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The Children in *Emma*

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The novel *Emma*, with Emma's trials and triumph which occupy it, begins on the wedding night of "poor Miss Taylor," now Mrs. Weston, and virtually culminates when "Mrs. Weston's friends were all made happy by her safety" in the delivery of her first child (461).[1] From the opening in late September to the culmination in late July,[2] a decorous ten months have elapsed. By then Emma is assured of Mr. Knightley's love, and her anxiety about being supplanted in Mrs. Weston's affection by "a tie even dearer than herself" has been allayed (422). The time scheme of the novel is thus in harmony with woman's biological rhythms in conception, gestation and childbirth. And children have their important though unobtrusive role to play in the action.

It is one of Emma's redeeming features that she is a kind and affectionate aunt, and almost as tender and tolerant of her nephews and nieces as she is of that other, older child, her father. Emma's tenderness is a genuine entity: her momentary cruelty to Miss Bates is uncharacteristic. To her nephews Henry, John and George (named for their grandfather, father and uncle), and her nieces Bella and Emma (named for their mother and aunt),[3] she is for the most part good-humoured and sensible, attentive but not indulgent. There is of course some irony at the expense of her exaggerated solicitude about Henry's inheritance when she objects to the suggestion that Mr. Knightley might marry Jane Fairfax: "Mr. Knightley must not marry! – You would not have little Henry cut out from Donwell?" (224). But it is one aspect of her growth in self-knowledge that she is later able to recognize her own sub-conscious motivation on this occasion: "she only gave herself a saucy, conscious smile" about the jealously that she had thought was "the amiable solicitude of the . . . aunt" (449-50).

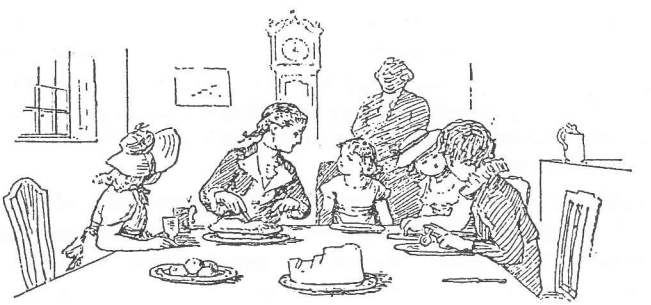
It is interesting to explore the attitude to children in *Emma* in order to estimate Jane Austen's place in the major cultural development in the concept of childhood. According to Philippe Ariès in his ground-breaking study, *Centuries of Childhood*,[4] it took many centuries to develop the attitude to childhood that we in the twentieth century tend to assume has been always with us. Infants in mediæval times had such a tenuous hold on life that they were hardly credited with an identity; and the children who survived were regarded as small adults, and absorbed early into adult society. Children were seldom portrayed in the visual arts, and when they did appear they were represented as miniature men and women. The concept of childhood as a separate state, with its own psychology and physiology, its own codes of behaviour, and its own needs for separate toys, amusements, clothing, and reading matter, did not develop, according to Ariès, until the seventeenth century, and even then the process was far from complete, nor was it uniform for boys and girls, or among different classes. Although in the eighteenth century John Newbery was recognizing children as a separate readership and creating books especially intended for their entertainment, in fiction children

seldom figured as characters. Among the novelists, for instance, Henry Fielding, even in *Amelia* (1752), his most domestic novel, could be so inattentive as to forget the names and sexes of his heroine's children as they grow, although her role as wife and mother is his major concern.

At issue is not only Jane Austen's place in this major and ongoing cultural movement towards a recognition of the status of childhood, but also the extent to which she was affected by a change more specific to her own time, the cult of the child as developed by Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets. For them, the child was hallowed as a being apart, not only as innocent and blessed, but as a source of wisdom to corrupted humanity. The child comes "Trailing clouds of glory . . . / From God, who is our home." He is venerated as a source of wisdom, and hailed by the titles "best Philosopher," "Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!"[5] The degree and kind of attention that Jane Austen pays to children, then, becomes part of a larger question on the extent to which her work is related to her great contemporaries, Wordsworth (who was born in the same year with her), Blake, and the other Romantic poets.

In his study of *Guardians and Angels: Parents and Children in Nineteenth-Century Literature* David Grylls states firmly that Jane Austen's "view of parent-child relations is profoundly pre-Romantic. She reveals in her fiction little belief in the wisdom or innocence of children and what she prizes most in young people is obedience and respect" (130).[6] If *Sense and Sensibility* were representative, I would be inclined to agree with him. But Jane Austen is not all of a piece; and the children in *Emma*, I think, provide evidence for Jane Austen as being more advanced in her attitude, and more in tune with the Romantic poets, that Grylls concedes.

