

“It is like a woman’s writing”: The Alternative Epistolary Novel in *Emma*

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None of Jane Austen’s novels after *Lady Susan* assumes an epistolary form in its published version, yet all contain letters of significance. In *Sense and Sensibility* what Willoughby himself calls “That infamous letter,” in *Pride and Prejudice* the missive which Darcy places in Elizabeth’s hands, and in *Persuasion* the note which Captain Wentworth leaves for Anne all mark decisive epochs in a romantic relationship with a letter, while the communications of Mr. Collins, Mary Crawford, and Isabella Thorpe reveal the inadequacies of their authors in wit, integrity, or sincerity. What all these letters have in common is their dramatic quality; a letter permits a character who does not possess the central sensibility of the novel the opportunity to deliver a soliloquy. There is no other letter writer in the Austen canon, however, who so delights in his chance to practice amateur theatricals on paper as Frank Churchill in *Emma*, nor is there one whose epistle receives so extended a buildup or so detailed a criticism by another character.

Unlike other letters in Austen novels, which arrive as a surprise twist or an incidental exposition of character, Frank Churchill’s letter receives protracted preparation from the beginning of the book, although it does not appear until near the end. In the second chapter he sends a “‘handsome letter’ . . . a highly prized letter” (4.18) to his new stepmother, the former Miss Taylor, but the letter comes instead of rather than as herald of the “most proper attention” (17) of his paying a visit upon the occasion of his father’s remarriage. He is eloquent, but with an eloquence at once unstated and not to be trusted. After his first visit to Hartfield, he writes in an altered and more creditable tone, “a long, well-written letter, . . . No suspicious flourishes now of apology or concern; it was the language of real feeling towards Mrs. Weston” (265). This letter is directly quoted from, but only in a politely meaningless snippet: “I had not a spare moment on Tuesday, as you know, for Miss Woodhouse’s beautiful little friend. Pray make my excuses and adieu to her” (266). The excerpt, a condescending compliment hardly intended to appear as anything but a polite gesture to a social inferior, is represented for its providing Emma with a gossamer material with which to begin to weave her fantasy of a romance between Frank and Harriet Smith. Frank is certainly insincere if the compliment is taken as seriously as Emma takes it, but the insincerity is so patent as to have a sincerity of its own; it is a courtly simper such as Philinte in Moliere’s *Misanthrope* would immediately have understood, discounted, and yet honored as a proper pose for a gentleman to assume. He is artificial, but not in a malicious way; the affectation is harmless, or would be if it were not expanded by Emma’s overactive romantic imagination. There, however, the fault is hers; their weaknesses complement each other in a way that foreshadows the developing complication and future resolution of the plot. Frank is established as the

primary letter-writer of the novel without our ever seeing much of what he actually writes.

His epistolary existence possesses a further dimension which remains hidden, though ongoing, throughout most of the work: his secret correspondence with Jane Fairfax. Neither side of this evidently extensive exchange, frequent enough to draw Miss Fairfax regularly and eagerly to the post office, is presented, though it does occasion Mr. Knightley's suspicion when Frank lets slip his "blunder" about Mr. Perry's carriage. What in a more discursive novelist would furnish the material for an entire epistolary subplot is elided into a suggestion, a plot device that triggers the Aristotelian "peripety or recognition"² when the liaison is revealed after the death of Mrs. Churchill. Frank Churchill is constantly writing letters, and those letters exert a powerful effect, both overt and covert, on the course of the novel, yet his incessant activity is barely betokened. An alternative, epistolary *Emma*, a *Frank*, could be constructed from his viewpoint via his correspondence that would contain all the same principal events, the same friendships and matches, as the book as it stands, although with completely altered emphases. But this hypothetical volume remains a phantom, except at a single point, when one long letter of his appears at length after all those preceding it have been suppressed.

