



## *Emma* and New Comedy

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AS WE KNOW, the most exciting developments in Austen criticism in recent years have been historicist (“new” or otherwise). However, historicism’s domination of the critical scene in Austen studies and in literary studies more broadly has generated other imbalances—among them, an inattention to what Andrew Delbanco terms the “only definition of literature that matters: right words in the right order” (208). As Delbanco reports, his “normally quick Columbia graduate students fall silent when a Melville seminar turns to the matter of his style [because they are] more intimate with the likes of . . . Foucault than with the rhythms of the Bible or Shakespeare” (Pinsker 55). Delbanco’s complaint has become almost standard among the many literature professors who took to the field out of a love of literature as such, for the historicization of literature has inevitably eclipsed the study of prosody, style, figuration, structure, irony, character, and all the means by which literature becomes itself, right words in the right order.

Perhaps just in time, literary studies have begun to see a resurgence of critical interest in aesthetics rather than history. In “Recuperating the Aesthetic,” an essay included in *Beauty and the*

*Critic*, an edited volume dedicated to countering history's grip on criticism, Christopher Beach makes the central claim: "Despite recent attempts to exile the aesthetic from the world of literary/cultural studies, the aesthetic will not be so easily dismissed or quarantined: questions concerning the nature and role of the aesthetic stubbornly persist in our discussion of both literature and culture" (96). Aesthetics seem to be back, if a recent article by Scott Heller in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is right. Citing eminent scholars such as Elaine Scarry, Anne Mellor, Marjorie Perloff, and George Levine, Heller concludes that the upsurge of interest in aesthetics is a backlash against the current supremacy of cultural studies, of reading texts in terms of their political meanings (A15-A16).

This discussion of the larger trends in literary criticism of the past few decades is by way of clearing some space for investigating Austen's formal and aesthetic achievement more closely, for the realm of aesthetics includes, necessarily, the realm of structure, form, and genre. The 1950s were the last period in which structure, form, and genre were widely discussed, when structuralism drew readers' attention to the creative function of form, the way in which "the larger rhythm of the whole action [of a narrative] shapes and indeed creates the parts" (Barber 594). Structuralism set as its task the "recognizing and describing of underlying configurations [in imaginative literature]" (Barber 594). For some time now, structuralist criticism has been, as P. G. Wodehouse would put it, "in the cellar with no takers," but I believe viewing Austen through a structuralist lens again may be generative.

To do so, I go back to the very oldest traditions of literature, to Attic comedy. What follows investigates Austen's use of a fictional form that has persisted in the human imagination for millennia; i.e., comic romance. Comic romance begins in human history in the fourth century b.c., in Athens. Roughly a century after the brutal, bawdy, and satiric comedies of Aristophanes (known as Old Comedy), the Greek playwright Menander revolutionized comedy with what is now known as New Comedy. T. G. A. Nelson provides a useful precis of Menander's line of influence:

[Menander's] New Comedy [makes its] most conspicuous contribution to later drama [with] the plot in which a young man and a young woman succeed in overcoming obstacles to their marriage. It is from Menander that the most notable continuous tradition of European comedy descends: it runs through the Roman dramatists Plautus . . . and Terence . . . to Italian and English Renaissance playwrights such as . . . Ariosto, Shakespeare, and Jonson. It influences Moliere in seventeenth-century France, and from him passes to eighteenth-century figures such as Beaumarchais, . . . Sheridan, and Goldsmith: its lineaments are still discernible in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, first performed in 1895. (19-20)

These living conventions of New Comedy are with us still, in every romantic comedy on film (*Notting Hill* and its ilk) and even in forms very little removed from their ancient Greek antecedents. Menander would have no trouble recognizing, for instance, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* or *What's Up, Doc?* as plots inspired by his work. As Harry Levin argues, "The battle of the sexes, the struggle of the classes, the clash of the generations—the leading themes of [Greek comedy] still frame the major problems of [George] Bernard Shaw" (33). Getting two young people together, past a series of obstacles and a thorny nest of complications, what W. S. Gilbert called the "nice dilemma," "pretty mess," and "how-de-do"—this is at heart the structure of comic romance (Levin 33).

