

# Emma

*J. Austen*

August 28-September 12, 2013

The remarkable fact about Austen is her modernity. She writes a simple, limpid prose, artful yet without any mannerism. Her worlds are small and her concerns are petty, yet universal and in the life of most people truly momentous. It is of course about marriage. And marriage in an English middle class family at the beginning of the 19th century was one important, if not the most important decision to be made, and maybe far more so for the woman than for the man. On it hinged the entire future, whether it be one of comfort and prosperity, at the center of social life, or misery at its edges. Money was important, yet to marry for money was detestable of course, but not to marry rich was foolish. Thus so many things had to come together. Social obligations, romantic compatibility and of course means.

Austen writes clearly and to the point. The central concern are of course the social interactions as they reveal themselves through dialogue. Austen dispenses with the kind of lengthy descriptions that mar the works of later novelists. She does not spend time on word painting or elaborate descriptions of dress or landscape, yet she manages to convey the latter with just a few touches. Weather is important, and we are not saved the snow in February, be it just a dusting, just enough to alarm somebody like Mr Woodhouse, or the oppressive heat of a summer day strong enough to throw a Mr Frank Churchill off his kilter. What impresses the modern reader is the varied way the author conveys conversations. Sometimes verbatim, at times rephrased, or merely suggested. Impressive too is the way that each character has his or her own voice, so they are more or less instantaneously identified without the need for the author to tediously provide pointers.

The heroine of the novel is indicated by the eponymous title. A young woman of twenty-one who has never met misfortune in her bright and cheerful life. True, her mother died early, but her place was more than adequately taken by a Miss Taylor, whose marriage to the older man Mr Weston supplies the introduction to the novel. The occasion is cause for deep regrets in the Woodhouse family, reduced to in addition to Emma herself to an old dotting father, whose kind solicitations is but a cloak for his own almost total egotism. Regrets in spite of the fact that her removal is but to a place less than half a mile from their abode. Emma has taken on the assignment of being a matchmaker, believing that the happy union of Miss Taylor and Mr Weston was of her own making, sensing before they did, the desirability as well as feasibility of mutual attraction. Eager to have a purpose for her restless youthful energies she befriends a young woman Harriet Smith at a local boarding school, taken by her prettiness, intrigued by her obscure provenance, she decides to raise her above her station, her first step being to prevent her from accepting the proposal of a young farmer, thereby revealing a more than permissible snobbishness, but fully compatible with her station in life and her times. The only one to be critical of her is the Mr Knightley, a bachelor fifteen years her senior, and the brother-in-law of her older sister Isabel, who has been removed to nearby London in marriage to a lawyer. He scoffs at

her ideas and provides a keener judgement of character and situations, than young Emma is capable of. The cast is small, in addition to the people just mentioned, there is the young clergyman Mr Elton, whom Emma thinks is a suitable suitor for little Harriet, and there are Mrs and Miss Bates. The older woman advanced in age, and the spinster daughter and aunt, who is a chatterbox are living on the edge of polite society, under the most modest circumstances, finds their only saving pride in their granddaughter and niece, whose letters they are always fond of producing and reading aloud from. Jane Fairfax by name, the niece has been taken up by richer people as a special friend of their only daughter and living comfortably on borrowed time, before her inevitable destiny as a governess is eventually to take place. We become privy to the fact that Jane is an accomplished individual, especially talented as a musician, which naturally provokes spoiled Emma's envious resentment. But Jane is for the moment far off in the periphery, as is the son of Mr Weston, who as a young widower was prevailed upon to have his young son Frank adopted by his disapproving in-laws - the Churchills. This son Frank, now of eminently marriageable age is expected to come and visit, but his visit is for some reason postponed due to the claims of his adopted mother, much to the disappointment of not only the Westons but of the small town itself, causing some sarcastic remarks by Mr Knightley. Emma sees him as a possible suitor, what would be more suitable than a match between the two of them, regardless of the fact that she has, as is common among young people, decided never to marry. Hopes that are of course shared by Mrs Weston, knitting the two families even closer together. Thus Emma is decided to like him a lot when he finally will appear.

And appear he eventually will. He turns out to be perfectly charming, yet Emma is soon disappointed with him. His frivolity of going to London just to have his hair cut, offends her sense of tact and taste. How could a man attach such importance to his hair? Jane Fairfax has also returned to the little town, instead of joining her family to visit their daughter Mrs Dixon in Ireland. Why does she not go? Emma readily comes up with an explanation. She must have formed an illegitimate affection for Mr Dixon, no doubt due to their joint residence at a seaside resort. Incidentally it turns out, but important for the overall plot, that Frank has already met her there and been privy to a boat accident at which she was rescued by the alacrity of Mr Dixon, a fact that of course lends further evidence to her conjecture. As Popper points out there is never any dearth of evidence for any conjecture.

