



Emma: The Pique of Perfection

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IN THE SHADOW OF PIKE'S PEAK, I am tempted to imitate Emma's imaginist tendencies and describe her progress toward perfection metaphorically as a hike in high peak country. Thus picture, if you please, Miss Emma Woodhouse in Merrill hiking boots, Gore-Tex anorak, and Tilly hat, swinging along from Volume One to Volume Three, her upward progress broken by an occasional descent into an alpine meadow or a heart-stopping rappel down a cliff face before she regains altitude. Imagine her engaged in difficult scrambles up rocks and scree or across a glacier or crevasse, until, through sheer hard slog, slugging from her Nalgene water bottle, she huffs her way to within a few feet of the peak. There Mr. Knightley reaches down a gentle hand to help her up that final steep step to the bright, wind-swept summit where together they admire the majestic view.

Now, what's wrong with this picture?

Well, for a start, Emma thinks she's pretty near the top all along, and in any case she's quite content to let people assume that she's already planted her flag on the summit. Her moral progress in the novel that bears her name is not so much a metaphorical climb from base camp to peak as it is an acknowl-

edgement of her need to keep climbing. Paradoxically, to achieve perfection, Emma must recognize that she is not perfect. In effect, *Emma* is about the “pique,” not the “peak,” of perfection.

Now, as a verb, “to pique” means to annoy, to offend, or to arouse resentment or curiosity, and as a noun, “pique” means resentment or offense taken. Both Emma and her evil twin Mrs. Elton, each thinking she sets the standard of perfection for Highbury, manage to annoy or to offend others and to feel resentment in their turn. They pique and they are piqued, but it is Emma, not Mrs. Elton, who is our heroine because she alone turns her sense of pique into a tool for self-knowledge and change. Emma’s progress, therefore, is less an assault upon Everest than a climb up the Hartfield Edition of a Twelve-Step Program for Perfection.

References to perfection permeate this novel. The very first sentence of *Emma* introduces a heroine who, in the words of the narrator, “*seemed* to unite some of the best blessings of existence” (5, my emphasis). The final sentence of the novel offers authorial assurance of “the perfect happiness of the union” between Emma and Mr. Knightley. Between that initial, misleading *appearance* of perfection and the final triumphant affirmation of “perfect happiness,” the words “perfect,” “perfection,” and “perfectly” (as well as such words as “blunder,” “ought,” and “doubt”) ring like keynotes throughout the novel, gaining resonance with each repetition.

Highbury gossips are preoccupied with each other’s perfection or imperfection. In one of their quarrels about Emma, for example, Mr. Knightley agrees when Mrs. Weston asks, “‘Can you imagine any thing nearer perfect beauty than Emma altogether?’ ‘I have not a fault to find with her person,’ he replied” (39). In Emma’s view, Harriet Smith “wanted only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect” (23). Unable to perfect the person, she perfects her drawing of Harriet instead. Mrs. Weston mentions to Mr. Elton that Emma has improved upon Harriet’s eye-brows and eye-lashes. “‘Do you think so?’ replied he. ‘I cannot agree. It appears to me a most perfect resemblance in every feature’” (48). Harriet, in turn, “did think [Mr. Elton] all perfection” (142). Emma informs Jane Fairfax “that Mr. Elton is

the standard of perfection in Highbury, both in person and in mind" (174), but to Mr. John Knightley she admits, "Mr. Elton's manners are not perfect" (111). His bride is reputed to be a "perfect beauty" (181). After meeting him, Emma declares herself "perfectly satisfied" with Frank Churchill (196). In response to his gallant praise of Mrs. Weston, she says, "You cannot see too much perfection in Mrs. Weston for my feelings" (192), while Mrs. Weston would not "betray any imperfection [of Frank's] which could be concealed" (196, 212). When Frank joins Emma in song at the Coles', he is "accused [by the company] of having . . . a perfect knowledge of music" (227).

While admiring Jane's new Broadwood piano-forté, Emma gloats to discover that the "amiable, upright, perfect Jane Fairfax was apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings" (242). Mrs. Elton asserts that she and Jane would together equal perfection: "I say, Jane, what a perfect character you and I should make if we could be shaken together. My liveliness and your solidity would produce perfection" (456-7). Mr. Knightley admires Jane Fairfax so much that both Mrs. Weston and Mr. Cole suspect him of being in love with her (223, 287), but while he acknowledges that "any body may know how highly I think of Jane Fairfax" (287), he adds, "Jane Fairfax is a very charming young woman—but not even Jane Fairfax is perfect. She has a fault. She has not the open temper which a man would wish for in a wife" (288). Later Mr. Knightley calls her "a sweet young woman" (426) and declares her to be the "perfect wife" for Frank Churchill (428), just as Emma had earlier pronounced Mr. Elton "perfect"—for Harriet.