The timing of the letter is significant: it occupies the bulk of the chapter immediately following that in which Emma and Mr. Knightley reach their understanding. The central question of the work has just been answered, the issue Mr. Knightley states early on: "There is an anxiety, a curiosity in what one feels for Emma. I wonder what will become of her!" (40). The decisive moment for the heroine of a novel of courtship, what Nancy Armstrong³ calls a domestic novel, comes when she chooses the man who will be her destiny, when she becomes "his own Emma, by hand and word" (433). The news of Frank Churchill's engagement, by alerting Emma to where the hopes of Harriet Smith have actually been tending, is what makes Emma "acquainted with her own heart" (407). After her turn in the garden with Mr. Knightley, the tension of the mainspring of the plot has been released, and it is precisely at this moment that Frank Churchill casts aside pretence and reveals his epistolary existence, the subterranean self that has been gliding parallel and unseen to the main action, the action clustered around Emma. We at last see a piece of that alternative novel, as soon as the novel as it is has resolved its central riddle.

The Frank of the letter is "Always deceived in fact by his own wishes" and "a very, very young man" guilty of "faults of inconsideration and thoughtlessness" (445, 446, 448), in Mr. Knightley's not entirely dispassionate commentary. He is also, however, the youth in whom Emma sees "a little likeness between us" (478), and to resemble Emma Woodhouse is not the worst of recommendations. This resemblance also constitutes the reason this episode from *Frank* is included in *Emma*; his position of lucky triumph after a career of giddy and reckless charm parallels hers, but with the exaggeration permitted to a man. He is permitted impropriety and the freedom to wander away from a valetudinarian parent on a scale Emma

could never think of for herself; he acts as her male alter ego, as wilful as she and less constrained, though not cursed with the degree of "too early an independence" (1.331) that ruins Willoughby's character and happiness together in *Sense and Sensibility*. A constant lover and not actually guilty of any crime, unlike Willoughby and Mr. Crawford, he is permitted the happy ending they are denied.

His style is one of perpetual hyperbole and flippancy, from "My courage rises as I write. It is very difficult for the prosperous to be humble" to "A thousand and a thousand thanks for all the kindness you have ever shown me, and ten thousand for the attentions your heart will dictate towards [Jane Fairfax]" (437, 443). As he confesses, he overflows with confidence and happiness, not merely the "disposition to hope for good" (437) he attributes to his being his father's son but the living in pleasant fantasy that leads to his certainty that "I have no doubt of her [Emma's] having detected me, at least in some part" (438). As Mr. Knightley has not spent years doting on his faults, he feels less forgiveness for them than for Emma's, but they resemble hers remarkably. Like her he descends from that archetype of the eighteenth-century feckless hero, Henry Fielding's Tom Jones. Like hers, Frank's character may not be "superior" (478), as Emma later tells him on their first meeting after the respective publicizing and forming of their two engagements, but it is frank, and he so exuberantly enjoys life that, as she concludes after reading the letter, "there was no being severe" (444) with him.

Like the union of Darcy's humbled pride and Elizabeth's amended prejudice, the matches that conclude *Emma* indicate that Edmund Bertram's doctrine is not always so unfortunate as in *Mansfield Park* that "Your being so far unlike, Fanny, does not in the smallest degree make against the probability of your happiness together: do not imagine it. I am myself convinced that it is rather a favourable circumstance" (3.348-49). Opposites not only attract; they can result in "perfect happiness" (484). Frank's romance and letter recapitulate Emma's own situation and character with an alternative coloring and gendering. After ambiguously intertwining with her story throughout the novel, the tale he has been ceaselessly engaged in telling offstage at last enjoys a moment of emergence in his own unmediated voice to form an oblique commentary on her situation. Frank is Emma, but in quite another sense than that Catherine used of Heathcliff in Emily Brönte's *Wuthering Heights*. Interiority, usually the preserve of the heroine in Austen, for once verges upon a male voice, if only to betray its boyish thoughtlessness. Mr. Knightley remarks of Frank's penmanship, "It is like a woman's writing" (297).

NOTES

- ¹ Jane Austen, *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), I, 325. Further references to Austen's works will be made in the text.
- ² Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*, ed. Lee A. Jacobus (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 91.
- ³ *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).