¹⁵ Men are responsible for the far-from-disinterested pretence that women are in themselves complete, loveliness requiring no further addition, least of all in the sphere of intellect. The thesis is cleverly demonstrated by applying to women a passage on Louis XIV that Smith had used to illustrate the automatic attachment of approbation to high rank. Just as the Sun King had no need for 'unwearied and unrelenting application', no need even for exceptional judgement, learning or valour, but excelled in his role simply by cultivating a graceful manner and majestic presence, so women in modern society, Wollstonecraft contends, are most likely to succeed. But the argument goes one step further, for Wollstonecraft directly attributes the rise of the chivalric and sentimental attitude towards women to the spread of courtly manners from Versailles, thereby associating it – and the related effeminization of men – with the politics of absolutism.¹⁶ Her own republican position affords her a mental vantage-point outside this entire structure, so that her critique of the shielded condition of women is aimed also at social hierarchy. Remove the privilege of rank, and remove the treacherous 'privilege' of gender, and all citizens will enjoy the benefit of experiencing a real thirst for approbation.

Though Austen may well have been stimulated by Wollstonecraft's brilliant idea of the wholesale court-ifying of women, she is likely to have found it both too idealistic and too sweeping. In giving Emma sovereign status, she cuts directly to the quick of the notion that high rank has inherently limiting effects, without committing herself to the view that female gender equates with social privilege when it comes to motivation. If she responds to the idea, she at least diversifies it. Jane Fairfax's situation is a reminder

¹⁵ See *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 133. For Jane Austen's knowledge of the *Vindication*, see above, p. 102.

¹⁶ For a full account of this aspect of Wollstonecraft's thought, and its relation to Austen, see Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*, pp. 13–18, 34–6, 202–3. See also Carol Kay's seminal essay, 'Canon, Ideology, and Gender: Mary Wollstonecraft's Critique of Adam Smith', *New Political Science*, 15 (1986), 63–76, especially pp. 69–72.

that there are women who have to make their way in a masculine world without the ordinary shield of provision, though her readiness to achieve can be taken as a corollary to Wollstonecraft's theorem. Miss Bates, on the other hand, as a low-ranking spinster, presents the case of a woman who lacks the talent necessary to compete in any intellectual way, but merits respect, nonetheless, for her benign disposition. But on one point Austen comes very close to the *Vindication* – to its argument about courtship, which precludes in fact the bold (and apparently *ad hoc*) contention that we have been examining. It is the sudden and conspicuous elevation of women during the period that they are eligible for marriage that brings up the larger issue of the culturally contrived status of the female sex. Though courtship offers only a temporary reign, the values it instils have a lasting effect, and one that reduces the chance of compensating for the advance of age, or of finding relief from the relatively subservient role of wife. Hence the remark that young women are 'treated like queens only to be deluded by hollow respect', or her quotation of lines from Ann Aikin:

In beauty's empire is no mean,
And woman, either slave or queen,
Is quickly scorn'd when not ador'd.¹⁷

In fact Wollstonecraft draws in this section of the *Vindication* on a tradition of satiric commentary that goes back beyond Mrs Barbauld (as Aikin became) to Samuel Richardson,¹⁸ but her emphasis is distinctive and the language she uses often chimes in with *Emma*, as when she claims that 'the sovereignty of beauty' has proved to be a bitter legacy, its inheritors having 'chosen rather to be short-lived queens than labour to obtain the sober pleasures that arise from equality'.¹⁹

The charade on *court-ship* that Mr Elton writes for Harriet's riddle-book but intends for Emma, pictures exactly the sort of courtship that Wollstonecraft has in mind, only from a masculine viewpoint. Each of the two syllables is encoded in a way that underlines the sovereignty of men:

My first displays the wealth and pomp of kings,
Lords of the earth! their luxury and ease.
Another view of man, my second brings,
Behold him there, the monarch of the seas!

¹⁷ *Vindication*, pp. 131–2, and note.

¹⁸ So in *Clarissa*, for example, Anna Howe complains that women are 'courted as Princesses for a few weeks, in order to be treated as Slaves for the rest of our lives'; see the Shakespeare Head Edition (Oxford, 1930), I, 191.

