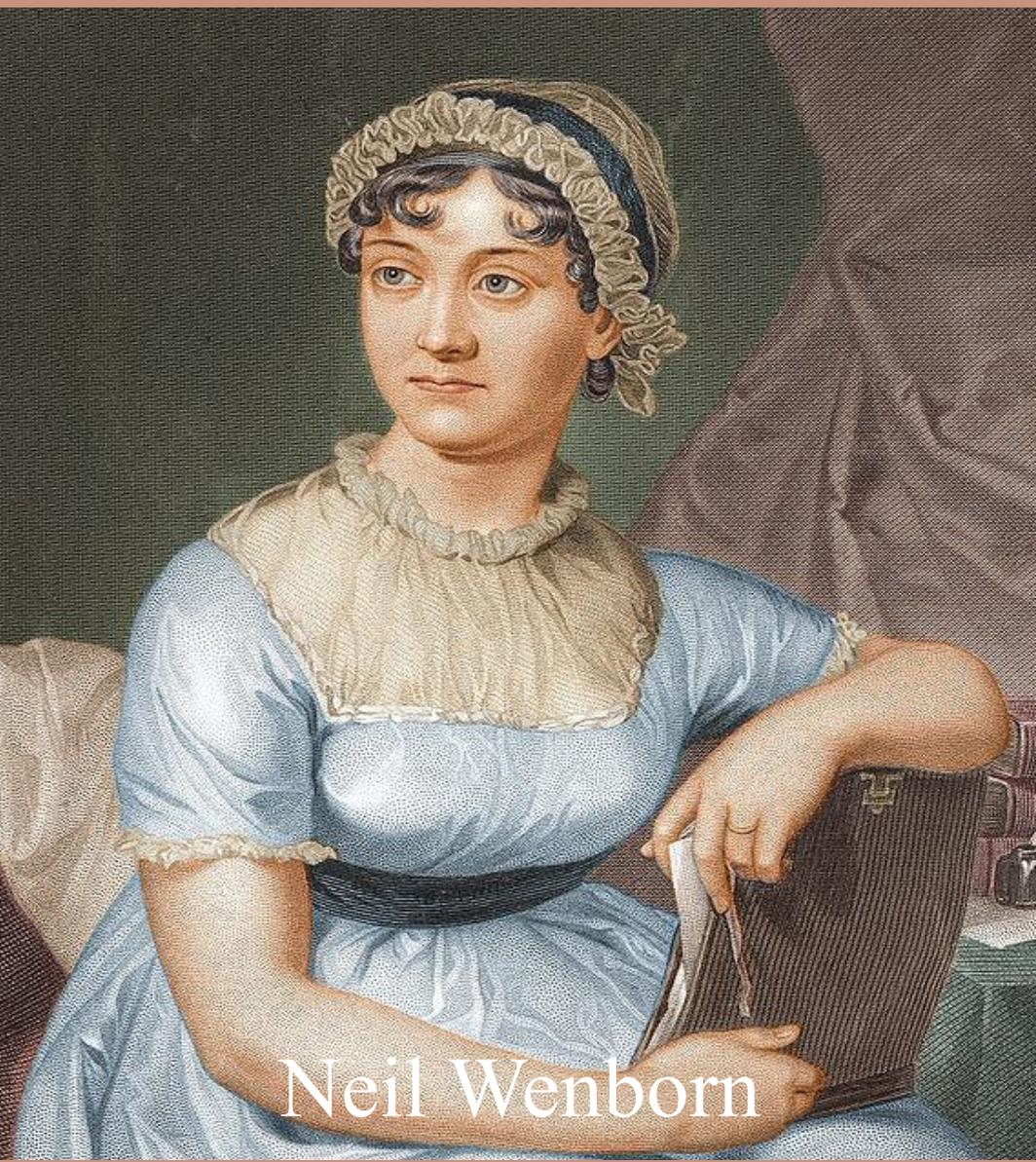


Reading Jane Austen

Emma



Neil Wenborn

TO BUY THIS BOOK

If your search engine has brought you straight to these sample pages please follow this link to the Humanities-Ebooks web page for this item.