Now the plot will unfold over the summer months. There is a farcical scene when Emma is trapped with Mr Elton in a carriage returning from a party, during which time he professes his love for her claiming that he had received plenty of encouragement. Emma is aghast at such a show of desire, besides she has all the time talked herself into the conviction that his court concerned poor Harriet. Mr Knightley has of course tried to dissuade her from such phantasies, Mr Elton is no sentimental fool, he would point out, he would surely be set to make a financially prudent match. Mr Elton suffers of course a major humiliation as a consequence and flees the scene for an extended sojourn in Bath, where he rather quickly finds consolation in a young woman he will marry in haste, something that causes much comment in the little town. The Clergyman has of course not much choice than to return to his parish, bringing his wife, whose vulgar airs and officious attempts at friendship puts Emma on her edge. The wife has better luck with Jane, who is not

in position to resist her attention, which causes the commiserations of Emma, who when meeting Jane again in person, somewhat reluctantly at first begins to appreciate her more and more, led on by her youthful enthusiasm for reconsidering past views. Jane really seems to be the exotic bird in the town, far too gifted and sophisticated to feel at home, her situation further aggravated by the modest position of her two relatives. There is a ball the preparations of which excites the young women and Frank, called back to his adopted mother, then follows the Churchills to Richmond in London, being there within easy reach of their town. There is a strawberry party at Mr Knightleys mansion, and an ill-fated excursion to Box Hill, a scenic spot only a few miles away, where Emma for some reasons never had visited. The excursion is not a success. The members of the parties are ill-matched, and Frank pays excessive court to Emma, something to which she playfully consents to. She tries to provoke the others into conversational action, in the process offending poor Miss Bates with her quick wit (I can understand her very well, I myself would not have been able to resist the jib), something mr Knightley takes her sternly to task for, and she becomes mortified as a consequence.

In many ways Emma is a detective story although there are no corpses, except that of Mrs Churchill who dies unexpectedly (sickly invalids are expected to live for ever) and as it turns out very conveniently, but there is an incredible revelation, namely that Frank and Jane have been secretly engaged all the time. In that small world this is more or less tantamount to a crime, and by it becoming known to the reader, many puzzles and hints in the narrative are retroactively explained, much to the delight of the same, Of course everything is well that ends well. Harriet, who really was nothing more than a rather silly thing, a toy mate of which Emma soon grew tired, gets a second chance by the young farmer and without Emma's intervention accepts him readily. And of course Emma realizes in the end that Mr Knightley actually means much more to her than a mere brother, their wedding taking place soon thereafter, when the worrisome business with Mr Woodhouse has been resolved to everybody's satisfaction, the ceremony officiated by Mr Elton of course, and the last words of the novel being given to his haughty spouse, who disdainfully remarks on the poverty of the wedding itself. Not enough lace. Is not Austen a bit too explicit here, but after having rowed everything back to port, she may be allowed her little joy of one drink too much.

As noted the plot is clear and very well constructed. The prose is impeccable, a fact which cannot be emphasized too much. And just to make the readers sure of her prose, she includes in the novel a lengthy, not to say ridiculously so, letter by the hand of Frank. A letter almost unreadable, Emma devours it, but Mr Knightley is unable to read it through, the ordeal only to be lessened by a concomitant sarcastic commentary for the benefit of Emma. Most writers are articulate even when they enter explicitly into the minds of their characters. Austen is too shrewd and serious to fall into such vain traps. Frank is not deserving of Jane, Knightley remarks, but maybe his demonstrated affection for the girl may after all redeem him. A most fortunate man he is, Knightley remarks with energy 'So early in life - at three and twenty - a period when, if a man chooses a wife, he generally chooses ill. At three and twenty to have drawn such a prize!'. Words of wisdom coming from the old maid of an author or simply another instance of her wit and sharp quill? Surely those are sentiments that suits an old bachelor very well.

Emma has of course been the subject of many a filmed version as well as serializations. What is only hinted at in Austen's novels, can then be given free reign and displayed in all its splendor. A costume drama set in a most idyllic of times. I must have seen one when I was a teenager, why should I otherwise have read the novel so early? I recall a stay in a rustic hotel room in Switzerland ('Swisserland' in the idiom of Austen herself) with a view of stately mountains and reading the book taken out of my parents library. What could I have understood at that tender age, when if admittedly somewhat intellectually precocious, I was socially innocent. All I recall is a characteristic envy of the characters having so many friends (as I thought) in others words moving in a social universe from which I was exempt. I also recall vividly the heat of the summer day, which is presented in the novel. Why did this stick in my memory? Because I had never experienced a truly hot day (not yet having visited the States)? And least of all expected it in England? And thus being unable to imagine why this could have caused any such discomfort? All the rest was of course wasted on me. I would the next summer, when turning eighteen, read 'Pride and Prejudice' probably also in tandem with a televised adaptation, but this time it seems to have made a deeper impression. At that age you mature quickly.

Yet for all her perfections, or maybe because of them, her novel is not exactly a page-turner. You read on with a certain impatience. Her world, if true, is also small. It is, on her own admission, a miniature on which much effort and care have been lavished. Although the subject matter may be momentous for the run of most men and women, it does not rise above convention. Jane Austen is not conventional, she only comments acidly and superbly intelligently on convention, but still convention sets the hedges that enclose. There is nothing extraordinary that happens, the constraints of the rules she has set herself are rigorously adhered to. The mind may be amused but never truly jolted. Emma may be the heroine and a most charming woman, whose physical attractions are only to be reflected in the eyes of Mr Knightley; still she is not the most intriguing, this role is played by the other Jane, the Fairfax one, which may be construed, if you are fanciful enough, as a self-portrait painted on the canvas. There is another world out there of adventure and excitement transcending the small conventional sphere, and Emma is, in spite of her charms and wit and energy, at bottom a truly conventional woman without any remarkable talents. On the other hand for a novel to survive the passage of time, in this case two centuries, it cannot only appeal to the intellect. In the case of Austen there is the charm of the conventional and idyllic, the very qualities I have just disparaged, and which survive the perfection of execution, which really belongs to another less charming and idyllic world, than that that continues to attract audiences.

September 13, 2013 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*