¹⁹ *Vindication*, pp. 130–1.

In paying court, however, all is turned topsy-turvy – men now play the part of slaves, women become queens:

But, ah! united, what reverse we have!
Man's boasted power and freedom, all are flown;
Lord of the earth and sea, he bends a slave,
And woman, lovely woman, reigns alone.

(73)

Had Emma realized that the lines were for her, she might have reacted to the hint that the reign of woman is valid only for the duration of courtship (Mr Elton is soon to discover that her sense of superiority is not conferred), but she is perfectly happy to watch Harriet being raised high on the see-saw of conventional gallantry. Indeed, so long as it is not herself that is concerned (she demurs somewhat at what it would be like to be the 'principal'), she is happy to find Mr Elton's show of 'love and complaisance' admirable, and the two of them embark on a joint exposition of courtship, made all the more stark as well as comic by their misunderstanding. Emma finds a flattering pose for Harriet, and sets about sketching her at full-length, improving the look of her eyes, while adding to her height. And the more she ennobles her sitter, the more Mr Elton is obliged to insist dotingly on the likeness she has caught, so determined is he that 'nothing that did not breathe a compliment to the sex should pass his lips' (70). Nor is the tableau of courtship that they jointly put on, much put out by the mistake about who loves whom, for person counts for little, it is plain, in Mr Elton's quest for a wife. Emma can later note that she was right all along. Her devoted admirer never had any real feelings for her, and since he only wanted 'to aggrandize and enrich himself', and has now failed to ensnare the heiress with thirty thousand pounds, he can soon be counted on to 'try for Miss Somebody else with twenty, or with ten' (135).

But in other ways Emma has got it wrong. She, too, is taken in by the charm and courtly babble of the man she chooses for Harriet, duped by him to such an extent that she can cite him in preference to Mr Knightley as a paragon of manners, or can call for a Hartfield edition of Shakespeare that seems likely to delete one letter from the line, 'The course of true love never did run smooth' (34, 75). Smoothness is a cardinal virtue for Emma in the heyday of her matchmaking – ever since her boast, in fact, of having 'smoothed many little matters' in supervising the Westons' growing acquaintance (13). And Mr Elton is a prime example of the smooth wooer who tirelessly upholds a pretence of adulation: he 'sigh[s] and languish[es] and stud[ies] for compliments', and on departing 'smile[s] himself off' like

the Cheshire cat, but though his desire to please is, in a sense, willed, it is indelibly ingrained in his whole bearing towards the eligible part of the sex, for whom his 'every feature works' (49, 111).

It is altogether apt that Jane Austen should introduce this brand of courtship in the context of a game and under the title CHARADE, for though the pattern of conduct to which Mr Elton subscribes is so entrenched as to count as a cultural form, we are constantly reminded of its artificiality. What begins as fiction, ends as fiction too. When Mr Elton, in fulfilment of Emma's prediction, succeeds in attaching Augusta Hawkins (the ten thousand pounds) much play is made of the fact that he finds a chief source of satisfaction in the way 'the story told well'. And the story *is* told in one of the longest and funniest sentences Austen ever wrote, though 'the wind-up of the history' has to be borrowed from the more imposing marriage of Mrs Elton's elder sister to the owner of Maple Grove (181–2, 183).

Austen's contemporaries could be relied on to recognize the underlying contours of a stereotype in the character whose 'gallantry [is] always on the alert' in mixed company, or who displays, as Emma admiringly says, 'the tenderest spirit of gallantry towards us all' (49, 77), for the word so repeatedly applied to Frank Churchill as well as to Mr Elton was replete with cultural clues. Samuel Johnson recorded its French origin in the Dictionary, where he singled out the sense of 'refined address to women', and in his famous story about the unhappy ride to his wedding laid the blame for an extravagant instance of sexual pedestalling on the currency of 'the old romances'.²⁰ David Hume had noted that modern gallantry was the true descendant of feudal chivalry,²¹ and in a dialogue known to Wollstonecraft had commented on its ascendancy in the France of his time, remarking, in particular, on the way the courtly elevation of women effected a change in general manners – a premium being placed on politeness and gaiety, at the cost of simplicity and good sense.²² Attention has often been drawn to the association of Frank Churchill's style with things French, originally by critics in search of Austen the Anti-Jacobin, but the gallicism in question has nothing whatever to do with the Revolution. When Mr Knightley remarks that Frank (aptly named) can be 'amiable only in French not in English' because he has the 'smooth, plausible manners' that rate as '*aimable*' while lacking real sensitivity to the feelings of others, his distinction is closely