The long line of New Comedy also includes Jane Austen. Though she never knew any Greek or Latin versions of New Comedy, Austen knew Shakespeare and Goldsmith and Fanny Burney; that is, she knew—and knew thoroughly—the tradition of comic romance from Shakespeare up through the novels and plays of the eighteenth century. When, with devastating narrative irony she has Emma explain to Harriet that "a Hartfield edition of Shakespeare" would need a long footnote to correct Shakespeare's line, "the course of true love never did run smooth," we know that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with all its lovers' delusions and final reconciliations, inhabits Austen's imagination.

Austen both enjoys and rebels from the conventions of comic romance in each novel. In each, the conventions of romance are parodied, but in each these conventions are also consummated.

In *Emma*, we can see Austen ring the changes, as it were, on a range of comic conventions of plot, character, and theme, creating comic effects of extraordinary sophistication and nuance, and deepening the moral, psychological, and social resonance of comic romance as a narrative form. Her adaptations of such character types as the braggart soldier (reimagined in Mrs. Elton) and of the killjoy, the refuser of festivity (reimagined in Mr. Woodhouse), link with her refashionings of plot devices such as the *anagnorisis* (or comic discovery) and *peripeteia* (or reversal of fortune) to build a narrative that extends the affective and aesthetic power of the comic novel as such. In particular, Austen moves the comic novel forward through a keenly original recasting of her protagonist in multiple comic roles, for Emma plays at various points the trickster, the ingenue, the fool, and the blocking character. Thus the happy ending in *Emma* relies on the heroine getting past herself more than getting past other people, an innovation that takes the comic romance to a new level of psychological realism.

Frye tells us that “the obstacles to a [protagonist’s] desire . . . form the action of . . . comedy, and the overcoming of them the comic resolution” (164). Here Austen’s psychological deftness comes into play, because the only real obstacle to Emma’s desire is her unwillingness to acknowledge that she is capable of love; indeed, that she loves Mr. Knightley. This internally imposed obstacle mirrors the absurd, cruel, or irrational law under which so many comedies begin—the Athenian law, for example, that leads the lovers to escape to the forest in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or the brutal bond for a pound of flesh that Shylock holds over Antonio at the start of *The Merchant of Venice*. Emma’s cruel and irrational law is one she postulates to herself. This law has two articles: first, that, with her gifts, she has an obligation to matchmake (as Emma says, it is “the greatest amusement in the world” [12]), and, second, that she will never be in love or marry (“I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature” and “I am not only, not going to be married, at present, but have very

little intention of ever marrying at all” [84]). The action of this comedy, like most New Comedies, works to evade or break this arbitrary and unjust law, and when the law collapses, it does so with the “speed of an arrow” (408). Further, at the undoing of Emma’s laws, two longstanding devices of comic denouement come together: *anagnorisis* (discovery or disclosure of the truth), and *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune), for Emma’s realization that she loves Mr. Knightley comes exactly when she is most sure he is lost to her:

She was bewildered amidst the confusion of all that had rushed on her with the last few hours. Every moment had brought a fresh surprise; and every surprise must be matter of humiliation to her. . . . How to understand the deceptions she had been thus practising on herself, and living under!—The blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart!—she sat still, she walked about, she tried her own room, she tried the shrubbery,—in every place, every posture, she perceived that she had acted most weakly; . . . that she was wretched, and should probably find this day but the beginning of wretchedness. (411-12)

Reversal of fortune and self-discovery are exactly conjoined.

This sophisticated compression of effects holds also to Emma’s characterization relative to the archetypal figures of comedy. In playing the obstacle to her own romance, Emma becomes, in essence, the heavy, a role traditionally held by a father figure or powerful older man (Mr. Woodhouse, of course, cannot operate as such a tyrannical figure, and the other father figure is our hero!). Whether a comedy concentrates on its blocking characters (as does *Tartuffe*) or on its lovers (as does *Twelfth Night*) tends to lead it into either the ironic or the romantic comic tradition. What is so compelling about *Emma* is that in this novel Austen performs the brilliant swerve of combining the blocking character with the lover in our protagonist. By so doing, Austen centers her novel squarely between the ironic *and* romantic comic traditions.