PLEASE VISIT
HUMANITIES-EBOOKS.CO.UK

Reading
Jane Austen
Emma

Neil Wenborn

Literature Insights ☼ Humanities-Ebooks

COPYRIGHT

© Neil Wenborn, 2008, 2014

Cover Image: Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

The Author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published in 2008 and re-issued in 2014 by *Humanities-Ebooks, LLP*, Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

Contents

The Author

Abbreviations

Introduction

1. Jane Austen in her Time

1.1 Life and Work

1.2 The Historical Background

1.3 The Literary Context

2. Writing *Emma*

2.1 Bits of Ivory? Jane Austen's Craft of Fiction

*2.2 The Composition of **Emma***

3 *Emma* in the Marketplace

3.1 Publication History

3.2 Readership History

4. Reading *Emma*

4.1 Volume I (Chapters 1 to 18)

4.2 Volume II (Chapters 19 to 36)

4.3 Volume III (Chapters 37 to 55)

5. *Emma* and the Critics

5.1 The First Half-century

5.2 1870 to 1939

5.3 1939 to the Present

6 Bibliography

6.1 Main Text

6.2 Biography and Letters

6.3 Criticism

The Author

Neil Wenborn graduated in English from Magdalene College, Cambridge, and worked at the Bodleian Library in Oxford before pursuing a career in publishing, becoming Editorial Director of one of the UK's leading independent publishers. Since 1989 he has been a freelance writer and publishing consultant and has published widely both in Britain and in the United States. His works include biographies of Haydn, Stravinsky and Dvořák. He is co-editor of the highly respected *History Today Companion to British History* (Collins & Brown) and *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge University Press). A collection of his poetry, *Firedoors*, is published by Rockingham Press.

Introduction

Emma is among the supreme achievements of English fiction. If not Jane Austen's most popular work—that accolade would no doubt go to *Pride and Prejudice*—it is surely her most inexhaustible. Written in fourteen months during the closing phase of the Napoleonic Wars, and set in a tight-knit fictional Surrey village, *Emma* is a book completely dominated by the personality of its eponymous heroine. It is famously a novel in which very little actually happens: its drama is above all the psychological drama of Emma Woodhouse herself. But perhaps because its central character is one of the most living, and most divisive, heroines in fiction, *Emma* is also one of the most variously interpreted novels in the language. It has been seen as the story of a woman's humiliation and reform and as a rallying cry for female authority, as a template of the modern detective novel and as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unregulated imagination. It has been read as a book about reading and a book about authorship, and has yielded subtexts on patriotism, health and religious conversion, among many others. People have been writing about *Emma* ever since Walter Scott published the first review almost two hundred years ago, but the novel's rich multidimensionality continues to offer new perspectives and new challenges not only to each new generation of critics, but also to each reader on each new reading. As Reginald Farrer observed in his classic centenary essay on Jane Austen, 'while twelve readings of *Pride and Prejudice* give you twelve periods of pleasure repeated, as many readings of *Emma* give you that pleasure, not repeated only, but squared and squared again with each perusal, till

at every fresh reading you feel anew that you never understood anything like the widening sum of its delights’.

Farrer was also among the first critics to draw attention to *Emma*’s unprecedented textural density—what he called ‘the manifold complexity of the book’s web’, in which ‘every sentence, almost every epithet, has its definite reference to equally unemphasised points before and after’.¹ The result is a fabric of astonishing narrative and thematic unity, across which events, scenes, even individual words, resonate with one another as if it were a single sounding-board. One of the main unifying principles, of course, is the mind of Emma Woodhouse herself. The heroine is absent from centre-stage for only a handful of pages, and almost everything we see in the novel we see, or think we see, through her eyes (to such an extent that the trace it leaves in the memory is akin to first-person narrative). In fact, the way Jane Austen manages the relationship between the narrator’s perspective and the heroine’s is one of the great high-wire acts of English literature. By allowing us, in the words of one critic, ‘to share Emma’s inner life without being limited by it’² Austen places us simultaneously inside and outside her heroine’s consciousness. In a sense, *Emma* thus has two overlapping narrators (indeed, one way of looking at Jane Austen’s much-discussed irony is to see it as the principal means by which she regulates the extent of this overlap at any given moment). Emma disposes the lives of those around her just as her author does, and while the cast of characters is identical in both cases, the tension between the two emerging patterns provides much of the novel’s narrative and thematic drive, as well as much of its comedy.

The critic John F. Burrows has remarked that every ripple in the surface of Jane Austen’s work repays attention.³ Of all the novels, this is truest of *Emma*. As Austen’s brother James and his wife were the first to recognize (see 5.1 below), *Emma*’s surface is very differ-

1 ‘Jane Austen, ob. July 18, 1817’ in F. Stafford, ed., *Jane Austen’s Emma: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), p.75.

2 A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of her Artistic Development* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p.149.