²⁰ 'She had read the old romances, and had got into her head the fantastical notion that a woman of spirit should use her lover like a dog'; see James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Roger Ingpen, 2 vols. (1925), 1, 42.

²¹ *History of England*, 1, 486–7. ²² *A Dialogue, Essays* 11, 300, 302.

allied to the one made by Hume, and draws on an issue much contested by the Enlightenment (149). While most historians of civil society treated the original chivalric rescue of women from a subjugated state as a landmark of social development, the *revivalist* chivalry of Versailles, of the latter-day romance, or of Edmund Burke's highly coloured championship of Marie-Antoinette was quite a different matter, smacking suspiciously of anachronism. Claudia Johnson in her account of the way the sentimental tradition was assailed by women writers of Austen's period, convincingly relates the portrayal of Frank Churchill and Mr Elton to Wollstonecraft's critique of the effeminized male, even if the perspective somewhat diminishes – or at times blurs – the sustaining context of enlightened debate.²³

If Frank Churchill and Mr Elton are linked by their smoothness of manner, they also come out on the same side of an important division that emerges at the close of the opening chapter, when Emma and Mr Knightley, in the first of many differences, disagree over the way courtships should be conducted. Priding herself on having brought the Westons together, Emma holds out for the managed match, even if she only claims for herself (perhaps out of modesty) a role somewhere between that of 'the do-nothing and the do-all' (13). Mr Knightley, on the other hand, is against 'interference' on principle, not simply because it can lead to mischief but because it is demeaning in itself. Hence his remark, 'A straight-forward, open-hearted man, like Weston, and a rational unaffected woman, like Miss Taylor, may be safely left to manage their own concerns', and his advice that Mr Elton be helped to the best pieces of chicken or fish but be left to 'chuse his own wife' (14). Though lightly stated here (and later betrayed by Mr Knightley himself), the idea that individual choice is potent and worthy of trust gathers force as the narrative unfolds, even though most of the courtships we see offend against the principle of open and free exchange, and do so in a variety of ways – Emma's pairings are imposed, Frank Churchill's engagement is disguised, and Mr Elton rates social requirements over the person. The 'do-nothing' school turns out to be the equivalent in the sphere of courtship of deregulation in the economy. Mr Elton who is perfectly 'rational and unaffected' in his dealings with men (Knightley's phrase returns) practises a kind of sexual protectionism towards women, taxing his every word and gesture with gallantry. Deceit drives Frank Churchill to ever more elaborate feats of social engineering; and Emma, preparing for the ball at the Crown, detects a wilfulness behind his gallantry which causes her to reflect

²³ *Equivocal Beings*, pp. 191–203. Carol Kay, by focusing chiefly on sympathy and the 'impartial spectator', underestimates Wollstonecraft's debt to Smith; see 'Canon, Ideology', pp. 63–76.

on how her liking for him might not long survive intimacy (250). Even after the disclosure of his double act, he remains glibly evasive towards her, his composure saving him from the bared emotions that enable Emma, in the case of Mr Elton, to momentarily break through the wall of compliment and brush aside the 'zigzags of embarrassment' (132). Straightforwardness is the hallmark of the open courtship, and Mr Knightley's directness to Emma takes within its compass not only the occasional rudeness ('Nonsensical girl!'), but also heated criticism. Indeed it says much about the open style of courtship that Mr Knightley should retrospectively identify his fault-finding and 'fancying so many errors' as the cause of his falling in love.