But Austen also goes further, giving Emma characteristics of two other key comic characters: the *eiron* or trickster figure, and the fool. The trickster figure, usually a tricky slave or servant

in Menander and Plautus (and Woodhouse!), labors as the architect of the scheming, tricking, and plotting which in turn bring about the happy ending. Puck and Ariel, Sancho Panza and Jeeves, are trickster figures; their methods may be full of ingenuity but their aim is shared—as Puck has it, “‘Jack shall love Jill / Nought shall go ill.’” In taking on the role of “illusionist” and matchmaker, Emma is participating in this ancient role, and when, for instance, she pretends to fix a broken shoelace so that Harriet and Mr. Elton may enjoy each other’s company without her in attendance, she joins the company of others who hatch schemes designed to bring about romantic happiness. The irony of Emma’s playing this role is clear, however, for all her matchmaking goes awry, and she finds that the comic character she has most resembled throughout is another character type altogether: the fool. And fool she acknowledges herself to be. When late in the novel, she and Mr. Knightley talk over Harriet’s engagement to Mr. Martin, Mr. Knightley points out that she is “‘materially changed since we talked on this issue before.’” Emma replies, “‘I hope so—for at that time I was a fool’” (474).

Comic convention ordains a special dispensation for fools as such. They are to be immune from injury; Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, we remember, are never hurt, no matter how many catastrophes of exploding factories or collapsing houses surround them; in Shakespeare, too, the fool is always safe, even on the blasted heath with King Lear. Threaten a fool, and the punishment can seem disproportionate, as it is for yellow-gartered Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, who takes on the fool Feste at his peril. It is partly for this reason that Emma’s insult to Mrs. Bates, the leading fool of the novel, garners Emma such a scalding humiliation and retribution. But fools cannot be hurt for long, or not much, and so Miss Bates, Mr. Weston, Mr. Woodhouse, and Harriet are all safe from real harm.

Another conventional comic figure who emerges in *Emma* is the boaster or braggart. This tradition extends back to Menander; on the Roman stage, such a stock character was known as the *miles gloriosus*, or bragging soldier. Now in *Emma*, conflict arises over social status, not foreign territory, and so it should not surprise that Austen reimagines the *miles gloriosus* figure in Mrs.

Elton, who boasts, not of slaying ten thousand but of enjoying the morning-room, laurels, staircase, grounds, and barouche-landau of her brother-in-law's estate, Maple Grove. But like the fools, Mrs. Elton comes to no serious embarrassment, for this general amnesty, extending over the whole of Highbury's inhabitants (though not to the unseen Mrs. Churchill, slated for a convenient death), is itself part of the way comedies commonly work.

Comic ends tend to let even the worst or most foolish characters off the hook. One particularly apt exemplar of this tendency can be found in the medieval mystery play, *The Second Shepherds' Play*; the villain, Mak, is caught redhanded after stealing a sheep, and instead of being hanged—the penalty the fourteenth century commonly reserved for such thefts—Mak is tossed in a blanket and let go. In *Emma*, even the actual lawbreakers seem to be exempt from punishment. The gypsies who attempt to rob Harriet escape unscathed; at any rate, after Harriet's "rescue," not a word is said about any measures the community might have taken to run the gypsies to earth, and the chicken-thieves who seem to be having the run of the neighborhood near the novel's close also operate apparently without retribution. Not that either of these lapses in community policing should give rise to surprise, despite the presence of a dedicated magistrate in Mr. Knightley, for the crimes the novel recognizes as important are not these pilferings at all, but rather are failures of social responsibility and of kindness, from the Eltons' snub of Harriet at the ball to Emma's own cattiness to Miss Bates.