Not only characters but also states of emotion are measured against an implicit paradigm of perfection. "Perfect happiness, even in memory, is not common," the narrator observes when, after the Coles' dinner party, Emma regrets her indiscreet remarks to Frank about Jane (231). After Mr. Knightley is assured of Emma's love for him, we are told, "he had passed from a thoroughly distressed state of mind, to something so like perfect happiness, that it could bear no other name" (431). Emma's "sole . . . alloy" in her own happiness after her engagement is "the necessity

of concealment from Mr. Knightley” of Harriet’s secret love (475). When that necessity is removed, we are told, Emma “could now look forward to giving him that full and perfect confidence which her disposition was most ready to welcome as a duty” (475).

The adverb “perfectly” frequently modifies statements about understanding or feeling in *Emma*. Mrs. Weston reminds Mr. Knightley that Emma’s father “perfectly approves” her friendship with Harriet (40). Emma is “perfectly satisfied” with the appearance and behavior of Frank Churchill (196), who says, in describing the Weymouth party for Emma: “There appeared such a perfectly good understanding among them all” (202). As she develops her suspicions about Jane and Mr. Dixon for Frank, “He perfectly agreed with her” (203). Emma assumes that “no doubt he did perfectly feel that Enscombe could not make him happy” (204). Emma, too, is “perfectly convinced” that Jane’s piano was sent by Mr. Dixon (218). In fact, just as the phrase “there could be no doubt” invariably signals a faulty inference in *Emma* (as in “There can be no doubt of your being a gentleman’s daughter” [30]), the adverb “perfectly” functions in this novel as a pretty accurate marker of imperfection.

But imperfection is not necessarily a bad thing. The problem with perfection is that it is static, impervious to growth or change, rather like Mr. Woodhouse, in fact. Emma’s repeated declaration that she will never marry, which Mr. Knightley rightly recognizes “means just nothing at all” (41), is predicated on the static, barren, putative perfection of her single state: “I cannot really change for the better,” she tells Harriet. “If I were to marry, I must expect to repent it” (84). Certainly Mr. Woodhouse, for whom “Matrimony, as the origin of change, was always disagreeable” (7), believes Emma to be perfect in her single state. Several times during Mr. Knightley’s visit to Hartfield on the melancholy evening of poor Miss Taylor’s wedding day he extols Emma’s perfection: “Dear Emma bears everything so well,” (11) he says to Mr. Knightley, while to Emma he observes, “whatever you say always comes to pass” (12); and, again to Mr. Knightley, “Emma never thinks of herself, if she can do good to others” (13). Now Emma knows that she’s not perfect, but she “would not have him really suspect such a circumstance as her not being thought perfect by every body” (11).

Most of Highbury agrees with Mr. Woodhouse. Months later, at Box Hill, Mr. Weston gallantly lauds Emma's perfection with his witticism, a riddle that feebly plays on her name: "What two letters of the alphabet are there, that express perfection? . . . 'M. and A.—Em - ma—.'" On that occasion Mr. Knightley cautions: "Perfection should not have come so soon" (371). He, of course, is "one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them" (11), and as usual, he's right: Box Hill may be geographically the highest elevation reached in the novel, but morally it is the nadir, not the peak, of Emma's perfection—and yet without Box Hill, Emma's insult, Mr. Knightley's rebuke, and Emma's "extraordinary" tears (376)—in short, without the pique of her putative perfection—she might never have reached the peak of perfection.

The day after Box Hill, when Emma makes her penitential visit to Miss Bates, that worthy woman repeats the usual Highbury gallantry: "So very kind!" replies Miss Bates to Emma's expressed concern for Jane, "But you are always kind." The narrator adds on Emma's behalf: "There was no bearing such an 'always' . . ." (380). Before Box Hill, Emma knew that she was not perfect, just as she knew, but would not own, that she had made Harriet too tall in her sketch (48), but she found it disagreeable to be told of her faults (11). After Box Hill, Emma finds it "unbearable" to be thought perfect by Miss Bates. This is a change indeed.

When a few days later she accepts Mr. Knightley's proposal of marriage after first appearing to discourage it, Mr. Knightley, we are told, passes "from a thoroughly distressed state of mind, to something so like perfect happiness, that it could bear no other name" (432). In his eyes, paradoxically, Emma is the "sweetest and best of all creatures, faultless in spite of all her faults" (433).