It might be objected that in making her central couple so fully exemplify a relationship of the 'do-nothing' kind, Jane Austen was forced to rely on some sleight of hand. Emma and Knightley can well seem free of the tricks of conventional wooing when there is nothing between them so far as they are aware. A case against the 'do-nothing' paradigm could be made by observing that were it not for the author's construction of a plot that provoked each lover to be jealous of outside attention to the other, Austen's central couple might never have come together at all. Certainly, report that Frank and Emma are intended for each other, as are likewise George and Jane, serves to spur them on (118–19, 226). But such authorial dealings are on the plane of 'the invisible hand'. And the slow maturation of the lovers' feelings for each other, their unselfconsciousness, and the very unintentionality of their involvement, remain wonderfully fresh and must have been particularly salutary when regulated courting was the order of the day.

The give-and-take in the central relationship of *Emma* has been veiled by a tendency on the part of critics to put Mr Knightley on a pedestal, but he is in fact, as Mary Waldron has shown,²⁴ a hero with peccadilloes, and these contribute to the reciprocity that is such a key feature of his attachment to Emma. He errs most obviously when he explodes at the report that Harriet has chosen to turn down Robert Martin's proposal, refusing (as Emma points out) even to tolerate the idea that the young woman may have her own views on this matter. On this occasion his male partisanship is brought into the open, and there has been some possible hint of it before, when he half-jokingly equates matrimony with submission (38). But Emma's argumentative triumph is offset by her total misreading of Harriet so that a

²⁴ Waldron, *Fiction of her Time*, pp. 114–26.

balance between them is maintained; the one wrong in theory, as Waldron puts it, the other wrong in fact.²⁵ But Mr Knightley's error is a case really of his failing to preach what for the most part he practises. Emma proves to have more than enough strength of character to keep his prejudices in check, and in many instances she dominates over her mentor. It is she who first suggests that they dance, and who reminds him that they are not brother and sister as she takes his hand (331), she who sees in a flash that he 'must marry no one but herself!' (408), and she, remarkably, who is to remain mistress of Hartfield after the marriage. When Mr Knightley coldly informs Mrs Elton that only the mistress of Donwell will have the final say on arrangements there, he does not reckon on his abdication taking him to someone else's home (354–5).

Conventionally, women could expect the brief reign of their courtship to lead to a more subdued status as wives, but in *Emma* matrimony brings no lessening of power. Mrs Churchill rules the roost at Enscombe, Mrs Elton is 'queen of the evening' at the Crown and tries to boss all Highbury, and Emma after the collapse of her fantasies of control enjoys a control that is all the more complete. Women of power abound in the novels – Austen, long before the days of affirmative action, sees to it that they are far more plentiful than a sample of her society would allow. Conversely, her reason for leaving *The Watsons* unfinished may well have been that she hated to dwell on the hopeless situation of her spirited heroine. But rank is no guarantee of worthiness in the novels, rather the contrary. Though Lady Susan radiates a charm that jams all perception of truth (and has a queue of critics in tow),²⁶ she falls victim to her own deceit at last, and is worsted in courtship by the daughter she maltreats. Mrs Ferrars is nasty, Lady Middleton mean, Miss Osborne fickle, Lady Catherine de Bourgh conceited, Lady Bertram comatose, Lady Dalrymple dull, Lady Denham sordid, and all are snobbish. Though Austen goes out of her way to make such figures vivid, ensuring that they are favourites with her readers, she makes it clear that exalted position has done them little good. Emma is the exception to the rule in being admirable as well as magnetic. She owes her attraction, however, not simply to her gifts, but to the painful process of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁶ Roger Gard provides the fullest account of this *nouvelle*, but tends to endorse Lady Susan's view that her superior talents free her of obligation. There is no mistaking the irony, however, when Lady Susan counsels her friend to scorn all those 'whose Sensibilities are not of a nature to comprehend ours' (301). Gard convincingly argues that Austen's realistic handling of epistolary conventions limited her access to dramatic representation, making the epistolary novel an unsatisfactory form for her; see *Novels*, pp. 29–44.

self-discovery (by no means a 'humiliation') that does much to clarify the effects of her supremacy without damaging her social esteem. It is through Emma, moreover, that Austen takes furthest the analysis of high rank.