Beyond determining the appropriate fate for fools and villains, there is a further moral negotiation required of all comedies, that between the demands of pleasure, fun, and release on the one hand and social order on the other. As Christopher Herbert has pointed out, "'compromise' is hardly an adequate word to describe the state of self-contradiction that many comedies fall into by virtue of their precarious double alliance with pleasure and with social order" (410), and this problem is particularly vexing for Austen, who, while not a Puritan nonetheless distrusts unbounded pleasure. One way comedies bring the problem of pleasure into the foreground is through the figure of yet another comic type, the killjoy or the hater of pleasure. The most usual pattern in

comic romances is for the killjoy to be mercilessly chastised, and then released. *Twelfth Night's* Malvolio, for instance, is roundly punished for his continual efforts to dampen festivity, against which Sir Toby must lament, "'Are there to be no cakes and ale?'" But comedies like Austen's, which take social order more seriously, especially comic novels set in the quotidian of England or any other real place rather than in never-neverlands such as Illyria, have a more difficult relationship with the killjoy and with pleasure more generally.

In *Emma*, the killjoy role falls in large part to Mr. Woodhouse. An advocate of thin gruel, Mr. Woodhouse dislikes cake, parties, sea-excursions, suppers, and weddings, and to have any pleasure herself, Emma must work around her father with great care. Austen plainly depicts Mr. Woodhouse's suspicion of pleasure as extreme, silly, and selfish. Nonetheless, the action of the novel brings him neither chastisement nor embarrassment. His only comeuppance at the novel's end is a trick so mild that he is never even aware that he has been worked upon, when Emma uses the thefts of neighboring chickens to engineer her father's willingness that she and Mr. Knightley marry. So the killjoy in *Emma* is as exempt from punishment as are the fools and braggarts, primarily because Austen is not a particularly avid defender of pleasure and license as such.

Austen's treatment of the complex relationship between pleasure and social order, and of comedy's role in negotiating this relationship, becomes clearer when one examines the function of the green world in *Emma*. The green world, a term coined by Frye, is now broadly used by critics to denote that stage or place in a narrative where the characters remove themselves from the city or from usual pursuits to go to the country, or the woods, or anyplace apart from civilization. The convention of the green world derives from Roman, medieval, and Renaissance customs of the holiday (beginning with the Roman Saturnalia). In such carnivals, revelry and the relaxation of ordinary social rules—sometimes even their reversal—would be the order of the day, and it is this holiday, carnival perspective which Bakhtin has identified as the spirit of folk humor: "As opposed to the official feast, one might say that [medieval] carnival celebrated temporary libera-

tion from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (11). These escapes from rules, hierarchies, and social order are notable in the comic romances of Shakespeare—think of the lovers' escape to the woods in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the movement to the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*. Sometimes the entire action of a Shakespearean comedy takes place in a green world, and we assume that the boundaries with the real world lie right before the start of Act I and right after Act V (for example, in *The Tempest* and *Twelfth Night*, which take place on an island and in the magical land of Illyria, respectively). In the green world, "the love intrigues work themselves out in a setting where social pressures are at a minimum: finally, when the redemptive magic of the natural world has taken effect, the characters return to the social world with new hope" (Nelson 31). Removals to a green world are also a staple of twentieth century comic romances, though in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, the green world is a Chicago Cubs game, and in the romantic film comedies of Preston Sturges, as Stanley Cavell points out, the green world is a magical place called "Connecticut" (49).

When Austen's characters enter a green world—in other words, when they remove themselves from the ordinary world for a holiday, as happens on two successive days at the height of the novel's action (the strawberry-picking expedition at Donwell Abbey and the pleasure trip to Box Hill the next day), we can be sure that we will not find any simple endorsement of pleasure. For instance, no more ironic and succinct debunking of planned leisure can be found in the British novel than the treatment of Mrs. Elton engaged in strawberry picking:

Mrs. Elton, in all her apparatus of happiness . . . was very ready to lead the way in gathering, accepting, or talking—strawberries, and only strawberries, could now be thought or spoken of.—"The best fruit in England—every body's favourite—always wholesome.—These the finest beds and finest sorts.—Delightful to gather for one's self—the only way of really enjoying them.—Morning decidedly the best time—never tired—every sort good—hautboy infi-

nitely superior—no comparison—the others hardly eatable—hautboys very scarce. . . . Maple Grove— . . . beds when to be renewed—gardeners thinking exactly different . . . gardeners never to be put out of their way—delicious fruit—only too rich to be eaten much of—inferior to cherries—currants more refreshing—only objection to gathering strawberries the stooping—glaring sun—tired to death—could bear it no longer—must go and sit in the shade.” (358-59)

Nor does Austen approve of the idea of other rustic delights as proposed by Mrs. Elton, who wishes that the guests come to Donwell Abbey on donkeys, and that there be “no form or parade—a sort of gipsy party” (355), suggestions in keeping with the sentimental tradition of pastoral retreat (we remember that Marie Antoinette herself played at shepherdess with a full flock of sheep at Versailles). Speaking for Austen’s values, Mr. Knightley firmly rejects all suggestions that disturb social order, including Mrs. Elton’s that she serve as hostess and “Lady Patroness” (354). After explaining that he will allow “only one married woman in the world . . . to invite what guests she pleases to Donwell” (he means a future Mrs. Knightley), he goes on to veto the notion of a table laid in the shade, a practice Mrs. Elton has termed “as natural and simple as possible.” His retort implicitly challenges green world inversions of order and stability: “My idea of the simple and the natural will be to have the table spread in the dining-room. The nature and the simplicity of gentlemen and ladies, with their servants and furniture, I think is best observed by meals within doors” (355). And yet despite Mr. Knightley’s authority, the Donwell Abbey visit ends in confusion: Frank is late; Jane, leaving to escape Mrs. Elton’s patronizing interference, quarrels with Frank, whom she meets on the road; and Frank, stricken with temper, indulges in escapist fantasies about Switzerland before a baffled Emma.

These confusions and miseries are only amplified at Box Hill, where Mr. Knightley is even more powerless to prevent the inversions of order and propriety. As in the Athenian woods of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the party at Box Hill cannot stay together in spirit or body; they traipse around in uncomfortable

ones and twos. And the eligible young people, while not exactly under a fairy's spell, are clearly as confused about right pairings as are Helena and Hermia, Demetrius and Lysander (it's not accidental, I think, that the two green world events at Donwell Abbey and Box Hill happen right at what Austen terms "almost Midsummer" [357]). Frank plays at loving Emma, Emma plays at being Frank's intended, Mr. Knightley plays a disinterested chaperon, and Jane plays a disinterested spinster. To add to the confusion, Emma believes that Harriet is interested in Frank, while Harriet believes that Emma knows she is interested in Mr. Knightley. And all the lovers are at their worst: Mr. Knightley and Harriet and Jane silent, Emma "gay and thoughtless" (368), and Frank full of "lively impudence" (369). When Frank orders the company to follow Emma's command as if she were "presiding," a role that properly belongs to Mrs. Elton as the most recent bride, he is playing his part in the green world suspension of ordinary hierarchies. And before long all the misunderstandings and ill-feelings come to a crisis: Emma insults Miss Bates, perfectly in keeping with green world license and carnival mockery and victimization. Austen thus takes full advantage of the green world convention as a space in the plot where confusion and riot come to a climax after which follow clarification and release. The comic plot requires a transgression on this order to make it possible for Emma to be chastised by Mr. Knightley, for her to feel her wrong, and for her to long for amendment, all necessary before she and Mr. Knightley can reach the happy ending the comic romance has guaranteed from the start.