3 ‘Style’ in Edward Copeland, and Juliet McMaster, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p.187.

ent from that of its predecessors. For all the classical balance of the novel's structure, its language is in many respects radically unstable. Gone, for the most part, are the ironically inflected epigrammatism of *Pride and Prejudice* and the quasi-Augustan periods of *Mansfield Park*. In their place is a prose which seems deliberately stripped of elegance, a style in which pithiness has been sacrificed to psychological truth. It is revealing to read passages of *Emma* and of, say, *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility* aloud, as Jane Austen habitually did to her family when composing them. The rhythms of the earlier works quickly take up residence in the mind; *Emma*, by contrast, continually confounds the reader's expectations of sentence shape and cadence. Austen does not allow you to relax your vigilance for a moment.

As with the surface, so with the depths. As Juliet McMaster has observed, 'nothing in the Jane Austen world is insignificant, because every little incident is indicative of a whole set of moral and social and psychological relations'.¹ Planet *Emma* has an active moral geography. Its contours are continually shifting as our viewpoints are subtly repositioned, our sympathies aroused, brought into conflict, alienated. In one of the earliest contributions to Austen criticism, written less than four years after the author's death, Richard Whately recognized this aspect of Jane Austen's work and its relationship both to her naturalism and to the essentially *dramatic* nature of her gift as a novelist. Astutely noting the absence of the author from her work, Whately remarked that 'the moral lessons' of Austen's books

spring incidentally from the circumstances of the story; they are not forced upon the reader, but he is left to collect them [...]: her's [*sic*] is that unpretending kind of instruction which is furnished by real life; and certainly no author has ever conformed more closely to real life, as well in the incidents, as in the characters and descriptions.²

The same article draws an analogy between Jane Austen and Shakespeare which, for all its apparent extravagance, was to have a

¹ Juliet McMaster, *Jane Austen the Novelist: Essays Past and Present* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1996), p.53.

² Southam 1, p.95.

long critical afterlife. Unproductive as such comparisons may seem to modern eyes, Whately's is in this respect an apt one: just as we do not look to Shakespeare for moral schemata, so *Emma* dramatizes the fundamentally provisional nature of what a more recent critic has called Jane Austen's 'ordering of values'.¹ We are presented with a continually self-qualifying landscape, in which feelings and judgement, spirit and letter, style and substance, act upon each other at once to deny us a firm moral foothold and to provide a running survey of the terrain in which we might be able to find one. As the narrator observes when Emma accepts Mr Knightley's proposal towards the end of the novel: 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure' (431). Paradoxical as it may seem, it is this very provisionality which gives *Emma* its pervasive sense of reality.

John Wiltshire, in his insightful study *Jane Austen and the Body*, has written of *Emma* that there is 'hardly a critic who, having once entered the close and intricate world the novel constructs, has not found it hospitable to a coherent and plausible reading'.² This book does not try to offer such a reading. Rather, it aims to introduce Jane Austen's masterpiece in the context of her life, times and literary heritage, and to look at the way it has been read and re-read by critics in the two centuries since it was published. At its centre is a close reading of the text, which attempts to uncover something of the book's extraordinary multivalence and, in the process, to set a few interpretive hares running. *Emma* can be a daunting novel to write about: Mr Knightley's text from Cowper, 'Myself creating what I saw', hangs over it as a warning to the overactive critical imagination. But as one of the book's most independent-minded Victorian readers, Mrs Margaret Oliphant, wrote of Jane Austen in an article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1870, 'Genius [...] goes a great deal deeper than conscious meaning, and has its own way, whatever may be the intentions of its owner.'³ It is a good introduction with which to throw ourselves on *Emma's* celebrated hospitality.

1 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p.262.

2 John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), p.110.

3 Southam 1, p.221.

1. Jane Austen in her Time

1.1 Life and Work

In the ‘Biographical Notice of the Author’ written a few months after Jane Austen’s death as a preface to the first, posthumously published, edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, her brother Henry described his sister’s life as ‘not by any means a life of event’. Half a century later, her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh’s hugely influential *Memoir of Jane Austen*, her first substantial biography, confirmed the image of a selfless ‘dear aunt Jane’, contented in her familial lot amid the sedate refinements of county and cathedral town. Even now Jane Austen is often seen as the archetype of the Regency spinster, condemned by gender, income and the rigours of the marriage market to a life of needlework, tea parties and household management—a life faithfully reflected in the novels she somehow happened to write in the interstices of domestic duty.