Harriet's story, which spans the entire novel (her engagement to Robert Martin is the last of the five to be made), repeatedly exposes Emma to an unfavourable light. From the start the very ground of the relationship is suspect. Emma, used to having her own way, and to taking approval for granted, chooses Harriet in the knowledge that she can count on her total compliance. Such companionship allows her to retreat into a fastness where her supremacy is never at risk; and Harriet increasingly stands between her and the world of sexual danger where men make advances. There are frequent hints at the vicarious life that Emma leads through her protégée. 'Oh! no, I could not endure William Coxe', she exclaims of the young man who has just popped into her mind as a possible replacement for Mr Elton (137). She is even caught indulging in lover's ruses (breaking her shoelace for example) to further her schemes, but always on Harriet's behalf. Particularly telltale is the timing of her idea that Frank Churchill is the obvious new suitor – she has recognized, only a page before, that she herself is 'quite enough in love' with him and would 'be sorry to be more' (265–6). The more Emma engages Harriet the more she keeps herself aloof, and her matchmaking is tied to her desire to reign alone. Austen's portrayal of this mechanism is subtle and profound, resistant to summary,²⁷ but a good pointer to its social significance is provided by a comic motif from *The Watsons*, where the caricatured Lord Osborne ('quite one of the great & Grand ones') insists on interposing a deputy between himself and the women who catch his eye. So Emma's namesake is asked to dance by Tom Musgrave who is also instructed to provide a description of her by daylight, and to do the talking on a visit to the Watsons' humble house. The explanation is that Osborne has grown 'unused to exert himself'.²⁸

Though Emma's patronage of Harriet seems benign when compared to Mrs Elton's of Jane – the one as absorbed in raising her dependant's prestige, as the other is in making a meal of her protégée's penury – it is flawed, nonetheless, by her failure to distinguish between merit and rank. This failing is stressed when Emma ponders Harriet's report of her encounter with the Martins, while shopping at Fords, after news has broken of Mr Elton's engagement. Though her heart goes out to the disappointed family

who display such 'genuine delicacy' at the meeting, and whose worth has been evident all along, she reins this impulse back by telling herself that no end of virtue can outweigh 'the evils of the connection' (179). To this theme she returns, noting some internal distress at her ruthlessness, after one of the most poignant and neglected scenes of the novel, the visit – designed to last fourteen minutes – that she allows Harriet to make to Abbey-Mill Farm. The visit is by way of concession, for Emma has already outlawed the whole family to protect Harriet's status, and its shortness (Harriet has spent six weeks there the previous summer) and its formality (Harriet is brought and picked up by Emma in her carriage) are meant to give a clear signal that it is the last. The arrangement reveals an ugly underside to Emma's scheme for a radical make-over of Harriet, whom we see reduced from a person with a particular history and identity to a doll-like plaything, and the scene is no more kind to Emma for being half-filtered through her consciousness. At first the conversation at the Martins is as uneasy and flat as Emma could desire, but at the last minute all changes:

Mrs Martin's saying, all of a sudden, that she thought Miss Smith was grown, had brought on a more interesting subject, and a warmer manner. In that very room she had been measured last September, with her two friends. There were the pencilled marks and memorandums on the wainscot by the window. *He* had done it. They all seemed to remember the day, the hour, the party, the occasion – to feel the same consciousness, the same regrets – to be ready to return to the same good understanding; and they were just growing again like themselves, (Harriet, as Emma must suspect, as ready as the best of them to be cordial and happy,) when the carriage re-appeared, and all was over. (187)

The cruel precision of Emma's timing, like the stark abstraction of her plans, is seen to cut through a ganglion of feeling that is tender and complex in process. Indeed the scene not only deals in the bodily but exfoliates in an organic way. Harriet's growth over the course of the year – with which her regard for Robert has evidently kept pace ('*He* had done it') – leads on to a growing sense of unanimity that makes the group feel 'like themselves'. While the much notched window-jamb punches a perspective into the past, it frames a real and ever-continuous world that lies beyond the fitful grasp of 'pencilled marks and memorandums'. And it is *there* in the concrete fact of physical presence and shared experience that emotional affinity has its roots. Austen evokes the naturalness of such God-given process with a mastery that gives full weight to the charge of trifling with the feelings of others that Emma levels against herself: 'it was adventuring too far, assuming too much, making light of what ought to be serious, a trick of what ought to be simple' (137). Personal identity is taken seriously in *Emma*,

²⁷ The novel's treatment of this surrogacy is very much wider-ranging, for example, than the quasi-psychological account provided by Tony Tanner in his *Jane Austen* (1986), pp. 181–3.