That paradox is key to understanding Mr. Knightley's preference for the perfectly imperfect Emma over the imperfectly perfect Jane. Mr. Knightley, like Jane Austen herself, is bored by perfection. In her "Plan of a Novel" Austen burlesques the exemplary "perfect" characters of many contemporary novels, proposing to create similarly impossible heroes and heroines:

He, the most excellent Man that can be imagined,
perfect in Character, Temper & Manners . . .—Heroine

a faultless Character herself—, perfectly good, with much tenderness & sentiment, & not the least Wit. . . .
(*Minor Works* 428)

On one occasion, moreover, she gently rebuked her handsome, clever, and rich niece, Fanny Knight, for provoking one of her suitors, a Mr. Wildman, into criticizing Austen's own imperfect heroines in her anonymously-published novels:

Have mercy on him [advises Aunt Jane], tell him the truth & make him an apology.—He & and I should not in the least agree of course, in our ideas of Novels & Heroines;—pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked. . . . (*Letters* 23 March 1817)

In creating Emma, whom she called “a heroine whom no one but myself would much like” (*Austen-Leigh* 157), Austen was aware that she risked alienating readers unaccustomed to complex characters, but she was writing for readers who could say with Mr. Knightley, “There is an anxiety, a curiosity in what one feels for Emma. I wonder what will become of her!” (40).

Thus we should not read the “perfect happiness” of Emma's marriage ironically. Although a child of the eighteenth century, Jane Austen held to an orthodox Anglican belief in the doctrine of Original Sin rather than to the Enlightenment belief in the perfectibility of human nature. In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Morning and Evening Prayers begin with a series of scriptural acknowledgements of human wickedness to be read “with a loud voice” by the priest, followed by a priestly exhortation to acknowledge and confess one's sins: “Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness. . . .” In the general confession that follows, the entire congregation says:

We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done. . . . (41-42; 53-54)

As a daughter, sister, and friend of clergymen, Austen would have heard or spoken these words hundreds of times a year throughout

her lifetime. Not surprisingly, her own prayers acknowledging human imperfection and asking Divine aid for repentance echo these orthodox sentiments:

Pardon oh! God the offences of the past day. We are conscious of many frailties; we remember with shame and contrition, many evil thoughts and neglected duties; and we have perhaps sinned against thee and against our fellow-creatures in many instances of which we have no remembrance. ("Prayer II," *Minor Works* 454)

Look with mercy on the sins we have this day committed and in mercy make us feel them deeply, that our repentance may be sincere, & our resolution steadfast of endeavouring against the commission of such in future. Teach us to understand the sinfulness of our own hearts, and bring to our knowledge every fault of temper and every evil habit in which we have indulged to the discomfort of our fellow-creatures, and the danger of our own souls. ("Prayer I," *Minor Works* 454)

To which Emma Woodhouse might indeed add, "Amen."

Without acknowledgment of sin, of offense against one's fellow-creatures, there can be no forgiveness and no steadfast resolution not to commit those sins again. Without acknowledgment of one's imperfection, there can be no improvement, no growth toward perfection. Emma behaves badly, but she also acknowledges her imperfections, engages in reflection, expresses remorse, and undertakes reformation. This struggle is sufficient to make her a heroine worthy of Mr. Knightley's love, for human perfection is achieved not through faultless behavior, of which no mortal character (no, not even Fanny Price) is capable, but through a process of self-reflection and self-correction that all of Jane Austen's novels valorize and all of her heroines exemplify. Perfection, for Austen, is not being but becoming.

Eventually Emma, her sense of her own perfection piqued, reaches the peak of perfection not as an "imaginist" of other people's romances, nor even as a romantic heroine herself, but as a true friend. True friendship involves an ability to see others as subjects, not as objects; that is, to see them as they are, not as

puppets to be manipulated and “perfected” according to one’s own paradigm, as Emma tries to perfect Harriet. That Emma is capable of such clear sight we know from the narrator’s assurance that “Emma was very compassionate” toward the poor of Highbury and “had no romantic expectations of extraordinary virtue from those, for whom education had done so little . . .” (86).

In offering true, disinterested friendship to Mr. Knightley when she believes that he wants to confide his love for Harriet Smith, in remaining a true friend to Harriet by preserving her secret even at the expense of her own comfort, and in determining to be a better friend henceforth to Jane Fairfax, Emma is finally able to join Mr. Knightley on the peak of perfection where, with very little white satin and very few lace veils, she marries him before the community of “the small band of true friends” whose hopes and predictions are “fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union” (484).

And I can’t imagine a more perfect ending than that.

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