There is no denying that Austen was as limited in her sphere of social action as any other woman of her time, background and income. But to view her life in the context of her connections is to open a window onto a very different world from that of her best-known works. Some of her nearest relatives look more like the cast of a novel by Fielding or Dickens than by the Jane Austen we think we know. Her flamboyant cousin and sister-in-law Eliza was convincingly rumoured to be the illegitimate daughter of Warren Hastings, one of the most powerful and scandalous figures of the age. An aunt, almost incredibly for someone of her background, faced transportation to a penal colony for alleged shoplifting. One brother is lost to the hidden history of mental handicap, while two others were in the thick of the naval struggle against Napoleon; a fourth, Henry of the ‘Biographical Notice’, presided over a spectacular banking crash, the shockwaves from which spread beyond its dire financial conse-

quences for several members of his own family. A cousin by marriage was even guillotined in the French Revolutionary Terror. All this is a far cry from the card tables and county balls of the novels, and serves as a salutary reminder of the extent to which the world of *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice*, while consciously reflecting the social milieu of the time, is also a deliberately selective construct. *Northanger Abbey* may set the ‘anxieties of common life’ against the ‘alarms of romance’, but for many of Austen’s immediate circle there might seem to have been little difference. To say the least, then, the range of experience accessible to her was significantly broader than the range she chose to draw on in her work. Indeed, in certain lights it can look almost as if, for Jane Austen, life and fiction have become transposed.

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775, the seventh child (of eight) and second daughter of a country parson and his aristocratically connected wife. Her father, George Austen, was rector of Steventon in Hampshire, where he supplemented a small income by farming and taking in pupils. Her mother, Cassandra (*née* Leigh), was descended from an Elizabethan Lord Mayor of London and had an uncle who was a long-serving Master of Balliol College, Oxford. Jane’s formal education was brief—from the ages of seven to eleven she intermittently attended boarding schools with her sister Cassandra in Oxford, Southampton and Reading¹—but her informal education at home was at least as important in shaping her as a writer. Books were central to the life of the Austen household. George Austen had an extensive library and, very unusually for a gentleman of his time, was actively supportive of his daughter’s literary career. Her mother wrote accomplished verse, and as a young Fellow at Oxford her oldest brother James produced a weekly journal called *The Loiterer*, modelled on Dr Johnson’s *The Rambler* and *The Idler*. Amateur theatricals of the kind immortalized in *Mansfield Park* were regularly

1 Jane and Cassandra remained especially close, particularly after the death of Cassandra’s fiancé Tom Fowle in 1797, and apart from their disabled brother George were the only members of the family not to marry. They were indefatigable correspondents when separated: much of what we know about Jane Austen derives from her surviving letters to Cassandra, who is known, however, to have destroyed a great deal of their correspondence.

mounted at Steventon, and reading, privately and aloud, was a staple of family entertainment.

Jane Austen's life falls into three distinct periods, which correspond to three comparably distinct periods in her creative career. For her first twenty-five years, until May 1801, the family lived at Steventon, with regular visits to relatives, notably including Jane's brother Edward, who was formally adopted by wealthy relations in 1783 and lived in some style at Godmersham in Kent from 1797.¹ To this period belong the three volumes of juvenilia, written as family entertainments between the ages of eleven and seventeen; the short epistolary novel *Lady Susan*, probably begun in 1794; the lost first versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* (*Elinor and Marianne*, probably written in epistolary form during 1795, and *First Impressions*, written between October 1796 and August 1797); and the first version of *Northanger Abbey* (*Susan*, probably begun around August 1798 and finished the following summer). The juvenilia, which include the miniature novels *Jack and Alice* and *Love and Freindship*, point in a very different creative direction from the one Jane Austen ultimately took and show in the most dramatic light the extent to which she reined herself in for publication: Dr Johnson may have ranked high in her literary pantheon, but these amazingly accomplished pieces, with their rambunctious heroines, cheerful amorality and laugh-out-loud burlesque of fictional conventions, are more Rabelais than *Rasselas*. This period also saw the first abortive attempt to publish her work: in November 1797 Mr Austen sent *First Impressions* to the publisher Thomas Cadell, but it was rejected by return of post. Jane began revising *Elinor and Marianne* the same month.

The second and most unsettled phase of her life began with Mr Austen's decision to retire at the end of 1800. The Austens left Steventon the following year, moving first to Bath, where Mr Austen died in January 1805, and then to Southampton, where they lived in diminished circumstances from October 1806 until July 1809, with extended visits to friends and family elsewhere. During these eight years Jane Austen wrote virtually nothing new, with the excep-

1 Edward adopted their surname, Knight, from 1812.

To Buy This Book

If this is what you are looking for please

Buy this Book

or

Browse our lists

Pdf Ebook Features:

**elegantly formatted
fixed page formats are easily cited
high quality graphics
internal and external hyperlinks
easy navigation by bookmarks
ideal for laptops, desktops and tablets**

**The book is yours to keep - and a copy is stored on
your bookshelf in case you lose it.**

We also sell:

Kindle editions from Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk

Paperbacks from Lulu.com and Troubador.co.uk

Library Editions from MyiLibrary and EBSCO