²⁸ *The Watsons*, see *Minor Works*, pp. 342, 333, 335, 338, 346.

and in one respect more so than in the other novels, for individuality is written particularly large in the actual mode of representation. Though reported speech is limited to fewer figures than is customary for Austen,²⁹ speech is quoted frequently, often at length, and diversified as never before, idiolect providing in many cases the chief instrument of characterization. It is no accident that we are given a monologue by Miss Bates before she is introduced (18), or that for pages of dialogue at a time no voice tags are required. Nowhere in fiction is Ben Jonson's maxim, 'speak that I may see thee', realized with greater comic panache or penetration.³⁰

But if Emma's treatment of Harriet is bedevilled by her obsession with rank, that is only what is to be expected. Charging herself, finally, with having tried 'to arrange everybody's destiny' (413), Emma merely states what Harriet has all along considered to be her patron's rightful due. Awed on her first meeting to be invited to shake hands, Harriet looks upon Emma as infallible and omniscient ever after and is perfectly attuned to her mentor's belief that she is, in her own words, 'always right in any man's eyes'.³¹ That high rank is specially conducive to illusion is of course a commonplace, but the idea was seminal to the Enlightenment, as might well be imagined of a movement rooted in protest against autocracy, whether secular or religious. In Jane Austen's time the critique of despotism found many fresh applications – to the Terror, to Napoleonic dirigism, even to the new phase of British colonial policy; and we know from her reading that Austen was well aware of these. It is a feature of such critique, furthermore, that it takes for granted that the political and psychological run into each other, as do also the national and domestic. David Hume makes this last elision when he remarks that the nastiness of despotism is known to all from 'observation in private life'.³² In *Emma* Jane Austen refrains from supplying any topical pointers such as the geopolitical references that provide a submerged analogue to the action of *Mansfield Park*. She allows her drama to speak, rather, for itself, but in the knowledge that her comedy of illusion has the power to stir association in distant and less familiar fields.

Perhaps there is no better epigraph to the political aspect of *Emma* than the passage in which Adam Smith, in the course of a chapter on virtue, warns against the dangers of 'new-modelling'. It is the autocrat who becomes so 'wise in his own conceit' and 'so enamoured with the supposed beauty'

²⁹ MacDonagh makes this point, *Real and Imagined Worlds*, p. 129.

³⁰ Ben Jonson, *Discoveries*, ed. G. B. Harrison (1966), p. 78.

³¹ For this and further instances, see pp. 84, 25, 38, 76, 404.

³² *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 5.1, fn. 8, pp. 121–2.

of his conceptions, that he falls into the habit of regarding those subject to his sway as so many pieces on a chessboard, forgetting that in human society every piece is alive and endowed with 'motion of its own'.³³ In *Emma* even Harriet, so ready to acquiesce, proves capable of making the very move that is most subversive to her mentor's plan in opting for Mr Knightley rather than Frank Churchill. Only with the collapse of their grand narrative, do Emma and she discover where their true feelings lie. Here again Austen verges, within her comedy of manners, on a topos much favoured by the Enlightenment: what might be termed the renewal that starts from the ruins of absolute rule. In his essay 'The Rise of the Arts and Sciences', David Hume maintained that despotism effectually puts a stop to 'all improvements' owing to its damping effects on the spirit of individual incentive and competition out of which new things grow;³⁴ but he argued, too, that autocracy was bound in the long run to fail in both the state and the domestic sphere, and for the same reason: 'human nature checks itself in its airy elevation'.³⁵