In *Emma* Jane Austen shows children not as merely tentative, liminal souls, nor as retarded adults, but as beings who are developing firm little identities of their own. She records and remembers their sex, names and habits. She recognizes childhood as a separate state with its own tastes and appealing characteristics. Emma has drawn separate likenesses of each of her nephews and nieces (and, as with her picture of Harriet, these representations constitute a recognition of significant identity in the little universe of Hartfield). She finds them difficult subjects, not only because they won't stay still, but because of their delicacy of feature. But even the youngest, the baby



George (this is before the birth of the new Emma), has been depicted, and Emma is "rather proud of little George." She admits, however, that the best parts of this sketch are his cockade and the corner of the sofa, rather than his face (45): – in the case of this infant, perhaps, the identity is still evanescent. But Emma is pleased to have captured the children's "air and complexion." This passage on the portraits, it seems to me, is indicative of an alert attention not only to individual children, but to the state of childhood itself.

Children's characteristics are studied, and their special needs are catered to. Emma's nephews, for instance, love a story, and Jane Austen, through Emma, notes the child's familiar requirements of a narrator to "Tell it again, and tell it the same!" In her propensity to romanticise life, to turn people into materials for her imagination, Emma at once feeds the boys' imaginations and her own: "Henry and John were still asking every day for the story of Harriet and the gipsies, and still tenaciously setting her right if she varied in the slightest particular from the original recital" (336). It is no wonder that, when Harriet arrives with news of a new love, Emma at once proceeds with her construction of the real-life romance in which the low-born maiden will marry the gracious Prince Frank who rescued her, and live happily ever after. "More wonderful things have taken place, there have been matches of greater disparity," she tells Harriet (343), no doubt recalling other stories she has told her nephews. Emma's fairy-tale continues the story she has been telling the boys about Harriet and Frank Churchill; she would not at all approve of the one Harriet has in mind, which is a separate story altogether.

Adults are judged, often, according to their behaviour towards children. Mr. Knightley as uncle is as affectionate as Emma is as aunt, and there is even some friendly rivalry between them as to which can be most attentive to their two nephews when they visit (312). Mr. Knightley, according to Mr. Woodhouse, is too boisterous with the children:

> "And then their uncle comes in, and tosses them up to the ceiling in a very frightful way!"
>
> "But they like it, papa; there is nothing they like so much. It is such enjoyment to them, that if their uncle did not lay down the rule of their taking turns, which ever began would never give way to the other." (81)

There are moments when *Emma* almost reads like a treatise on children's behaviour. Certainly the observation of childhood ways and games is close and precise.

Mr. Woodhouse, who is a loving grandfather in spite of being so childlike himself, sees the children not as retarded adults but as beings set apart.

> "They are all remarkably clever; and they have so many pretty ways. They will come and stand by my chair, and say, 'Grandpapa, can you give me a bit of string?' and once Henry asked me for a knife, but I told him knives were only made for grandpapas." (80-81)

These middle-class children are clearly being sheltered, carefully protected, set aside from adult and fallen humanity as beings still innocent. But as the novel registers, lower-class children have not the same privileges, nor the same status as blessed and innocent beings. The little girl from the poor family Emma visits is sent out to fetch broth in a pitcher to bring back to her

distressed family, and alone too (though even Harriet cannot walk alone about the lanes). In the gipsy episode "a child on the watch" and "a great boy" are most active and clamorous in getting money for the group (333). These children are still undifferentiated from the children of earlier times: they are required to take on adult tasks and responsibilities at an early age. The separation and sanctification of childhood was a cultural luxury not always available to the lower classes, and Jane Austen registers the fact.

In a novel as faultlessly constructed as *Emma*, nothing is superfluous: every detail contributes to the beauty of the overall design. What, then, are we to make of the protracted visit to Hartfield of young Henry and John Knightley? Since there is no dramatised scene in which they appear, no such charming incident as the dance of that *other* Emma with little Charles Blake in *The Watsons*,[7] it is easy to assume that the nephews' visit is a mere piece of decoration, useful only in contributing some atmosphere and keeping going the family chronicles of Woodhouses and Knightleys. What are the boys there for? – Just to be seen and not heard, like many other fictional children? – or even, just to be neither seen *nor* heard? Jane Austen, like Emma Woodhouse, is too good an aunt to settle for that.

"Dear little Henry" and "dear little John" arrive with their father (318); they are mentioned passingly on a few occasions; they have their stories, as we have seen; and they duly become, by virtue of leaving Hartfield, "the 'poor little boys,'" in Mr. Woodhouse's phrase (347). *Then* it becomes clear why Jane Austen had introduced their visit; she needed not their presence, but their recent departure, for the sake of their "box of letters" (347). Aunt Emma with her own hands has written out the letters of the alphabet on separate cards, to create a game for improving their reading skills. Now the stage is set for the game of alphabet, in which Frank Churchill can produce the words "blunder" and "Dixon" as part of his secret communication with Jane Fairfax that Mr. Knightley intercepts. "These letters were but the vehicle of gallantry and trick," he discovers. "It was a children's play, chosen to conceal a deeper game" (348). That explicit evocation of the rub between innocent childhood play and sophisticated adult manipulation is going on at large among characters simple and gullible on the one hand, and intricate and intriguing on the other. The child motif, like "the little boys' dance" that Thackeray identified as a significant strand in *Vanity Fair*,[8] points up adult scheming and adult manipulation.