Almost all comic romances close with a festive ritual, a dance, or a wedding. Weddings are preferred, for, as Helen Gardner explains, "the great symbol of pure comedy is marriage, by which the world is renewed" (54). The most complete and festive comedies have a whole roster of marriages to enact—three in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance. In *Emma*, the final scene is the wedding of the principal lovers, but the sense of comic completeness is amplified by the reader's knowledge that one other couple has just completed its nuptials (the Robert Martins) and another will be married a month hence—Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. These secondary couples are commonly employed in

comedies, and serve as foils to the more complex characters who are the protagonists. From Shakespeare, one might think of Hero and Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* or Sebastian and Olivia in *Twelfth Night* as representative of the convention. If Austen were writing even fifty years later, I venture that she would have begun the strategy employed by most of the major Victorian novelists, that of accommodating a comic end for the hero and heroine at the cost of a tragic or pathetic end for the secondary couple (e.g., Will and Dorothea's happiness in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, set against the tragic failure of Lydgate's marriage to Rosamond). Had this darker vision been accommodated, Jane's illness would have turned fatal, and Frank would have been left groping to understand the depth of his loss. But Austen's commitment to the full comic round is undiminished, and the novel which began with one happy wedding ends with the expectation or enactment of three others.

As Frye points out, "The tendency of comedy is to build as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated" (165). In particular, Harriet must be included. The plot waits, even hangs about, for several chapters after Emma and Mr. Knightley have discovered that they love each other, before the wedding can take place, for Harriet stands as the only person still potentially hurt, perhaps for life, by Emma's earlier misdeeds. This same long interval between romantic resolution and wedding includes a reconciliation with Frank and Jane, and, at the last, Mr. Woodhouse's change of heart that allows the wedding. It is important that all—or almost all—are included (Mrs. Elton does not witness the wedding ceremony, even though she is the wife of the officiant). Although the Eltons remain inimical, it is important to note that the narrator in this final scene neither gloats nor makes comic points by pointing out the embarrassing fact that Mr. Elton, once a contender for Emma's hand, now officiates at Mr. Knightley's and Emma's union. The churlish Mrs. Elton is admitted into the final paragraph (though not into the ceremony itself) only to give one last nastiness—"Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business! Selina would stare when she heard of it!" (484)—but then she is immediately over-

ruled by the narrator.

Therefore, in keeping with the strong strain of irony rather than idealization in *Emma*, the general last movement toward inclusion does not come at the cost of including the Eltons in the ideal society constituted by Mr. Knightley, Emma, and the “small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony” (484); neither we nor the good characters are expected to forgive the Eltons, for they show no signs of amendment. Given that the selfishness and stupidity of the world is past redemption, in *Emma*, as in all of Austen’s novels, the comic close is enacted for a select few. Nor is the comic close riotously festive, for Austen’s suspicion of unrestrained pleasure (as in her depictions of the green world) dictates that the final scene is civilized and restrained in its felicity: “The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade” (484). And yet we are assured that this wedding, in keeping with the Western comic tradition, constitutes a putative guarantee of comic happiness—Mr. Knightley and Emma enjoy, we are told at the last, “the perfect happiness of the union.” Thus Austen finds her own path through the comic conventions she inherited from ancient writers she never read and from Shakespeare and others she knew familiarly to create perhaps the most satisfying and skillful New Comedy of the nineteenth century.

#### NOTES

1. See Riley for a further discussion of the indestructibility of the fool, including an excursus on that pair of fools, R2D2 and C3PO from the *Star Wars* saga. Curiously, with the possible exception of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen never employs the comic convention of the wise fool, a character readily found in both Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies (e.g., the fool in *King Lear* and Feste in *Twelfth Night*). Her fools are never given the opportunity of saying something wise beyond their seeming capacities, nor do children or laborers (the favorite Romantic variants of the wise fool, *vide* Wordsworth) give rise to unexpected jewels. Austen’s commitment to rationality and common bourgeois experience holds fast.
2. For the clearest and earliest explication of the relation between Saturnalia, green world, and Shakespeare’s comedy, see Barber.
3. Darkness is not allowed at the end, but like most comedies, *Emma* contains tragic possibilities. As in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shylock intends to cut out Antonio’s heart, or Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, where the hero is on the scaffold in the final chapters, Austen’s novel includes the threat of governess-work and, later, a serious illness for Jane Fairfax as well as the possibilities of unloved misery for

both Harriet and Emma. For a further discussion of the place of the tragic within the comic, see both Frye, 177-79, and Nelson, 29-30.

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