Enlightenment paradigms run deep in *Emma*, which is perhaps why it, more than any other Austen novel, provides the blueprint for a plan widely used by writers of liberal fiction later in the century. Emma, as we have seen, progressively breaks through the cocoon of egotism that keeps her apart from Highbury until she is in more complete possession of the story, by the end, than any other character. In this respect she is the precursor of many heroines who are understood to receive their essential education from digesting all that is signified by the texts in which they figure. She is in company here with Esther Lyon in *Felix Holt* who compares her task of 'trying to make character clear before her' to the reading of a book, thus pacing George Eliot's reader who ideally learns what Esther does from the experience – 'to doubt the infallibility of her own standard', which is no less than Emma has done before her.³⁶ When Henry James, in his dialogue on *Daniel Deronda*, vividly describes Gwendolen Harleth's history as 'the universe forcing itself with a slow, inexorable pressure into a narrow, complacent, and yet after all extremely sensitive mind', he echoes Felix on what 'life thrusts into the mind', which includes, in his case, data as distressing as a 'splinter'.³⁷ George Eliot found many metaphors to illustrate

³³ *TMS*, vi.ii.2.17, 233–4. ³⁴ 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences', *Essays* 1, 179.

³⁵ 'Of the Balance of Power', *Essays* 1, 355.

³⁶ *Felix Holt, The Radical*, ed. Fred C. Thomson (Oxford, 1980), p. 216.

³⁷ 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', in F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948), p. 264; *Felix Holt*, p. 222.

the painful but liberating work of recognition that underlies the plots of her major fiction. No one forgets the candle on a tray, picking out concentric circles from random scratches, that is offered in *Middlemarch* as a parable of 'the egotism of any person now absent'.³⁸ But a fuller model for the heuristic process is developed in *Felix Holt* from Adam Smith's image of the animated chessboard, a figure better suited, after all, to the shifts of narrative. In context it is applied to Matthew Jermyn who presumes, overconfidently, that he can suppress the truth about the Transom family by manipulating his dependants, only to find that the most servile of his cat's-paws has a will of his own. So George Eliot asks her reader to 'fancy what a game at chess would be if all the chessmen had passions and intellects': 'You might be the longest-headed of deductive reasoners, and yet you might be beaten by your own pawns. You would be especially likely to be beaten, if you depended arrogantly on your mathematical imagination, and regarded your passionate pieces with contempt.'³⁹

Though they undergo a similar process of recognition Esther and Emma have, of course, a very different text to read, and prove to be different kinds of reader too. Where Esther subdues herself to a higher truth and finds salvation through Felix, Emma remains as wilful and as economical with the truth as ever, and yet achieves a greater strength. There is a paradox here that goes back to the complexities of her character and it is never more fully displayed than at the moment of the last of her many discoveries, which is that Mr Knightley has no special feelings for Harriet after all. Emma's tender sympathies are evident in her reluctance to recognize that Mr Knightley is proposing to her rather than talking about his love for Harriet, but when the recognition does come she instantly decides to draw a veil over the whole matter of her friend's infatuation in case it should interfere with what she now most hopes for herself. So the last milestone in Emma's progress towards clarification turns out to be a boundary-mark, signalling the point at which she passes beyond 'heroism of sentiment' to the home territory of self-love, in particular of that unfashionable Stoic duty revived by the Scottish school, the care of self (431).⁴⁰ But Emma's refusal to let on about Harriet has other implications as well. It means, for one thing, that she emerges higher in the domestic knowledge stakes than Knightley does, and though her *suppressio veri* is small, and not 'material', it does allow her to snatch composure from the jaws of possible further shame. Indeed, Emma's sleight of hand not only underlines her renewed

³⁸ *Middlemarch*, ch. 27 (1965), p. 297.

³⁹ *Felix Holt*, ch. 29, p. 237.

⁴⁰ *TMS*, VI.ii.1.1, 219.

ability to seize and maintain control, but increases our sense of her stature, for it exposes a relative impercipience in Mr Knightley, who never thinks to inquire into why Emma kept backing away when he began his proposal. But the last word on Emma's handling of the last piece that falls into place in her mental recovery of Highbury is the sceptical observation of the narrator: 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure.'⁴¹

⁴¹ *Emma*, p. 431, and see above, pp. 11–12.