In one demonstrable way Jane Austen approaches the Wordsworthian view of the child as close to God, and a source of wisdom. In *Emma* the children are the peacemakers. After she has quarrelled with Mr. Knightley over preventing Harriet's engagement to Robert Martin, Emma wants to be friends again;

> and she hoped it might rather assist the restoration of friendship, that when he came into the room she had one of the children with her – the youngest, a nice little girl about eight months old, who was . . . very happy to be danced about in her aunt's arms. (98)

Emma is right, for Mr. Knightley, though initially grave, is soon led on "to take the child out of her arms with all the unceremoniousness of perfect

amity." The nephews and nieces that they have in common are one strong bond between these two principals, who may be said to have rehearsed their roles as parents together. This particular incident shows Emma at her usual activity of making use of a child. But there is another that is well beyond her influence.

It is little Henry and John who at last bring about the fortunate union of Harriet and Robert Martin. The excursion of the John Knightleys to Astley's, the famous equestrian exhibition and forerunner of the circus, is undertaken for the boys' entertainment, and Robert Martin is invited to be of the party. Mr. Knightley, our source of information on this coming together of the estranged couple, says he cannot supply all the "minute particulars" that Emma is eager to hear of the renewed courtship. But, with a certain amused suggestiveness, he does supply one detail that enables an "imaginist" to reconstruct the scene:

> "[Robert] did mention, without its being much to the purpose, that on quitting the box at Astley's, my brother took charge of Mrs. John Knightley and little John, and he followed with Miss Smith and Henry; and that at one time they were in such a crowd, as to make Miss Smith rather uneasy." (472)

The detail that slips out from an "overflowing" heart, "without its being much to the purpose," signals some charged memory, presumably of a treasured physical contact between the young man and woman[9] who are escorting the unconscious little boy in a crowd. Robert's proposal follows hard upon this precious moment. Again, the child mediates, and dissipates obstacles to love which otherwise could be insuperable. "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God": Jane Austen could have been recalling the sermon on the mount, but she is also participating in the Romantic veneration for the child.

We meet Emma when she is on the threshold of majority, "nearly twenty-one" (5). But Emma as child is a concept we are also invited to contemplate. Her little niece, another *Emma*, is at eight months an image of an earlier self; Emma exhorts her, like a benign fairy godmother. "Little Emma, grow up a better woman than your aunt. Be infinitely cleverer and not half so conceited" (99). And when Mrs. Weston, who has been to Emma almost "a mother in affection" (5), delivers a little girl who will be somewhere between a sibling and a god-daughter to Emma, it is as though we foresee another possible re-run of Emma's journey to maturity. Mr. Knightley assumes her mother will spoil her as she spoiled Emma, but that she will be none the worse for it. "I am losing all my bitterness against spoilt children, my dearest Emma," he tells her (461). After all, he has been in love with her since she was thirteen.

Jane Austen might echo Mr. Knightley. She too loses her bitterness against spoilt children. In *Sense and Sensibility*, in her treatment of the Middleton brats, a degree of bitterness is quite audible, and obedience seems the most desirable trait in a child. But *Emma* shows not just a greater tolerance for children, and a developed sense of childhood culture, but a greater affection, and even some reverence.

NOTES

[1] I use R. W. Chapman's edition of *Emma*, volume 4 of *The Novels of Jane Austen* (London: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 1933, reprinted 1966).

[2] See Chapman's appendix, "The Chronology of *Emma*," pp. 497-8; and Jo Modert's "Chronology Within the Novels," in *The Jane Austen Companion* ed. J. David Grey, A. Walton Litz and Brian Southam (New York: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 57-8.

[3] J. David Grey, "Children," in *The Jane Austen Companion* cited above, p. 43.

[4] Translated by Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962); originally published as *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (1961).

[5] William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807).

[6] David S. Grylls, *Guardians and Angels: Parents and Children in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Faber, 1978), p. 130.

[7] I have discussed the attitude to the child in Jane Austen's fragment in "Emma Watson: Jane Austen's uncompleted Heroine," forthcoming in *Critical Reconstructions: The Relationship of Fiction and Life. Essays in Honour of Ian Watt*, ed. Robert Polhemus (Stanford University Press).

[8] See "Before the Curtain," the Preface to *Vanity Fair* (1847-8). In the chapter initals of the novel Thackeray included a series of vignettes of children's activities as commentary on the action among the adults of the corrupted world of Vanity Fair. These initials usually show children aping dangerous adult activities – "blindly with [their] blessedness at strife" – as Wordsworth put it.

[9] To call again on Thackeray (who memorably deals with places of public entertainment in the early nineteenth century): there is a comparable scene between Arthur Pendennis and humble little Fanny Bolton among the crowds at Vauxhall: "People were rushing and squeezing there beside and behind them. One eager indivdiual rushed by Fanny, and elbowed her so, that she fell back with a little cry, upon which, of course, Arthur caught her adroitly in his arms, and, just for protection, kept her so defended, until they mounted the stair, and took their places." (*Pendennis* [1848-9], chapter 46). Mr. Knightley's cryptic detail suggests some such incident between Harriet and Robert Martin in the crowd at Astley's.